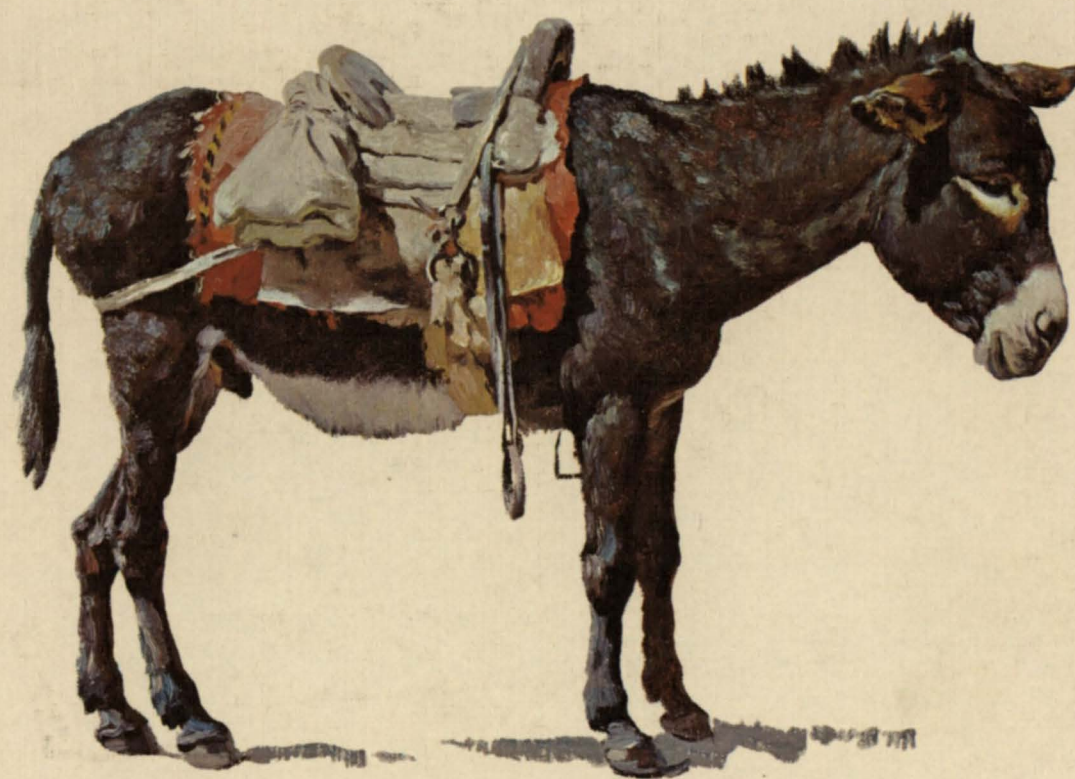


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# K. R. LEIGHT

PORTFOLIO OF AN AMERICAN ARTIST





Over the years, Leigh's remarkable studio on West 57th Street came to be a source of wonder to New Yorkers and the metropolitan art dealers with whom he came in contact, for as one reporter stated: "...it indeed resembles a Western prop room—suspended from the walls are the bleached skulls of buffalo, mountain sheep and horses, scattered over the floors are Navajo rugs and displayed elsewhere about the apartment are tomahawks, war clubs, arrows, and other relics of a past chapter of the history of the prairies...which threaten to take up all his working space." And an editorial of a later date recalls that Leigh, "...a tall, soldierly-straight man, affected a snowy-white mustache and goatee to complement his whitening hair, and his resemblance to Buffalo Bill Cody was often commented upon."

"Leigh was the most outspoken and forthright artist I have ever known," recalls Erwin Barrie, director and manager of the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York City. "At his one-man exhibitions, he loved to talk with visitors, whether they were critics, art students or corporation executives...Many times I have heard his booming voice reverberate through our large Sargent Gallery, letting some timid, shrinking girl know what he thought about abstract painting..."

"I recall, when a client was interested in buying a group of five or six important Leigh paintings, a situation arose that threatened the loss of the sale for our galleries. The prospective buyer objected to the fact that one of the cowboy ponies was painted in a somewhat purplish color, caused by the reflection of the blue sky on the sweaty body of a dark brown horse. The buyer tried to persuade Leigh to change the color of the horse and finally said he would not decide to buy any of the paintings unless Leigh would accede to his request..."

"I used all my influence with the artist to get him to make a slight change, but he wouldn't do it."

