

***Drawn to Antiquity: Works on Paper from the
Lawrence Alma-Tadema Collection,***

with Sarah Kilroy, University of Birmingham



Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), *Study of a Sandal, Mainz Museum*, undated (about 1876), pencil on paper, 9.8 x 33.3 cm. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (AT E2606).

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to this Tuesday Talk from the Barber Institute of Fine Arts. I'm Sarah Kilroy, Head of Conservation for the Cadbury Research Library, a near neighbour of the Barber on the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. Today, I will be introducing *Drawn to Antiquity: Works on Paper from the Lawrence Alma-Tadema Collection*, currently on display in the Barber's Beige Gallery Print Bay. I'll provide a bit of background to the artist Alma-Tadema, discuss his collection and how he used it in his work, and tell the extraordinary story of how it comes to be in Birmingham. Along the way, I'll be pointing out some of the exciting discoveries we made while preparing the drawings for the display.

Born Lourens Tadema in the far north of the Netherlands in 1836, as a young man he moved to Antwerp in Belgium to train to be an artist. He set up his first studio in Brussels, before permanently relocating to London in 1870. It was in Britain that he would have a successful 42-year career, becoming one of the most popular and wealthy artists of the Victorian era. He added his godfather's name, Alma, to his own surname – strategically elevating himself to the top of the alphabetical list of artists in the catalogues of group shows. And after the move to London he also anglicized his first name to Lawrence.

During his working life he made just over 400 paintings. He is best-known for his depictions of intimate figural scenes in opulent classical settings, which especially appealed to the British and American art market from the mid-1870s onwards. But Lawrence did not begin by painting the classical

period - his early works were predominantly domestic scenes from medieval history. Two male nude studies made during this period of his career are on display in *Drawn to Antiquity*. However, in 1863 he visited Italy for the first time, where the remains at Pompeii, and the sights of Rome, made such a strong impression on him that his focus turned to portraying scenes from classical antiquity.

Alma-Tadema injected life into his paintings of the antique by using a great deal of colour in the form of flowers, bright seas and skies, all bathed in a serene light. Textures, such as smooth, white marble became his trademark, and the whole of his canvases would be highly worked, with the same focus of intensity and attention to detail applied to all the seemingly peripheral material details. His pictures were eagerly anticipated by the Victorian audience and echoed the popular culture of the day, which had seen a growing interest in antiquity. Pompeii was undergoing a phase of accelerated excavations, with the findings reported in the press - stimulating the imaginations of artists and writers. Lew Wallace's best-selling Roman-era novel *Ben-Hur*, was published in 1880, and Henryk Sienkiewicz's book *Quo Vadis*, a love story set against a backdrop of Nero's Rome, in 1896, to great acclaim. Alma-Tadema's fanciful scenes provided an idealised visualisation of this historical period. At a time when there was no cinema or television it is not difficult to understand why Alma-Tadema's paintings with their vivacity, intrigue, and sheer technical skill, were so enjoyed by the public.

Newly wealthy bankers and industrialists commissioned pictures of luxurious and decadent Roman scenes from Alma-Tadema, and he was happy to oblige. The cost of his commissions escalated from 1874 onwards, bringing him and his London-based Belgian agent, Ernest Gambart, considerable wealth. Alma-Tadema channelled this income into the improvement of his London homes, firstly renovating Townshend House near Regents Park and eventually building a vast studio house in St Johns Wood, designed along the lines of a Pompeiian villa, the interiors of his homes imitating the interiors in his paintings. His houses were filled with porcelain, rugs and ornaments, and frequently featured in fashionable magazines. Funding his voracious collecting activities drove his continued need to paint to raise income.

For Alma-Tadema to depict authentically the ornamental details of classical life - the furniture, marble columns, elaborate jewellery, candelabra, and musical instruments - required a considerable amount of research, and, importantly, visual source material from which to make preparatory drawings. Alma-Tadema started amassing photographs and books, in what would evolve into the largest collection of its kind on classical antiquity. He acquired images of the places he had visited in Italy and bought up batches of photographs of heritage sites aimed at tourists. Some images were specifically commissioned from the leading photographers of the day. However, he was more interested in the subject matter than the maker, and these would end up mixed in with the souvenir photographs.

His archive eventually expanded to 5300 photographs, covering the material world of classical architecture, ornament, decorative sculpture as well as the natural world of landscapes, seascapes, animals, birds, flowers, fruit, and trees. He arranged his photograph collection into 164 portfolios, labelled and categorised by themes and kept in the studio for ease of reference. Each photograph was methodically pasted onto a large sheet of standard-sized card, measuring about 30 by 40 centimetres. As well as being a tidy storage system, the rigid card had a practical purpose, as it allowed the photographs to be propped upright to draw from in the studio. As they were not bound into albums but kept loose, they could be worked from individually, without the cumbersomeness of keeping open a heavy volume.

