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(Re)constructions

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“Not so, surely, looked the Greeks”: Alma-Tadema’s Reconstructions of Grecian Scenes

La reconstruction des Grecs anciens chez Alma-Tadema : enjeux et résistances

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada

- 1 “Five-o’clock-tea Antiquity”: Whistler’s famous quip about Alma-Tadema’s reconstructions of the everyday lives of the ancients (Swanson 1977, 20) underscores their anecdotal and domestic dimension. Within the general revival of antique subjects that characterized British painting in the 1860s, which many contemporary reviewers and critics in the press referred to as a “classical” school, Alma-Tadema’s visions of the antique past stand apart. His banal or frivolous scenes differ from the idealistic and academic classicism of Watts and Leighton or from the proto-formalist Aestheticism of Moore, Whistler and Burne-Jones—even though some of these painters emulated his manner at some point in their career. Victorian “classicism” was indeed a distinct pictorial trend which overlapped with Aestheticism while also looking towards *genre*. However, what has perhaps not been sufficiently taken into account in studies of these movements (Wood, Christian, Barrow 2007, Prettejohn 2007, Staley) is that most painters and art critics established distinctions between Greek and Roman subjects. Academic artists such as Leighton and Watts singled out Greek iconographical sources, such as Phidian sculpture, for their artistic value and intellectual aura. Similarly, artists with Aestheticist leanings such as Moore and also Leighton eulogized Greek forms on account of their intrinsic formalist qualities. Both the classical and the Aesthetic painters therefore assigned specific functions to Greek subjects because of their potential for idealization and/or aestheticization.
- 2 Alma-Tadema’s Greek subjects were distinctively pedestrian. As Wood notes, “[i]f Athens was the inspiration, Pompeii was the reality” (28). Alma-Tadema was not a convinced Hellenist and he was mostly inspired by the material culture he saw when visiting excavations in Italy. Most of all, his treatment was indebted to the aesthetic principles and compositional methods of *genre* painting. He reconstructed a past that was made

plausible and tangible thanks to his thorough knowledge of the latest archaeological discoveries but also to his conviction that human affects and activities were permanent throughout history. He often established analogies between the sensibility of the ancients and that of the moderns. Likewise, many commentators argued that his ancients looked real because they were described as modern people. Yet in a context when Greece and "Hellenism" assumed a particular relevance for the Victorians and functioned as an intellectual and cultural model, as Turner has shown, such analogies were particularly problematic. Alma-Tadema's approach to Greek subjects did certainly not conform to his contemporaries' expectations.

- 3 One important aspect of Alma-Tadema's Greek subjects which this article wants to address is that they reflect a transition in Western art from history to *genre* painting. Vottero has studied the transition in French Academicism from historical paintings to the new category of "scenes of historical *genre*" or "anecdotal history painting" (79-95). Prettejohn (1996) examines this transition in her study of Alma-Tadema's Roman subjects, which sometimes depict historical figures but mostly concentrate on everyday scenes with ordinary individuals. The painter produced some twenty subjects set in archaic or classical Greece, which include renowned figures of Greek history, domestic or familial scenes, representations of drinking or sleeping banqueters, renowned or anonymous sculptors, vase makers, painters or poets, and maenadic rites or festive celebrations. Barrow (2001), who brackets his Greek scenes together with his Roman subjects, evokes his preference for "Greek genre" when such subjects were concerned (43). However, perusal of the reviews and critical assessments published in contemporary periodicals shows that Greek subjects raised specific expectations. Greece and Rome hold a different cultural status, in a context when history painting is still considered with respect. Alma-Tadema's reconstructions of Greek life thus raise specific aesthetic and theoretical issues, which accounts for the mixed reception they sometimes met with. In particular, some of these objections reflect ingrained moral or ideological biases that have to do with issues of sexuality, gender, class, and race. Alma-Tadema was wont to dispose playful or even roguish visual motifs that allude to unorthodox sexual mores. But suggesting the gendered or racial otherness of Greek culture was still a delicate matter for his contemporaries.

