

The background of the cover is a detailed 19th-century painting of a storm at sea. The sky is filled with heavy, dark, and turbulent clouds, with some light breaking through near the horizon. The sea is dark and choppy, with white-capped waves crashing against a sandy beach in the foreground. Several large sailing ships with multiple masts and sails are visible on the horizon, some appearing to be struggling against the wind. The overall mood is one of intense natural power and historical drama.

**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

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, and Fronia E. Wissman

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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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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16. Elizabeth Prettejohn discusses Alma-Tadema's compositional tendencies in "Antiquity Fragmented and Reconstructed: Alma-Tadema's Compositions," in *Amsterdam–Liverpool 1996–97*, pp. 33–42, and Prettejohn 2002, pp. 115–29.
17. For a discussion of Alma-Tadema's work for the London stage, see Barrow 2001, pp. 165–69.
18. Dolman 1899, p. 604.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 605.
20. Alma-Tadema 1907, pp. 169–80.
21. Phillips 1891, p. 206.
22. For example, in his review of the Academy's memorial retrospective of 1913, A. Clutton Brock discusses Alma-Tadema's relationship to seventeenth-century Dutch genre painters. See Brock 1913, pp. 285–86. More recently, Christopher Wood has written that "his character, his temperament, and his art remained, to the end of his life, essentially Dutch." See Wood 1983, p. 106.
23. Phillips 1891, p. 207.
24. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema to Thomas Armstrong, 3 Sept. 1887 (The Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema Collection: photographs and correspondence of the famous Victorian painter, University of Birmingham Library, Add. 28).
25. Gosse 1894, p. 493.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 494.
27. Williamstown and others 1991–92, p. 97.
28. For a discussion of the Grove End Road house and Alma-Tadema's other residences and interior designs, see Julian Treuherz, "Alma-Tadema, Aesthete, Architect and Interior Designer," in *Amsterdam–Liverpool 1996–97*, pp. 45–56.
29. A letter in the Clark curatorial file from Evelyn Joll of Agnew's, dated 5 Apr. 1979, states that Agnew's sold this picture along with another to Daniel Thwaites, of Blackburn, and that Thwaites's great-grandson sold this picture at Christie's some years before the date of the letter. Clark records indicate the first sale date as 15 July 1887, but Vern Swanson gives it as 30 Apr. 1887; see Swanson 1990, p. 233.

4 | Mrs. Ralph Sneyd (Mary Ellis Sneyd) 1889

Oil on panel, 30.5 x 23.8 cm

Lower left (on chair arm): L. Alma-Tadema op. CCXCV

Gift of Michael Coe in memory of Sophie D. Coe
1996.12

Alma-Tadema has been so closely associated with his depiction of scenes from ancient history that his portraits have inevitably been given little, if any, attention in the literature. Alma-Tadema himself complained that his portraits were the least recognized part of his oeuvre. When interviewed by Frederick Dolman in 1899, he noted: "People . . . always seem to forget that I paint portraits."¹ The situation is typified in George Moritz Ebers's 1886 biography of his friend when, at the end of the book, he states that "Tadema has also proved himself a portrait painter." After this tantalizing comment, however, Ebers cuts off any discussion with the plea that because he has "already exceeded my allotted space, I am prohibited from mentioning separately the portraits."² Helen Zimmern in her 1902 biography associates Alma-Tadema's portraits with the later phase of his career and praises "his wonderfully careful technique" and "perfection of finish." Nevertheless, she goes on to describe the inevitable resistance to associating Alma-Tadema with the portrayal of real-life, contemporary people rather than "blue skies, placid seas, spring flowers, youths and maidens in the heyday of life."³

Painted in 1889, the portrait of Mrs. Ralph Sneyd elicited notice when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy the following year. Chosen as one of the "Principal Pictures" of 1890 by Henry Blackburn in his *Academy Notes*, it is one of seventy-seven other portraits mentioned in the exhibition.⁴ While Blackburn restricted his commentary to a terse description of the sitter's apparel of "black dress with white stripes,"⁵ the reviewer writing in the *Illustrated London News* praised the "transparency" of the "flesh-tints."⁶

The common criticism directed at Alma-Tadema's figures was their lack of expression, exemplified by the *Art Journal's* warning that "it should be understood explicitly that the general lack of attraction of his figures is due to their complete denial of spirituality."⁷ That this failing was generally accepted and presented a particular challenge to his portraiture is clear even from the writing of the artist's advocates. In an extended article on Alma-Tadema for the Christmas



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Supplement of the *Art Journal* in 1910, Rudolf Dircks stated: “It is not . . . in the presentment of the human drama that his great qualities rest. It is in his love and appreciation of the so called accessories of life.”⁸

Alma-Tadema himself explained his theory of the importance of the setting in portraiture. Countering Frederick Dolman’s claim that portraits were “the least interesting part of an exhibition,” Alma-Tadema noted: “When you or I meet a friend, we see not only him but his surroundings, whether it is in a room, a garden, or the street. I consider, therefore, that you should paint

not only men and women, but some part also of their accessories or environments, and it is upon this principle that most of my portraits have been executed.”⁹

Accordingly, it is not surprising that even in a canvas of small dimensions, Mrs. Sneyd occupies only the lower left, allowing us to see the features of the room in which she sits. The Mexican onyx windows identify the setting as Alma-Tadema’s own home at 17 Grove End Road.¹⁰ The rugs, the inlaid table, the floral screen, pots of flowers, Mrs. Sneyd’s jewelry and her black-and-white striped dress with its fringe

all contribute to the profusion of detail—which Dircks terms “accessorial finish”¹¹—that was characteristic of Alma-Tadema’s subject pictures. Within this High Victorian setting, Mrs. Sneyd’s stiff arms and doll-like face are softened by her direct engagement with the viewer and the smile that plays on her lips.

