



JUDITH LEIGHTON

COURTHOUSE GALLERY  
FINE ART

# JUDITH LEIGHTON

## **Retrospective**

JUNE 19–JULY 13, 2019

Introduction by Karin Wilkes



*Caged Bird*, 1997, pastel, 11.5 x 8.5 inches

COVER *Woman at the Park*, 2000, pastel, 29 x 21 inches

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*Crayola Room*, 2011, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches



*Grove*, 2007, pastel, 23 x 18 inches

# JUDITH LEIGHTON THE ART SPIRIT



*Interior with Two Chairs*, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5

Our second retrospective of Judith Leighton's pastels include the best of the remaining paintings in her estate. There are paintings of women, landscapes, and still lifes with a focus on her many interiors of tables and chairs.

Leighton preferred the richness of dry pastels to other mediums, and this show offers a range of colors from the melancholy mood of her muted grey-blues and greens (*Interior with Two Chairs*) to the festive primary reds and yellows (*Crayola Room*). Chairs are haphazardly pushed back from the table, suggesting a lingering satisfaction with a delightful meal as guests retire to the parlor for tea. Her women are serene and content as they hold a flower, invite you to talk, hug a dog, or linger in the park while they contemplate a peaceful afternoon (*Woman at the Park*).

While organizing the show, Leighton's good friend Steve Wright lent me her well-worn copy of *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri. Leighton came across Henri's book in the 1940s when she took courses at Washington University in St. Louis. *The Art Spirit* became her bible.

Robert Henri was the founder of the Ashcan school and an influential American artist, teacher, and an outspoken advocate of modernism in painting. As I scanned the



*Woman at the Park*, 2000, pastel, 29 x 21 inches



*Blue Green Series III*, 2007, pastel, 14 x 11



*Still Life with White Cup*, pastel, 11 x 8.5



*Blue Green Series II*, pastel, 14 x 10

dog-eared pages, I was able to trace Leighton's thoughts by following a well-marked trail of underlined passages. Like most treasured books, her copy contained mementos. A few photographs were tucked between the pages and a note with an apology from a friend who had borrowed the book too long.

Some passages dealt with the importance of technique, others talked about discovering the true soul of an artist. For Henri, making a bad picture of your personal view was better than making a good painting with superior technique. "Blunder ahead with your own personal view." Although Leighton was masterful with dry pastels, she never let technique become the thing.

Two large stars flanked one particular passage: "The greatness of art depends absolutely on the greatness of

the artist's individual personality and on the same source depends the power to acquire technique sufficient for expression." These two thoughts seem to define Leighton's approach to content and quality.

This passage brought a smile: "The great masters in all the arts have been whole men, not half men." In both instances, the word "men" was blatantly crossed out. In terms of feminist views, the book was dated (copyright 1923). Leighton was clearly a modern woman, and she apparently had a thing or two to teach Robert Henri.

In another poignant passage, Henri said: "It is not easy to know what you like. Most people fool themselves their entire lives about this. Self-acquaintance is a rare condition." And "Do whatever you do intensely." Leighton did. After two divorces, three children, alcohol and drugs, and an



*Woman with Dog*, pastel, 27 x 21 inches



*Interior with Green Table*, 2007, pastel, 23.5 x 19.5 inches

intervention by one loving son, she came out on the other side of convention and went straight to her work.

Leighton created a livelihood from making and selling art, and she surrounded herself with art, beauty, and joy. She was one those individuals to whom Henri was speaking, to those for whom happiness is to be found through the arts.

This memory written by her friend Sean Morrissey brings to mind an image of a woman who knows exactly what she likes, a contented woman much like the women in her paintings:

