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Lawrence Alma-Tadema

At Home in Antiquity

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Directors' Forewords

FRIES MUSEUM

Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) was born in Friesland and in 1870 settled permanently in London, where he became one of Britain's most successful painters. After being knighted by Queen Victoria in 1899, he was known as 'Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema' for the rest of his life. Thanks to generous donations from the artist and his two daughters, the Fries Museum possesses a unique collection of Tadema's art, consisting of early paintings, works on paper and personal items from his homes and studios. This trove has grown subsequently through donations and strategic purchases of major paintings. Upon closer inspection, items from the museum's holdings of archaeological objects, electrotyped replicas and textile samples can often be recognized in photographs and drawings of Tadema's houses, and in his paintings.

For these reasons, it has been a longstanding objective of the Fries Museum to organise a major exhibition dedicated to this famous son of Friesland. The important 1996–1997 retrospective presented at the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam) and the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool) was initially planned for the Fries Museum, but unfortunately proved impossible to mount here. Today we are delighted that we can, at last, explore Tadema's art and life in the magnificent building that the museum opened in 2013. We are especially pleased that this exhibition has been planned in cooperation with the Belvedere (Vienna) and Leighton House Museum (London). This international touring exhibition represents a new level of excellence and ambition for the larger, revitalized Fries Museum, and also constitutes an ideal preamble to 2018, when Leeuwarden will become European Capital of Culture.

The exhibition of 1996–1997 offered, for the first time, a thorough overview and reassessment of Tadema's work. We are honoured that three members of the team who put that groundbreaking project together – Elizabeth Prettejohn, Teio Meedendorp and Edwin Becker – have contributed to this one, especially Elizabeth Prettejohn in her role as guest co-curator. What makes this new exhibition distinctive is its close consideration of the spatial concerns so evident in Tadema's art. One of its most intriguing features is often mentioned, yet has never been properly explored until now: that the nascent film industry looked to his paintings for inspiration. Tadema's credible and compelling portrayals of life in ancient times served as a blueprint for the evolving mass-medium of film, which was inventing its own methods of visual storytelling. His images' unique persuasiveness promptly inspired Italian filmmakers, and eventually their counterparts in Hollywood. That influence is still visible today, a century after Tadema died; anyone who has ever seen a film set in antiquity has experienced his vision.

Just as exciting, this exhibition highlights the interdependence of Tadema's life and art via the unique interiors of his houses, which he and his family designed and decorated together. Works of art in their own right, these spaces were – for him, his artist-wife Laura, and his artist-daughter Anna – akin to laboratories for testing ideas about painting. Endowed with the eye of an art director, Tadema was literally the master of ceremonies at his family's many social gatherings for both friends and clients. These interconnected ideas of space, architecture, film – and even of Tadema's well-received designs of sets, costumes and props for theatre productions – are presented here for the first time by a truly international group of experts.

Finally, this project considers Tadema's paintings in a European context by examining their links with what was occurring elsewhere in London, and in Vienna. His complex relationship with Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), who lived in a house of similar grandeur, is explored in this publication, as is the connection between Tadema and the early work of Gustav Klimt (1862–1918).

We thank all of those who have contributed to this project so generously with their knowledge and insights. The curatorial team's excellent contacts with museums, private collectors, dealers and the world of film studies have been invaluable in gathering the loans for this exhibition: they are Elizabeth Prettejohn (University of York), Peter Trippi (an expert in nineteenth-century art based in New York) and Ivo Blom (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam). Their efforts have extended much further than any institution could have expected, and so we are extremely grateful to all of them. From the Fries Museum, Marlies Stoter and Frank van der Velden were essential leaders on the curatorial side, while Jenny Reynaerts (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), Edwin Becker and Teio Meedendorp (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam) formed the expert panel who advised on the project's conceptual development. In addition, we are delighted to thank all the specialists who contributed such insightful texts to this publication.