Although Dircks also comments that “most of the subjects of Sir Lawrence’s portraits would seem to have been his friends,”¹² there does not seem to be a connection between the Sneyd family and the artist.¹³ Colonel Ralph Sneyd (1863–1949) married his cousin Mary Evelyn Ellis (d. 1923) in 1885, inheriting Keele Hall, the family estate in Staffordshire, in 1888.¹⁴ The first Keele Hall was built for Ralph Sneyd’s namesake in the Tudor era and the second built in 1863 just before his birth.¹⁵ The family also had a long tradition of collecting fine art and books, as is evidenced by the numerous sales of Sneyd property through Christie’s and Sotheby’s between 1903 and 1932.¹⁶ Alma-Tadema’s portrait is not listed in any of these sales or in a late nineteenth–early twentieth-century inventory.¹⁷ EP

PROVENANCE Commissioned by Ralph Sneyd, 1889; [N. Mitchell, London]; sale, Christie’s, London, 9 Nov. 1945, no. 85; Nicholson, London;¹⁸ [Robert Isaacson Gallery, New York, by 1960, until at least 1962]; Michael D. Coe, New Haven (by 1991–96, given to the Clark, 4 Nov. 1996); Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1996.

EXHIBITIONS London 1890, no. 900; New York 1962, no. 10; Williamstown and others 1991–92, no. 39, ill., lent by Michael D. and Sophie D. Coe.

REFERENCES Blackburn 1890, p. 21; *Illustrated London News* 1890, p. 686; Dircks 1910, p. 31; *Art News* 1960b, p. 20, ill.; Swanson 1990, pp. 239, 436, no. 332, ill.

TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a mahogany panel 1 cm thick with a very slight concave warp in the lower left corner. The panel has a dark gray wash on the reverse. There is a network of large wrinkles in the uppermost white preparation layer, which may have been an incompatible ground applied by the artist over the commercially applied ground. This wrinkling is most severe in the left third of the image, especially in the figure. The wrinkles have opened up the paint, revealing peaks of white ground or paint below. Scratching marks across the wood grain probably indicate that the panel was given some tooth before it was primed. The X-radiograph reveals a pale band around the perimeter, which is 2.5 cm wide on all but the right border, which is 1.9 cm wide. The surface shows evidence of cleaning and a brush revarnishing in a glossy resin that is soft and easily damaged. The edges of the painting seem to have a felt impression from

a padded frame rabbet. Some of the wrinkles are retouched where solvent abrasion and splits in the dark paint layer had created white ridges as the wrinkles emerged. There are also small inpainting spots in the face and on the right table. The signature is possibly done in an ink wash.

The ground appears to be comprised of several off-white layers, presumably oil based to have formed such wrinkles. A number of drawing lines and changes can be seen in infrared reflectography, as well as in normal light, suggesting the painting sequence of some details. There seems to be a faint sketch for the face, seen in the eyes and the shape of the head, although these may be executed in thin brown paint. Changes from the underdrawing to the final painting can be seen in the lead tracery of the right side of the stained glass window, and there may be a small object drawn on the floor in front of the rear pedestal table, which was not included in the paint layer. In normal light, it can be seen that parts of the sitter’s hands and an adjustment to the size of one arm are painted over the black dress.

1. Dolman 1899, p. 613.
2. Ebers 1886, p. 90.
3. Zimmern 1902, pp. 36–37.
4. Blackburn 1890, p. 3.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
6. *Illustrated London News* 1890, p. 686.
7. *Art Journal* 1883, p. 36.
8. Dircks 1910, p. 7.
9. Dolman 1899, pp. 613–14.
10. Patricia Ivinski made this observation in Williamstown–Baltimore–Cincinnati–Memphis 1991–92, p. 101.
11. Dircks 1910, p. 18.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. Although Swanson misidentifies the sitter, neither he nor Ivinski found any evidence of a personal relationship between the families. See Swanson 1990, p. 239; Williamstown and others 1991–92, p. 102.
14. Kolbert 1976, n.p.
15. Pevsner 1974, p. 158.
16. For example, in the 1924 Old Master sale of “Sneyd Heirlooms,” there were 124 lots of British, Dutch, Flemish, Italian, and French paintings. See Christie’s 1924b. At a separate sale, furniture, porcelain, and other works of art were sold. See Christie’s 1924a. See also A. L. Munby’s discussion of Walter Sneyd’s collection of illuminated manuscripts in Munby 1972, 107–19.
17. For the reference to the Sneyd inventory and for clarification of dates and other details, I am grateful to Helen Burton of the Special Collections and Archives at Keele University, where the Sneyd papers are held.
18. The early provenance of this picture is documented in Swanson 1990, p. 239.