Alma-Tadema's treatment of history

- 4 As a Dutch-born painter, Alma-Tadema was influenced by the Northern schools of *genre* painting. In the early 1850s, he studied in the studios of three Antwerp historical painters, Gustave Wappers, Nicaise de Keyser and Baron Leys, whose pastiches of seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish genre scenes he emulated (see Baetens). He first followed the codes of continental history painting and then discarded academic compositional schemes in the early 1860s. His compositions were henceforth less centred; the figures seemed to have been taken on the spot and were even cut off by the frame. Alma-Tadema was also influenced by the French *Néo-Grecs*, who turned away from the neoclassical style of the Davidian school and privileged a documented reconstitution of ancient décors, costumes and artefacts. He met Boulanger and Gérôme when he stayed in Paris in 1863 to receive a gold medal (Swanson 1990, 29). The *école du calque* modified the visual codes and theoretical underpinnings of history painting and transposed antique subjects into historical *genre*. The figures no longer functioned as *exempla virtutis* but were

engaged in anecdotal actions that were easy to interpret. The bourgeois classes of the French Empire were particularly attracted to these erudite and decorative works, notably because of their mild eroticism (Couëlle 6).

- 5 The *Néo-Grecs*' success probably encouraged Alma-Tadema to adopt "Pompeian" subjects in the early 1860s. His technical abilities also allowed him to perfectly render the archaeological objects he saw when he travelled to Naples and Pompeii. A decisive moment was when he met the Belgian dealer Ernest Gambart in Antwerp in 1864, who owned a gallery in London: the latter convinced him that accessible Roman subjects were highly marketable and he would also gain from moving to London. The British artistic context was then marked by the revival of Antiquity in painting that took place in the early 1860s. But it had also been characterized by the vogue for *genre*—mainly contemporary subjects and "problem pictures"—since the 1830s. There had been a small yet highly influential school of historical painting in Britain in the first four decades of the century—with John Flaxman's purist classicism and then with Benjamin Haydon and James Barry's neoclassical works—but representations of Antiquity had been on the wane. In parallel to the vogue for contemporary subjects, historical "costume" scenes set in the seventeenth or eighteenth century and treated as *genre* were also in fashion.
- 6 Alma-Tadema's move to London thus coincided with the revival of the "grand manner" and the return to antiquity in the works of the classicist painters Leighton, Watts or Poynter. However, his detailed scenes of everyday life in Antiquity differed from their style. He found success with the new bourgeois classes, who appreciated his mundane scenes. The painter's imaginative visions of the past do not imply a thorough knowledge of the classical texts but privilege the depiction of material culture. Besides, his figures express simple emotions and are engaged in uncomplicated and thus accessible actions. The critic Monkhouse, for example, explains that the painter is truer than his French counterparts when "he generally paints scenes of ancient days [because] he approaches his subjects from the side of personal experience in life". This is because Alma-Tadema "approaches the painting of his characters from the side of *genre*, and modern *genre*" (Monkhouse Dec. 16 1882, 439). The valuation of "personal experience", combined with successful theatrical effects—the critic refers to "the *mise en scène* and the properties of his stage" (439)—are therefore elements which for Monkhouse make his pictures quite modern.
- 7 Alma-Tadema's relocation of Victorian sentiment within Antiquity is part of what Swanson has assessed as "Bourgeois Classicism" (Swanson 1990, 39). It was an original trend in the European nineteenth-century pictorial context. Thévoz, in his study of Gleyre's academicism, claims that the French bourgeoisie assigned a specific function to academic painters. He studies how their canvases fantasize a filiation with the antique past and provide a fantasied grounding and origin for bourgeois power. The position of the bourgeoisie was indeed insecure historically and socially. Academic paintings of Antiquity thus provide a mirror image of the system that the bourgeois classes established, which is transposed into the harmony that was originated by a fantasied Antiquity (34). For Thévoz therefore, the scenography and presentation of events and figures—envisioned as *sub specie aeternitatis*—are part of a strategy: the past is conjured up as a bygone time separated from the present and yet the play on temporality entails the fixity of essences. Illusionism, perspective and spatial verisimilitude thus combine to create a still omnipresent order (44). This process he addresses as a bourgeois fantasy and

he opposes it to realist and naturalist painting, which provides a partial point of view and arrests a single instant in the linear duration.