We have appreciated the enthusiastic collaboration of our colleagues at the Belvedere in Vienna and the Leighton House Museum in London. Together we have devised a unique European tour for this exhibition, which will be seen first in the city where Tadema grew up, then in one of nineteenth-century Europe's most important cultural centres, and finally in the city where Tadema achieved success – and particularly in the atmospheric studio house of his friend Leighton. In Vienna, we would like to thank Alfred Weidinger, Peter Aufreiter and his successor Stephan Pumberger, and in London Daniel Robbins and Sally Dobinson, for their expertise and cooperation.

Of course, warm thanks are due to the large number of lenders – both museums and individuals – who have agreed to live without their treasures during the exhibition. In several cases, this marks the first time that the artworks have been seen by the public in decades. We are particularly grateful to our colleagues at Christie's (especially Peter Brown and Rosie O'Connor) and at Sotheby's (Seth Armitage and Simon Toll) for their invaluable help in contacting private owners; also helpful in this regard was the distinguished biographer of Alma-Tadema, Vern G. Swanson.

To our special partners at Sliker Film, the movie theatre within the Fries Museum, and EYE in Amsterdam, we are extremely appreciative of their crucial assistance in sourcing the films that establish the link between Tadema's paintings and films both old and new. Obviously, many more people within the Fries Museum were intensively involved in realising this exhibition, including planning for its logistics, design and promotion. Though space will not permit it, they all deserve to be named here.

The Province of Friesland made a decisive donation to the project as part of the run-up to Leeuwarden's 2018 year as European Capital of Culture. We are also grateful for the support of the Mondriaan Fund and we thank the Isaacson-Draper Foundation for its generous contribution toward the realization of this publication.

Finally, our greatest thanks must go to the Turing Foundation, which honoured this exhibition's concept with the Turing Award I in 2015. This exceptionally generous financial contribution has been crucial; it set into motion the flow of additional funds and intellectual energy and, without it, we would not have been able to transport so many artworks from lenders worldwide.

We truly hope that visitors to the exhibition and readers of this publication will enjoy learning about the personal and artistic journey of the talented boy from Friesland who invented the attractive and compelling images now known around the world, both through his paintings and through the living legacy of film.

Kris Callens
Director
Fries Museum

BELVEDERE

I am particularly pleased about this unique opportunity to present Lawrence Alma-Tadema's work in a comprehensive exhibition in the Belvedere.

Alma-Tadema is a controversial figure in the art history of the late nineteenth century, but he is extremely interesting to recent scholars for precisely that reason. For decades his painting was not really taken seriously, despite its enduring popularity with collectors and the broader public. The subjects of his historical genre paintings were regarded as too saccharine or even kitschy, and his reconstructions of life in antiquity were often dismissed as decadent presumption. The latter polemic is evident from the very title of an exhibition of the collection of Allen Funt at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1973: *Victorians in Togas*. That exhibition, however, also marked the true beginning of serious consideration of Alma-Tadema. It was followed by other projects and publications that made a crucial contribution to showing the artist and his entire epoch in a new light.

