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'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, recrées à partir de toute une panoplie de sources originales étudiées in situ. Ces sources sont énumérées en fin d'article.
The Cool Twilight of Luxurious Chambers*:
Alma-Tadema's 'A Dealer in Statues'

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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. An early work by the artist, his Opus XIX, dated 1867 and in excellent condition, 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 XIX, 1867. Oil on panel, 61.5 x 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

1 Inv. 1986.2. Purchase, Horsley and Annie Townsend Bequest, oil on panel, 61.5 x 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 XIX.
2 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 Alph. 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 in 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. 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 CCCXI, 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. 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. 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 CCCXXII, 1905-7, present location unknown) for an astonishing £145,000.

The course of Alma-Tadema’s career has recently been thoroughly re-examined by Vern Swanson, 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 XVIIIe Dynastie (Pastimes in Ancient Egypt: 3000 Years Ago), Opus XVIII, 1869 – won the artist a medal, thus setting the direction of his career. 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 patronic 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 115.
7 Vern G. Swanson, Alma-Tadema: The Painter of the Victorian Vision of the Ancien 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, no 269, now Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, England. It should be noted that regulations of the Salon of 1864 were reforming, so that no ordering of medals in 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 laureates at the Salon of 1864 included Paris de Chavannes, Millet, Morceau 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], IVe groupe, Les œuvres d’art, 99, and A. Bonnin, Les œuvres françaises et étrangères [Paris: E. Dentu], 35).
hundred works were exhibited at Burlington House in a Royal Academy Memorial Winter Exhibition.9

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 disinfect the Order of Merit of Tadema’s scented soap?’10 sums up contemporary British reactions to Victorian art as the product of ‘the purely commercial ideals of the age in which [it] grew up,’11 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 Muse, but by the spawn of the Python.’12 He accused Alma-Tadema of disserve 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,13 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 Euxosas – none of them over ten years old,’ he characterized the effect of one of Alma-Tadema’s paintings, A Pyrrhic Dance (Opus lxix, 1869, Guildhall Art Gallery, London) as ‘a microscopic view of a small detachment of black-beetles, in search of a dead rat.’14 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.15

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 1907.16 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.’17

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), 169–186.
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 heurces pour les colorations robustes; il a des rouges qui font plaisir à l’œil et des bruns qui sont les plus beaux au monde; .. comme peintre, il a des mérites auxquels les connaisseurs attachent toujours un grand prix.

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.’

Georg Ebers, a prominent archaeologist and critic of the time, published a biography of the artist as early as 1886, and two serious attempts at a catalogue raisonné of the paintings were undertaken during his lifetime.

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 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.

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 Cattulus 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 Galleswanthe, Opus xxxi), 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. 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
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, while later in England, Zimmern recalled *A Dealer in Statues* specifically for ‘the harmonizing of the lady’s dark cinnamon dress and the gentleman’s white dress with the surroundings.’

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). In all,

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24 *Supra,* p. 24 and n. 18.
25 Zimmern, 10.
26 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 mettle [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/xii (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.
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 Gainbart and Knoedler, and was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle of 1878.28 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 1886.29

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

Alma-Tadema treated this topos a total of twelve times between 1867 and 1877.27 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*.

27 Other than the Montreal panel (Opus c.xix), *A Roman Amateur* (Opus c.xviii), and *The Picture Gallery* (Opus 1), already cited, these paintings are: *A Roman Art Lover (Silver Statue)* (1868, Opus c.xx), *A Roman Art Lover (The Runner)* (1870, Opus c.xxxix), *A Visit to the Studio* (watercolour, 1873, Opus c.xiii), *A Picture Gallery* (1873, Opus c.xvi), *The Sculpture Gallery* (1874, Opus c.xxxv), *A Picture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus* (1874, Opus c.xxvii), *The Sculpture Gallery* (1875, Opus c.xvii), *Painting in Ancient Rome* (1877, Opus c.xxxvii), *The Sculptor’s Studio in Ancient Rome* (1877, Opus c.xxx).


