

# Leonilla, princess of sayn-wittgenstein- sayn essay



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## “ Leonilla, Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn”

By Franz Xaver Winterhalter, 1843

Franz Xaver Winterhalter was born of peasant stock, in Mensenschwad, a small village in Germany's Black Forest. His early training, as an apprentice in a studio in Freiburg, began when he was thirteen. He learned engraving and he supported himself as a lithographer, while he studied painting in Munich (nga, par. 1). Even though he is known to be an academic painter, this seems to be a contradiction, as Webster's Dictionary states that an academic painter followed rules and conventions, while a painter from the Romantic Movement broke away from convention and painted more by feeling and freedom of form, which is what Winterhalter did.

According to Britannica Biography Collection on EBSCOhost, Winterhalter was hired as the drawing master to the Grand Duchess of Baden in 1828, which first entered him into court circles. Around 1835 he went to Paris and was appointed as court painter, first to King Louis-Philippe, and then to Napoleon III, where he painted portraits of the royal families and leading members of the court. In *Franz Xaver Winterhalter and the Courts of Europe 1830-70*, Richard Ormond says, “ No portrait painter has ever enjoyed such extensive Royal patronage as Winterhalter.” During his career, he painted the royal families of Belgium, France, England, and most of Europe's leading aristocracy.

His first trip to England to paint Queen Victoria was in 1842. He returned several times to paint the growing royal family, doing at least 120 works for

them (abcgallery, par. 1). One of these, a private painting commissioned by Queen Victoria, was to be given to Prince Albert as a

birthday present. She wanted her pure femininity to show through in this picture, so she was depicted in common clothing, with a sultry look, lounging against a red pillow, with her hair

loose and no reference to her royal position. The prince reportedly loved the “secret painting”, which is now in the royal collection in Windsor (abcgallery, par. 4).

Although Winterhalter never received high praise from serious critics, his portraits were prized for their subtle intimacy. His popularity among royal and aristocratic patrons came from his ability to create the image his sitters wanted to project. According to Ormond, “He breathed life into the tired and debased conventions of Royal imagery”(51).

One of his many royal patrons was Princess Leonilla of Russia. She was married to Prince Ludwig Adolf Friedrich, and very active in fashionable Parisian circles. In 1843, Winterhalter was commissioned to paint Princess Leonilla’s portrait. This is the piece that I chose to write about from the Getty Museum: “Leonilla, Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn”. A very large, full-length portrait, an extremely heavy and substantial oil on canvas.

Rather than painting according to a concept of ideal beauty, correcting any flaws, Winterhalter “humanized” his subjects, by painting with a more objective view of his sitter’s features, and bringing out their own unique beauty. This style of painting was known as Romanticism (Ciseri 59).

Princess Leonilla is depicted in a daring pose; reclining on a low sofa, with bright red draperies behind her, reminiscent of the private painting he did for Queen Victoria. She is looking directly at the artist, or the viewer, while suggestively playing with the pearls around her neck. Even with this sensual pose, because of her beautiful gown, the opulent surroundings, and even the way she is holding a small fan in her hand, her wealth and social standing is evident. Her face is so natural you can almost imagine that she is going to smile at any moment, as her mouth is almost turned upward, but not quite yet. Her large, brown eyes seem sad, and the intimacy of the painting makes you feel like she is going to bare her soul to you.

Though not at the actual center of the painting, I felt the visual center is right at her waist. The style is naturalistic, and the detail is so precise, it looks like a photograph. The waist is small and the gown is fitted right here, with a full bust above and a pink sash tied loosely around it. Under where the sash lies, the skirt of the gown becomes very full, and you see the many luxurious folds of her silk gown falling onto the carpet, as she lies back on the low sofa. As your eyes are drawn away from the waist and this precise detail, the detail of the carpet in the foreground, and the large column and draperies in the background, are not quite as precise, thus, not seeming as important.

She is lying on an open balcony and behind the column is an oleander plant, and further back, the ocean with a distant island and clouds in the sky displaying the colors of sunset. Winterhalter used atmospheric perspective as he painted each receding item with less detail. The plant still has some

detail and color; you can clearly see green leaves and pink flowers; but the ocean and far away island are hazy, blue and non-distinct.

This technique serves two purposes: to show the distance of the island and the horizon from the balcony, and also to ensure that Princess Leonilla is the focus of the painting. As Ormond states “dramatic juxtapositions of figure and landscape, inside and outdoors” (185) is a technique Winterhalter repeats in many of his portraits of the French Court.

This portrait has immense depth, making you feel you are inches away from Leonilla, and miles away from the island in the background. I picked this piece because of the many different elements of design and principles of art used. The implied texture of her gown; the depth created with atmospheric perspective; the asymmetrical balance, as she is definitely more on the left side of the picture, but the directional lines of her body and her gown, draw your eyes across the painting to the large column on the right, which is wrapped with a bright red drapery, and the fringed valance pointing back inward at the top of the picture, drawing your eyes to the unifying valance at the opposite side with its red drapery, bringing your focus back down to Leonilla once again.

This portrait is 4 ft, 8 in. high, by 6 ft. 11 in wide, virtually life size. Standing in front of it you can feel the grandeur of the setting, almost being able to hear the rustle of silk in her skirt, and are captivated by the true beauty of Princess Leonilla.

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