"Finally I said 'If you will take your palette and stand in front of the picture, I will take your photograph and write the client that I had asked you to make this change, and that I was enclosing a photograph for his consideration.' This was a hard pill for Bill Leigh to take and he merely dry-brushed the picture, with no paint on the palette. The client wrote to have the picture sent on, and also stated his pleasure at the way the painting now looked."

"I include this little incident because it gives a good idea of Leigh's character—and, I am afraid, also of mine."



Represented in many private collections and in several other museums throughout the nation, Leigh is characterized by such works as the charcoal study of "Girl with Goats," on preceding page, or the oil portrait of "Navajo Boy," reproduced above.

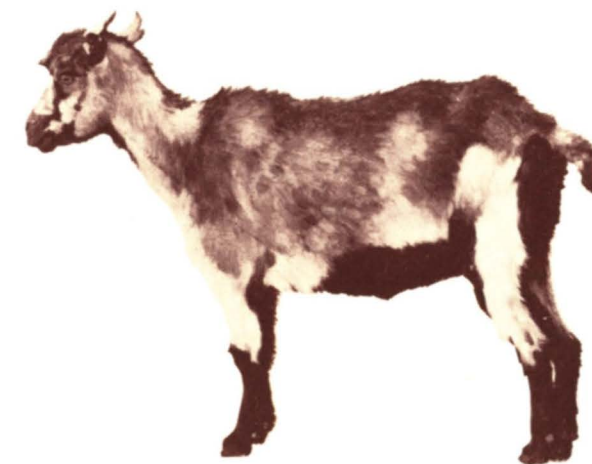
"The greatest exhibition of his work took place in the Grand Central Art Galleries in 1956, the year following the artist's death," continues Barrie in his brief account. "It was called '90th Anniversary Roundup' and included in all, one hundred sixty-one works in various media: oil, charcoal, pen-and-ink, and one piece of sculpture in bronze, which, interestingly enough, is the only piece of sculpture Leigh ever did."

"...and after having controlled the sale of William R. Leigh's paintings during much of his lifetime, it is a source of great personal satisfaction to me that Mr. John C. Traphagen, Leigh's brother-in-law, has since given Leigh's entire studio, including all its trappings,

sketches, etc. to the Gilcrease Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma..."

Described by other contemporary associates as a man with stubborn opinions, uncooperative and difficult to know—and in earlier days, to work with—Leigh definitely believed in his viewpoint and his purpose, with respect to his work, and today is generally regarded as having been the last of "the painters of the Old West," and acknowledged as having made an extensive contribution to the record of our nation's recent past through his pictorial renditions of events pertaining to the history of the western United States.

"Indicative of Leigh's virtuosity as a technician and his keen powers of observation," concludes Erwin Barrie, "is the large collection of African paintings which he did on the two safaris for the Museum of Natural History. I have had the pleasure of placing the entire African group in private collections and in the Explorers Club of New York; but, of course, his reputation will always rest on the foundation of his knowledgeable cowboy and Indian paintings."•





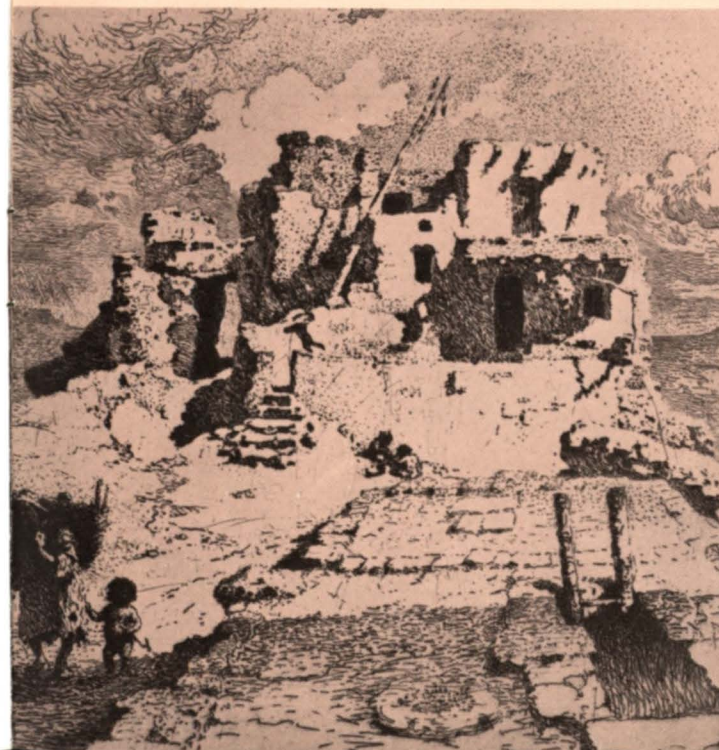
Although in his autobiographical accounts Leigh invariably describes himself as a "student of nature" whose conscientious aim it is to "re-create natural scenes," it might nevertheless be noted that a great many of his finished pictures are too selective in choice of subject and too vividly dramatic and individual in style to be labeled "scientific" documents or otherwise placed in the category of *realism*. Certainly, in his preliminary sketches and innumerable studies and smaller paintings he does show himself to have been a very careful and patient observer of detail; and some critics have acclaimed him to be, with reference to his animal studies, one of the most accomplished draftsmen America has yet produced. But the imagi-