29 Advertisement included in *Art Annual*, 1886.
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,\(^\text{30}\) 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.\(^\text{31}\)

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

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\(^\text{30}\) 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 xiv. art market, New York, Sotheby Parke Bernet [29 May 1980], lot 39).

\(^\text{31}\) ‘Chronicle: The Royal Gold Medalist and his Picture,’ Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, xvi/xii (1905-06), 444.
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). 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.

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 inaccessible. However, he almost certainly would have known its engraving by Flamang and Laguiller-mie, published in the important periodical *L'Artiste* in 1863, the year he arrived in Paris. 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.'

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 Boisigirard, since this figure closely resembles a drawing Alma-Tadema made.
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.\textsuperscript{30} Vern Swanson has provisionally identified three of the other males in the painting as Verhas, Alfred Verwee and Mochelles, all friends of the artist.\textsuperscript{37}

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.\textsuperscript{38}

The exemplar of the ‘Neo-Grec’ manner in French painting is Ingres’ celebrated \textit{Antiochus and Stratonice} of 1840 (Fig. 7), whose Pompeian setting was based on an archaeological reconstruction by the architect Victor Baltard.\textsuperscript{39} 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.\textsuperscript{40} Typical of Gérôme’s work at this time is \textit{Le roi Candide} of 1859 (Fig. 8), a painting deeply indebted to Ingres’ \textit{Stratonice}. The spatial relationships in both these paintings resemble that of \textit{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

\textsuperscript{36} The drawing and photograph are reproduced in Swanson, 12 and 18.

\textsuperscript{37} Information communicated by Vern G. Swanson to the author, 7 May 1986.

\textsuperscript{38} Carlo Pietrangeli, ‘Archaeological Excavations in Italy 1730-1850,’ in \textit{The Age of Neo-Classicism} (London, Royal Academy, Victoria & Albert Museum, 9 September - 19 November 1972), ill.


\textsuperscript{40} Swanson, 46.
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. 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. 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, 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
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 fontes*. 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, even his anachronisms are invariably based

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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 *Glauca and Nнять* (Opus xlv, Collection Mr. and Mrs. Noah Burk, Ohio).
on direct study of Italian sites and of works in the
great museums, probably supplemented on occa-
sion by newly-published scholarly documentation
of recent excavations.\(^5\) For this reason, the set-
tings recorded in the early works in particular are
easily identified as masterfully composed pas-
tiches 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 pic-
ture, 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.

\(^5\) Newly-available illustrated publications on Pompei and
Herculaneum included François Mazois, Les vues de Pom-
pei (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1824-38), 4 volumes; Louis Barre,
Herculaneum et Pompei (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1839-40), 8
volumes; Fausto and Felice Nicolini, Le cave ed i monumen-
ti de Pompei, disegnati e descritti (Naples: Nicolini, 1853-96), 4
volumes; and later Giuseppe Fiorelli, Gli scavi di Pompei dal
1861 al 1872 (Naples: Tipografica Italiana, 1873).

\(^6\) I would like to thank Paul Denis, who kindly helped me to
identify these antiques and their present locations.

\(^7\) 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 Gour-
don 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 1986, lot 505).
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 425, 10-11). They serve as models for the
furnishings in several of the later paintings.

marble sarcophagus in the Museo Capitolino, rep-
resenting the Endymion Myth (Fig. 11). Next is the
Vatican's Laocoon (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 Sappholes in the Laterano (Fig.
13), while the draped seated female figure touch-
ing 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 Vatic-
ian's Poseidippos (Fig. 16).

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
(Opera xxxviii, 1866, Museum of Fine Arts, Bos-
ton). All are very close to a bronze table found at
Pompeii and now in the Museo Nazionale,
Naples. 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).
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 Centenario (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 Pompei 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 lxv, 1868 (Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum). The rinceau pattern running the length of the upper edge of the painting...
appears to be directly copied from one on the west wall of the atrium of the Casa dei 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.

RESUMÉ

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 xix, 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 du 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.