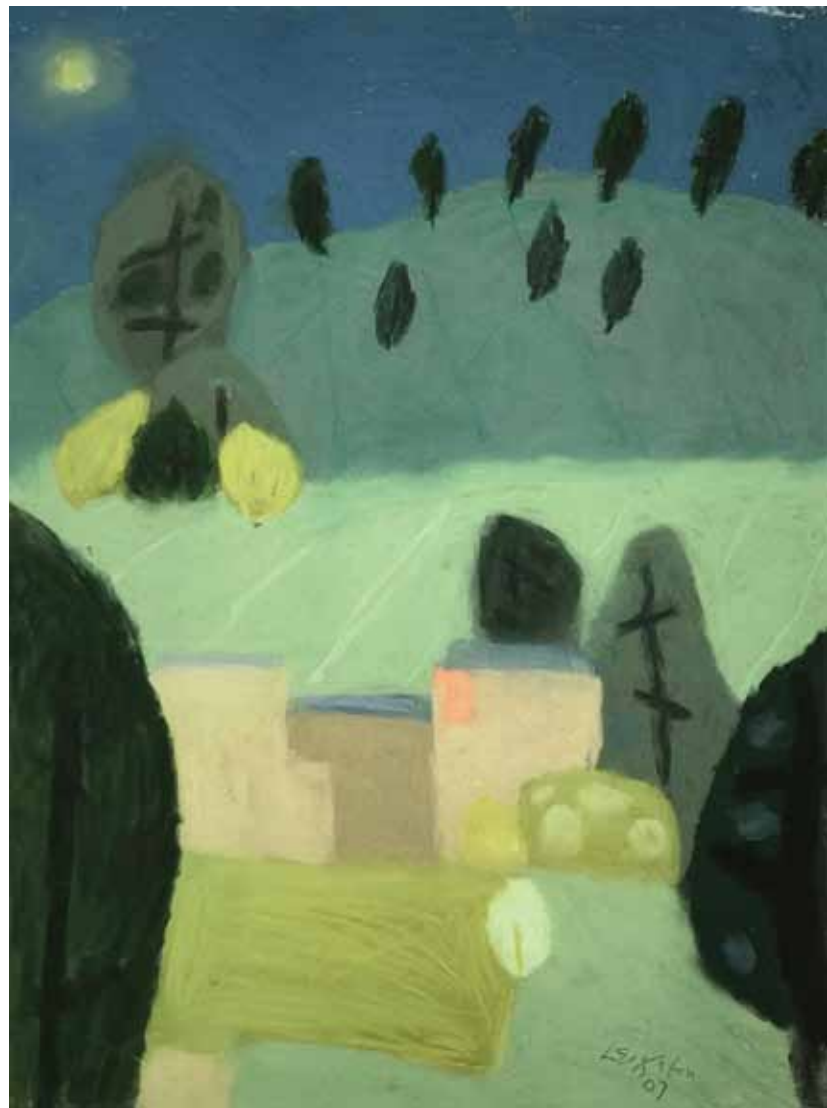
“I remember her sitting sipping her morning coffee/reading Colette/listening to Edith Piaf/a white room filled with plants/many shades, hues, and colors green/her dog laying at her feet/French doors open wide/bright sunny summer morning (Erik Satie, *gymnopédies*) her favorite room/her time of day.”

Leighton’s legacy both personal and professional is inspiring. She overcame insurmountable odds to rediscover herself and championed countless artists, enriching the lives of her patrons from the 1980s until her death in 2011. Steve Wright’s beautiful description of her influence on others could easily describe the artworks in this show: “Judith’s impact on a person was powerfully benign. She had a very good eye. Sparks flew out of her.”

— Karin Wilkes, *Director*  
Courthouse Gallery Fine Art



*Do You Want to Talk*, 2009, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches



*Moonlight Hill, 2007, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches*



*Interior with Pink Rug, 2007, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches*



