

## *Derek Milton Leigh*

In a large oil painting depicting Cetshwayo's capture by British forces, on which he was working shortly before his death in July 1993, Dick Leigh draws together an entire range of interests that had earlier been variously reflected in his work over an artistic career spanning more than 30 years.

The painting has a dejected, well-lit, figure of Cetshwayo being held at lance and gunpoint by redcoated British soldiers. The figures are all to some degree stylized, and simplified, and placed in stage-like sequence on the left and right flanks of the format. This sense of a staged event is characteristic of much of Leigh's work, pointing to an interest in theatricality closely allied to his interest in pictoriality.

The shafts of light which delineate the major players in this historical event are not unlike the carefully-placed beams of stage spotlighting, directing the viewer to a key moment in the narrative. Much of Leigh's landscape work, too, has this quality of a large set, built in nature and serving as an arena for the human participants in events which are often cyclical in character, such as seasonal changes.

The studied sense of placement which this approach to painting implies, is evident too in the many still-lives and interiors painted by Leigh. A nice balance between objects seemingly casually observed and those more deliberately sited is always struck, with the clear, controlled lighting again tending to act as the delineating agent in these subdued domestic dramas.

Stage design relies often on a specific sense of decor and embellishment, and in this way too some parallels can be drawn between Leigh's paintings and the worlds of dramatic irony and narrative. The linear reduction of the foliage, the soldiers' uniforms, the shields and the regalia of the Zulu guards in the painting of Cetshwayo's capture, for example, refers intriguingly to the simplification and patterning typical of stage props.

The play of humour, romanticism and irony bound up with the event is equally well conveyed in an earlier historical piece, *The arrival of Jan van*

*Riebeeck in the Pietermaritzburg City Hall, 1952* (1991). In this painting Leigh's interest in history, chiefly South African and European history, is apparent, as is his sense of locality and the transfer of sets of cultural values and architectural styles from one community to another. These same concerns are present in a side to his work perhaps less well known than his painting, that is his writing and research.

In an article in *Theoria*, 1992, entitled 'The Empire paints back', Leigh explores the processes which govern the perception of artworks and, particularly, the different visions which spectators may have of art and the physical world, depending upon their differences in educational and cultural background. His knowledge of and insight into the historical attitudes underpinning Western art theory forms the basis in this article for an inquiry into the reasons for the eventual dominance of Western modes of visual representation throughout much of the world. By tracing the history of conventions such as perspective and shading, and by analysing the role of photography, Leigh makes several telling points about what he refers to as 'the colonization of vision'. Some similar themes are explored in his thesis for a Master's degree in the History of Art, in which attitudes to war and violence in the Napoleonic era are tested against the daily realities of that turbulent period.

The romanticization of violent periods and events interested Leigh, and the political pressures that informed the Romantic artist's conception of an historical event, which are the kinds of things described in the thesis, clearly attracted Leigh's interest in relation to more contemporary, local, developments.

In Leigh's painting and in his writing there is, then, a consistency of aim and expression evident over a long productive career. His interests were equally consistently developed and disseminated in another sphere, and that was in his teaching.

It was as a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine Art and History of Art on the Pietermaritzburg campus of the University of Natal that Leigh spent the greater part of his teaching life, some 23 years in all. He had previously worked for short spells as a school teacher in Zambia and as a Lecturer at the University College which was the forerunner of the University of Durban-Westville, and at the Natal Technikon.

The compass of his teaching skills was exceptional. Working easily in the diverse fields of art education, art history and theory, painting and drawing, Leigh communicated a deep love for his subject to generations of students ranging from fledgling first-years, to post-graduates. Past students frequently recall the liveliness of his criticism sessions, his sensitivity and perceptiveness in acknowledging the individual strengths and capacities of each student in his classes.

A gauge of the admiration which his academic colleagues had for his teaching capabilities is the number of occasions on which Leigh was appointed as an external examiner by other institutions, or invited to conduct workshops or special classes for them, notably at the Universities of Fort Hare and the Witwatersrand.

Always generous with his time, especially if it was to help promote art locally, Leigh worked collaboratively not only with other academic institutions but also with clubs, societies and schools; acted as an adjudicator for art competitions; presented informal talks, and wrote critiques and short articles for publication in the *Natal Witness*. The Tatham Art Gallery in Pietermaritzburg, the Natal Arts Trust and the Natal Society of Arts all enjoyed Leigh's

constructive assistance and support over the years.

As an always locally prominent artist Leigh had begun to gain a not inconsiderable national reputation during the past decade, having had his works publicly exhibited on more than 35 occasions during this period, including two exhibitions in Germany. He is represented in the permanent collections of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, the Durban Art Gallery and the Tatham Art Gallery, and featured in the prestigious Cape Town Triennial in 1985 and 1988. Recognition for his fine balance of French influences (he studied briefly in France in the 1960s) and harder, more angular, African physical properties was rapidly growing at the time of his passing.

The wide range of interests and geographically scattered contributions notwithstanding, there was ultimately a very specific focus of activities in Leigh's life and work, and that was on the environs of Pietermaritzburg. From his studies at the local university in the 1960s, through his several teaching appointments in its Department of Fine Art and History of Art, and in his extensive body of paintings and drawings, his warm engagement with the local community was always paramount.

TERENCE KING



D.M. Leigh

*(Photograph: Natal Witness)*