- 8 Alma-Tadema's personal reconstructions of antiquity as historical *genre* both submit to and diverge from that model. On the one hand, he represents the Ancients so as to make them look like his contemporaries—which Swanson evokes through the particular mirror images of the imperialistic or commercial classes:

Alma-Tadema's painting was a perfect mirror of the Victorian imperialist self-image. Seeing themselves as inheritors of an empire, many Englishmen revelled in Alma-Tadema's affirmation of their society, loaded with historical associations. They were much taken with an artist who could prove in paint that the Romans were not too different from the wealthy merchant class of Great Britain. Hence the claim that he portrayed "Victorians in toga". (Swanson 1990, 39)

- 9 On the other hand, Alma-Tadema depicts common, anonymous and even menial or divergent individuals. His personal version of historical *genre* thus raises complex social and political questions, which in part explains some of the harsh critical assessments his works sometimes received. Undeniably, the transition from history to *genre* was not always taken for granted. One example of this is a review published in 1867 by the art critic J.B. Atkinson, who laments the general predominance of modern subjects in the Academy and the resultant absence of elevating historical subjects:

Of High Art, in the old sense of this term, there is next to none; the change that has come over the English in common with Continental schools is remarkable. Heroic noses, Jupiter brows, Herculean muscles, Roman togas, and other paraphernalia of high historic schools, are out of fashion and obsolete. A plain coat and breeches [...] are now accepted as garbs worthy of demigods. (Atkinson 1867, 79-80)

Atkinson deplores the fact that anecdote has replaced history painting, and deplores that "[s]omething above the level of common daily experience has indeed been long wanted as a relief to the dull level of prosaic facts which artists have for some years past been accumulating on canvas, as if a picture were a table of statistics, or a ledger in a merchant's counting house" (85). This was exactly the kind of historical *genre* paintings Alma-Tadema was then producing, and he even often transposed his contemporaries' commercial or leisure activities within Antiquity. In fact, his Greco-Romans were either criticized because they were too "Victorian" in terms of the depiction of their sensibility and mores; or they were appreciated precisely because any subject set in Antiquity was clothed with an aura of dignity and grandeur. Cosmo Monkhouse, for instance, extols his power to authentically reconstruct the past and to provide a plausible depiction of the ancients: "[...] in painting Ancient Greece and Rome he helps still more our desires to realise what is beyond our experience", not only because of the "accurate" architecture, artworks and costumes, which are "great aids to reconstruction" (Monkhouse Dec. 23 1882, 456), but also because of his illusionist depiction of the figures:

[He] has dealt with such materials in so imaginative a manner as to give an appearance of reality as great as if he were painting views in the London of today. But he not only does that; he fills them with people who are quite at home in his imaginary world, who wear their strange costumes with the ease of long habit, and eat and dance and pipe and flirt as to the manner born. (456)

For Monkhouse indeed, the "mere reconstructive faculty, though [...] fed with ample stores of knowledge" and with "the purest imagination", is successful precisely because he thought that the ancients were like his contemporaries, which enables him to perfectly reconstitute their moods and feelings:

Though the cultured few may reckon as his highest efforts his attempts to reproduce that part of the old life which is utterly dead [...] it is those in which old

and modern sentiment approach one another which are most pleasing to the greatest number. We all know that human nature is much the same in all ages, but there is a special delight in being reminded of it pictorially [...]. (457)

What Monkhouse appreciates, then, is Alma-Tadema's ability to make his figures alive and real, which is due to his profound affinities with modern subjectivity. He also expresses admiration for the painter's theatrical staging of the past, which becomes as vivid as contemporary life. Monkhouse even recognizes contemporary people in the models:

The only thing that shakes our faith is the appearance of English faces among the actors. But, after all, this disturbs it as little as at a theatre where the acting is good; and Mr. Alma Tadema's acting is nearly always good. He, and even Mr. Gambart, pass as more than tolerable Romans when they wear togas instead of cutaway coats. Practically, therefore, Mr. Alma Tadema succeeds in the intention of his art, which is to make us feel what life was like in the old world. (457)

- 10 The painter and his family often posed for his canvases, and he liked wearing Greco-Roman disguises for his parties; he also designed décors and props for the stage. Contemporary bourgeois leisure practices, such as the theatre and costume balls, are here successfully assimilated to ancient pastimes.
- 11 However, many reviewers found faults with the representation of the ancients through modern subjectivity, and this especially when it came to the Greeks. His series of siestas and banquets, for instance, were vituperated by a number of critics who were offended by the pictorial depictions of Greeks sprawling and sleeping off their wine (see Barrow 2001, 45-48; 72-73). Monkhouse thus spurns the "vulgarity of the figures" and the "unpleasant representation of an interesting scene" (457). One consequence of this dialectic analogy between ancient and modern people was that the former no longer acted as a noble, idealized and exemplary mirror to the latter, as in historical painting. Monkhouse thus notes that "there is nothing more destructive of the kind of illusion that Mr. Alma Tadema desires to produce than palpable modern sentiment". Indeed, "[t]he effect of any direct appeal to the experience of to-day [...] shatter[s] our faith in the sincerity and knowledge of the would-be restorers of past times". Monkhouse nonetheless judges that the painter produces effective canvases thanks to his extraordinary imagination and technical abilities. He reconstructs "bits out of a real world of which he had been an eye-witness" and his achievement "is due to his tact in not forcing modern sentiment too far" (457). Reconstructing ancient people through the lens of the modern subjectivity entails a delicate balance. However, a hesitation irrupts in the reception of Alma-Tadema's Greeks, as they are still expected to function as *exempla* while acting out as fantasied and fascinating others.

The Soldier of Marathon: a conversation piece in the gynaecium

Fig. 1. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Soldier of Marathon*, 1867, oil on canvas, 39.5x56.5 cm, private collection.

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Fig. 2. Luc Olivier Merson, *Philippides, le soldat de Marathon*, 1869, oil on canvas, 114x147 cm, Paris, École Nationale des Beaux Arts.

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- 12 Although *Phidias Showing the Frieze of the Parthenon to his Friends* of 1868 (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery) and *A Pyrrhic Dance* of 1869 (Guildhall Art Gallery) could pass for historical paintings, most of Alma-Tadema's Greek works belong to the category of historical genre. His *Soldier of Marathon* [fig. 1] is a Greek subject and yet it looks like one of his Roman or Pompeian subjects. Alma-Tadema threw together diverse elements of Greek and Roman décors, artworks and furniture, and the title is meant to secure the Greekness of the work. The artist clearly distances himself from continental historical painting, as shows a comparison with Luc Olivier Merson's *Phillipides, le soldat de Marathon* [fig. 2]. Although the canvas was painted after Alma-Tadema's, it was the kind of academic works he was acquainted with. He actually saw it at some later date because the soldier's position is similar to the figure of the shepherd in *A Reading from Homer*. Merson's *Philippides* has just thrown himself at the feet of the archons of Athens to deliver the news of the victory of the Greeks in Marathon but also of the Persians' imminent attack upon the city. Merson complies with the codes of *peinture d'histoire* (he won the *Grand Prix de Rome* in 1869): he places the archons and the celebrated soldier in the centre and represents the latter in the nude. Alma-Tadema, on the other hand, relegates a now anonymous soldier to the left and some elements are cut by the frame, which testifies to the influence of photography. The young man converses with his mother and his wife or sister—Victorians, not in togas, but in chitons, for they were modelled on the artist's first wife and her mother. The action no longer takes place on the agora but in a cramped room, perhaps the gynaecium. Common people have replaced the representatives of individual heroism, and domesticity has taken the place of the *polis*. The soldier's raised arm is a remote reminder of the rhetorical gestures of academic painting, but his other hand bathetically raises a cup while the young woman holds her chin attentively and

unremarkably. The room is quite sober, except for a decorative frieze on the upper walls and an ornate bench, which looks more Pompeian than Greek. This is a conversation piece of sorts transposed into Greece.