native romanticism characteristic of his large, action-packed canvases indicates a man with rather more of an emotional than a logical, disinterested nature—a dramatist rather than a historian—and many of his private views as expressed in his personal correspondence strengthen and support this observation.

Considered by many to be a controversial figure, in his day, outspoken among his associates, sometimes contradictory in his comments concerning art and expressing what might seem, today, very radical views regarding certain topics outside the field of art, Leigh slowly developed a wide-spread reputation in the field of American genre painting, especially in the area of Western subjects.

Leigh's knowledge of Indians came from familiar association, for he at times lived among the Navajo, Hopi, Zuni, Apache and Sioux tribes, saw the secret Navajo fire dance and learned, firsthand, the character and strength of the American Indian.

The oil on the preceeding page, entitled "Western Sports," as well as the studies reproduced on this page, were among the contents of his studio which was brought to the Gilcrease Institute and reassembled in a gallery exhibit; the entire studio collection was a gift from Leigh's heirs, Mr. and Mrs. John C. Traphagen, of New York City.





"My cousin, Ellen Page, introduced us," writes Leigh in his autobiography. "She had been commissioned to go to Arizona to get design suggestions for women's clothes from the costumes of American Indians." Leigh accompanied his future wife on her first trip west, and made many more studies of the region, himself, during that period. Following their marriage, they established together the Traphagen School of Fashion, in New York City, and Leigh continued to paint his pictures of the West, teaching illustration at the 42nd Street Public School to help support their joint commercial venture.

The pencil study of the trees, above, and the pen-and-ink rendering of the man shooting the wild boar, opposite, were studies made during Leigh's trip to East Africa in the late 1920's, in the company of Carl Akeley, who was sent to that region by the Museum of Natural History to collect specimens for the institute's African Hall.

Placed in charge of designing the panoramas and arranging the habitat groups, such as the "Lion Group" pictured below, Leigh also wrote a book about his African adventures, and received wide notice for his work at the museum.



One of Leigh's students at the 42nd Street school at that time worked at the Museum of Natural History, and he came one evening to the artist's house with an invitation from a Mr. Carl Akeley, who was a well-known taxidermist at the museum with a considerable reputation in his field.

"I saw Mr. Akeley," recalls Leigh, "and he asked me to lunch, and told me that George Eastman had offered him the sum of one million dollars to build an African Hall of habitat groups at the museum. Akeley wanted me to make the studies needed to complete the backgrounds for these groups, and then and there we came to an agreement, which was carried out as described in my book, *Frontiers of Enchantment*, which I wrote upon finishing my two trips to Africa for the museum."

Leigh was put in charge of the installation of the African Hall, which he supervised for three years, before resigning to return to his

studio. Before leaving the museum, he left in the hands of his assistants the studies for each of the remaining groups, and later he comments in a typescript of a radio interview, that:

"As an artist, I saw in Africa a picture which seems to have escaped completely the scientists, missionaries and big game hunters who have, up to now, been Africa's chief historians...and in my book I made the statement: 'the historian and the scientist need the artist to supplement their studies, to make them more understandable, in human terms...more complete.' When I wrote that, I was thinking of the African Hall in the Museum of Natural History; for the reaction of the public to those habitat groups as they developed and as the backgrounds neared completion, showed me how true my statement was.

"Never before has anything in the museum awakened such popular enthusiasm, or made the museum such a living institution..."

Preliminary charcoal sketch of figure incorporated into one of Leigh's oils entitled "Panning for Gold."



"The old Indians, when I walked through the village, looked at me with hatred. I had done nothing; my mere presence infuriated them. They muttered and scowled, but they said nothing, did nothing. I know now that fear, and fear alone, restrained them; I was very careful not to afford grounds or excuse of any kind for complaint on their part.

