

## The Cool Twilight of Luxurious Chambers: Alma-Tadema's 'A Dealer in Statues'

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### Résumé de l'article

Étude sur un tableau de Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, acquis récemment par le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal et intitulé *Un marchand de sculptures* (Opus XLIX, 1867). L'auteur étudie l'accueil réservé par les critiques à l'oeuvre d'Alma-Tadema, de son vivant et après sa mort, afin de remettre dans son contexte historique la réévaluation actuelle de ses peintures. Étant donné qu'il s'agit d'une des premières oeuvres où Alma-Tadema exploite le thème de la vie quotidienne chez les anciens dans un décor à reconstitution archéologique, le tableau est d'abord examiné du point de vue de son sujet, soit le collectionneur ou le marchand d'oeuvres d'art dans la Rome antique. *Un marchand de sculptures* est la première d'une longue série de peintures portant précisément sur ce sujet et qui devaient valoir le succès à leur auteur. L'examen, tant du contenu archéologique que du style de l'oeuvre (en particulier son traitement de la profondeur spatiale) fait ressortir l'influence des peintres français « néo-grecs » du milieu du siècle, notamment de Gustave Boulanger et d'Ingres vers la fin de sa carrière, de même que la tradition flamande des tableaux de « cabinet d'amateur », plutôt que des peintres victoriens à qui l'on devait associer Alma-Tadema. On y voit que l'apport de l'artiste à l'interprétation de ce thème est de placer des personnages actuels, connus de l'époque, dans des décors de nature strictement archéologique, recréés à partir de toute une panoplie de sources originales étudiées *in situ*. Ces sources sont énumérées en fin d'article.

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# *The Cool Twilight of Luxurious Chambers\*: Alma-Tadema's 'A Dealer in Statues'*

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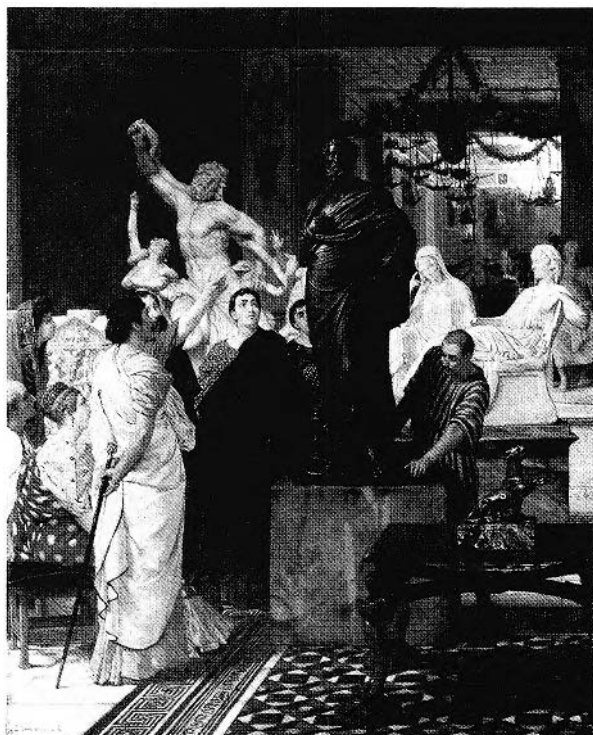
JANET M. BROOKE

*The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*

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In 1980, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts acquired a small panel, known variously as *A Dealer in Statues* and *A Sculpture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus* (Fig. 1), by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.<sup>1</sup> An early work by the artist, his Opus XLIX, dated 1867 and in excellent condition,<sup>2</sup> it represents a dealer or collector of sculptures proudly invoking the merits of a large bronze before a group of rapt admirers in a sumptuous interior decorated in the manner of Pompeian houses of the first century A.D.

FIGURE 1. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Dealer in Statues*, Opus XLIX, 1867. Oil on panel, 61.5 × 46.9 cm. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Purchase, Horsley and Annie Townsend Bequest (Photo: Museum).



Alma-Tadema's impressive rise to fame in artistic circles in England and elsewhere during the second half of the nineteenth century is well known. Indeed, his unequivocal success as a painter is amply documented in contemporary literature and primary sources. Yet, much as his praises were sung almost universally during his lifetime, so, in the first half of our century, was his work almost as generally denounced, ignored, or equated with everything considered derisive in Victorian painting. As a result, the charting of Alma-Tadema's rising and falling star offers no more typical example of the relationship of an artist's position in the history of art to his standing in the history of taste.

The unusually complete documented provenance of Montreal's *A Dealer in Statues* stands as a symbol of the fate of Alma-Tadema's pictures from their celebrity during his lifetime, through their subsequent oblivion, to their reappraisal (coinciding with the re-evaluation of Victorian painting as a whole) in recent years. Between 1867, when Alma-Tadema submitted *A Dealer in Statues* to his

\* John Ruskin, *The Art of England; Lectures Given in Oxford* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1883), Lecture III: 'Leighton and Alma-Tadema,' 68.

<sup>1</sup> Inv. 1980.2. Purchase, Horsley and Annie Townsend Bequest, oil on panel, 61.5 × 46.9 cm, signed and dated lower left 'L. Alma-Tadema 67.' Listed in Rudolph Dircks, 'The Later Work of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A.,' *Art Annual*, xxxv (Christmas 1910), 27, as Opus XLIX.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Alma-Tadema maintained a chronological list of his paintings (and some watercolours) from the very early *Portrait of my Sister Atje*, and assigned them consecutive "Opus" numbers. From 1871 onwards, he included the Opus number with his signature on the paintings themselves. Dircks' catalogue of Alma-Tadema's paintings (*ibid.*) respects this system of dating and thus remains the authoritative source for the chronology of Alma-Tadema's paintings.

agent Gambart for sale, and 1917, the panel passed through no less than twelve hands, evidence of its great market potential. In 1890, it was sold at auction from the Harter collection to Agnew for £483; by 1906, it brought \$23,000 in New York, an extraordinary sum for the time.<sup>3</sup> About ten years later, the work was sold for roughly one-tenth that price, subsequently 'disappearing' from the scene for some fifty years until it surfaced in 1970 on the auction market, changing hands several times more before it was acquired by the Montreal Museum.

The provenance of other works by Alma-Tadema reveals nearly the same pattern as that of the Montreal panel. *Spring* (Opus CCCXXVI, 1894, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu), for example, one of the Alma-Tadema's finest paintings, was unloaded onto the market in 1945 for \$3,600; even at that sum, this was the highest auction price paid for an Alma-Tadema in twenty-five years. When it reappeared on the market in 1972, it sold

for \$55,000.<sup>4</sup> The Funt collection, consisting of thirty-five Alma-Tademas, was auctioned for close to half a million dollars in 1973. More significantly, its preview showing in the auction rooms at Sotheby's Belgravia in London constituted the first 'exhibition' of his work in England in sixty years.<sup>5</sup> The latest in the growing list of records for Alma-Tadema's work is the 1980 hammer price of the large *Caracalla and Geta* (Opus CCCLXXXII, 1905-7, present location unknown) for an astonishing £145,000.<sup>6</sup>

The course of Alma-Tadema's career has recently been thoroughly re-examined by Vern Swanson,<sup>7</sup> and therefore bears retelling only in the broadest terms. Born in Dronryp (Holland) in 1836, he studied principally in Belgium at the Antwerp Academy, and between 1859 and 1862 in the studio of Jean-Auguste-Henri, Baron Leys (1815-1869). Removing to Paris by 1863, his first submission to the Paris Salon in 1864 – *Les Égyptiens de la XVIII<sup>e</sup> Dynastie (Pastimes in Ancient Egypt: 3000 Years Ago)*, Opus XVIII, 1863 – won the artist a medal, thus setting the direction of his career.<sup>8</sup> While in Paris he met Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904) and, apparently through Rosa Bonheur, the influential art dealer and collector Ernest Gambart, with whom he was to work in close association until the latter's death in 1902. He returned briefly to Belgium, and finally settled in London in 1870.