- 13 Alma-Tadema's canvas panders to the bourgeois ethos, and his bourgeois public could perfectly identify with the figures; but it also discreetly disrupts the gendered constructions at work not only in neoclassical painting but also in Victorian society. While Merson's work [fig. 2] is a glorification of the public sphere—which in history painting was the preserve of masculinity—Alma-Tadema's composition, setting and props emphasize the private sphere—which in Victorian pictorial representations of modern subjects was currently associated to the feminine. True, the soldier still wears his *cnemids* but they contrast with his crossed legs. The tokens of his military status—his helmet and armour—have actually been symbolically placed next to the door. A red cask full of jewels is placed above the young man's head, thus providing a diagonal foil to his arms. Furthermore, the mother's distaff is visually echoed by the man's cup, and both occupy the central position. Alma-Tadema's adoption of *genre* therefore discreetly subverts the gendered codes of history.
- 14 Reconstructing the ancients as if they were Victorians also raised the issue of racialist constructions of the Greco-Romans. According to Alma-Tadema's friend and biographer, the Egyptologist and novelist G.M. Ebers, the painter wished to become like his "beloved ancients". Representing the past was a way for him to escape an ugly, utilitarian present; he conjured up a world where the beautiful and the good were linked and men were closer to nature (33-35). Ebers often describes Alma-Tadema's ancients as free and blithe people and he even alludes to sexual and social practices that were totally at variance with Victorian mores. Alma-Tadema particularly liked to depict elements that could shake up contemporary assumptions about sexuality or race. The dialectic analogy between the ancients and the Victorians thus appears as fundamentally ambivalent. What's more, the Greeks function either as repulsive or as seducing mirror images to the Victorians. They literally stage a return of the repressed.
- 15 Some critics found his Greeks highly disreputable, most probably because they were still ascribed a noble status. G.A. Simcox, for example, praises his power to recreate the material life of these past civilisations: "[...] it is the imagination that really does the work of reconstruction" and in fact "[t]he artist has brooded over his knowledge until it lived in visible form before him" (110). However, the unidealized rendering of the figures is highly problematic and prevents him from finding any sign of "the passion of beauty" in his works. This, to him, is due to the absence of any intellectual or moral dimension:

But when we come to the figures it is clear that they must have been felt before they were seen; and it is a curious proof of the thoroughness and independence with which the artist goes to work that they are felt so very much upon the animal side. It is not that his art is in the least sensuous; he leaves the spectator always in a state of purely aesthetic satisfaction, which is quite compatible with a grave, disinterested curiosity. Still the objects of this curiosity are for the most part unmistakably animals; the mere physical basis of life, which most painters suppress in order to paint either spirits or passions or costumes, is almost always prominent. It is not emphasized or insisted upon, but while Mr. Alma Tadema's pictures often leave us uncertain as to what the figures are thinking or feeling, they never leave us uncertain as to what they are. He shows us a Roman lady lying, very likely sprawling, not ungracefully on a sofa, and we know just as much about her, thanks to him, as we know by the help of our own eyes of the cat on the hearth-rug; he

shows us Greeks over their dinner or their wine, and we know them as we might know dogs feeding or cattle grazing. (110-111)

This mundane treatment deprives his figures of any noble dimension. Most of all, they raise issues of both class and race which the Greeks' propensity to idealize their figures evaded:

One can hardly doubt that consciousness must have been intermittent in such undeveloped races, as it is probably intermittent among undeveloped classes now; and it is less surprising that ancient art should have dwelt upon the conscious moments than from the unsophisticated specimens of the Mediterranean races which could be studied to the highest average type which was reached two thousand years ago. (111)