"The younger men just didn't see me. I didn't exist...

"The women wore red blankets issued to them by the Government; the red contrasted marvelously with their black hair. It seemed as if it would be impossible to add, or take away, anything to heighten the fabulous picturesqueness—color, line, massing, distribution—everything was perfect! .....

And of the last few days of this first visit to New Mexico, Leigh writes:

"...it was mesa country, great red rock walls

rose above me...I explored one of those platforms and found a look-out station, and the remains of an ancient pueblo. I saw my first hogan, with its crude corral, and the Indians' method of milking goats...Their's was such a very primitive life, that it carried me back a thousand years...through fantastic lapses of time...

Leigh made many studies at Laguna, and then went on to spend two weeks sketching in the Grand Canyon. Returning to New York, he concludes that "My entire horizon had been revamped, and I knew now that my original conception was correct: my field was in the frontier West. Thereafter, I was in the West as often as I could earn enough money to take me there."

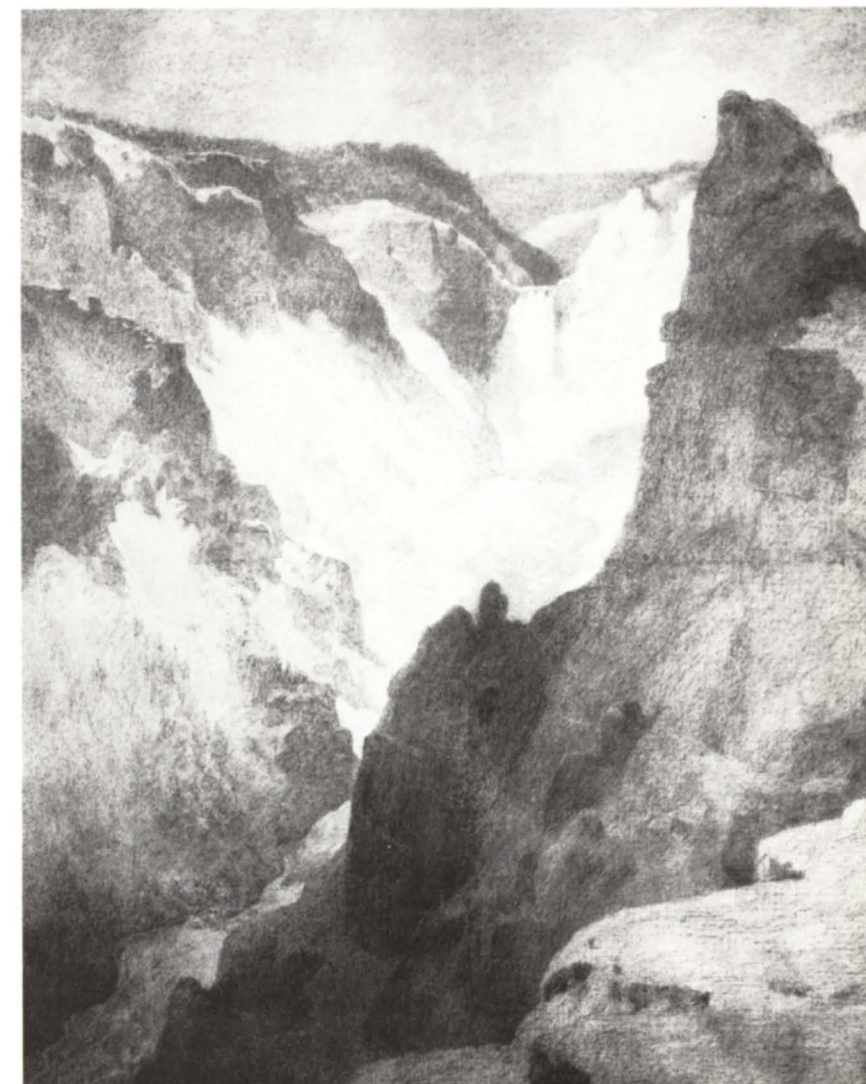
Eventually, two New York art dealers in partnership, named Snedecker and Babcock, became interested in Leigh's work and decided to include him among a small group of American