By the following decade, Alma-Tadema had become one of the most sought-after painters in England and Europe. With John Poynter, Frederick Lord Leighton and others, he helped to re-establish the popularity of classicising subjects in English painting from the 1870s onwards. With them, he dominated the Victorian art establishment until the close of the century with his unique and meticulously-rendered imaginings of the patrician pleasures of the daily life of the ancients. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1876, and became a full member in 1879. He was knighted in 1899, awarded the Order of Merit in 1905 and the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1906. In France, he was made an officer of the *Légion d'honneur* in 1878, and elsewhere in Europe was awarded numerous honours, reflecting the extent of his international reputation. In 1882, The Grosvenor Gallery in London sponsored a loan exhibition of some two hundred and eighty of Alma-Tadema's paintings, and in 1913, the year following his death, several

3 London, Christie's (26 April 1890), and New York, American Art Galleries (14 March 1906), lot 195.

4 Burton B. Frederickson, *Alma-Tadema's Spring* (Malibu: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1976), 11, and Los Angeles, Sotheby Parke Bernet (28 February 1972).

5 London, Sotheby's Belgravia (6 November 1973); see also Russell Ash, 'The Sale of the Allen Funt Collection of Paintings by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema,' *Art at Auction: The Year at Sotheby Parke Bernet 1973-74* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 74-84.

6 London, Sotheby's Belgravia (9 April 1980), lot 22. For additional documentation on the history of the art market for Alma-Tadema, see Gerald Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste, Volume I: The Rise and Fall of the Picture Market 1760-1960* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston), 158-59. Reitlinger's survey shows a similarly dramatic rise and decline in the market between the 1870s and the 1940s. For a listing of the pictures auctioned in England between 1870 and 1910, see Algernon Graves, *Art Sales from Early in the Eighteenth Century to Early in the Twentieth Century (Mostly Old Master and Early English Pictures)* (London: Algernon Graves, 1918), 1, 4-7.

7 Vern G. Swanson, *Alma-Tadema; The Painter of the Victorian Vision of the Ancient World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977), 8-35. Mr. Swanson is also preparing the *catalogue raisonné* of Alma-Tadema's works. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for his generosity in sharing with me research concerning the provenance of the Montreal painting.

8 Paris, Salon de 1864, n° 29; now Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, England. It should be noted that regulations of the Salon of 1864 were reformed, so that no ordering of medals into first, second and third class was made; Alma-Tadema's medal was therefore not a gold, or first class medal, as stated in Swanson, 14. Alma-Tadema's co-laureates at the Salon of 1864 included Puvis de Chavannes, Millet, Moreau and Ribot. At the Exposition Universelle of 1867, the year he painted the Montreal picture, he submitted no less than twelve works, for which he was awarded a second-class medal (Paris, Exposition Universelle de 1867, *Catalogue général* [Paris: E. Dentu, 1867], 1<sup>er</sup> groupe: *Les œuvres d'art*, 93, and A. Bonnin, *Les écoles françaises et étrangères* [Paris: E. Dentu], 35).

hundred works were exhibited at Burlington House in a Royal Academy Memorial Winter Exhibition.<sup>9</sup>

It was inevitable that as early as the last few years of his life, Alma-Tadema's particular brand of classicism, a mixture of rigorous archaeological precision, genre, and Victorian whimsy, had already lost a great deal of its authority in the eyes of those English art critics turning to France in search of a formalist, forward-looking art. By the beginning of the twentieth century, they had begun to champion the cause of the Post-Impressionists, of Cézanne and Gauguin, and to lament what they perceived to be the absence of an avant-garde movement at home. Roger Fry, in particular, wrote frequently of a conservative stranglehold of the Royal Academy over the English art scene; in a biting review of the 1913 winter retrospective of Alma-Tadema's works, he seemed to single out the artist as a kind of symbol of the sorry state of 'official' art in Britain. His famous outcry in the weekly *The Nation*, 'How long will it take to disinfest the Order of Merit of Tadema's scented soap?'<sup>10</sup> sums up contemporary British reactions to Victorian art as the product of 'the purely commercial ideals of the age in which [it] grew up,'<sup>11</sup> and tacitly acknowledges Alma-Tadema as the exemplar of that age.

Indeed, Alma-Tadema was not without isolated detractors even at the zenith of his success during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. John Ruskin, of course, is the best known of these, and his sometimes peevish outbursts against the artist are best understood when considered against the background, first, of his own support of the Pre-Raphaelite movement (with which, on occasion and to Ruskin's chagrin, Alma-Tadema was erroneously associated in contemporary literature), and second, of the otherwise almost universal admiration of the artist's work. His principal objection to Alma-Tadema was not, like Fry's, stylistic, but rather moral. Lecturing students at Oxford in 1883 during his second tenure as Slade Professor, Ruskin warned them against artists like Alma-Tadema, whose classicism was still pervaded 'by the continuing poison of the Renaissance, and ruled, not by the choir of the Muses, but by the spawn of the Python.'<sup>12</sup> He accused Alma-Tadema of disservice to the tradition of the Ancients by portraying them in a 'universal crouching or lolling posture,' and of inappropriately selecting 'the last corruption of the Roman State and its Bacchanalian frenzy' as his subject-matter,<sup>13</sup> rather

than, we may suppose, the idealism of Attic Greece or Republican Rome. Describing his own purer vision of Antiquity as 'the Spartan Helen dabbling with Castor and Pollux in the Eurotas – none of them over ten years old,' he characterized the effect of one of Alma-Tadema's paintings, *A Pyrrhic Dance* (Opus 1X1X, 1869, Guildhall Art Gallery, London) as 'a microscopic view of a small detachment of black-beetles, in search of a dead rat.'<sup>14</sup> That said, Ruskin nonetheless did admire Alma-Tadema's pictorial imagination and his spectacular technical ability and could declare, in the same lecture, that the latter 'attends and enhances together the expanding range of his dramatic invention.' He admitted, moreover, that Alma-Tadema's understanding of ancient architecture surpassed even his own.<sup>15</sup>

Alma-Tadema's special knowledge of ancient art (and of Roman architecture in particular) was universally acknowledged by his contemporaries. The competence he demonstrated in this field through his paintings was recognized by the Royal Institute of British Architects, who admitted him into their society as an Honorary Fellow and invited him to lecture them on ancient architecture in 1907.<sup>16</sup> It is possible that Alma-Tadema's facility with his subject, combined with the hard-earned panache with which he expressed this knowledge pictorially, is at the root of the distrust with which his paintings came to be held by some critics after his death. Other reviewers of the 1913 retrospective exhibition echoed Fry's misgivings of so apparently effortless a talent. In the *Burlington Magazine*, Clutton Brock, again viewing the pictures from a perspective clearly conditioned by a Post-Impressionist aesthetic, complained that Alma-Tadema had tried to make the viewer believe that he had actually witnessed the moments represented in his pictures by filling them with archaeologically accurate details, and to paint 'the prose of things not familiar, the genre of a life not seen.'<sup>17</sup>

9 *Winter Exhibition* (The Grosvenor Gallery, Winter, 1882-83); *Works by the Late Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A.* (Royal Academy, London, 1913).

