A Victorian 'Arbiter Elegantiae'

The Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

[LUC DEVOLDERE]

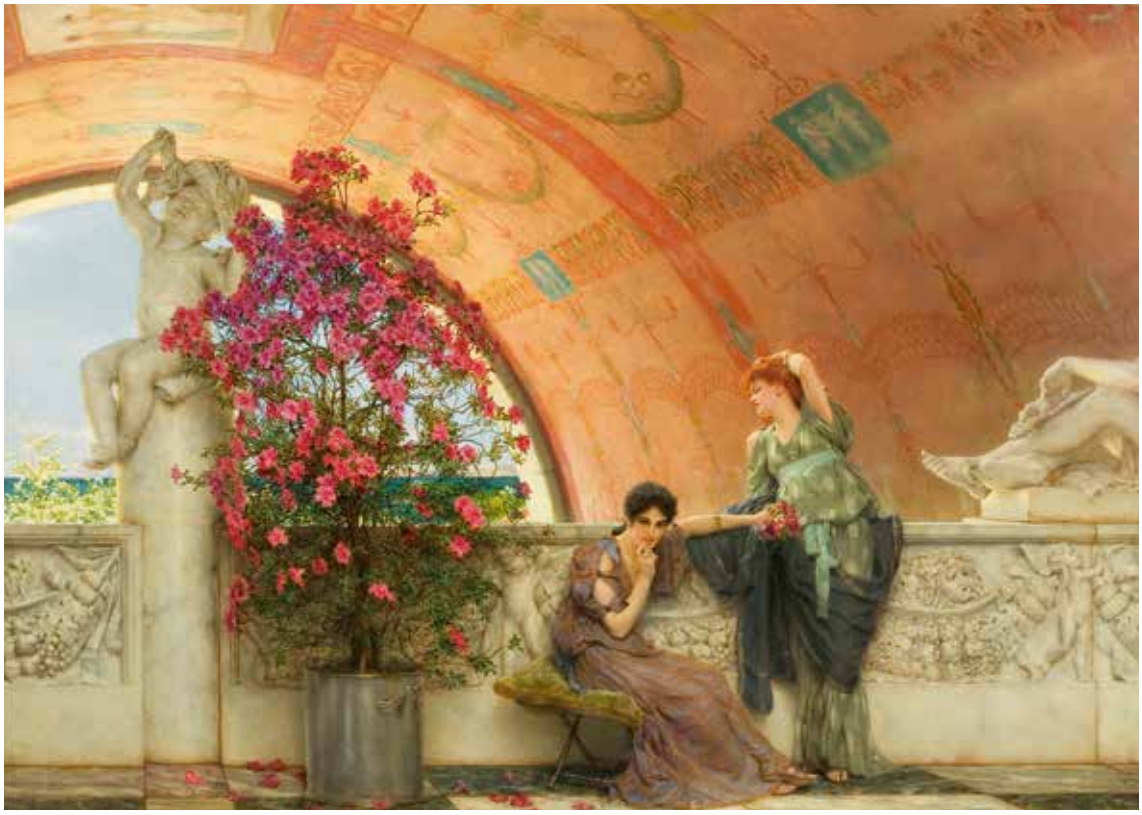
'(...) two drunken women embracing, over-coupled, over-perfumed, overcome, swooning, turned pale, eyes bulging, and died together, with hiccupping gurgles... A little further, a boy rose, laughed madly, punched the air and collapsed senseless in a heap of black violets, sinking as in a bed of velvet...'
Louis Couperus, *De berg van licht* (The Mountain of Light, 1905)

Not so long ago Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte compared the influx of refugees into Europe to the invasions by the barbarians that led to the fall of the Roman Empire. A persistent topos it seems. An equally persistent topos to explain the collapse of the Imperium Romanum is that of the 'decadence' of the Romans. A tough combination: threatened from both inside and outside, the once so glorious imperium must almost inevitably fall.