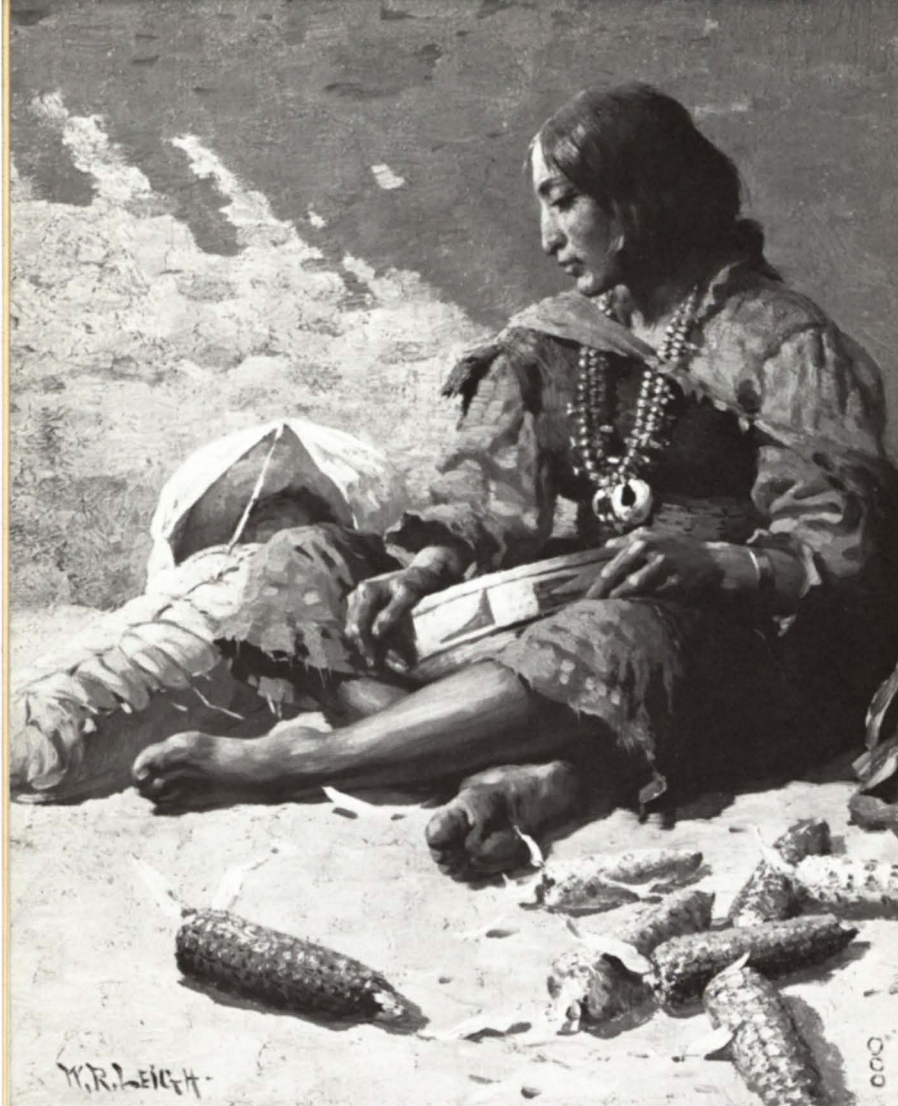


The painting, above, entitled "Badlands at Night" and the charcoal study of the Grand Canyon, shown below, represent years of travel in the American Southwest.

painters whom they were thinking to promote, at the time, and finally Leigh began to sell some of his paintings. Scribners continued to use his work, occasionally, as when they reproduced his painting entitled "The Great Beyond" on the opening page of their Christmas issue, one winter, and a Mr. August Heckscher bought three of Leigh's canvases dealing with historic subjects, that same year. But the prices he received for his paintings did not satisfy Leigh, and following a hunting excursion to Wyoming he later relates that "...my forty-six-inch canvas of a bear hunt was sold for the ridiculously inadequate sum of four hundred dollars."

Sometime before the First World War Leigh met the woman who was destined to become his second wife, and from all accounts his prospects definitely took a turn for the better when, eight years after their first meeting, on June 4th, 1921, Leigh married Ethel Traphagen.





In Laguna, New Mexico, Leigh records that he began to realize for the first time his desire to acquaint himself with the American West; and remembering his first weeks, there, he comments:

"I was eager to waste no time whatever; I saw that I needed studies of everything, the vegetation, the rocks, the plains, the mesas, the sky, the Indians and their dwellings, scores of studies—dependable studies. I saw that I must, as far as possible, soak up everything; I must know the manners and customs of the people, and their employments—in short, absorb all that it was humanly possible to absorb.