*Blues in the Night*, 2004, pastel, 23 x 17.5 inches



*Seven Trees*, pastel, 23 x 17 inches





*Suburb*, 2007, pastel, 24 x 17.5 inches



*Woman Holding Flower*, 2002, pastel, 17 x 11.5 inches



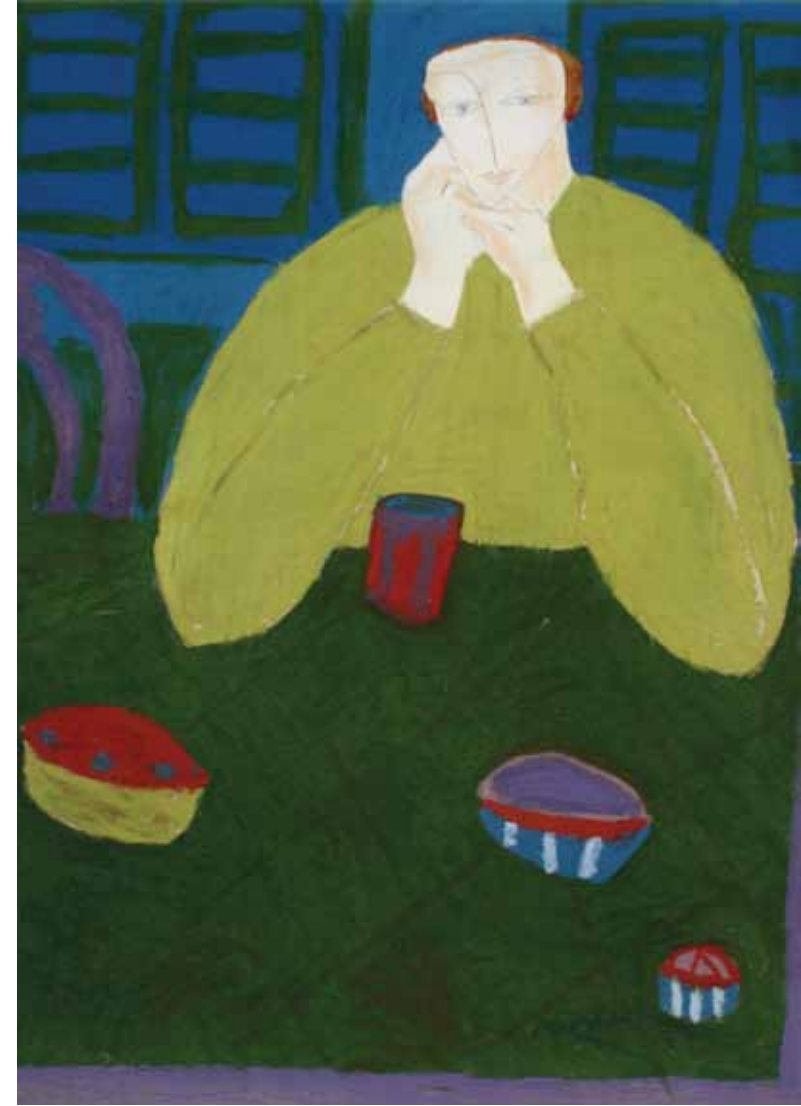
*Between Seasons*, 2011, pastel, 22.5 x 17 inches



*Persistent Trees*, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



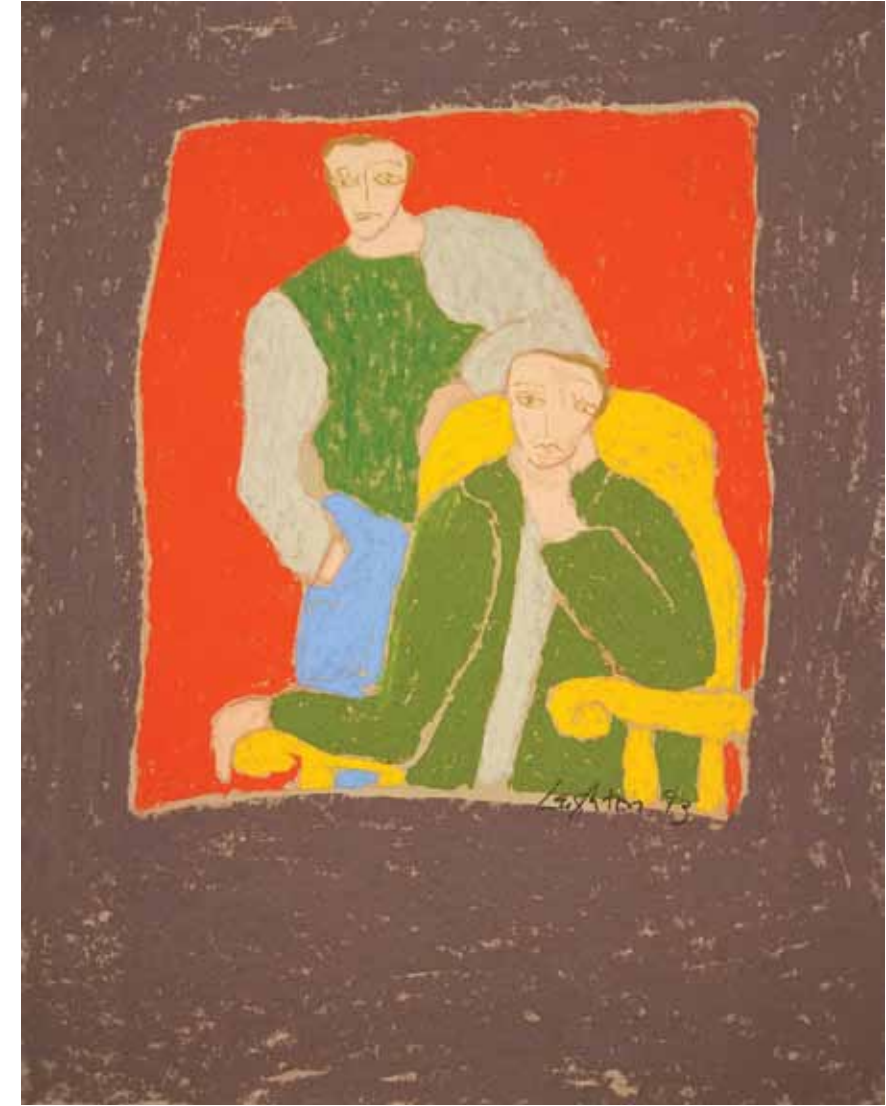
*Sheltering Sky*, 2010, pastel, 23 x 17 inches