Less well known are the 584 drawings in the collection, interspersed among the photographs. The majority were made by Lawrence Alma-Tadema himself, although some are by his wife, Laura, and his daughter, Anna, who were both practicing artists. An example of one of Anna's works – a beautiful watercolour study of chrysanthemums - is included in the Barber display. The collection also includes drawings by his studio assistants, notably James Gaul, who appears to have been sent on drawing missions to the Roman collections in Rochester and Colchester to copy the pots in preparation for Alma-Tadema's large painting *Hadrian in England* in 1884.



Anna Alma-Tadema (1867-1943), *Study of Chrysanthemums*, London, 1883, watercolour on paper, 22.1 x 30.8 cm. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (AT E2050).

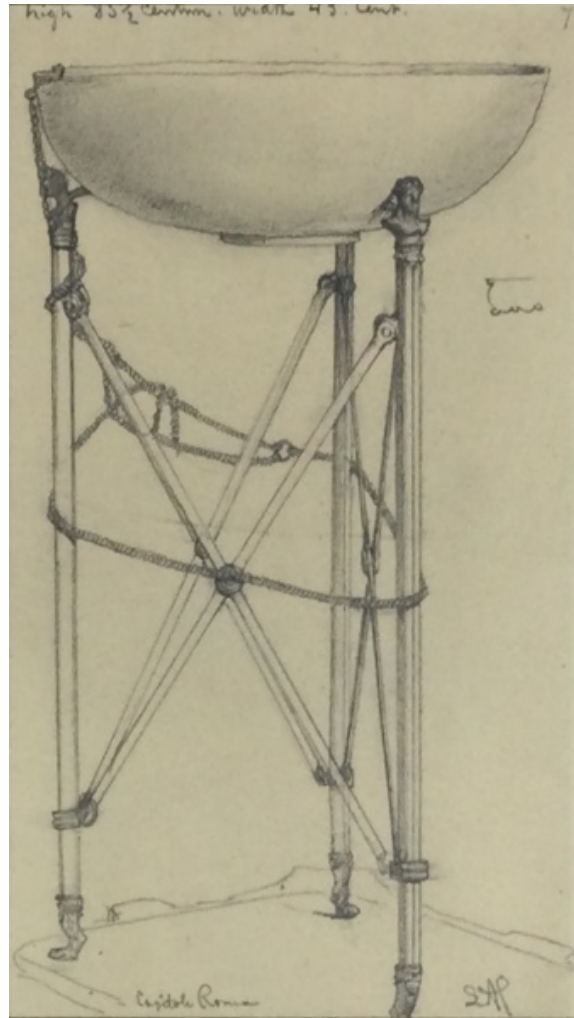
The drawings in the collection vary in their quality and level of detail, at their most basic they are simple diagrams of architectural features and plans, some are tracings of artefacts illustrated in books, many are sketches drawn from museum collections. A good example of this is a study of a Roman soldier's sandal which he made from a preserved specimen in the Mainz museum; the drawing is included in the Barber display. The inanimate relic is brought to life by the inclusion of an imagined soldier's foot. Alma-Tadema would re-purpose this sandal in one of his paintings, using it on the foot of *A Romano-British Potter*, in his work of the same name in the Musée D'Orsay.

Drawing from sculpture would have been part of Alma-Tadema's formal training and a discipline he continued throughout his career. There are several drawings in the collection dated 1876 – a time when he made an extended visit to Italy while his London house was being renovated, the roof having been blown off by a barge explosion on the nearby Regent's Canal. During this stay in Rome, he wrote to his fellow artist, Eyre Crowe back in London, complaining that the Italian weather, in particular the uncomfortable humid Sirocco wind of the Mediterranean, was interrupting his work and the persistent grey skies rendered the landscape dull and unattractive to paint. Perhaps it was the bad weather that drove him indoors to make drawings of the sculptures displayed in Villa Ludovisi and the Capitoline Museums.

While going through the works on paper to make the selection for the Barber display, a surprising discovery has been a group of 43 preparatory drawings gifted by his daughters in 1921, which had only been listed as a group and not individually described in the catalogue. Among them is a sketch of a kneeling woman bent double with her long hair tumbling forward over her head to the floor. Alma-Tadema has labelled this drawing 'The Widow', and it can be decisively linked to his finished painting *The Egyptian Widow* of 1872, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Similarly, a small sketch of a babe in arms, has been inscribed in pencil by Alma-Tadema as 'Frank's bébé for "Sunday Morning"'. *Sunday Morning* is a painting of a Dutch nursery scene he made in about 1871, now part of Tate Britain's collection. The glimpsed view of the child's face, gazing up at the nursemaid in that painting, corresponds with the baby's

face in the drawing. Both these new discoveries are on display at the Barber for the first time.