The appropriate type for the Greeks has to conform to precise ideological and racialist considerations. Another journalist, John Forbes, goes even further and compares the Greeks shown in his scenes of siestas to people of Asiatic origins:

His workmanship is so consummate, that we linger over his pictures as over a Greek gem, though we are not attracted to his subjects—nay, are rather repelled by them. What human interest can we, living in the nineteenth century, have in painting, or having painted for us, those half-naked sensuous Greeks, lying on couches and drinking their wine out of flat paterae? To us they suggest men in different stages of a Turkish bath; and no beauty of drawing, or harmony of colour, or wonderful painting of accessories can quicken us into thorough enjoyment of "The Siesta"; "The Dinner"; or "The Wine". (276)

- 16 Bearing in mind Thévoz's argument about the fantasied inscription of modern bourgeois civilization within an antique filiation, such comments cast an instructive light on Alma-Tadema's version within the British context. Despite the contemporary taste for *genre* and its typical depiction of people engaged in everyday actions, which his reconstructions of Greece reflected, such subjects sometimes failed to win the critics' approval. Some were indeed of opinion that these noble people of the past should not totally look like themselves. Thus, Alma-Tadema's depictions of the objectionable aspects of Greece or of Rome diverge both from history painting—because of the trivial treatment of the figures—and from modern *genre*—because he alludes to practices that were customarily not admissible in such paintings.

Desacralizing Homer

Fig. 3. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Reading from Homer*, 1885, oil on canvas, 91.4x183.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art (The George Elkins Collection).

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- 17 It was still expected of painters to choose physical types that were those of white Europeans when the Greeks—and especially important literary or historical figures—were portrayed. When Alma-Tadema painted *A Reading from Homer* [fig. 3] he chose a title that evokes the prestigious bard, whose cultural aura was still prevalent in the nineteenth century, as Turner has shown (135-186). Many French historical paintings present the poet as a blind old man in the semi-nude who declaims his verse on the agora or in marketplaces, surrounded by admiring countrymen and by picturesque Mediterranean landscapes.¹ Alma-Tadema, for his part, only alludes to the oral literary tradition Homer originated. He thus differs from a well-established academic tradition, concentrating rather on his successful pictorial formula of the moment. He adopts larger formats for his antique scenes, which are bathed in a bright, artificial light that enhances the vividness of the white marble and the colours of the sea and sky. The figures are placed centrally on a raised platform that overlooks a magnificent backdrop (often the Bay of Naples); they are clad in elegant draperies and engage in pleasant interactions. And yet these luminous scenes may be read diversely.
- 18 Alma-Tadema depicts an unspecified rhapsodist who has placed an open roll on his knees as an aid to his declamation while a group of Greek youths listen to him captivantly. The artist has relegated the poet to the right of the painting and he has moved the anonymous public to the centre. French academic painters frequently depict young couples listening to Homer, with male figures in the nude and female figures clad in classic draperies. Alma-Tadema takes up this formula while bringing modifications that open up aesthetic, gendered and racial dissonances. He portrays the female figure as the typical “English rose”, which corresponds to a conventional gendered codification; nevertheless, he accentuates the Mediterranean type of some of the male figures, which was at variance with traditional iconographical codes. Moreover, the man situated on the left seems quite androgynous: his full mouth recalls Simeon Solomon’s ambivalent masculine type, and he wears a flower crown and a long coat that give him a rather feminine look. His theatrical posture probably derives from a Hellenistic Tanagra figurine

of a draped woman in a hat that had entered the British Museum in 1875 (Terracotta figure of a woman standing, c. 300-200 BC, Boeotia, British Museum). Alma-Tadema shows openness to the domestic art of Greece but also to the "Asiatic" side of Greek culture, which was not taken for granted at the time; he also subtly subverts gendered constructions.