10 Roger Fry, 'The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M.,' *The Nation* (18 January 1913), 667.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Ruskin, 71.

13 Ruskin, 69 and 71.

14 Ruskin, 66-67 and 69.

15 Ruskin, 68.

16 Published as: L. Alma-Tadema, 'Marbles: Their Ancient Application,' *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, xiv (1907), 169-180.

17 A. Clutton Brock, 'Alma-Tadema,' *Burlington Magazine*, xxii (February 1913), 286.

In fact, this is precisely what Alma-Tadema *had* done, and while this ideal may have later seemed a tired Victorian pretension to critics attempting to sensitize their public to other movements in painting, it was a novel aesthetic in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in England and on the Continent. Alma-Tadema's contemporaries, who witnessed the stunning progress of his technical capacities from exhibition to exhibition, and the increasingly complex formal and subjective structures of his works (as even Ruskin recognized), could only wonder at the artistic talent and scholarly rigour of one who appeared so thoroughly capable of defying time and place to capture for them what seemed, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, a true image of Antiquity. Already in 1867, early in the artist's career – the year Montreal's *A Dealer in Statues* was executed – the French critic Paul Mantz declared of the young artist in his review of the paintings at the Exposition Universelle of that year:

La curiosité domine dans ses tableaux. Rembrandt n'en savait pas si long sur la couleur locale ... Il a un pinceau ferme et sûr, un art particulier à caractériser les têtes, et un goût véritablement heureux pour les colorations robustes; il a des rouges qui font plaisir à l'oeil et des bruns qui sont les plus beaux au monde; ... comme peintre, il a des mérites auxquels les connaisseurs attacheront toujours un grand prix.<sup>18</sup>

Other critics whole-heartedly championed Alma-Tadema's works. Helen Zimmern, in an extended biographical and critical account of his career to the 1880s, characterized him as 'unique among living painters, and altogether unapproachable,' and described the effects of light on the minutely-executed sculptures and figures in *A Dealer in Statues* as 'miracles of painting.'<sup>19</sup> Georg Ebers, a prominent archaeologist and critic of the time, published a biography of the artist as early as 1886,<sup>20</sup> and two serious attempts at a *catalogue raisonné* of the paintings were undertaken during his lifetime.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Paul Mantz, 'Les beaux-arts à l'Exposition Universelle,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 1/xxiii (1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1867), 20.

<sup>19</sup> Helen Zimmern, 'L. Alma-Tadema, Royal Academician; His Life and Work,' *Art Annual*, iii (1886), 10 and 16.

<sup>20</sup> Georg Ebers, *Lorenz Alma-Tadema; His Life and Works* (New York: W.S. Gottsberger, 1886).

<sup>21</sup> Carel Vosmaer, *Catalogue raisonné* of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, manuscript, Leiden, ca. 1885, and Rudolph Dircks, 'The Later Work', including a checklist of the complete works to 1910 (see note 2).

<sup>22</sup> Swanson, 22-23. Alma-Tadema's meticulous, multi-volume sketchbooks (preserved at the Birmingham University Library) are filled with drawings and observations of Roman art and architecture.

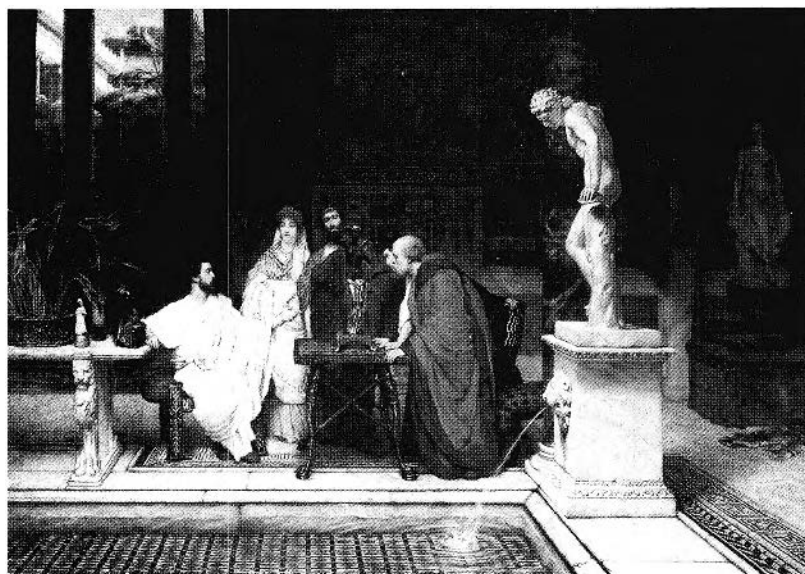
<sup>23</sup> Antwerp, Société royale pour l'encouragement des beaux-arts, *Salon de 1867*, n° 22, as 'Un Romain.'

Alma-Tadema's earliest works, produced in Belgium and France, consisted of genre paintings of obscure episodes of northern European mediaeval and Renaissance history (strongly influenced in style and choice of subject by his teacher Leys), as well as the occasional portrait and several subjects based on Egyptian themes, witness his Paris Salon medal picture, *Pastimes in Ancient Egypt*, of 1863. It is generally recognized that the artist's propitious adoption of themes drawn from Roman (and later occasionally Greek) literary and archaeological sources was the result of the influence of the extended trip to Italy he undertook late in 1863. There, he visited the museums of Rome and Naples, and sketched extensively at Pompeii. Throughout his career, he renewed and expanded his knowledge of classical antiquity through repeated visits to Italian sites, and also appears to have read extensively on the subject.<sup>22</sup>

His first paintings drawn from classical sources date to 1865, the year following his return from Italy, when he executed several small panels with Roman themes, most notably *Catullus at Lesbia's* (Opus xxvii, private collection, England). That year, he also painted several works in his more conventional mode (*Gallo-Roman Women*, Opus xxiv; *The Death of Galeswinthe*, Opus xxxii), but by 1866, had already abandoned these subjects entirely. Almost all his subsequent historical genre, which comprises the vast majority of his production, was clothed in classical garb.

