



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

VOLUME ONE

Edited by Sarah Lees

With an essay by Richard Rand
and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber

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Nineteenth-Century European Paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute is published with the assistance of the Getty Foundation and support from the National Endowment for the Arts.



The Getty Foundation



Produced by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
225 South Street, Williamstown, Massachusetts 01267
www.clarkart.edu

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Production by The Production Department,
Whately, Massachusetts
Printed on 135 gsm Gardapat Kiara
Color separations and printing by Trifolio, Verona

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Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London
P. O. Box 209040, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-9040
www.yalebooks.com/art

Printed and bound in Italy
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Nineteenth-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute / edited by Sarah Lees ; with an essay by Richard Rand and technical reports by Sandra L. Webber ; with contributions by Katharine J. Albert, Philippe Bordes, Dan Cohen, Kathryn Calley Galitz, Alexis Goodin, Marc Gotlieb, John House, Simon Kelly, Richard Kendall, Kathleen M. Morris, Leslie Hill Paisley, Kelly Pask, Elizabeth A. Pergam, Kathryn A. Price, Mark A. Roglán, James Rosenow, Zoë Samels, Fronia E. Wissman.

volumes cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-935998-09-9 (clark hardcover : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-300-17965-1 (yale hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Painting, European—19th century—Catalogs. 2. Painting—Massachusetts—Williamstown—Catalogs. 3. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute—Catalogs. I. Lees, Sarah, editor of compilation. II. Rand, Richard. III. Webber, Sandra L. IV. Title. V. Title: 19th-century European paintings at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

ND457.S74 2012

759.9409'0340747441—dc23

2012030510

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5 | **Hopeful** 1909

Oil on panel, 34 x 13.8 cm
Lower left: LAT / op. / CCCXCIV
1955.873

Alma-Tadema's small late work was the only one by the artist that Robert Sterling Clark purchased. Painted as a gift for Queen Alexandra, the single figure searching the horizon for signs of her beloved's return might seem an all too apt subject for the consort of the notoriously wandering King Edward VII. In fact, Alma-Tadema was friends with the royal couple and had even assisted with the decorations for their coronation in August 1902.¹ Moreover, the theme was one which the artist explored a number of times in his later career, as in the watercolor *Impatient or Expectations* (1901; private collection), which he also gave to the Queen.²

Of the five paintings in which women wait for men, *Hopeful*, pared down to its most essential elements, is perhaps the simplest.³ The composition is nevertheless replete with details that characterize Alma-Tadema's work. The advantages of Alma-Tadema's choices in constructing this scene are clear when this painting is compared to a work painted just a year before, *At Aphrodite's Cradle* (private collection).⁴ In the latter image, the viewer is blocked off from the figures who are seen only from the waist up. By contrast, Alma-Tadema reinforces a psychological connection to the woman of *Hopeful* by placing her in the viewer's space. Alma-Tadema has taken the figure of *Hopeful* from the earlier work, altering her costume and changing the placement of her right arm. His extension of this arm creates an elegant diagonal line that gives additional momentum and urgency to her task.

By placing the statuesque woman in the corner of the roof, the artist not only presents a full-length view of the subject, but also maximizes the surface area of the marble architecture. Within limited dimensions, Alma-Tadema effectively uses the setting to amplify both the tonal range and emotional content of the painting. The whites and blues of costume, stone, sea, and sky set up a rhythmic link among a variety of textures. Juxtaposing the milky marble with the play of midday light on the complicated folds of the dress, Alma-Tadema demonstrates his virtuosity in manipulating white paint and its blue undertones. Only the red hair and the lavender sash stand out from this cool palette.



