



**NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PAINTINGS  
AT THE STERLING AND FRANCINE CLARK ART INSTITUTE**

**VOLUME ONE**

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With an essay by Richard Rand  
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James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, and Fronia E. Wissman

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## Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

English, born Netherlands, 1836–1912

### 1 | Preparations for the Festivities (The Floral Wreath) 1866

Oil on canvas, 54 x 69.2 cm

Center (on altar): L. Alma. Tadema.

Bequest of Madeleine Dahlgren Townsend  
1982.11

*Preparations for the Festivities (The Floral Wreath)*, with its domesticated treatment of a Pompeian ritual, displays the hallmarks of Alma-Tadema's contribution to the Néo-Grec movement of the mid to late nineteenth century. While the attention to details, such as the mosaic floor tiles, the lion's-head spout, and the inlaid chairs, indicates the artist's interest in archaeological accuracy, the figures that occupy the foreground seem engaged in a conversation that Victorian viewers could imagine taking place in their own drawing room.

Painted in 1866, just a few years into the Dutch-born artist's independent career, *Preparations for the Festivities* played an important role in the establishment of Alma-Tadema's reputation. Exhibited at the Exposition Générale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, the painting garnered both public and official recognition, capped by King Leopold's awarding Alma-Tadema the Knighthood of the Order of Leopold on 17 October 1866. That Alma-Tadema saw the Brussels Salon as an important venue to make his name is clear from the unusual way he signed this work: the trompe l'oeil effect of engraved letters on an ancient altar in the center of the canvas boldly announces the artist's ambitions. In fact, in early accounts of the artist's career, his decision to add the first part of his surname is explained as a way to receive alphabetical priority in exhibition catalogues.<sup>1</sup>

With its ancient setting, rich colors, crowded composition, and profusion of textural details, *Preparations for the Festivities* is a fine example of the early maturity of Alma-Tadema. The mask of Bacchus hung above a tunic on a wooden beam to form an altar demonstrates that the preparations are for a feast of the wine god, but the fact that this mask is cut off by the edge of the canvas and is cast in shadow minimizes the need to assign a specific holiday to the painting. Rather, the occasion allows the artist to display his extensive knowledge of antique objects. As Patricia

Ivinski has shown in her identification of the prototypes for the bronze drinking cups (rhyta) as objects from the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples,<sup>2</sup> Alma-Tadema's work lends itself to an archaeological impulse to find sources. *Preparations for the Festivities* is an early example of the artist's new interest in such subjects.

Alma-Tadema's turn to Greco-Roman settings is easily attributable to the impact of his first trip to Italy in 1863 just after his first marriage. His friend, biographer, and Egyptologist Georg Moritz Ebers (1837–1898) recounted that the death of his mother, his marriage, and his visit to Florence, Rome, Naples, and Pompeii made that year "specially momentous" for Alma-Tadema, and remarked on the professional, as well as the personal, milestone of 1863.<sup>3</sup> Ebers observed that in Italy, Alma-Tadema "lost his taste for the representation of isolated historical events."<sup>4</sup>

The early historical works to which Ebers refers are those, such as *The Destruction of Terdoest Abbey in 1571* (1857; now destroyed), which Alma-Tadema painted while at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp.<sup>5</sup> He entered the Academy in 1852, and Baron Gustave Wappers (1803–1874) and Professor of Archaeology Louis de Taeye (1822–1890) introduced him to subjects of Flemish history. This type of subject matter was even more pronounced in the work of Baron Henri Leys (1815–1869), whose studio Alma-Tadema joined in 1858.

While his exposure to ancient works of art in the museums and archaeological sites of Italy provided



Fig. 1.1. Detail of frame (cat. 1)





1

him with the raw materials for his new subjects, Alma-Tadema had also seen recent contemporary French depictions of ancient Greece and Rome at the 1862 International Exhibition in London. Painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Thomas Couture (1815–1879) presented scenes from Greek and Roman history with drama and high gloss. Alma-Tadema's more intimate interiors, such as *Preparations for the Festivities*, clearly reveal the differences between his depiction of the ancient world and those painted by Gérôme and his circle.

Alma-Tadema's early biographer Helen Zimmern proposed that his Dutch birth provided the key to the artist's innovative approach to Classical subject matter. Noting that Alma-Tadema "applies the methods of genre painting to the treatment of antique themes," Zimmern linked this novel approach to his aesthetic precursors, the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> The conversation between the two ladies preparing garlands and the gesturing man, with the maid in the far background lighting lamps does, in fact, convey the same interest in daily life as the encounters between soldier and lady, doctor and patient, maid-servant and mistress depicted by Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch, and Gabriel Metsu.