*Cakes and Ale*, 2007, pastel, 25.5 x 18 inches



*Departure*, pastel, 24 x 20 inches



*Couple*, 1993, pastel, 28.5 x 22.5 inches



*Blue Green Interior III, 2010, pastel, 23 x 17.5 inches*



*Hurricane Winds, pastel, 23 x 17.5 inches*



*Interior with Pink Chair, 2008, pastel, 24 x 20 inches*



*The Blue Vase, pastel, 23.5 x 17.5 inches*



**JUDITH LEIGHTON** (1929–2011) was born in Beverly, Massachusetts, and grew up in St. Louis, Missouri. She attended Washington University, graduating in 1951 with a dual major in art and archaeology and English literature. Leighton began painting with watercolors in the 1950s, gaining notice for her work by the 1960s, receiving first prize in the annual Skinker DeBaliviere Community Council Art Fair in St. Louis in May, 1968.

Watercolor painting came easy to Leighton, but she eventually switched to dry pastels for their richness and the challenges they presented. She began painting simplified all-over compositions, her treatment of each subject reflecting a modernist sensibility. Even her more representational work had an out-of-the-ordinary feel, as

if the object of her attention—a vase of flowers, a line of trees, a room with chairs and table—were a prompt to creative interpretation.

In 1970 Leighton moved to Belfast, Maine, where she set up a studio and gallery. She soon became a fixture of the Maine art scene. She was chair of Belfast's first Street Festival and was included in juried shows, including the 1973 Bangor Sidewalk Art Festival where she won best in show. She took part in art festivals organized by the Women's League of the Jewish Community Center in Bangor, exhibiting alongside George Daniell, Dahlov Ipcar, Vincent Hartgen, Stell Shevis, Chenoweth Hall, Margaret Manter, and Denny Winters. She continued to develop artistically and studied privately with Leonard Craig and Susan Groce.

From 1980 until her death, Leighton ran one of most engaging and exciting galleries in New England, first in Castine and then in Blue Hill. The three-floor barn with its art-filled alcoves offered work by a remarkably diverse roster of artists.

Leighton's journey as a painter and fine art dealer is all the more remarkable when one considers the demons she managed to overcome. As Edgar Allen Beem noted in his fine tribute to her in *Maine Times* in 1991, at the time she opened her gallery, Leighton was at "the nadir of her life." She had been, Beem wrote, "suffocating in an extremely unhappy marriage, addicted to alcohol, Valium and sleeping pills, and better off unconscious than not."

Leighton reinvented herself and built a new life based on art—her own and others'. "In spite of all that's gone



Judith Leighton's studio, Blue Hill, Maine.

on in my life," she told Beem, "I like to celebrate life." The gallery and the paintings she made over the final thirty-plus years of her life were part and parcel of her recovery—a period of sobriety and happiness that, in her son Peter Leighton's words, "provided as much punch as the earlier challenges to her perceptions."

She felt that it took "a real artist most of a lifetime to get in touch with this personal vision." Leighton's life in art is a testament to her own search for that vision—singular, celebratory and, in the end, deeply fulfilling to all concerned.

## Judith Leighton's Shoes

In preparation for Judith Leighton's show, her good friend Steve Wright loaned me her book *The Art Spirit* by Robert Henri. He also loaned me a pair of her shoes, thinking the shoes might add some whimsy to the catalog. These were Leighton's gallery shoes, and she liked them so much, she owned two pairs.

I found *The Art Spirit* helpful in writing my essay for this catalog, but her shoes were a conundrum—until I decided that a painting of the shoes would make a lovely tribute. Since Philip Frey's solo show happened to coincide with Leighton's, I asked him to do the honors.

— Karin Wilkes, *Director*  
Courthouse Gallery

NEXT PAGE Philip Frey, *Judith Leighton's Shoes*, 2019, oil on canvas, 12 x 12 inches



Philip Frey, *Judith Leighton's Shoes*, 2019, oil on canvas, 12 x 12 inches

Judith Leighton's shoes are comfortable, practical, and bear the signs of wear. She was a talented artist and preeminent Blue Hill gallerist, who championed Maine artists and set the benchmark for a successful gallery. No one can truly walk in another's shoes, nor fill them. Even so, one painter can pay homage to another, by looking closely and recording what they see. I am delighted to attempt such a gesture to honor Judith Leighton and her legacy.

— Philip Frey 2019





*Woman with Owl, 1993, pastel, 27 x 21 inches*

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