The ingredients of that 'decadence' are a cocktail of dissoluteness, sexual excess, drunkenness and moral degeneration that led to the kind of physical exhaustion and moral vacuity that we can see in the monumental painting by Thomas Couture, *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847) in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The metaphorical setting is that of a feast, an orgy past its zenith, exhausted bodies, lust satiated, danced off their feet.

Compare this rather cliché painting with *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) by Lourens Alma Tadema (Dronrijp, Friesland, 1836 - Wiesbaden, 1912), later known as Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Born in Syria, Heliogabalus had been Roman emperor for four years, between 218 and 222 AD, when, not yet twenty, he was murdered by soldiers from the Praetorian Guard. He created a furore as high priest of the sun god, married several times in his short life, including with a man (whereby he was the 'woman'), prostituted himself and became legendary as the proverbial eccentric, shamelessly perverse and decadent emperor. It was inevitable that Couperus would glorify the tormented, androgynous 'boy emperor' with undecided sexual identity in *De berg van licht* (The Mountain of Light, 1905).



Unconscious Rivals, 1893, oil on canvas, 45.1 x 62.8 cm

A rose is a rose is a rose...

But let's take another look at Tadema's roses. The setting of the painting is again a feast, but there is something completely different going on here.

The painter must have been inspired by an anecdote from the emperor's gossipy biography (Historia Augusta, *Vita Elegabali*, 21), 'In a dining hall with a moveable ceiling he once buried his parasites under violets and other flowers, so that some actually suffocated because they were in no state to crawl out of the flowers.'

Heliogabalus was not the first to splash out on this technology. In his Domus Aurea, the megalomaniacal new palace that Nero had had erected after the fire of Rome, in 64 AD, he already had ceilings that could shower his guests with flowers and sprinklers that sprayed perfumes (Suetonius, *Vita Neronis*, 31, 1-2).

Couperus describes it like this: 'The roof turned, the cupola tipped, the caissons opened and rosettes ... There, in the four corners of the hall, suddenly and simultaneously, and in such a deluge that you could hear them rustling, it snowed flowers like colourful snow, fluttering in a flutter of petals (...).' And this is followed by page after sensual page, almost tumbling over each other, about the rain of scents and flowers that Heliogabalus (Antoninus in The Mountain of Light) poured out over his guests.

The Roses of Heliogabalus, 1888, oil on canvas, 132.1 x 213.9 cm © Colección Pérez Simón, Mexico. Photo by Arturo Piera

Tadema's canvas intrigues in a different way. Unmoved, the impassive protagonist Heliogabalus, reclining above left, with flaxen moustache and goatee beard, looks down on what he has wrought, the practical joke quietly turning into manslaughter. His victims, equally impassive, leaning languidly on cushions, seem to embrace their demise. Their death by drowning is reminiscent of Leopardi's verse from *L'Infinito*: 'E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare' ('... and shipwreck in this sea is sweet for me'). There is a pact between impassivity, overrefinement and perversion in this picture. We are far from the feast in Trimalchio, a scene from the picaresque novel *Satyricon*, by Petronius, one of Nero's courtiers who had fallen into disfavour. In the novel, the nouveau riche host astonishes his guests with the choicest foods, but his vanity and stupidity ruin the setting.

In Tadema's work you see at the most some fruit and a few goblets. The rose petals (the painter prefers them to the violets in the biography) flutter into the room like confetti and pile up at the bottom left. Like a wave spreading widely on the beach. Like swirling clouds, motionless yet nonetheless moving. A maenad, one of the followers of Dionysius, the god of intoxication and ecstasy, plays the double flute. A statue of Dionysius himself with faun and panther towers above the emperor's mother, who looks straight at us. On the right, a bearded man looks searchingly – judgementally? – at the emperor. In front of him, a reclining woman stares impassively at the spectator. She is not buried under the petals. Not yet?