"I started to paint, paint, paint. The wild cattle that roamed at will—the bulls—were a danger. I know bulls too well to take any chances; whenever there were wild cattle in sight, I edged towards rocks or trees.

"I found it almost impossible to get any of the Indians at Laguna to let me paint them. They were told by their medicine man that by so doing they would lose part of their souls.

Leigh, as an artist, was primarily concerned with subject matter, and was particularly ambitious to depict scenes of the American West. Concerning his methods of working, he commented that "method and technique are important, but what is objectified in a work of art remains of primary importance. No matter how a work of art may be executed, the idea it conveys remains the vital point."

The small oil studies shown at the left are among the many which he did during his frequent visits to New Mexico and Arizona; one of the finest examples of his larger, finished canvases, the oil painting on the following page is entitled "Up Where the Big Winds Blow."



Circumstances improved the following year, however, and Leigh found employment working on a series of murals and panoramas together with a number of other art students, and thus was able to maintain his existence and provide himself with the necessary tuition for another year at the academy. Gaining something of a reputation for his work on the panoramas, he was offered other commissions, in time completed his training, and, finally, after nearly twelve years in Munich, resolved to return home to the United States.

In his book, *My America*, Leigh relates that he had become tired of painting European subjects, that after years of traveling about Germany and France he had accomplished about as much as he could, in terms of developing his painting technique—that he longed to return to America to search for new subject matter to paint.

Advised again and again to remain in Europe, Leigh nevertheless set sail for the States, commenting, years later, that "...when I got back to New York, I had forty dollars upon which to begin life."

In his autobiography he writes: "At all costs I had hoped to avoid illustrating, yet it seemed as if I were doomed to do it...I went to *Scribners Magazine*, in anticipation of which emergency

I had provided myself with several black-and-white compositions." The art editor of *Scribners* gave Leigh a job illustrating articles about United States history, "...a thing as I would never in a thousand years have selected of my own accord to do," he later recalls. He found himself a studio in New York City and began working—wondering, at the time, why it was that there was only one art dealer in New York who handled pictures painted by American artists.

In 1906, Leigh first turned to the West for inspiration.

"I wanted to go to the West to acquaint myself with our frontier," he writes, "with the purpose of devoting my life to depicting the activities of the Indians, cattlemen, soldiers and pioneers."

Working his way from New York, he went broke in Chicago, and finally talked certain officials of the Santa Fe Railroad into giving him free passage to New Mexico in exchange for a painting, to be delivered later. The company was so pleased with the painting he sent back to the Chicago office that it promptly ordered several more at \$250 apiece, thereby providing Leigh with sufficient funds to maintain himself for some months in the Southwest.



Taken from the countless studies contained in Leigh's reassembled studio, the figure (upper left) and the small oil completed during his first trip West in 1906 (shown above) illustrate the artist's energy in researching material for his finished works.

Pictured at an etching press in the photo, opposite, Leigh worked his subjects in a variety of media. The etching of the rams on the preceding page is based on one of his numerous animal studies, and is typical of his preoccupation with depicting natural forms.



Born on a farm in Berkeley County, West Virginia, in 1866, Leigh, from early childhood, showed a remarkable talent for drawing—particularly for drawing animals. When he was fourteen an uncle from Baltimore suggested that he be sent to the Maryland Institute, where an excellent art teacher had been recently employed; the following autumn, the young student boarded a train for Baltimore to attend his first formal art school, and was set at once to work copying master drawings and concentrating on the elementary problems of shading, proportion and perspective.

During his third year at the art school Leigh was advised to continue his education in Europe. A train of events brought him to visit his uncle, who consented to support him during his studies abroad, and, in July, 1883, he set out for Europe and the Royal Academy at Munich, Germany.

However, after three years in Germany, studying, traveling and enjoying the life of the Continental art student, Leigh received word from home that his uncle intended to discontinue his financial support as soon as the artist reached his twenty-first birthday. His parents managed to provide for him through the following semester, but young Leigh was finally obliged to return home, with only half his art training completed.

With the family farmlands sold and his

father bankrupt, Leigh found himself a job in Baltimore teaching in a girl's boarding school, and supplemented his meager salary with crayon portraits which he sold for only a few dollars apiece. But the young man was anxious to continue his education, and when spring came he went back to Europe, determined to remain there until he had completed his academic training.

In his autobiography Leigh tells a story familiar to many art students:

"After only two months in the class, I had to get out and hunt for a job. It was one of the hardest winters I ever saw in Munich; hunting for jobs was not easy...and finally I was compelled to begin borrowing. It was a nightmare time.