The Montreal *A Dealer in Statues*, painted and exhibited in 1867 at the Antwerp Salon, during his brief return to Belgium, is thus one of the earliest products of this change of direction.<sup>23</sup> This painting, moreover, is significant in Alma-Tadema's oeuvre for several reasons. In the first instance, it contains several formal elements which were to characterize his work well into the 1870s, elements which were to win him virtually immediate acclaim upon his arrival in England in 1870. The composition of the picture is a simple, frieze-like arrangement of figures (either human or marble) set across the foreground, parallel to the picture plane; from this, architectural elements recede in a sharp diagonal into the background – pierced, as are many of the other pictures from this period, by a small 'hole' in the composition (here an atrium), illuminated by a secondary light source. The same kind of arrangement of compositional elements can be seen, for example, in a picture painted the following year, *A Roman Amateur* (Fig. 2). Another

FIGURE 2. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Roman Amateur*, Opus LVIII, 1868. Oil on panel. 53.5 × 80 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, Mary Gertrude Abbey Fund (Photo: Museum).



compositional device used extensively by Alma-Tadema later in his career makes an early appearance in the Montreal painting. The rigidly formal double row of figures and sculptures, clearly inspired from the classical tradition in painting, is softened by a decidedly anti-classical, casual arrangement of the figures quite in keeping with the informal subject of the picture. The two figures to the extreme left, for example, are cut off abruptly (one is tempted to say humorously) by the edge of the panel, while the faces of two other figures – the seated woman and the man standing behind the central bronze sculpture – are unexpectedly ‘sliced’ by superimposed elements. This ordering of figures is a tightly structured part of the picture’s visual unity, yet it is made to look incidental to it. Masterful compositions of this kind were to become a hallmark of the artist’s work.

Again, the rich, saturated colours used in *A Dealer in Statues* are typical of the palette Alma-Tadema employed until the 1880s, when he began to paint outdoor subjects requiring appropriately lighter hues. These tones were directly inspired from painted architectural elements at Pompeii and are carefully carried from the background to the figures in the foreground to unify the composition. This early, characteristically warm, dark palette, which prompted early biographers to call Alma-Tadema’s first work a ‘Pompeian Period,’ was much admired by the artist’s contemporaries. In France, Paul Mantz had singled out his exceptional eye for colour in 1867,<sup>24</sup> while later in England, Zimmern recalled *A Dealer in Statues* speci-

fically for ‘the harmonizing of the lady’s dark cinnamon dress and the gentleman’s white dress with the surroundings.’<sup>25</sup>

Finally, *A Dealer in Statues* is the first of a number of pictures Alma-Tadema painted on the theme of the art collector in ancient Rome. Like the Montreal panel and Yale’s *A Roman Amateur* (Fig. 2), these pictures invariably represent a group of wealthy connoisseurs sitting comfortably in a richly-decorated interior dotted with celebrated antiquities. This subject was to prove particularly successful for Alma-Tadema, inasmuch as it flattered not only the owner’s knowledge of ancient art, but also paralleled his own collecting ambitions with those of the Ancients. The same year, the artist painted *The Picture Gallery*, which is of the same dimensions as *A Dealer in Statues* and was probably meant as a pendant to it (Fig. 3).<sup>26</sup> In all,

<sup>24</sup> *Supra*, p. 24 and n. 18.

<sup>25</sup> Zimmern, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Towards the end of his career, Alma-Tadema related the following, probably somewhat embellished, anecdote concerning the genesis of the ‘collector’ pictures: ‘They [Alma-Tadema’s artist friends] often chaffed him about his archaeological art, and on one occasion defied him to paint a Roman Picture Gallery [the challenge being that no Roman paintings other than wall painting are extant]. This put him on his metal [sic] and he painted one. Then his picture dealer commissioned him to paint a shop of sculpture.’ Related in ‘Chronicle: The Royal Gold Medalist and his Pictures,’ *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, III/XIII (1905-06), 444. At any rate, *A Dealer in Statues* was certainly finished first, since Alma-Tadema assigned it an earlier Opus number. I would like to thank Vern G. Swanson for the communication of this reference to me.





FIGURE 3. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Picture Gallery*, Opus I, 1867. Oil on panel, 71 × 46.4 cm. England. Collection Mr. H.E. Finsness (Photo: London, Sotheby's Belgravia, 6 November 1973, lot 7).

Alma-Tadema treated this topos a total of twelve times between 1867 and 1877.<sup>27</sup>

Of all the versions he painted of this theme, the closest compositional parallel to *A Dealer in Statues* is a very large work dated 1874 entitled *The Sculpture Gallery* (Fig. 4). Indeed, a comparison of the two reveals that the latter picture is in fact identical in composition to *A Dealer in Statues*.

<sup>27</sup> Other than the Montreal panel (Opus XLIX), *A Roman Amateur* (Opus LVIII), and *The Picture Gallery* (Opus I), already cited, these paintings are: *A Roman Art Lover (Silver Statue)* (1868, Opus LXXV), *A Roman Art Lover (The Runner)* (1870, Opus LXXIX), *A Visit to the Studio* (watercolour, 1873, Opus CXIII), *A Picture Gallery* (1873, Opus CXVII), *The Sculpture Gallery* (1874, Opus CXXV), *A Picture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus* (1874, Opus CXXVI), *The Sculpture Gallery* (1875, Opus CLVII), *Painting in Ancient Rome* (1877, Opus CLXXVII), *The Sculptor's Studio in Ancient Rome* (1877, Opus CLXXX).

<sup>28</sup> Bibliothèque Nationale. Département des Estampes. Inventaire du Fonds Français après 1800, II (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1937), 492, cat. 36.

<sup>29</sup> Advertisement included in *Art Annual*, 1886.

Alma-Tadema has merely substituted a new set of figures, sculpture, architectural elements and wall paintings in the later picture for the ones in the Montreal picture, while maintaining the same formal arrangement and spatial relationships in both. The 1874 *The Sculpture Gallery* became one of Alma-Tadema's best-known compositions, not least through the publication of an engraving by Auguste Blanchard (1819-1898) of the picture, which proved to be highly successful. It appeared in 1877, issued by Gambart and Knoedler, and was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle of 1878.<sup>28</sup> It seems that the engraving was later reissued by L.H. Lefevre in London: his sales advertisement for a portfolio of engravings after Alma-Tadema, including Blanchard's, was still appearing as late as 1886.<sup>29</sup>

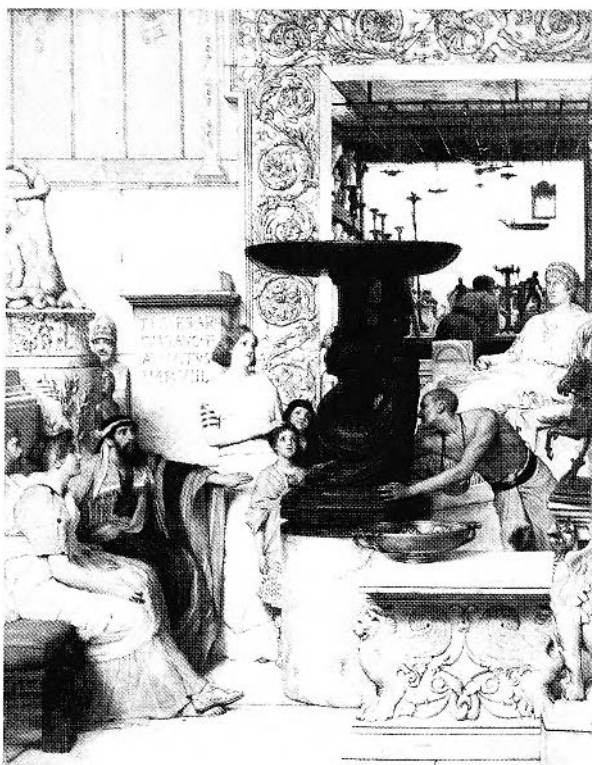
In the year following, Alma-Tadema executed a smaller version of his 1874 picture, with minor variations, for engraving (Fig. 5). In these two later treatments of the theme, however, he simply elaborated a composition he had created seven