Art historians' view of the era of historicism and Victorian art has fundamentally changed since then. The reserve that art historians showed about studying the supposedly unmodern sides of the nineteenth century has given way to a new interest in the exciting 'side paths' of art history, which often represented the mainstream of the time. In 2010, the Belvedere had great success showing the exhibition *Sleeping Beauty: Masterpieces of Victorian Painting from the Museo de Arte de Ponce*, with major works by Frederic Leighton, Edward Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais, and other famous artists from the circle of the Pre-Raphaelites. That exhibition, curated by Alfred Weidinger, was the first time the Belvedere intensely grappled with something it had only begun to explore: the influence the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites had on Austrian painting and especially the early Gustav Klimt. This exhibition about Lawrence Alma-Tadema is a unique opportunity to continue and supplement the research begun back then. Alma-Tadema's painting was distinct from the mysticism of the Pre-Raphaelites, but it was at least as important an influence on Austrian art history. The decorative effect of his paintings, which usually results from contrasting small, intricate elements and large, planar ones, was closely studied by the young Gustav Klimt and would crucially shape his painting in the decade between 1886 and the founding of the Secession in 1897. Already in the very first major work by Gustav Klimt and his *Künstler-Compagnie* (Artists' Company) – the 1886–87 ceiling paintings in the two grand stairwells of the Burgtheater in Vienna – the reception of Alma-Tadema is unmistakable. Although Alma-Tadema was already famous in Austria in the 1870s, and recognised as a star of the international art scene, his work had scarcely been appreciated here previously. His artistic approach was too different from the traditions of historicism that were established in Austria. That made the ceiling paintings in the Burgtheater all the more surprising. Their success was so resounding that Klimt's *Künstler-Compagnie* was subsequently hired for the most important commissions on the Ringstrasse in Vienna. The style had its finger on the pulse of the age, uniting scholarly learnedness and elaborate aesthetics in decorative paintings with a positive mood. Especially as a formalist, Alma-Tadema anticipated the efforts of the Vienna Secession. Despite all their realism, his pictorial compositions thrive on a simple and classical view, and in an extremely rigorous way they are calculated with an eye to their decorative effect.

In that light, it is hardly surprising that, as with Alma-Tadema, Gustav Klimt's painting, especially his early work, was for a long time largely rejected by art historians. Klimt and his comrades in arms had chosen the cheerful aestheticism of Alma-Tadema, with the latter's life-affirming, youthful freshness, as a model for their reform movement. The necessary and logical first step on the path to a modern aesthetic, the antithesis of the pathos-laden daubs of historicism, was no longer understood in that context decades later. With his un-programmatic aestheticism and the classical clarity of his compositions, Alma-Tadema was an important model for the whole of European Art Nouveau. Although he slowly lost significance as a role model after the founding of the Vienna Secession in 1897, his influence continued to be felt long thereafter.

Agnes Husslein-Arco

Director

Belvedere

LEIGHTON HOUSE MUSEUM

Leighton House Museum has been in the care of The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea since 1927. Built by Frederic Leighton in the mid-1860s, the house helped define what it was to be a successful artist in the late Victorian period. Combining a working studio with domestic accommodation, space for entertainment and the display of collections, Leighton's house makes a uniquely appropriate setting in which to explore Alma-Tadema's own preoccupations with domestic life, expressed both through his work and his equally extraordinary studio-houses. That these two artists were such close contemporaries and knew each other's homes well only heightens the relevance of the exhibition in this particular setting.

We are delighted to have the opportunity to present this exceptional exhibition in Alma-Tadema's adopted 'home' city and would like to thank our organising partners at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden and the Belvedere, Vienna for all their help in making this possible. We are also grateful to Strutt & Parker and Christie's International Real Estate for their generous sponsorship of the exhibition in London and, finally, the staff at Leighton House for their dedication and commitment to the project.

Councillor Timothy Coleridge
Cabinet Member for Planning Policy,
Transport and Arts, The Royal Borough of
Kensington and Chelsea

Alma-Tadema and Frederic Leighton are frequently cited as leading exponents of classicism in Victorian painting. Of their generation, they are also the two artists whose reputations were most closely identified with the studio-houses that they created. The extensive restoration of Leighton's home between 2008 and 2010 was preceded by research that confirmed how closely the form and decoration of the interiors related to the pictures and objects that Leighton displayed within them. Each room presented an aspect of his interests as his collector, with material organised and arranged with many of the same considerations that might be applied to the creation of museum displays.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the last additions to the house made in the year before Leighton's death. The Silk Room on the first floor was designed as a picture gallery. Top lit with its walls lined in green silk, it was built primarily to house the growing collection of works presented to Leighton by his contemporaries. Pictures by Watts, Millais, Sargent and Moore were displayed together on the south wall with Alma-Tadema's *In My Studio* set amongst them. On the east wall was hung Leighton's collection of Venetian Renaissance paintings including works by Tintoretto and Schiavone and on the north side, a group of fifteenth-century Italian pictures with works by Vivarini, Giambono and Barna di Siena were displayed together. This curation of his collection by Leighton and the orderly arrangement of works by school within the spaces specifically created for their display sets up an intriguing context and precedent for this exhibition of Alma-Tadema's works.