Tadema worked long and meticulously on the large canvas. He even had roses shipped in from the French Riviera. For four months during the winter of 1887-1888, masses of them were sent weekly to the artist's studio in London. Months after the painting was completed the painter still found dried rose petals there.

In Victorian England flowers had all kinds of meanings. Deep red ones stood for romantic love, the pink ones we see on the canvas were an expression of a milder affection. In John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (1852) we see the tragic heroine of *Hamlet* floating dead amidst flowers in a shallow stream. Even a century later swimming in rose petals still seems to have fascinated visual artists. Annie Leibovitz photographed a naked Bette Midler (New York, 1979), asleep among roses, and in the film *American Beauty* (1999) Kevin Spacey gazes at the girl next door, floating in a bath full of blood-red petals.

But I am still not tired of Tadema's roses. This canvas transcends the historic art of the Antwerp school where he learned his trade. Is it moralizing? Or just a style exercise? An impression? Or is it after all a unique depiction, a picture of a civilisation that knows it is doomed?

The king is dead. Long live the king

How different from *A Roman Emperor*, 41 AD – the only work by Tadema that depicts an historic fact, although the painter tries to condense a complex series of events and actions into one scene, and succeeds too. Leaving the theatre, Caligula is murdered by officers of the Praetorian Guard. At the palace, his uncle, the stuttering cripple Claudius, hides behind a curtain fearful for his life. A soldier sees his shoes protruding and greets him – as emperor. Tadema

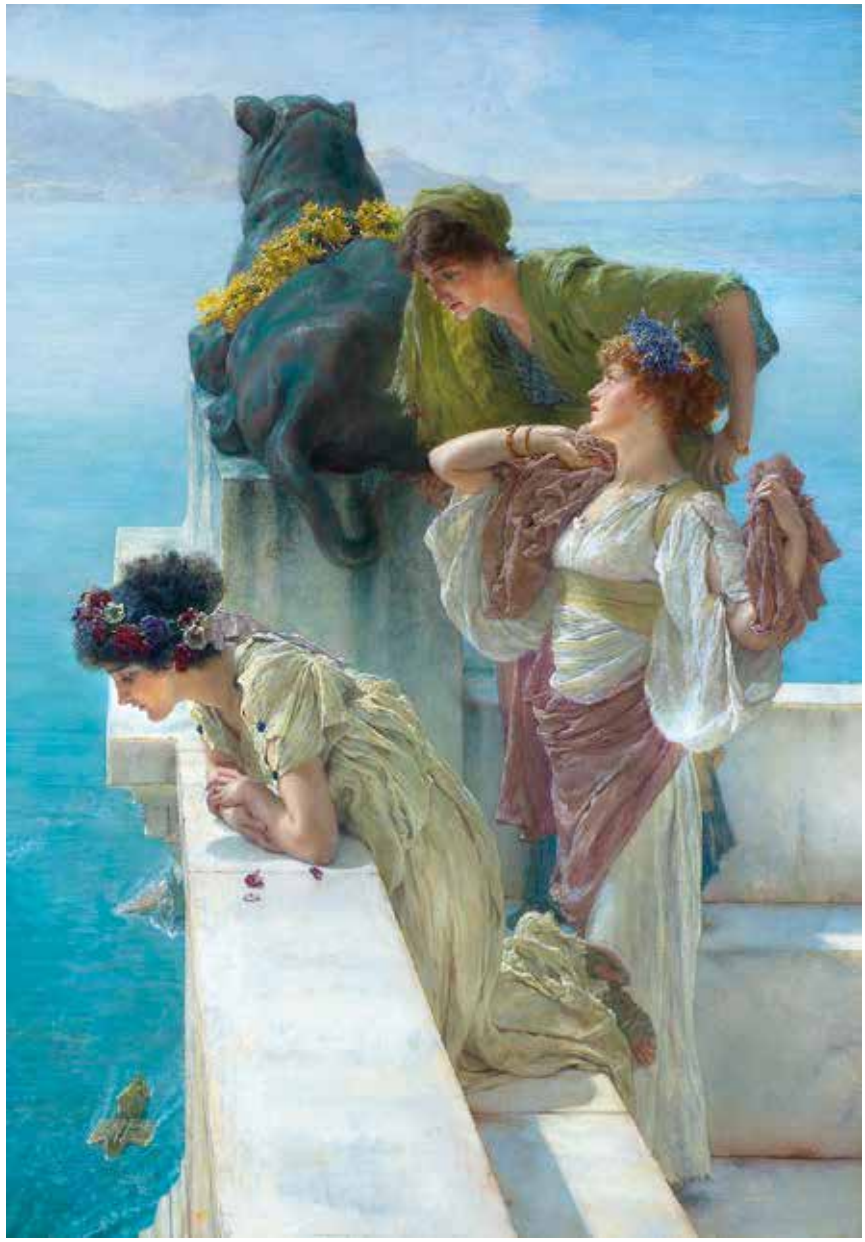
puts the two together in one picture. The dead Caligula ('little boot') lies, fallen backwards on top of another corpse, in the centre of the picture. His head is not visible, but he is recognisable by his green boots. On the left, voyeuristic women and cheering soldiers watch. Meanwhile a hooded figure has already taken advantage of the situation to steal from the palace.