FIGURE 4. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Sculpture Gallery*, Opus CXXV, 1874. Oil on canvas, 219.7 × 167.8 cm. Hanover (N.H.), Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Gift of Arthur M. Loew (Photo: Museum).



years earlier in *A Dealer in Statues*. Although in at least one instance Alma-Tadema did execute an almost identical replica of an earlier work for a specific reason,<sup>30</sup> he did not habitually 'repeat' his works (a fairly standard practice among late nineteenth-century painters), by, for example, reproducing his Academy successes for private clients. Late in life, in his acceptance speech on the occasion of his receipt of the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects (1906), he recalled the circumstances surrounding the creation of the 1874 picture and its relationship to the 1867 *A Dealer in Statues*. He relates how, in 1870, Gambart commissioned him to paint enlarged life-size versions of the 1867 *A Dealer in Statues* and *The Picture Gallery* for his private collection, indicating his intention to have them engraved for eventual sale. Since the artist believed that certain elements in the picture were not really conducive to a black-and-white format, he significantly altered the details of the commissioned pictures with the engraving process in mind.<sup>31</sup>

FIGURE 5. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Sculpture Gallery*, Opus CLVII, 1875. Oil on panel, 77 × 59.1 cm. Norfolk (Va.), The Chrysler Museum, on loan from the collection of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. (Photo: Museum).



While Alma-Tadema is rightly identified with Victorian painting in England, such an association has tended to obscure the fact, in contemporary and later literature, that he began his career on the Continent. His Dutch origins, his Belgian training under Leys, and his exposure to French painting during his residence in France in the 1860s must not be overlooked as influences upon his early work in particular. Furthermore, while the role of his Italian sojourn cannot be overestimated in Alma-Tadema's early classicizing pictures like *A Dealer in Statues*, it does not alone account for the artist's decision to embrace whole-heartedly these new themes. Clearly, Alma-Tadema did not embark upon this new phase in his work in a cultural vacuum, but was influenced by several contemporary and historical precedents.

Three years before Alma-Tadema made his first Paris Salon submission in 1864, Gustave Boulanger (1824-1888) exhibited a large canvas at

<sup>30</sup> Alma-Tadema painted a second version of one of his first major pictures, *The Education of the Children of Clovis* (Opus XIV, 1861, present location unknown), in a reduced format in 1868 (Opus LXIV, art market, New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet [29 May 1980], lot 39).

<sup>31</sup> 'Chronicle: The Royal Gold Medalist and his Picture,' *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, III/XIII (1905-06), 444.



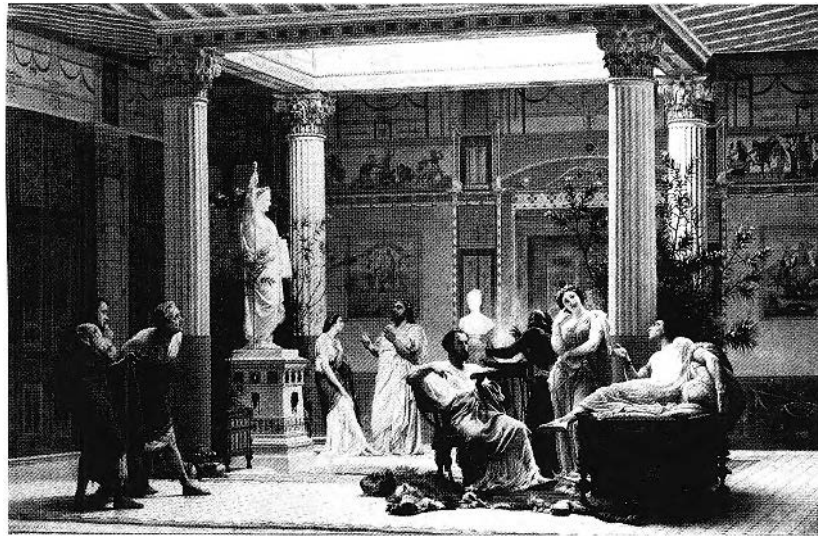


FIGURE 6. Gustave-Clarence-Rudolphe Boulanger, *La répétition du 'Joueur de flûte' et de 'La femme de Diomède', chez S.A.I. le prince Napoléon, dans l'atrium de sa maison, avenue Montaigne*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 83 × 130 cm. Versailles, Musée national du Château, Inv. MV 5614 (Photo: Musées Nationaux).

the Salon entitled *La répétition du 'Joueur de flûte' et de 'La femme de Diomède', chez S.A.I. le prince Napoléon, dans l'atrium de sa maison, avenue Montaigne* (Fig. 6).<sup>32</sup> This painting, which met with immediate success, is a unique pictorial record of an actual event: the performance of two plays set in antiquity, in the Pompeian-style house, designed by Alfred Norman in 1854-59, of the Prince Jérôme Napoléon in Paris. Portraits of a number of prominent individuals who took part in the performance are included in this idealized reportage, including the novelist and critic Théophile Gautier (who wrote *La femme de Diomède*), the dramatist Augier (author of *Le joueur de flûte*) and well-known members of the Comédie-Française.<sup>33</sup>

It is not known if Alma-Tadema saw this picture while he was in Paris; it was in the collection of the Prince Napoléon and therefore relatively inacces-

sible. However, he almost certainly would have known its engraving by Flamang and Laguillermie, published in the important periodical *L'Artiste* in 1863, the year he arrived in Paris.<sup>34</sup> Many of the elements in Boulanger's painting are paralleled in Alma-Tadema's early work in general and his 'collector' pictures like *A Dealer in Statues* in particular. The use of a reconstruction of a Pompeian interior in both paintings is the most obvious point of comparison, although in the case of the Boulanger, the setting is an actual room decorated in this manner, and only copied in the painting, while Alma-Tadema used sketches made *in situ* to create his Pompeian interiors. Both compositions also feature a frieze-like arrangement of figures in the foreground, as well as an atrium providing a light source. The most important resemblance between the two paintings is the fact that in both, contemporary figures are transplanted into an antique setting creating, as one critic of Boulanger's picture put it, 'an elegant modern fantasy on an ancient theme.'<sup>35</sup>

In the Montreal *A Dealer in Statues*, as in Alma-Tadema's other works of this period, actual members of the artist's family and entourage people his Pompeian reconstructions. They reappear in various groupings like a troupe of actors. In *A Dealer in Statues*, the standing woman at the far left is almost certainly the artist's first wife, Marie-Pauline Gressin de Boisgirard, since this figure closely resembles a drawing Alma-Tadema made

32 Paris, Salon de 1861, n° 356. See also *The Second Empire: Art in France Under Napoleon III* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1 October – 26 November 1978), cat. VI-12.

33 Linda Safran, 'A Note on Boulanger's *Répétition générale du Joueur de Flûte*,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, VI/XCVI (novembre 1980), 185-6.

34 *Inventory du Fonds Français après 1800*, XII (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1963), 227, cat. 16: *Répétition du Joueur de flûte et de la femme de Nicomède* (sic) dans l'Atrium de la Maison de S.A.I. le Prince Napoléon. This engraving is dated to 1861 by Safran, 185.