With its sequence of spaces, each distinctive in its decoration and character, Leighton gave careful consideration to how the 'visitor' might progress through these rooms, gaining an understanding of the range of his interests and breadth of his aesthetic tastes as they developed. Today, these same spaces inform how *At Home in Antiquity* is presented, giving an immediate coherence to the works shown within each of them and allowing a sense of progression as the exhibition unfolds through the house in a manner that echoes Leighton's original conception. Built to function as a private residence, working studio and space in which he could entertain, it is Leighton's careful consideration of how the house might function as a display space that gives the presentation of this exhibition its own distinctive identity.

Daniel Robbins
Senior Curator
Leighton House Museum



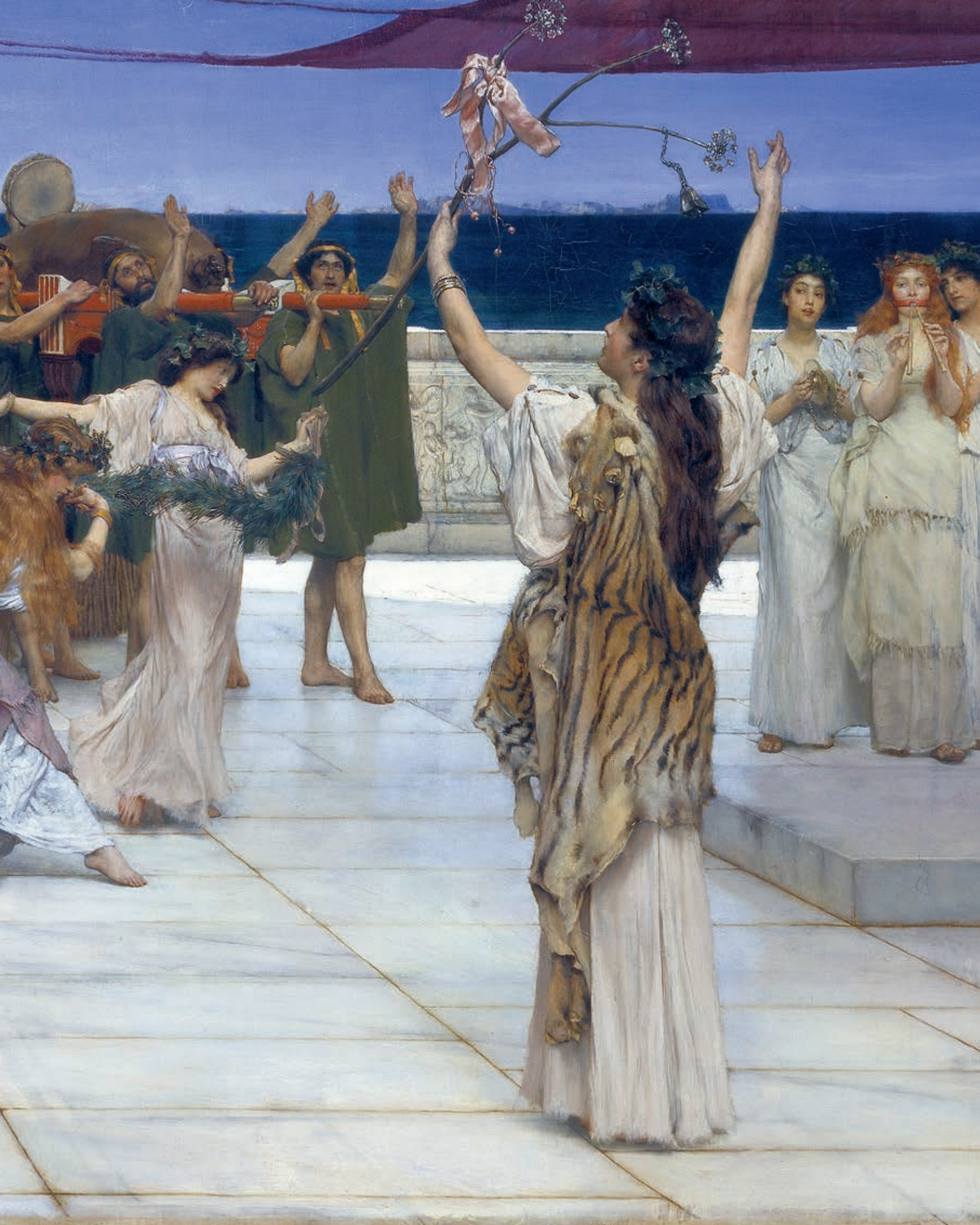


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The Beginning of a Journey: Dronryp to Brussels, 1836–1870

Introduction by Elizabeth Prettejohn

This book tells the tale of an extraordinary journey: from the tiny village of Dronryp in a remote corner of the northern Netherlands, to the magnificent surroundings of Edwardian London and on to the international worlds of art and cinema in the twentieth century. It is the tale of a remarkable artist, born in 1836 to the middle-class Tadema family in the province of Friesland, who became Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Royal Academician and member of the Order of Merit, celebrated throughout the world for his vivid paintings of scenes from classical antiquity. And it is also the tale of his family and friends, who were not only his companions on his artistic journey but also his collaborators in the creation of two innovative studio-houses, artworks in their own right as well as workshops and laboratories for artistic creation of multifarious kinds.

Alma-Tadema's career as 'the archaeologist of artists' has been explored in previous books and exhibitions, not least the pioneering retrospective held in 1996–97 at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, and the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.