On the right the soldier pulls the curtain back – his flamboyant red shoes have betrayed Claudius. But you can also read the guard's gesture and bow as recognition of the new emperor – who recoils in panic. An unheroic transfer of power indeed. It becomes even more complex if you zoom in to the bloodied bust of Emperor Augustus, rising above the dead Caligula. The founding father of the dynasty looks away. To the left of him hangs a truncated painting showing the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, where he defeated Anthony and Cleopatra and laid the foundations for his rule as emperor. So what does Tadema mean by this? That decline has already crept into the Julio-Claudian dynasty? Power is bestowed and removed for the first time by soldiers.

The picture continues to perplex. Does the title of the painting refer to the dead Caligula, a crazy pervert who does have something in common with Heliogabalus, or to the new Emperor Claudius? Whatever else, this 'historic picture' does not reveal its secrets.

Surprising perspective

A Coign of Vantage (1895) is Tadema's version of the three Graces, whose circular arrangement we recognise from, for example, Botticelli's *Primavera* and Rubens. In Tadema's painting, they have become frivolous, slightly bored, pre-Raphaelite young ladies, hippie girls in rustling dresses 'with flowers in [their] hair'. Tadema breaks the circle open and lets his three Graces harmonise subtly with each other on their exquisite belvedere (*A room with a view!*), gazing out nonchalantly over the sea round Capri. For that is where we see them, on the famous island in the Bay of Naples, at the villa of the art collector Axel Munthe. Tadema photographed the vantage point himself and changed the sphinx into a lioness. A Roman luxury galley passes heedlessly below. The luxuriously extended rear deck suggests that this might perhaps be Emperor Tiberius himself sailing in. In his later years, Tiberius withdrew to the island to indulge his paranoia and sexual excesses. Did the painting's Victorian buyer, who undoubtedly knew his Suetonius (Tiberius's biographer) – think of this? Look at the three rose petals on the marble balustrade. They must have fluttered out of the hair of the woman leaning over the balustrade and will be blown away by the wind in the blink of an eye. If you consider where the painter (photographer?) must have stood to portray these women, you realise just how surprising the chosen perspective is. The title is substantiated, and applies to many of Tadema's canvases: *A Coign of Vantage* is always a good place to observe and assess. Tadema avoids classical frontality; he likes decentring and goes for daring cut-offs. That was already true of *A Roman Emperor*. They are choices that work in a subtly disturbing and unsettling way – very different from the neo-classicist Winkelmann's ideal of 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'.