35 A. de la Fizelière, review of the Salon of 1861, quoted in *The Second Empire*, cat. VI-12.

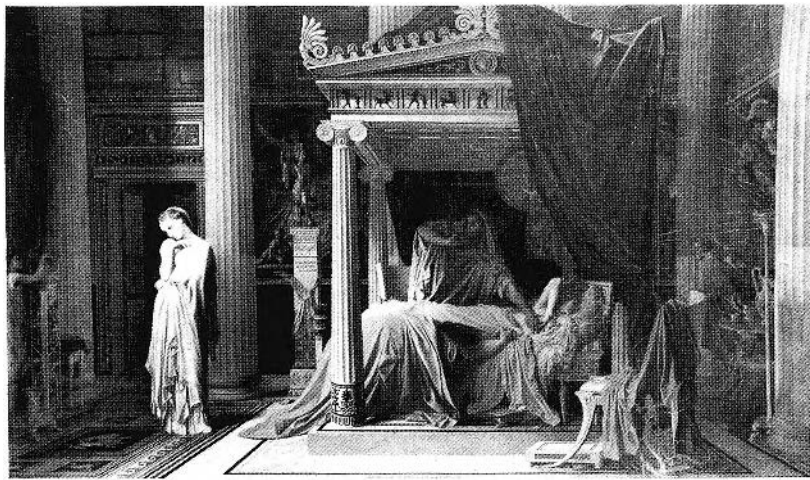


FIGURE 7. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Antiochus and Stratonice*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 57 × 98 cm. Chantilly, Musée Condé (Photo: Lauros-Giraudon).

of her at about the same time. One is also tempted to identify the red-headed bearded connoisseur showing the sculpture to the other figures as the artist himself, on the basis of the resemblance of this figure to a photograph of Alma-Tadema taken in the 1870s.<sup>36</sup> Vern Swanson has provisionally identified three of the other males in the painting as Verhas, Alfred Verwee and Mochelles, all friends of the artist.<sup>37</sup>

The construction of the 'Maison Pompéienne' by the Prince Napoléon, its use as a setting for a play based on antiquity, and the commemoration of these events in Boulanger's painting together attest to the enormous popularity at mid-century of the 'Neo-Grec' manner in French art. Among the many sources of the 'Neo-Grec,' new direct French involvement with the ongoing excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum may be cited, since it greatly enhanced the knowledge of Roman interiors, spurring a renewed popularity for classicizing motifs in the arts in general.<sup>38</sup>

The exemplar of the 'Neo-Grec' manner in French painting is Ingres' celebrated *Antiochus and Stratonice* of 1840 (Fig. 7), whose Pompeian setting was based on an archaeological reconstruction by the architect Victor Baltard.<sup>39</sup> Figures are here arranged in a shallow foreground space carefully

delineated by minutely-researched architectural ornament, and relieved, to the left, by a deep recession into space leading to an open door. Among the many other 'Neo-Grec' painters active in France at mid-century was Gérôme, who produced several such works around 1860; Alma-Tadema met Gérôme in Paris in 1864 and is known to have been influenced by him.<sup>40</sup> Typical of Gérôme's work at this time is *Le roi Candule* of 1859 (Fig. 8), a painting deeply indebted to Ingres' *Stratonice*. The spatial relationships in both these paintings resemble that of *A Dealer in Statues*, which likewise depends on architectonic elements to construct a tight, carefully controlled setting for the foreground figures. Ingres' painting, Gérôme's 'Neo-Grec' pictures, and Boulanger's canvas attest to the popularity and critical acceptance of the use of elaborate Pompeian reconstructions as pictorial settings in French painting around 1850. Their accent on polychrome architecture, sumptuous

<sup>36</sup> The drawing and photograph are reproduced in Swanson, 12 and 18.

<sup>37</sup> Information communicated by Vern G. Swanson to the author, 7 May 1980.

<sup>38</sup> Carlo Pietrangeli, 'Archaeological Excavations in Italy 1750-1850,' in *The Age of Neo-Classicism* (London, Royal Academy, Victoria & Albert Museum, 9 September – 19 November 1972), li-lij.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 135.  
<sup>40</sup> Swanson, 36.

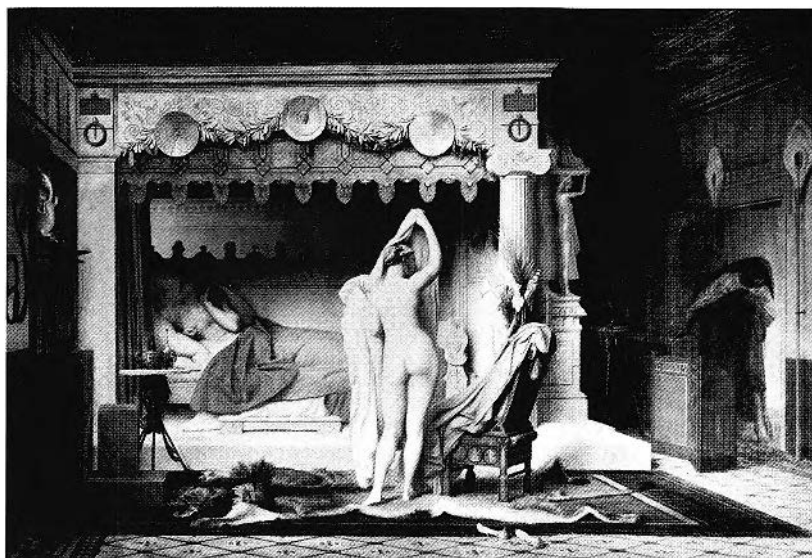


FIGURE 8. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Le roi Candale*, 1859. Oil on canvas, 67.3 × 99 cm. Puerto Rico, Museo del Arte de Ponce (Photo: Museum).

furnishings, and somewhat unheroic subject matter, moreover, distinguish these works from the Davidian Neo-Classicism of French painting at the beginning of the century, and ally them with the newly-revived interest in Rococo art in France at this time. The extent to which the compositions used in 'Neo-Grec' works became conventionalized in French painting may be illustrated by a canvas dated 1882 also in the collection of The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts by the orientalist Benjamin-Constant, *Le lendemain d'une victoire à l'Alhambra* (Fig. 9). It is hardly coincidental that the 'set' used here repeats almost identically the spatial composition of *A Dealer in Statues*.

Other traditions also find their echo in Alma-Tadema's 'collector' pieces. One of these has recently been proposed by C. Franklin Sayre, who notes their resemblance to the popular seventeenth-century Flemish 'cabinet d'amateur' paintings.<sup>41</sup> In these works, wealthy art lovers are shown gathered in large interiors filled with the painting and sculpture collections of a connoisseur who proudly describes 'his' treasures to his audience.<sup>42</sup> Alma-Tadema would certainly have become familiar with such works when he lived in Antwerp in the 1860s. These paintings served to record and immortalize the tastes of their owners,

while Alma-Tadema's are, of course, imaginary versions of the same theme. Nevertheless, Alma-Tadema uses contemporary portraits in his pictures, as do the 'cabinet d'amateur' paintings. In addition, both use similar spatial conventions, although it must be noted that they are characteristic of seventeenth-century Flemish paintings of interiors in general.