"I inhabited a little studio room on the fourth floor of a building reached by a winding stairway. Next door to me was a painter named Geiger...a somewhat rotund man who never favored me with so much as a glance. Probably he didn't want to know any other paupers who might want to borrow money.

"One morning, as I started down the stairs, I discovered a big gap broken out of the bannister. At the foot of the stairway stood my landlord, who told me that Herr Geiger, the day before, had sold a picture, and that he and his patron had gone out to supper together to

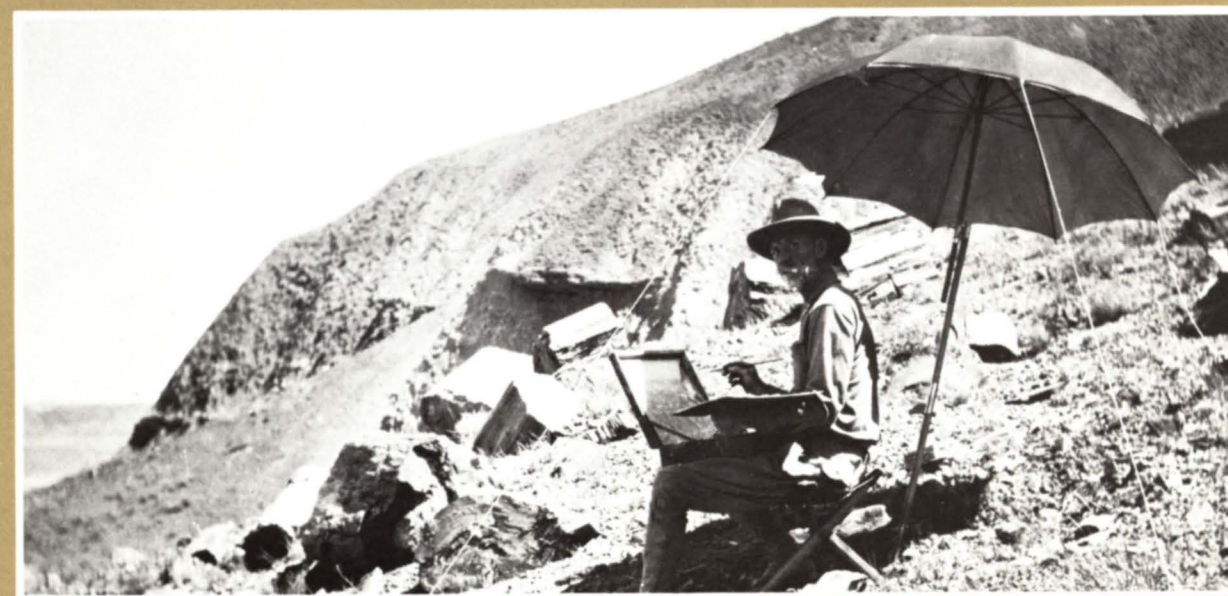


celebrate with a bottle of wine. The wine had affected Geiger so much that his companion had brought him home about midnight. While the latter was unlocking Geiger's door, he left the painter leaning against the bannister, with the result that he toppled backwards and fell to his death.

"That winter remains an indistinct blur of misery and anxiety, of endless trudgings through the snow in search of employment. I remember visiting one painter who, I had been told, sometimes employed others to assist him on some of his projects. He looked at the studies I showed him, and remarked that they were unusually life-like, that I ought to get work, but that he had none to offer."

The pencil drawings reproduced on these pages were made while Leigh was a student in Europe, and demonstrate the technical training which served him throughout his lifetime.

Leigh probably had the finest technical training of any of America's Western artists, although he painted from the viewpoint of an observer, unlike certain other painters who participated in much of what they depicted in their work.



"My work has been called 'documentary,'" said Leigh in a radio interview in 1939. "This I feel to be the finest of compliments, for I have devoted a lifetime to re-creating natural studies and have endeavored, above all else, to paint with fidelity to nature."

This interest in nature as subject matter was characteristic of the artist throughout his lifetime of over eighty years, and is very much in evidence in the countless studies of animals, human beings, landscapes, trees, cloud formations and other natural arrangements which constitute a considerable part of the Gilcrease Institute's collection of this man's work. The many charcoal sketches, carefully-planned compositions and small oil studies on canvas board which came to Tulsa with all his studio belongings and personal effects in 1964 testify to the investigation and research which provided the basis for most of his larger works, and indicate his concern for achieving historic or scientific authenticity in his finished paintings.