¹ In this book, and the exhibition it accompanies, we shall never forget the fascination of archaeological discovery for Tadema, but we shall tell the tale of his extraordinary career in a new way, to show how the spaces within which he lived, and the people with whom he shared them, both reflected and influenced an artistic vision that remains compelling. Among those who have been inspired by that vision are film directors, designers and producers from the beginnings of cinema through to the present day. Although this aspect of the artist's legacy has often been noted, we shall here explore it in detail for the first time.

Alma-Tadema's tale is punctuated by dramatic changes in fortune, and sometimes by tragedies. The artist's father Pieter Tadema, a notary first in Dronryp and then in the larger town of Leeuwarden, died when his son (named Lourens Alma after his godfather) was just four years old, and the family struggled to make ends meet. It would have been entirely reasonable for Lourens to succumb to his family's wishes and become a lawyer, as his father had intended, but already in his teens he displayed the independence of mind on which he later prided himself: 'If I have obtained any degree of success, it is because I have always been faithful to my own ideas.'² He never shirked his responsibility to provide for his mother, Hinke Dirks Brouwer, and sister Artje, but he did so in his own way: by succeeding, against the odds, as an artist. In his early teens he was working so hard at

both drawing and schoolwork that he became seriously ill. The doctors feared he had not long to live, and he was at last allowed to devote himself to art. Quickly, he recovered his health – the first of the dramatic reversals that would mark his career.

Perhaps we can already see something of this determination to succeed in his self-portrait at the age of 16 (Fig. 1). The forthright stare and furrowed brow are signs of personal tenacity, but perhaps there is also a certain pride in his Frisian origin; his friend and biographer Georg Ebers quoted the saying, 'The Frieselanders must be free so long as the winds blow from the clouds and the world stands.'³ Already, too, there is a hint of his taste for a grand interior in the background; the boy is simply dressed, but there is no doubt about his ambition. The self-portrait is a fine achievement for a sixteen-year-old. Nonetheless, the pose and setting remain fairly conventional, as does the subdued colour scheme. Although, as Marlies Stoter's essay reveals (pp. 26–37), he never lost touch with his Frisian origins, he would need to leave home to try his ambition in the wider world.