A Coign of Vantage, 1895, oil on canvas, 58.88 x 44.45 cm

Soft eroticism

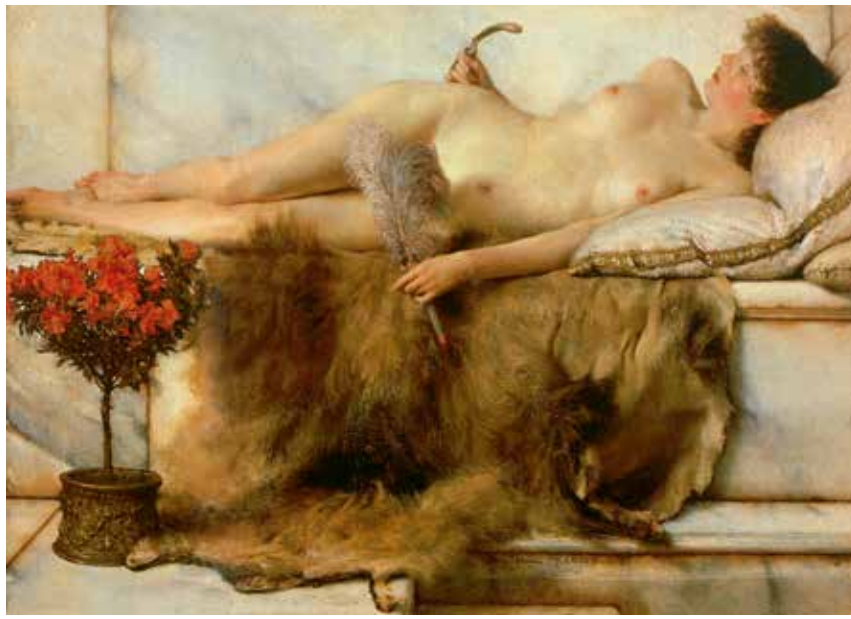
Tadema did paint a few nudes. His most suggestive can be admired in the small but striking *Tepidarium* (1881). A flushed woman lies on an animal skin and silk cushions beside the tepid bath in a Roman bath complex, an ostrich feather fan just concealing her private parts. Only the bronze strigil situates the picture clearly in Antiquity – it was used to scrape oil from the body. A little later, Freud will almost certainly see it as a phallic symbol. The association with the pink, flushed cheeks and open lips is quickly made. Here lies a woman who has just pleasured herself? But the painter's subtlety evades this explicit interpretation. This Venus does not lie with her back to us looking at herself in the mirror, like Velasquez's. She reveals herself completely yet remains submerged in her individuality.

The Women of Amphissa (1887) shows a scene we find in Plutarch: a band of wandering maenads ends up in the Greek town of Amphissa. According to the myth and the rite, the maenads go into the mountains, singing and dancing themselves into a trance, whereupon they tear apart a wild animal and eat it raw. The transgression and sexual connotations are obvious.

In the morning the women wake befuddled and dishevelled in the town's market place. They are encircled by the local matrons and given food. Compassion. Seldom has the chasm between virtue and control and licentiousness and abandon been made more visible than in this juxtaposition of women in animal skins and flowing garments and their tight-laced congeners.

Tadema does not show the sexual act but suggests the befuddlement, the flushed languor after the erotic madness, the memory of the transgression,

Tepidarium, 1881, oil on canvas, 24.2 x 33 cm



The Women of Amphissa, 1887, oil on canvas, 121.8 x 182.8 cm

which was not publicly tolerated at that time and in that milieu. Its buyers must have recognised it, but they could hide behind the historic setting: a bathhouse in ancient Rome; an historic story from Plutarch. His eroticism is soft. It is no coincidence that his naked woman lies in the *tepidarium*, so she is lukewarm, and not in the hot *caldarium*.