Throughout his life Leigh's chief ambition was to "paint America"—more especially the American Southwest—and while attempting to earn his livelihood in New York in the early 1900's as a commercial illustrator, he made frequent trips to Arizona and New Mexico where his imagination was captured by the picturesque and colorful desert country, the animal life, the Indians of the arid mesas and the historical events of that region. Traveling also through Texas, Wyoming and the Dakotas, living sometimes among the Navajos, Apaches, the Sioux and Blackfoot Indians, he recorded

his observations and, in time, his work began to receive the attention of Americans interested in native, historic subjects, eventually taking its place alongside the work of such popular artists of the West as Frederick Remington and Charles Russell.

However, Leigh's work was not totally confined to the American scene, for in the 1920's he was chosen to accompany the Carl Akeley expedition to East Africa, and later the Carlisle-Clark expedition to the same region, for the purpose of gathering scientific information for the Museum of Natural History in New York. Akeley was sent to collect materials from which to recreate scenes for a newly-proposed African Hall, to bring back wildlife specimens and mount them against their appropriate backgrounds; Leigh was assigned the monumental task of designing these backgrounds, and from 1932 through 1935 was responsible for the completion of the arrangements of these habitat groups. His book, *Frontiers of Enchantment*, published in 1938, gives an account of his African adventures; and in his unpublished autobiography Leigh records other experiences, recalling the events of his youth and describing the difficulties and disappointments he encountered as a student in Europe and a struggling young artist in New York City. From this autobiography and another of his published works entitled *My America*, the following narrative of his career is derived and included here, briefly, to indicate the more important events which determined the course of his life and influenced the direction of his work as an artist.

Leigh built his paintings upon a carefully-prepared sketch, such as the detailed charcoal rendering of the Indian girl, entitled "Zuni Belle," reproduced on the following page.

The oil shown at left, entitled "New Moon," indicates Leigh's romantic interest in western American subjects.



The illustrations accompanying this article are reproductions of original studies in the Gilcrease studio collection or taken from the museum's drawings and prints files, and the following list of biographical statistics is included here for reference purposes.

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA OF  
WILLIAM ROBINSON LEIGH, N.A.

LEIGH, William Robinson: born in Falling Waters, Berkeley County, West Virginia, September 23, 1866; son of William Leigh and Mary W. Colston. Educated under private tutors, studied art at the Maryland Institute, Baltimore, 1880-83, and at the Royal Academy in Munich, Germany, under professors Raupp, Gysis and Von Loefftz from 1883 through 1887, and under Von Lindenschmit, 1891-92. Painted six cycloramas, including "Battle of Waterloo" and a "Crucifixion of Christ," 1891-96.

Awards in Europe: bronze medals, Royal Academy, Munich, 1884, 85, 86 and 87; silver medals, 1891-92. Honorable Mention, Paris Salon, 1892. Returned to U.S. in 1896, married Anna Seng, 1898; one son, William Colston Leigh. Married second wife, Ethel Traphagen, 1921. Worked as magazine illustrator, portraitist, landscape painter, pre-eminently distinguished for paintings of American Southwest.

Awards in United States: First Medal, Appalachian Exposition, Knoxville, Tennessee, 1911; New York City Federation of Women's Clubs, 1950 and 51; Citation, Kappa Pi National Art Fraternity, 1951; Benjamin West Clinedinst Medal for outstanding achievement in the arts, 1953; Citation 60th Anniversary, cyclorama, Einsiedeln, Switzerland, 1953; first recipient Alumni Honor Medal of Maryland Institute, Baltimore, 1954; Award from National Life Conservation Society, 1954.

Member of Carl Akeley expedition to Africa, 1926-27, and member of Carlisle-Clark expedition to Africa, 1928, both for Museum of Natural History, New York City; master painter of backgrounds for animal habitat groups in Akeley African Hall, Museum of Natural History, 1932-1935.

National Academician, and member of Allied Artists of America (a founder), Authors' League, Art Students' League, American Artists Professional League, American Watercolor Society, Salmagundi Club, Adventurers' Club. Author: "Cleft Wings," (play), 1930; "The Western Pony, 1933; "Frontiers of Enchantment," 1938; also short stories for magazines. Invented artist's campstool (patented 1918). Studio: 200 West 57th Street; office: 1680 Broadway, New York City.

Died, March 11, 1955.

