

CALYPSO-HENRI LEHMANN
1869- G322



Label-Current

The story of the beautiful nymph Calypso is told in Homer's "Odyssey", an ancient Greek epic. Calypso lived on the island of Ogygia, where the shipwrecked hero Ulysses (Odysseus) drifted ashore. Plying Ulysses with luxuries, love, and offers of immortality, Calypso kept him with her for seven years. Finally the gods intervened and let him sail for home. Here, Calypso mourns Ulysses' departure, on the same shore where the homesick hero himself used to stare despondently out to sea. The painting is still in its original frame. The Latin inscription is from a Roman poet's retelling of Homer's famous poem: "When Ulysses sailed,/ By the lone wave Calypso wailed./ Day after day unkempt sat she / And communed with the cruel sea."

Lehmann shows Calypso seated on the shore, mourning her lover's departure. Her gauzy drapery and disheveled tresses, as described by Propertius, provide a foil for the classical nude form.

When Calypso appeared at the Salon of 1870, the critical response polarized instantly by virtue of Lehmann's position

within the art world and the political events under Napoleon's III's declining dictatorship. Lehmann was not only identified with Ingres but with government-sponsored art. Calypso's defenders spoke up as mourners of "la grande peinture", who were aghast at the quantities of landscapes, portraiture, and still life that now dominated the salons.

Calypso was ideal and true, in a platonic sense, rather than vulgar and real like Lefebvre's Verite*, an allegorical nude figure from the same salon, which most of these critics detested.

Lehmann deliberately subordinated all other aspects of the composition to the nymph's graceful form, since he sought above all to convey her enticing character. The balance between real and ideal resides in the figure alone: the sensual appeal of the suavely brushed flesh bespeaks carefully study of the model, yet this veering toward the particular is kept strictly in check by the dominance of line, the elegant geometrical purity of the composition (note the repeated play of triangles, specially noticeable where the neck is elongated to form a line).

In Lehman's interpretation Calypso's sorrow takes on an alluring serene poignancy.

Biography

Henri Lehmann (14 April 1814 – 30 Mar 1882) was a German-born French historical painter and portraitist. In 1831, at the age of 17, he travelled to Paris to study art under Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, becoming one of his most accomplished pupils and a close associate for many years. After some years in Rome, Lehmann settled permanently in Paris in early 1842 and set out on an official career, which brought him full honors. He worked on various decorating projects both religious (church of St. Merri, chapel of the Jeunes Aveugles) and secular (City Hall, Palais du Luxembourg, Palais de Justice).

The first were to survive better than the second, which were mostly destroyed by fire or during the Commune. Only the Salle du Trône in the Senate, not easily seen, remains intact.

At the Salon of 1855 (Exposition Universelle), Lehmann displayed a large number of paintings, no less than twenty-one. Elected a member of the Institut de France in 1864 and appointed professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1875. He died in Paris on March 30, 1882; a wealthy venerated professor of art who was known for his defense of traditionalism in the face of such upstarts as the Impressionists. His many pupils included George Seurat, a radical whose precise craftsmanship and rational compositions nonetheless reveal his debt to Lehmann.

Although many of Lehmann's murals have been lost or forgotten, in recent years the pendulum of taste has once again swung back in his favor. Works owned by the Louvre and other French museums have been dusted off and placed on view, and their high quality newly rediscovered. However Lehmann's place in history had always been retained by the strength of his suavely accomplished and often idiosyncratic portraits. (Portrait of Mrs. Alphonse Karr 1845)*

Works at the MIA

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/105426/4/women-carrying-mortar>

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/12970/1/etude-de-draperie>

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/10017/2/portrait-of-cl-mentine-mrs-alphonse-karr>

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/1026/3/calypso>

*Portrait of Mrs. Alphonse Karr 1845



**Lefebvre's Verite

