

Sotheby's

Victorian & Edwardian Art

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LOT 51

EDMUND BLAIR LEIGHTON

1853 - 1922

STITCHING THE STANDARD

signed and dated I.L.: E.B.L./ 1911

oil on canvas

98 by 44cm., 38 by 18in.

ESTIMATE ±150,000-200,000 GBP

Lot Sold: 373,250 GBP

PROVENANCE

Christie's, 23 April 1928, lot 152 as Preparing the Flag, bought by W.W. Sampson;

Phillips, 26 September 1977, lot 119 as Awaiting his Return, bought by Richard Green, London;

Private collection;

Sotheby's Belgravia, 27 June, 1978, lot 63 as *Stitching the Standard*;
Private collection

CATALOGUE NOTE

On the crenelated battlements of a medieval castle a beautiful maiden makes the finishing touches to a pennant depicting a black eagle on a background of gold. It is a time of peace, the sun is shining and all is calm and the young lady has taken her needlework into the light away from the bustle of the castle. Painted in 1911 *Stitching the Standard* encapsulates the spirit of Pre-Raphaelitism in its later phase, in the years before WWI when life was more innocent and untarnished by the horrors of war. Romance, meticulous draughtsmanship and beauty above all else, are the hallmarks of the late Pre-Raphaelite movement of which Blair Leighton was a leading light. Painted a generation after Rossetti and Millais revived interest in chivalric tales of heroic knights, damsels in distress, romantic bards and mournful kings, Blair Leighton interpreted the same subjects without any loss of intensity. His paintings evoke the poetry of Tennyson and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* but *Stitching the Standard* does not depict a particular Guinevere, or Lily Maid of Astolat; she is a nameless damsel of the Middle Ages with no story to tell.

In 1912 Blair Leighton painted another medieval woman on the walls of a fortress in his narrative painting exhibited at the Royal Academy, *The Hostage* (sold in these rooms, 27 November 2003, lot 33). In this picture he included a figure that closely resembles the pose of girl in *Stitching the Standard*, although he had made her hair blonde and replaced the standard with an embroidery frame. Blair Leighton's biographer Alfred Yockney does not list any painting with the title *Stitching the Standard* in his list of the artist's work but it is possible that this is the picture entitled *The Device* among the pictures from 1911.

Blair Leighton painted a world of medieval romance that was to be a potent influence on early film-makers, as significant perhaps to the conception of the medieval world at the cinema as Lawrence Alma-Tadema was to that of the classical world. Blair Leighton's paintings met the need of those who wanted to immerse themselves in romance for a moment, as Yockney explained, 'We live in an age of unnatural haste and of wonderful scientific progress. The main roads and rivers bear witness to the changes which are taking place, while by-paths and back-waters and the very air we breathe are penetrated by the vibrating inventions of mankind. There seems to be little repose and no room for sentiment. Yet in the midst of this material world there is everyday evidence that the chief animating principles of life are lacking in force unless associated with affection. The audience of one remains the most potent inspiration, knight-errant survives, prisoners of love sue for deliverance, and journeys still end in lovers' meetings.' (ibid Yockney, p.14) The same is still relevant and Blair Leighton's work retains the power to charm in the yearning romance of its beauty.

Edmund Blair Leighton was born in London on 21 September 1853, the only son of Charles Blair Leighton and Catherine Boosey and no relation to Frederick Leighton, the painter. Charles Blair Leighton was an artist destined for greatness as a portrait painter, tutored by the famous Benjamin Haydon, along with Landseer and Eastlake. At the time of Edmund's birth, the Blair Leightons lived at Red Lion Square, the former residence of Rossetti and Deverell, and four years later William Morris moved into the square. In this environment Edmund was raised surrounded by artists and men of position and undoubtedly would have trained in his own father's studio. Unfortunately, the early death of his father, aged thirty-two, prevented this. Edmund was placed in a private boarding school in St. John's Wood and later went to the University College School. He was encouraged to put all hope of becoming an artist firmly behind him and look towards a mercantile career. Although he worked during the day in the City, in the evenings he attended classes at the South Kensington School of Art and at Heatherley's School of Painting where many artists founded their reputations. At the age of twenty-one Edmund Blair Leighton left his office job and launched himself into the art world with great resolve and self-belief and in 1874 he was accepted as a Student at the Royal Academy Schools where he excelled. His first exhibit at the Royal Academy was entitled *A Flaw in the Title of 1878* (Royal Holloway College) and he continued to exhibit paintings with literary titles, usually with a highly romantic charge. His work can be divided in two, those pictures depicting Eighteenth Century trysts and those with a more dramatic subject

of medieval heroines and heroes, from the Morte d'Arthur and Shakespeare. Most memorable among the medieval subjects are Abelard and Heloise, Elaine, How Lisa Loved the King, Lady Godiva, A King and a Beggar Maid, Dedication and Tristram and Isolde. The two qualities which can always be found in his work are beautifully meticulous studied detail and a sensitive capturing of humanity. As Yonckney wrote in 1913, 'Romance, poetry, and the drama of humanity appealed to him strongly from the beginning. He saw a world composed of vital situations awaiting interpretation, and it became his desire to give expression to those emotions which are among the privileges of life at its ripest moments.' (The Art of E Blair Leighton, by Alfred Yockney, in The Christmas Art Annual 1913, p. 13)

We are grateful to Kara Lysandra Ross for her assistance with the provenance for this picture, which will be included in her forthcoming catalogue raisonne of the artist.