Moreover, Alma-Tadema's careful painting technique continues the Netherlandish tradition of *fein-*

*malerei*. In an article for the *Century Magazine* in 1894, Alma-Tadema's sister-in-law, Ellen Gosse, described in detail his painting method, quoting him as saying, "Nothing can be done well without taking trouble."<sup>7</sup> It was precisely the high level of finish and attention to detail that Alma-Tadema's detractors pointed to as the source of his popular appeal. On the occasion of his 1883 retrospective at the Grosvenor Gallery, the *Art Journal* disapprovingly noted that "the reproduction of surfaces, the completeness of execution which gives almost illusory effects of texture, will always command a delighted admiration."<sup>8</sup>

Alma-Tadema's attention to every detail is also seen in the elaborate frame of this work (fig. 1.1). Lynn Roberts has called Alma-Tadema "the most notable frame designer" amongst the Victorians of the period termed "High Renaissance."<sup>9</sup> In this case, the richness of the Pompeiian interior that is the subject of the painting is extended onto a complicated gilded molding frame. The organically shaped corner motifs and the scrolls surrounding the artist's name in the center of the lower edge mark the frame as a departure from the subdued classical frames favored in the first part of the century. Diamond-shaped lozenges against a hammered background provide an extensive surface for reflected light, offsetting the darker palette of the painting. EP

**PROVENANCE** Commissioned by Donner, Brussels (from 1866); Baron Jules de Hauff, Paris, sold to Goupil, 16 Dec. 1881; [Goupil, Paris, 1881, sold to Avery, 6 May 1882, as *Préparatifs d'une fête*];<sup>10</sup> [Samuel Putnam Avery, New York, from 1882, d. 1904]; Madeleine Dahlgren Townsend, New York, bequeathed to the Clark, 1981; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1982.

**EXHIBITIONS** Brussels 1866, no. 8, as *Avant la fête*, lent by Donner; The Hague 1866, no. 355, as *Voor het feest*, lent by Donner; Williamstown 1983c, no cat.; Williamstown and others 1991–92, pp. 14, 46–47, no. 5, ill.; Williamstown 1995a, no. 30.

**REFERENCES** Alma-Tadema, Vosmaer, and Vosmaer c. 1885, no. 45; Ebers 1886, p. 44; Standing 1905, p. 46; Dircks 1910, p. 25; Swanson 1990, pp. 33, 137–38, 301, no. 72, ill.; Hunter 2000, p. 5, ill.

**TECHNICAL REPORT** The original fabric support is a twill weave linen, wax-resin lined in 1982 to two layers of fiberglass fabric with a polyester monofilament mesh interlayer. The painting was originally out of square, so the top left edge and lower right corner now reveal part of the preserved tacking margins. Stretching distortions at the fabric's edges, confirmed in the radiograph, suggest that the canvas may have been prepared by the artist. A slight enlargement of the picture took place before 1982, probably to accommodate a specific frame. There is an early frame indentation 1.3 cm in along the right edge, and edge retouching was noted in the 1982 report. There are strong vertical age cracks, and short traction cracks of varying width are scattered throughout the surface. Beneath these cracks in the lower half of the image are colors that may indicate substantial changes by the artist, or perhaps the presence of another picture. When the picture was examined in 1982, previous abrasion and solvent sensitivity were noted in the glazed colors, so the varnish was only partially removed. Under ultraviolet light, considerable old natural resin varnish can still be detected, especially in dark passages. New inpainting can be seen on the left and right edges, in the animal fur, the man's chair, and the woman's white dress. Older retouchings are found on the left woman. There is an inscription by the artist in black ink on the reverse, now hidden by the lining: "Je sous-signé déclare le présent tableau original et tout de ma main. L. Alma-Tadema."

The ground layers are off-white and contain small round translucent particles, possibly quartz, probably added for texture. No underdrawing is visible in infrared examination, although there are thinly painted architectural lines. The X-radiograph shows numerous alterations, including what seems to be a fireplace mantel to the right of the seated woman, suggesting that the standing woman is a later addition. The man's tunic was originally shorter, and he may have had a laurel wreath on his head. Among other smaller changes, the male figure's outstretched foot was once closer to the female figure. The paint surface is built up with thick,

paste-consistency light-colored forms, which were then glazed to darken, tone, or accent them with detail. The black elements on the woman's chair were first painted red, making this either an artist change or his imitation of a type of lacquer work. The tile pattern on the floor at the woman's feet has, over time, struck through the container for the flowers, and under low magnification, it is clear the flowers were painted after the floor paint was set.

1. Ebers 1886, pp. 3–4. Rudolf Dircks, however, debunks this self-christening as a myth, noting that he signed his drawings "L. Alma Tadema" even at the age of six. See Dircks 1910, p. 4.
2. See Williamstown and others 1991–92, p. 47. Ivinski notes that the same rhyta are used in Alma-Tadema's *The Women of Amphissa* (cat. 3).
3. Ebers 1886, p. 25.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
5. S 32.
6. Zimmern 1902, p. 24.
7. Gosse 1894, p. 491.
8. *Art Journal* 1883, p. 33.
9. Roberts 1986, p. 275.
10. See Goupil Stock Books, book 10, p. 195, no. 15826. Avery also records his purchase in his own notes as "bought of Goupil . . . Tadema 850" (Notebook V, p. 110, 20 May 1882, in Avery 1979, 651–52).

## 2 | Pine Trees in a Roman Park 1876

Oil on canvas, mounted on plywood, 22.1 x 35.5 cm

Lower right: L. Alma-Tadema a.a.t.

Gift of the Joseph F. McCrindle Collection

2009.12.1

This small oil sketch depicts a garden, identified by scholars as that of the Villa Borghese in Rome.<sup>1</sup> A pale, unpainted form presumably representing a wall cuts across the lower left of the composition, and a grove of pine trees and dense bushes, painted in vibrant greens, are visible behind it. Directly in front of the wall stands a solitary tree. A long tree trunk cuts a vertical line across the right side of the composition, extending from the signature to the top edge of the canvas. The bottom of the wall and the bottom left of the composition are unfinished. The sketch was likely painted in the open air on unstretched canvas pinned to a board, as suggested by the tack holes at each