With the representation of a marble relief of a sleeping dog, Alma-Tadema blurs the boundaries between flesh and stone. The compositional echoes between the inert dog, a symbol of fidelity, and the living woman are reinforced by the woman's pose. Leaning on the lunette, with her left arm encircling her head, the woman, in effect, frames herself in the same way that the circular arch frames the curled-up canine. Moreover, while the white robes symbolize purity, their coloration also emphasizes their sculptural quality. In fact, when questioned by Frederick Dolman about the source of his knowledge of antiquity, Alma-Tadema responded that his understanding of costume came "mainly from sculpture and antique paintings."⁵

Alma-Tadema's reputation and success lay in his familiarity with and skill in re-creating the accessories of ancient Rome and Greece, and he went so far as to number each of his works an "opus" with roman numerals. As "op. CCCXCIV" of 408 numbered works, *Hopeful* is one of Alma-Tadema's last. Having attained financial security and, in 1899, a knighthood, Alma-Tadema painted fewer easel productions than in his peak years of the 1860s through the 1880s. After the death of his second wife, Laura Epps, in the summer of 1909, and with his own health deteriorating, Alma-Tadema gradually scaled back his public duties; he died on 28 June 1912 while at the spa at Wiesbaden. Although the drastic change in his critical fortunes is best seen in Roger Fry's excoriating 1913 comparison of his works to "very good, pure, wholesome margarine,"⁶ recent years have seen a reappraisal of his work.⁷ EP

PROVENANCE Executed for Queen Alexandra of England (from 1909); possibly M. Polak, London; sale, Christie's, London, 24 Apr. 1936, no. 28; [possibly Vicars Brothers, London]; [N. Mitchell, London, sold to Clark, 23 Nov. 1937]; Robert Sterling Clark (1937–55); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1955.

EXHIBITIONS Williamstown 1958a, ill.; Provo 1979, no cat.; Williamstown and others 1991–92, no. 37, ill.

REFERENCES Dircks 1910, pp. 16, 32, ill.; Swanson 1990, pp. 272, 483, no. 423, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel 1.6 cm thick whose reverse is primed with a pale ground and a dark gray paint. Although the panel is unusually thick for painting, the preparation layers on the back suggest that it was made for this purpose. There is a very slight warp where the lower right corner has pulled forward. An invoice from Knoedler's in Paris suggests that this picture was cleaned, possibly by

Henri Helfer in 1938. The painting was cleaned again in 1978, and a faint fluorescence in ultraviolet light shows traces of the first varnish. A row of retouches along the top edge cover old frame abrasion, and scattered deposits of metal leaf dot the left edge and upper left corner of the picture. Old solvent abrasion makes it difficult to read the drape and shadows of the costume in several areas. The present spray-varnish coating has a slightly reticulated surface in some locations.

The ground layers are an off-white color. In general, the paint layers are structured in thin veils of glaze-like application, and the presence of resin in the paint layers is likely. In infrared reflectography, underdrawing can be seen beneath the thinly applied paint, with especially clear lines in the hand resting on the parapet. In both infrared and normal light, changes are detectable in the arched corner of the balcony, where an additional rounded section is visible to the left of the painted one. This may indicate that two rounded sections were intended in the initial composition or that the artist moved the arched shape in the final layers. The opacity of paint at the abandoned site suggests that the artist had at least started to paint this configuration. Under magnification, several lines in the architecture contain black particles, probably charcoal, scattered in the paint. Warm dark brown sketching lines can be seen in the costume outlines, folds, shading, and along the sash. Other changes to the image are visible in reflected light, in an arching brushstroke 2.5 cm below the costume's sash, adjustments to the figure's throat and chin, and a shift in the line of her back.

1. Swanson 1990, p. 87.
2. This watercolor (private collection) shows a green-robed woman drawing back a curtain. It is one of fifty-one watercolors to which Alma-Tadema gave an opus number—in this case opus CCLXVII. See Williamstown and others 1991–92, p. 110, no. 46.
3. The other four works are *Expectations* (1885; location unknown), *Coign of Vantage* (1895; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), *Hero* (1898; location unknown), and *At Aphrodite's Cradle* (1908; private collection); S 304, 371, 389, 420.
4. S 420.
5. Dolman 1899, p. 606.
6. Fry 1913, p. 667.
7. See, for example, Prettejohn 2002, pp. 115–29.