Simply...marbellous

Tadema has gone into the history books as one of the finest painters of marble (*Punch* magazine referred to him as a 'marbellous artist') and the blue of the Mediterranean Sea and sky. On his honeymoon, in 1863, he had studied the interiors of Roman houses and their decoration in Pompeii and at the Museum of Naples, and he reproduced them perfectly in his depiction of an Antiquity that looked like an elegant, upper-class Victorian England, with ladies in their intimate environment gazing languorously in patrician *ennui* at some undefined point. His Antiquity was not that of the romantic, foliage draped ruins of Piranesi, but that of the archaeological discoveries. They influenced Hollywood cineastes' settings from D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and Cecil B. De Mille's *Cleopatra* (1934) to Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000) and *Exodus* (2014).

In his archives, Tadema kept photos of objects and artefacts grouped per theme, but he did not hesitate to mix styles and objects from different periods on canvas if that suited the composition better. The details are therefore his-

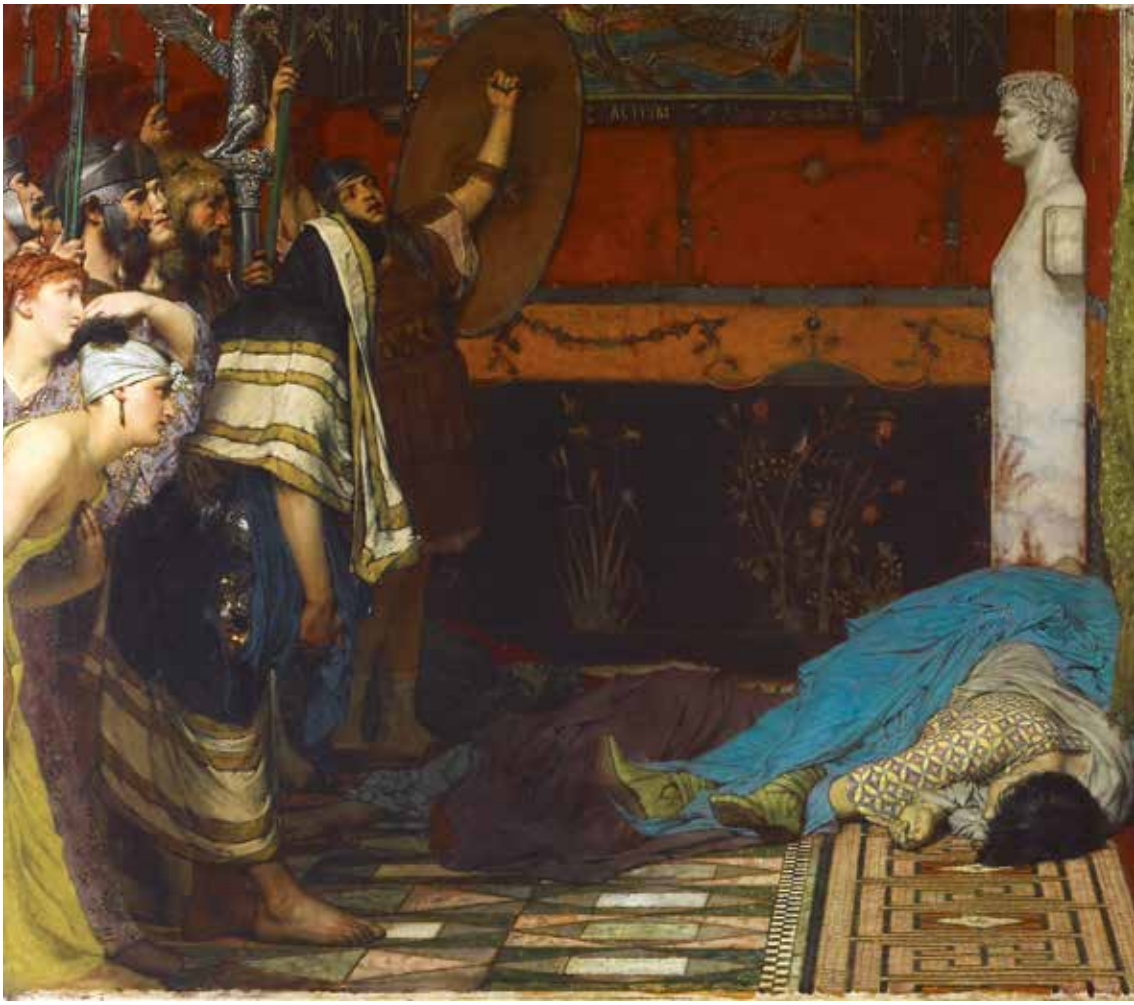
torically accurate but the composition is a deliberate construction. His treatment of history can probably best be compared with what Marguerite Yourcenar says about historical novels: 'Whatever one does, one always reconstructs a monument in one's own fashion. But it's already quite a lot to use only authentic stones.'