There are many more images in the collection than Alma-Tadema could ever have feasibly included in his paintings. Having such wide source material ensured there was always sufficient variety for the content of his compositions. Despite this, he returned to some images repeatedly. A metal bowl on a tripod, drawn from the museums in Rome, can be seen in his famous 1888 painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, it has a prominent place in *A Kiss* of 1891 and reappears above the triumphal procession in *Spring* painted in 1894; eventually being used twice in the imperial seating area in his final work *Preparation in the Coliseum* of 1912.



Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), *Metal vessel on a tripod*, Rome, undated, pencil on paper. Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham (AT E980).

While he was known for his thoroughness in research, Alma-Tadema was not rigid in portraying archaeological details truthfully. The photographs and drawings were there to fire the artistic imagination, and he would modify and adapt aspects to achieve the right look and feel to suit the story of each work. Indeed, it is Alma-Tadema's fanciful imaginings of classical Rome that inform many of the present-day perceptions of what classical civilisation looked like. His paintings have been the inspiration for

directors of epic 'Sword and Sandal' movies, including the 1951 blockbuster *Quo Vadis*, the 1963 production of *Cleopatra*, and more recently Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator*. Scott, and the production manager, Arthur Max, acknowledged Alma-Tadema's paintings were a direct source of inspiration for the styling of the movie. Alma-Tadema's romanticised conceptions of classical life live on through the medium of film.

So how did Alma-Tadema's archive come to be at the University of Birmingham? After his death in 1912 the collection was purchased and gifted to the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London, as the Alma-Tadema Memorial Library in 1915. As well as the photographs and drawings it contained his 4000 books on antiquity. A further donation of 43 drawings was made by his daughters, Laurence and Anna, in 1921. Almost immediately after his death the value of his works plummeted, as his depictions of decadence and luxury were totally out of sync with the modern world of the early-twentieth century. Even during his lifetime his work had met with criticism. John Ruskin, who was unhappy at Alma-Tadema's commercialisation of art, described him as 'the worst painter of the nineteenth century'. After the 1913 memorial exhibition there would not be another public exhibition of his work until 1962.

In 1947, despite having paintings in museum collections around the world, Alma-Tadema's reputation had fallen into obscurity, and the V&A were looking for a new owner for the Memorial Library. This is when it was transferred to the University of Birmingham Library, not for its art historical merit, but as a resource for students of archaeology and

antiquity - and it remains a rich source of information to this day. It has been enhanced over the years with the addition of 300 letters from the artist's correspondence. Since the 1990s, interest in Alma-Tadema's work has grown and now his paintings command high prices again. *The Finding of Moses* holds the record for the highest sum ever paid for a Victorian painting, at nearly 36 million dollars. So, it is both timely and wonderful that we are able to share with you a selection of his drawings through the Barber's display, *Drawn to Antiquity*.

Thank you for joining me for this talk. I hope you will be able to see the drawings in person. Please remember to book free, timed-admission tickets through the Barber's website. If you are not able to visit in person, you can still enjoy the images on the Cadbury Research Library's Flickr site.

My thanks to Robert Wenley and the team at the Barber for making the display possible, and to Jack Davies for the guitar music to accompany this talk.

Resources used for this talk and suggested reading:

Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi (eds), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity (Friesmuseum)*, Prestel Munich, 2016.

Véronique Gerard-Powell, 'Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema RA', in Daniel Robbins (ed.), *A Victorian Obsession: The Perez Simon Collection at Leighton House Museum*, Royal Borough Kensington and Chelsea, 2014, pp. 34-68.

Kathleen Morris and Alexis Goodwin (eds), *Orchestrating Elegance: Alma-Tadema and the Marquand Music Room*, Clark Art Institute, 2017.

Rosemary J. Barrow, *Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, Phaidon, 2001.

Elizabeth Prettejohn (author), Edwin Becker (editor) et al., *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema 1836-1912*, Van Gogh Museum, 1996.

Gerald Horsley, *The Alma Tadema Memorial Library*, *Architectural Review*, vol. 39, Feb 1916, pp.34-35.

Vern G. Swanson, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema 1836-1912*, Garton & Co. and Scholar, 1990

Guide to the Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema Collection. Photographs and correspondence of the famous Victorian painter, University of Birmingham Library, Brill, IDC Publishers, 1998

Related links:

Book to see the display in person (until 21 September 2021)

<https://barber.org.uk/visit-us/>

View the display online:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/cadburyresearchlibrary/albums/72157718754170351>

Search the CRL online archive catalogue for the Lawrence Alma-Tadema Collection (ref. AT):

<https://calmview.bham.ac.uk/>

Speaker information

Sarah Kilroy has been Head of Conservation and Programming at the Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham since 2011. She has a specialism in the conservation of works of art on paper. Prior to joining the University in 2004 she held conservation posts at the Museum of London, Middlesex University and in private practice.