According to a story recounted by his brother-in-law, Edmund Gosse, the painters of Amsterdam were not prepared to accept a Frisian pupil.⁴ However that may be, it is clear that the young artist already had his sights on an international career. Within months of



1 *Self-Portrait of Lourens Alma Tadema*, 1852, oil on canvas, 58.5 × 48.5 cm, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden – Collection Royal Frisian Society

completing the self-portrait, he was a student at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp where, as Jan Dirk Baetens's essay shows (pp. 38–47), he could benefit from a sound academic education under teachers of European eminence. By 1860 he was working in the studio of the most famous of the Antwerp painters, Henri Leys. This was a period of youthful enthusiasm and high spirits, but above all one of intensive hard work. If the young artist was both fiercely independent and overweeningly ambitious, he was also prepared to dedicate himself, body and spirit, to his enterprise. When he painted a Gothic table into one of Leys's paintings, the master thought it looked insufficiently robust: 'I want [a table] that everybody knocks his knees to pieces on'.⁵ Tadema repainted it, and in his later work he never lost the determination to make each material object look as tangible and specific as possible.

By the early 1860s his meticulously crafted works were beginning to appear at public exhibitions: *The Education of the Grandchildren of Clotilde* (seen here in a fine contemporary engraving, Fig. 2), *Venantius Fortunatus Reading his Poems to Radegonda VI* (Fig. 3) and *Queen Fredegonda at the Death-Bed of Bishop Praetextatus* (Fig. 35) were displayed at various exhibitions in Belgium and Holland between 1861 and 1864. These examples of the artist's early fascination with the Merovingian dynasty, Frankish rulers from the mid-fifth to the mid-eighth century, demonstrate not only the careful historical research that Tadema learned from his Antwerp teachers, but also his growing proficiency as a painter of fine detail and accurate perspective – see for example the expert foreshortening of the floor-pavements in all of these paintings. The delicate Corinthian capitals and fluting of the columns in *The Education of the Grandchildren of Clotilde* are surprising reminders of classical elegance in this bloodthirsty scene. This is perhaps the earliest example of a kind of ironic title which the artist would use frequently in his later works. Queen Clotilde (wife of the Merovingian ruler Clovis, who reigned 481–511 AD) is no kindly grandmother: she presides over an 'education' that teaches the boys axe-throwing for purposes of vengeance. In these Merovingian subjects, too, the young artist is already beginning his exploration of the sunlit vistas that may open from a sombre domestic interior.

In addition to these scenes from Merovingian history, the young artist was also developing an interest in the material culture of Egyptian antiquity. After a preliminary showing in Brussels, *Pastimes in Ancient Egypt* (Fig. 4) made Tadema's debut at the Paris Salon, the most important exhibition of the period, in 1864 and even won him a medal. The painting must have owed its success partly to its erudite details, but also to its strange, yet uncannily convincing, evocation of customs three thousand years old: the lithe dancers, caught in mid-air, wheel before the

massive columns that epitomize Egyptian antiquity for observers of today, as much as for the Parisians of 1864.

Not only was this work exhibited in Paris, the world's artistic capital at this date, it was researched from artefacts in the Louvre and the British Museum in London, as well as from books – another sign of the artist's increasingly cosmopolitan outlook. While the sequence of international exhibitions, beginning with the Crystal Palace or 'Great Exhibition' of 1851 in London and the Exposition Universelle of 1855 in Paris, encouraged many artists to exhibit beyond their own national borders, Tadema was unusually quick from the start of his career to disseminate his work internationally – and this, as we shall see, became a lifelong habit.