Interestingly enough, a tradition of 'cabinet d'amateur' painting also existed in England. Works painted as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century show portraits of celebrated connoisseurs at home with their collections. This tradition seems in fact to have been established in England by Flemish painters, since one of the earliest such pictures, *The Earl of Arundel in the Sculpture Gallery at Arundel House, London* (Arundel Castle, collection of the Duke of Norfolk), was painted by the Flemish artist Daniel Mytens around 1630 during his sojourn in London. English taste for these paintings received new impetus during the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries with direct British participation, especially by artists, in Italian excavations, paralleled by an increased interest for collecting Greek and Roman antiquities there. An interesting example of these later pictures is a small painting dated 1811,<sup>43</sup> recently on the art market (Fig. 10); a mixed group of figures in informal poses is seen admiring a Ptolemaic bust, with the *Hope Athena* in the right foreground. The scene is placed in a classicizing polychrome interior lit by an opening in an atrium in the left background. In all, the composition is not unlike

41 C. Franklin Sayre, 'Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *A Roman Amateur*,' *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin*, xxxiv (June 1973), 13-14.

42 For these paintings, see S. Speth-Holterhoff, *Les peintres flamands de cabinets d'amateur au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Bruxelles: Elsevir, 1957).

43 London, Christie's (21 November 1980), lot 110.

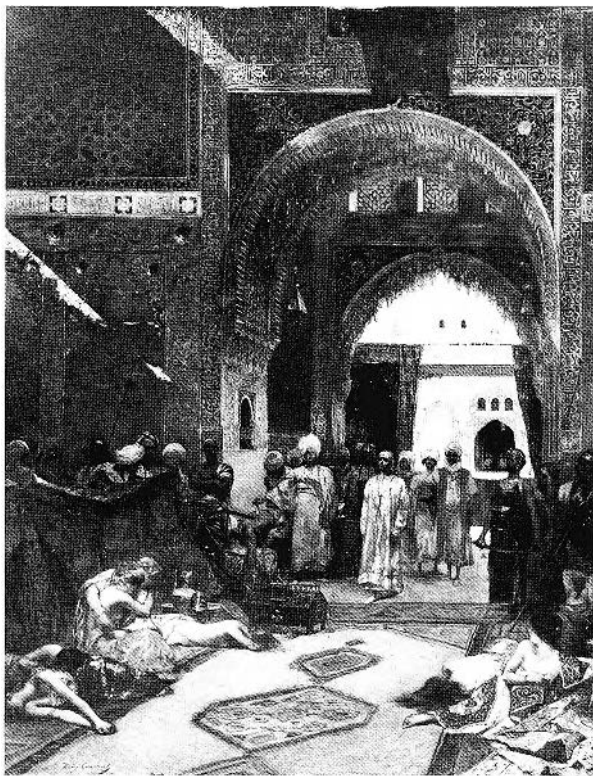


FIGURE 9. Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant, *Le lendemain d'une victoire à l'Alhambra*, 1882. Oil on canvas, 132.1 × 106 cm. The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Sir George Drummond (Photo: Museum).

FIGURE 10. Michael William Sharp, *A Capriccio Interior*, 1811. Oil on canvas, 117 × 99 cm. London art market (Photo: London, Christie's 21 November 1980, lot 110).



that of *A Dealer in Statues* and Alma-Tadema's other 'collector' pictures. The existence in England of paintings such as this virtually guaranteed Alma-Tadema a warm reception for his own unique interpretation of this established theme.

Alma-Tadema's particular contribution to the theme of the 'collector' picture is then two-fold. In the first place, he painted portraits of recognizable contemporaries in an antique setting, but in a manner which at once associates his paintings with and yet distinguishes them from 'Neo-Grec' painting in France around 1850-60. In the latter, painters such as Ingres and Gérôme selected themes from antiquity and placed them in appropriate, carefully polished reconstructions based on authoritative documentation concerning ancient interiors, lately enhanced and popularized by new excavations. Now, Boulanger's unique *Joueur de Flûte* describes a real event, where playwrights and actors participated in new plays set in antiquity, in a real setting itself inspired by Pompeian architecture and decoration. Alma-Tadema, on the other hand, has represented an imaginary event, drawn from neither antiquity nor from contemporary life *per se*, all the while garbing it in an archaizing mode which is formally indebted to the 'Neo-Grec' precedent. Thematically however, he has drawn upon an altogether different, older source, that of the Flemish 'cabinet d'amateur' painters. Unlike them, though, he has not immortalized the collecting acumen of an individual at a precise moment in time but, rather, has invented an idealized statement of the same theme, using known individuals, whose classicism renders the work a generic visualization, almost an illustration, of the subject. At the same time, it could not help but flatter the aspirations of clients of Alma-Tadema's own day by providing an ancient precedent for their collecting ambitions.

Moreover, in the Roman reconstructions in his 'collector' pictures, as well as other works, Alma-Tadema went directly *ad fontis*. While some themes other than those of the 'collector' pictures may have been based on the run of popular literature appearing in England and elsewhere in the wake of the resurgence in interest in antiquities around 1850,<sup>44</sup> even his anachronisms are invariably based

44 For example, two characters from the immensely popular English novel, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (first published in 1834 and subsequently re-issued in numerous editions) had already served as the subject for Alma-Tadema's 1867 *Glaucus and Nydia* (Opus XLVI, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Noah Butkin, Ohio).

on *direct study* of Italian sites and of works in the great museums, probably supplemented on occasion by newly-published scholarly documentation of recent excavations.<sup>45</sup> For this reason, the settings recorded in the early works in particular are easily identified as masterfully composed pastiches of recognizable objects and architectural elements from various sites. In Montreal's *A Dealer in Statues*, the sculptures in the foreground, which function almost as a second frieze of figures in counterpoint to the 'living' individuals in the picture, are well-known works of ancient art, easily recognizable to the *cognoscenti* among Alma-Tadema's audience. From left to right, we see first the right-hand portion of a third-century A.D.

45 Newly-available illustrated publications on Pompeii and Herculaneum included François Mazois, *Les ruines de Pompéi* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1824-38), 4 volumes; Louis Barré, *Herculaneum et Pompéi* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1839-40), 8 volumes; Fausto and Felice Nicollini, *Le case ed i monumenti de Pompei, disegnati e descritti* (Naples: Nicollini, 1854-96), 4 volumes; and later Giuseppe Fiorelli, *Gli scavi di Pompei dal 1861 al 1872* (Naples: Tipografica Italiana, 1873).

46 I would like to thank Paul Denis, who kindly helped me to identify these antiquities and their present locations.

47 See R.A. Briggs, *Pompeian Decorations* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1911), n.p. It is worth noting, in addition, that Alma-Tadema tried his own hand at furniture design in an antique mode, either copying existing models or inventing new designs. He was commissioned in 1884 by Henry Gordon Marquand, the President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, to design a music room for his mansion (for which Leighton designed the ceiling decoration). Among the furnishings were a piano and two stools (repro. New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet, 26 March 1980, lot 535). Other pieces he designed appear in the catalogue of the posthumous sale of the contents of his celebrated studio at Grove End Road (London: Hampton and Sons, 3-16 June 1913, e.g. lots 4-5, 10-11). They serve as models for the furnishings in several of the later paintings.

