

***Portrait of Leonilla, Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn*, Franz Xaver Winterhalter**

Portrait of Leonilla, Princess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn

Franz Xaver Winterhalter
German, Germany, 1843
Oil on canvas
56 x 83 1/2 in.
86.PA.534



Questions for Teaching

Portraits can tell us a lot about a person and the time in which they lived.

What are your first impressions of this woman? What details in the painting make you say that? (Students may notice that she looks wealthy because of her dress and jewelry.)

Describe the setting (background) of the painting? (Outdoor and indoor settings come together. The flower bushes, blue peaks of the faraway mountains, the ocean, and expanse of clouds lend a peaceful, even tropical, tone to the work.)

Describe the body language, posture, and facial expression of the sitter. What do these details communicate about her?

This portrait is 56 inches high and 83 and half inches wide—about the size of a billboard on the side of a bus. Where would you imagine it would have been displayed in the late 1800s? What do your observations of the sitter, the size of the portrait, and your guess about its location reveal about the subject?

Background Information

In a daring pose reminiscent of harem scenes and odalisques, Princess Leonilla of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn reclines on a low Turkish sofa on a veranda overlooking a lush tropical landscape. Only her unassailable social position made it possible for Franz Xaver Winterhalter to use such a sensual pose for a full-length portrait in Paris in 1843.

Known for her great beauty and intellect, the princess is resplendent in a luxurious gown of ivory silk with a pink sash around her waist. A deep purple mantle wraps around her back and falls across her smooth arms. Under carefully arched eyebrows, her heavy-lidded eyes gaze languidly at the viewer while she toys with the large pearls around her neck. Winterhalter contrasted sumptuous fabrics and vivid colors against the princess's creamy flesh to heighten the sensuality of the pose, the model, and the luxuriant setting.

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About the Artist

Franz Xaver Winterhalter, (German, 1805—1875)

Born in a small village in Germany's Black Forest, Franz Xaver Winterhalter left his home to study painting at the academy of Monaco, a country located along the French Riviera between France and the Mediterranean Sea. Before becoming court painter to Louis-Philippe, the king of France, he joined a circle of French artists in Rome. In 1835, after he painted the German Grand Duke and Duchess of Badew, Winterhalter's international career as a court portrait painter was launched. Although he never received high praise for his work in his native Germany, the royal families of England, France, and Belgium all commissioned him to paint portraits. His monumental canvases established a substantial popular reputation, and lithographic copies of the portraits helped to spread his fame.

Winterhalter's portraits were prized for their subtle intimacy, but his popularity among patrons came from his ability to create the image his sitters wished or needed to project to their subjects. He was able to capture the moral and political climate of each court, adapting his style to each client until it seemed as if his paintings acted as press releases, issued by a master of public relations.