By the 1860s travel was also becoming easier for artists, due to improvements both in transport and in the European political climate, and again Tadema was in



2 *The Education of the Grandchildren of Clotilde*, engraving by Johannes H.M.H. Rennefeld after Op. XIV, 1861, 40.8 × 49.4 cm, Fries Museum, Leeuwarden



3 *Venantius Fortunatus Reading his Poems to Radegonda VI*, 1862, oil on canvas, 66 × 83.3 cm, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht



4 *Pastimes in Ancient Egypt 3000 Years Ago*, 1863, oil on canvas, 99.1 × 135.8 cm, Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston

the vanguard: his trips to Cologne in 1861 and to London in 1861 and 1862 were followed by a journey to Italy the next year, on honeymoon with his new bride, Marie Pauline Gressin Dumoulin de Boisgirard, born in Brussels to a French family of higher social class than the Tademas. The journey and the marriage, which followed the death of the artist's mother earlier in 1863, opened a new phase for the artist, now, aged 27, the head of his own family.

All of Tadema's biographers, beginning with Ebers and Gosse, the personal friends who wrote the earliest accounts of his career in the 1880s, have described this journey to Italy as a watershed. This was the Northerner's first encounter with the brilliant sunshine and Mediterranean vegetation of the South, and the freedom-loving Friesian's first experience of a newly independent and unified Italy. It may be that when he planned his journey, Tadema was most interested in the Early Christian and Byzantine monuments that corresponded to the historical period of his recent paintings. *Interior of the Church of San Clemente, Rome* (Fig. 16) features re-used Roman columns in a sumptuous Early Christian interior where the variegated marbles and the glinting gold of the apse mosaic seem to anticipate later concerns of the artist. A tiny figure in fashionable modern dress is just about to disappear behind a

column in the distance – surely this is Pauline? And whose is the head that can be glimpsed above the marble parapet still farther away? Here we see the dawn of what would become a life-long interest in how a human figure – a person like any one of us – might move through the grand architectural spaces of an ancient building.

It may have been only gradually that the artist's fascination with classical – that is, Roman or Greco-Roman, rather than Byzantine or Early Christian – antiquity began to take shape. It is evident, though, that a crucial element was this sense of the embodied human being's encounter with a three-dimensional space, as it was experienced, above all, at Pompeii, the Roman town buried in the volcanic eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, rediscovered in 1748, and under continuous excavation since then. One of the artist's closest friends, the Dutch author Carel Vosmaer, told the story of his first visit to Pompeii in the fictionalised form of a novel, *The Amazon*, where the Dutch artist-protagonist Siwart Aisma is based on Tadema:

What could be gained from the study of books and monuments he had already assimilated, but he wished to conjure up before his imagination the very life of the men of old – to walk,



5 *Glaucus and Nydia*, 1867, oil on panel, 39 × 64.3 cm, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

sleep, dream, eat, within the very walls where these Romans lived...⁶

A photograph from the artist's collection shows a figure in a dark suit and bowler hat, crouching to take a measurement in the corner of a Pompeian domestic interior; this is presumed to show the artist himself, on that fateful trip of 1863 (Fig. 6). We seem to see 'the archaeologist of artists'⁷ making exact measurements, amassing data for his paintings of the next few years, meticulous reconstructions of the Roman material environment of the first century AD.

Paintings of this kind began to appear at exhibition within a year or two of Lourens and Pauline's return from honeymoon. In examples such as *Entrance of the Theatre* (Fig. 19),⁸ *Glaucus and Nydia* (Fig. 5, which represents characters from Edward Bulwer Lytton's best-selling novel *The Last Days of Pompeii*), *The Flower Market* (Fig. 7)⁹ and the exquisite *Flowers* (where the model was probably the artist's sister Artje, Fig. 8), we see the Pompeian material environment coming to life before our eyes. *Roman Reading* (Fig. 9) presents a male figure in deep red draperies reading from a papyrus roll; behind him is a cupboard filled with many more rolls, the ancient equivalent of a bookcase. The artist has made



6 *Alma-Tadema (?) measuring in the House of Sallust, Pompeii*, c. 1863, photograph, Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, portfolio CXXIII, 11161