marble sarcophagus in the Museo Capitolino, representing the Endymion Myth (Fig. 11). Next is the Vatican's *Laocöon* (Fig. 12) shown, of course, with its pre-twentieth-century accretions. The central 'bronze' sculpture is a translation into metal of the well-known marble *Sophocles* in the Laterano (Fig. 13), while the draped seated female figure touching her forehead is the Museo Vaticano *Penelope* (Fig. 14). In the far right foreground is a Capitoline sculpture known in Alma-Tadema's day as a first-century A.D. portrait of *Agrippina* (wife of Germanicus), but now identified as a Roman matron, about third century A.D. and therefore, like the sarcophagus, inconsistent with the first-century A.D. *terminus ante quem* established by the picture's Pompeian decor (Fig. 15). The sculpture in the right middle distance is the Vatican's *Poseidippos* (Fig. 16).<sup>46</sup>

The furnishings of the room are less easily identified. The small bronze tiger or panther on the table in the foreground is similar to several published examples of Roman animal sculpture. Any comparison of this work to existing sculptures must remain generic, since a fair number of them have been excavated at first-century A.D. sites. The wooden table on which the bronze sits is very close in style to a metal table appearing in several paintings of the same date, such as the 1868 *A Roman Amateur* (Fig. 2), and *Tibullus at Delia's* (Opus xxxviii, 1866, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). All are very close to a bronze table found at Pompeii and now in the Museo Nazionale, Naples.<sup>47</sup> Part of the composite *pietra dura* and mosaic floor, re-used in part in *A Roman Amateur* (Fig. 2, right edge of mosaic), appears, among



FIGURE 11. Marble sarcophagus with scenes from the Myths of Selene and Endymion, A.D. 210-220 (lid of A.D. 130). Rome, Museo Capitolino, Inv. 723 (Photo: Alinari/EPA).

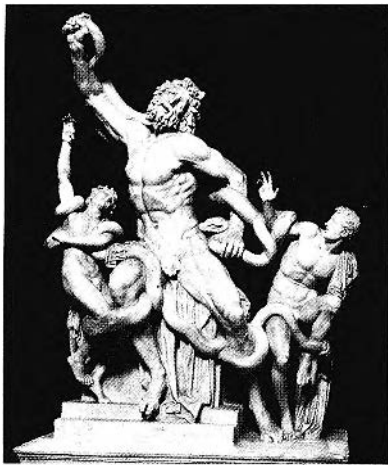


FIGURE 12. *Laocöon*, marble, about 50 B.C. Rome, Museo Vaticano, Inv. 74 (Photo: Anderson/EPA).



FIGURE 14. *Penelope*, Roman marble copy of a 5th-century B.C. original. Rome, Museo Vaticano, Inv. 261 (Photo: Alinari/EPA).

FIGURE 13. *Sophocles*, Roman marble. Rome, Museo Laterano, Inv. 476 (Photo: Anderson/EPA).

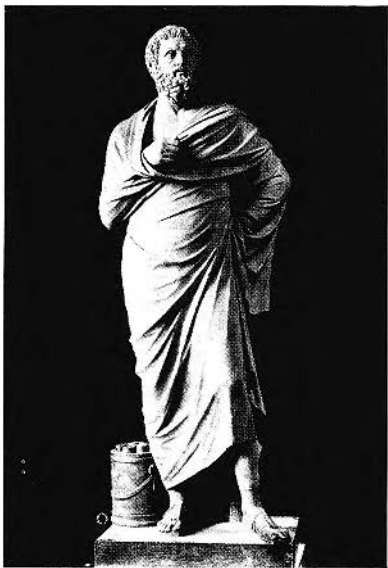


FIGURE 15. *Seated matron* ('Agrippina'), marble of the 3rd-century A.D. Rome, Museo Capitolino, Inv. 84 (Photo: Alinari/EPA).



other places, on the caldarium apse floor of the Casa del Menandro (I 10, 4).

As for the two-dimensional decorations, Alma-Tadema has incorporated painted elements from various extant sources, mostly at Pompeii. The ceiling of the middle-ground chamber between the main room and the atrium in the painting would appear to be composed from the decorations of the triclinium ceiling of the Casa del Cen-

tenario (IX 8, 3 and 6), the upper register of the wall of a cubiculum in the Casa dei Amorini Dorati (VI 16, 7) and the vaulted ceiling of the room east of the peristyle in Pompeii IX 2, 10. Alma-Tadema painted a very similar ceiling in another 'collector' picture executed the following year, *A Roman Art Lover* (*Silver Statue*), Opus I.XV, 1868 (Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum). The rinceau pattern running the length of the upper edge of the painting





FIGURE 16. *Poseidippos*, Roman marble copy of a Greek original. Rome, Museo Vaticano. Inv. 271 (Photo: Alinari/EPA).

appears to be directly copied from one on the west wall of the atrium of the Casa del Dioscuri (vi 9, 6-7). The painted masks and garlands of the upper edge of the wall of the left-hand side of the painting are similar to those of the Casa delle Maschere in Rome, while the painted walls of the atrium background are almost identical to those of the atrium of one of the best-known Pompeian houses, the Casa dei Vettii.

Over the years, most of the analyses of Alma-Tadema's work have limited themselves to remarking on the artist's particularized, eclectic vision of Roman life, a vision whose whimsies, of course, bespeak at least as much of the mores of Alma-Tadema's own day as of those represented in the paintings. Visually compelling, Alma-Tadema's paintings have perhaps been their own worst enemies, since their very virtuosity and richness have tended to discourage historians from looking beyond subject to possible stylistic models, and to position the artist logically within the history of nineteenth-century painting. Yet we have seen that Alma-Tadema's early paintings, like Montreal's *A Dealer in Statues*, draw upon the mainstream of official art in France at mid-century, as embodied by the work of the late Ingres and of other artists such as Gérôme.

*A Dealer in Statues* is of particular interest in characterizing this position, since, as noted, it is one of the first pictures in which Alma-Tadema successfully synthesized his models into a cohesive and unique aesthetic statement, one which was to inform his work during the following several decades. Moreover, it is the artist's first examination of the theme of the Collector in Antiquity, a theme which was to prove enormously successful for him, and to which he returned on numerous occasions over the next ten years.

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## RÉSUMÉ

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Étude sur un tableau de Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, acquis récemment par le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal et intitulé *Un marchand de sculptures* (Opus XLIX, 1867). L'auteur étudie l'accueil réservé par les critiques à l'œuvre d'Alma-Tadema, de son vivant et après sa mort, afin de remettre dans son contexte historique la réévaluation actuelle de ses peintures. Étant donné qu'il s'agit d'une des premières œuvres où Alma-Tadema exploite le thème de la vie quotidienne chez les anciens dans un décor à reconstitution archéologique, le tableau est d'abord examiné du point de vue de son sujet, soit le collectionneur ou le marchand d'œuvres d'art dans la Rome antique. *Un marchand de sculptures* est la première d'une longue série de peintures portant précisément sur ce sujet et qui devaient valoir le succès à leur auteur. L'examen, tant du contenu archéologique que du style de l'œuvre (en particulier son traitement de la profondeur spatiale) fait ressortir l'influence des peintres français «néo-grecs» du milieu du siècle, notamment de Gustave Boulanger et d'Ingres vers la fin de sa carrière, de même que la tradition flamande des tableaux de «cabinet d'amateur», plutôt que des peintres victoriens à qui l'on devait associer Alma-Tadema. On y voit que l'apport de l'artiste à l'interprétation de ce thème est de placer des personnages actuels, connus de l'époque, dans des décors de nature strictement archéologique, recréés à partir de toute une panoplie de sources originales étudiées *in situ*. Ces sources sont énumérées en fin d'article.

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