Meanwhile, we are aware that every period has its Antiquity, its idea of Antiquity, which says more about the period itself than about Antiquity. Ancient Rome in the time of Caesar and Octavianus in the British-American-Italian television series *Rome*, which was filmed in Cinecittà (2005-2007), is shown as a city of filthy, dark alleys where violence and sex are raw and explicit. It is a very long way from Tadema. A perfectionist and control freak, he was trained at the Academy of Art in Antwerp in the historic style of Henry Leys and Louis Jean de Taeye. In 1870 his career planning took him to London, where he found an environment and a public with plenty of purchasing power that he could readily supply. The right man at the right moment in the right place, who held up a mirror of themselves to his clientele: affluent Victorians with leisure, cultural aspirations and a desire to travel. After their grand tour in the South, he gave them back a vicarious Antiquity, with a glistening blue Mediterranean Sea and sky, and the memory of marble: a manageable, socially acceptable, readily available Antiquity.

Tadema's art was also a response to a tendency for escapism in the class that profited from the industrial age, a desire to escape the machines and the harsh trading to which they owed their luxury and their class identity. Add to that just socially acceptable erotic titillation, packaged in a pseudo mythical decor, and the morally admissible splendour and magnificence of another time and place. In short, Tadema's canvases could be seen as an upper-class version of what the butler saw. In the end, though, Tadema's appeal goes deeper. By transposing his own culture to a revered civilisation which, like his, derived its pride from property and the showy display of material wealth, the painter put Victorian England first in the succession to Rome.

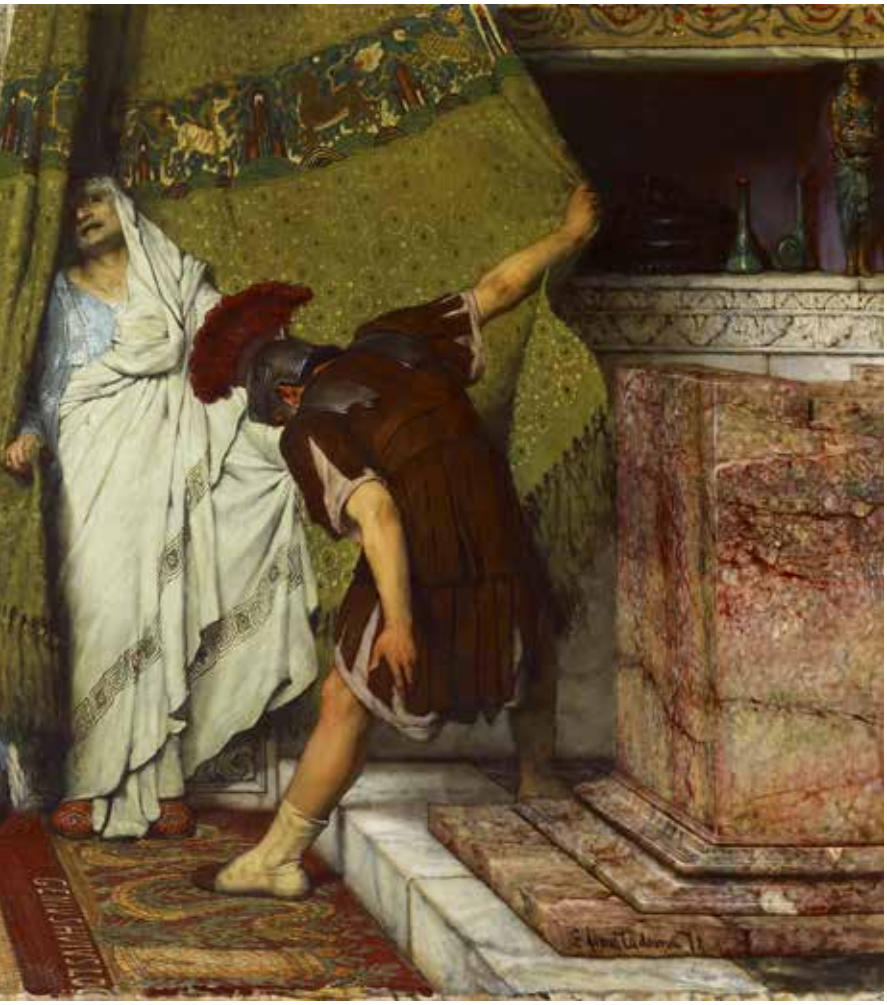
Art or kitsch?

