



Leonard, Michael (b. 1933)

by Richard H. Axsom

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Britain's leading photorealist painter, Michael Leonard is accomplished in a number of genres, including portraiture and still life. Among his portraits is a celebrated painting of Queen Elizabeth II with one of her corgis, which was commissioned by *Readers' Digest* in celebration of the monarch's sixtieth birthday and now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

But Leonard's dominant subject is the nude, and while he has painted both male and female nudes, he is best known for his (frequently homoerotic) figure studies of males in various states of undress.

Leonard was born in Bangladore, India, in 1933. In his early twenties he studied graphic design and illustration at St. Martin's School of Art in London. He worked as an illustrator during the 1960s, taking up painting early in the next decade and first exhibiting his work in 1972.

He has commented that he deliberately chose to study graphic design and illustration because he thought that those subjects were more likely to lead to a comfortable living. While he was extremely successful in the world of illustration and advertising, "After a few years I became aware that a fundamental part of me was not being expressed, and I started painting at home in my spare time." Finally, in his early forties he was able to pursue his art full time.

Leonard's preferred media are alkyd oil paint on Amazonite and pencil on paper. These allow a precisionist handling of form, the hallmark of his style.

Although Leonard's materials, subjects, and style are traditional, his paintings and drawings take their place in the context of contemporary art (i.e., the modern tradition since 1970).

His realism is allied to a variety of realist and photorealist styles that began appearing in the late 1960s, following the domination of modernist abstraction after World War II. The new respectability of realist figuration was an aspect of a pluralism that embraced both established and unorthodox media, innovative formats, and confessional content that addressed personal identity in social and political terms.

Leonard's openly gay identity and his revisionist take on the traditional nude, particularly his substituting the poetics of gay desire for the traditional heterosexual eroticism of the nude, placed him in the vanguard of progressive developments.

Leonard's male nudes are lean, athletic, and in their late 20s and 30s. Although he may present them reclining or in contemplative poses, they are most characteristically shown dressing, undressing, or toweling dry after bathing.

A small pencil drawing of 1980, *Stripped Torso*, is reminiscent in pose and linear precision of the traditional

academic study from life. It presents a standing figure who, with arms crossed, pulls his undershirt over his head, concealing his face in the act but baring his muscled chest and stomach. The removal of the undershirt as an act of exposure is echoed below by the figure's unbelted and unbuttoned trousers that partially reveal the elasticized band of his briefs. As an eroticized portrayal of the unclothed figure, this drawing and Leonard's art have a rich context in the history of the nude.

Despite its many themes and motifs, Western art is dominated by the nude figure. Introduced by the ancient Greeks, the idealized and sensual nude carries moralizing and spiritual content as an expression of the good and the divine. From the beginning, the female nude was more sexualized in presentation, specifically in the bathing and reclining Aphrodites and Venuses of the Classical and Renaissance periods.

In the fine arts tradition, the overtly eroticized male nude--similarly presented for the pleasure of the viewer--appears only in the modern period, notably the later twentieth century with isolated earlier influences. An important precedent for Leonard's own special focus was set in the nude paintings of the French Impressionist Gustave Caillebotte, with men drying themselves after indoor baths.

Leonard works from his own photographs, modifying composition and scale and imbuing imagery with new qualities as it is altered by oil paint or pencil. His realism is tempered with pronounced formal values that accentuate abstract form. He frames his figures in tight close-ups and angled perspectives that crop limbs and heads. His subjects bend over, stretch, or towel themselves; their arrested movements are caught in a complex intertwining of fragmented torsos, legs, and arms.

In the painting *Stooping Bather* of 1980, a naked man turns at the waist and leans down to dry his lower right leg with a towel. In the lower left, a portion of an angled wall behind the figure and its molded baseboard and wall socket are formal elements that add to the abstract design of the bather's body. Leonard positions the model to eliminate the head and cut from complete view his legs, back, and one arm, allowing only the down-stretched left arm to be seen in its entirety. The eye concentrates on the exchange of anatomy and pure form, and is further compelled by the interplay of tanned skin, the ruddiness of elbow and kneecaps, and white groin unexposed to the sun.

Leonard's paintings exhibit a luminous play of light and dark that recalls the tenebrism of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish painting. The artist enjoys rhyming patterns of light and shadow cast by his figures' musculature with the folds of towel and fabric that may drape or partly cover the nude.

In style and subject, Leonard's greatest debt is to Edgar Degas's paintings and pastels of bathers--prostitutes sponge bathing in the privacy of their Parisian bedrooms and boudoirs. Degas's cropped and angled compositions suggest the presence of an unnoticed voyeur, relishing what he has caught in his gaze. Leonard, too, visually invites us to join him in private encounters with male beauty, restating Degas' theme in contemporary gender terms.

In scenes where Leonard gives his male nude an attribute of skull or mirror, as in the painting *Vanitas* of 1991, he places his figure in a time-honored tradition. The nude or clothed woman--goddess, saint, or mere mortal--posed before a mirror or holding a skull was a trope for moralizing statements on life's pleasures and brevity. Leonard draws his nudes into this convention, allowing the viewer to ponder in sensual male terms those universals formerly expressed by the female nude.

The supine and drowsily sleeping nude in *Vanitas* places one arm, supported by the other, over his face to half conceal it. A skull that is nestled in the crook of the model's arm is also half-covered by an article of clothing thrown askew on the bed. Leonard further develops a parallel theme of sacrifice made by the bearded young man's reclining figure, seen in steep perspective from knee to head and recalling Andrea Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, a famous early Renaissance painting dating to the late fifteenth century.

Very few of Leonard's paintings address homosexual identity directly, but those like *Vanitas* are, in part, the artist's empathetic response to the AIDS crisis. Couched in traditional symbolism and in terms of the Western nude, *Vanitas* hauntingly alludes to spent sexual desire and the inevitability of death.

If Leonard's nudes betray a sharp awareness of art historical tradition even as he extends and modifies those traditions, so too do his portraits. In a series of portrait drawings entitled "Drawn to the Past," he deliberately portrays contemporary likenesses in the manner of earlier artists, attempting thereby to "throw a new and intriguing light on the character of a face and incidentally provide my sitters with some surprising ancestors."

Leonard has said of his work that "My pictures marry observed reality with abstract values and are often enriched with personal subtexts or echoes of the work of great artists I admire. They are above all celebrations, and I hope to continue making them for as long as I am able. For me there is no occupation more fulfilling."

The artist resides in London.

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About the Author

Richard H. Axsom is Senior Curator of Prints and Photographs at the Grand Rapids Art Museum. He is Professor Emeritus of Art History at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, where he taught courses on the history of modern and contemporary art. His extensive publications on contemporary prints include catalogues raisonnés for Ellsworth Kelly, Claes Oldenburg, Frank Stella, and Tony Winters.