Having lost his first wife and a son by the age of thirty-three, Tadema subsequently married a young English artist. His chic residence in Regent's Park developed into a shrine and a mirror of his oeuvre. He entertained there with style, but no one was allowed to touch or move any object, however carelessly it seemed to have been put down. He was, as Tacitus Petronius described it, an *arbiter elegantiae*, someone who determined etiquette, fashion and life style and embodied them with refinement. Perhaps, in the end, he felt trapped by his phenomenal skill and commercial success. To a friend he admitted, sighing: 'I paint a piece of marble, and they want nothing but marble; a blue sky, and they want nothing but blue skies; an Agrippa, and they want nothing but Agrippas; an oleander bush, and they want nothing except oleanders. Arrgh! A man isn't a machine!' Perhaps it was not as simple as Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science Halbe Zijlstra suggested when, outlining the underlying principles of his cultural policy in 2010, he quoted the Frisian artist: 'While I am painting, I am an artist, once the work is finished, I am a businessman'.



Alma-Tadema sold his *Roses of Heliogabalus* to the British parliamentarian John Aird for the sum of £4,000. Today that is the equivalent of at least €100,000. He died in 1912, feted and knighted, and was buried in St Paul's Cathedral. Just in time. With the brutal disillusionment of the First World War his work fell out of fashion, rejected as slick, empty and superficial. In 1934 *The Roses* was sold for £483 and in 1960 the work was worth just £105. Since then the value has risen meteorically again. In 1993 Christie's auctioned it for something over £1.6 million. The tide could change again though. When he was alive Tadema produced art. After his death it appeared to be kitsch. If kitsch is, as Roger Scruton claims, 'fake art, expressing fake emotions, whose purpose is to deceive the consumer into thinking he feels something deep and serious', then Tadema is more than kitsch. Behind the impassivity of some of his paintings, there is something brewing that is difficult to put a finger on.

The Roses will be on display this year in Vienna and London. Go and have a look at them. Tadema has still not given away all his secrets. Perhaps he is what Nietzsche said of the Greeks: superficial. Yes. *Aus Tiefe*. ■



Translated by Lindsay Edwards

A Roman Emperor, 41 AD, 1871,
oil on canvas, 83.8 x 174.2 cm
© Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore

EXHIBITION

Alma-Tadema. Classical Charm

Till 18 June 2017 in
the Belvedere, Vienna.
www.belvedere.at

From 7 July to 29 October 2017 in
Leighton House Museum, London.
www.leightonhouse.co.uk

FURTHER READING

Elizabeth Prettejohn and Edwin Beckers, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*. New York: Rizzoli and Van Gogh Museum, 1996

Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi (ed.), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity*. Leeuwarden: Fries Museum, 2016, published in association with Prestel-Verlag, Munich