- 19 Another interesting element of this picture is that it appears as a visual staging of the Nietzschean dialectics of the Apollonian and the Dionysian tendencies of Greek culture. Alma-Tadema was probably acquainted with the ideas the German philosopher had put forward in his *Birth of Tragedy* of 1872 through his German friend and biographer, Helen Zimmern, who was also Nietzsche's friend and translator. The Apollonian tendency—the rational, ordered side of Greek culture emblemized by the field of music and incarnated by the rhapsodist, whose brow is crowned with a laurel crown, the attribute of Apollo—subsumes the Dionysian tendency—the irrational and primitive elements of Greek culture that are here embodied by the shepherd wearing a goat's skin, who is captivated by the reading. Some accessories and details evoke the literary oral and written tradition of Greek culture, such as the roll and cithara, which symbolise Greek artistic and intellectual genius. Other elements, on the other hand, such as the flowers and tambourine, point to Greek floral and maenadic rites that involved the body through energetic dances or uncontrolled trances. Because of the horizontal format, the figures appear like actors placed on a stage in front of a painted backdrop. The entire canvas thus appears as a visual transposition of the Nietzschean notion that the theatre functions as a site for the reconciliation of the antagonistic poles of Greek culture. Incidentally, Klimt, who was strongly influenced by Alma-Tadema (Becker 80-81; Fellingner 158), copied the figure and posture of the shepherd in a Dionysian subject, *The Altar of Dionysus* (Wiener Burgtheater, Vienna)—who is a visual reminder of Merson's horizontal Marathon soldier. The pleasant and sentimental scene gives way to a meditation on the oral and written status of Greek literature. Music and archaic rites appear as essential components of Greek culture—quite an original choice in Victorian painting—, even though Alma-Tadema implies that they may be temporarily domesticated by poetry.
- 20 Some critics objected to this treatment because it devaluated the epic poet who had originated an illustrious literary tradition. Others even disapproved of what they considered as objectionable types. Claude Phillips, for example, passes a negative comment on the décor—suggesting that the pilasters "scarcely [...] represent any known type of pure Greek architecture, but rather seem to reproduce some specimen of semi-Asiatic art" (335)—so as to introduce his condemnation of the physical types. Although he appreciates the "fair-haired woman of the type affected by the painter", which corresponds to a national and much-valorised type in painting, he notes that the male figure on the left is "a man of haggard mien" (335), which suggests that the figure does not conform to iconographical conventions. The "unity" of the composition and the "archaeological research and invention" do not make up for the disappointing types, because they lack the dignity which such subjects call for:

If, however, the picture is considered from the higher point of view [...] we find it singularly wanting in all the more human and inspiring qualities which we might reasonably look for. The facial types, though they have an air of realistic truth, are of a low order, and not such as should have been selected for such a subject; and the interest displayed by the listeners in the recital of the great epic is but of a languid and unintelligent kind. Not so, surely, looked the Greeks, even when fallen from

their high estate, as they listened to the soul-stirring verses of their revered bard!
(336)

- 21 Representing Homer implies "a higher intellectual effort" and "a work nobler and more sympathetic in suggestion" (336). For the reviewer, Alma-Tadema's treatment consequently belongs to *genre* too patently. And beside the aesthetic criteria such a subject entailed, one gathers that white European types would have been much fitter.

Sappho's subtle subversiveness

Fig. 4. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, 1881, oil on canvas, 66x122 cm, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

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- 22 Despite hostile responses, Alma-Tadema was keen to evoke gendered ambivalence underneath the apparent banality and mildness of historical *genre*. Sappho and Alcaeus [fig. 4] was an appropriate subject. This was the context of the Victorian "construction of Sappho herself as the first woman poet" (Prins 3), and she was also associated with love between women. In Alma-Tadema's depiction, she listens to her fellow male poet, who plays on a richly ornamented cithara. Prins suggests that she is "detached from the lyric performance" (56) because she is deprived of her lyre. The composition enhances the poet's role, although he is positioned on the side, opposite the group of Sappho and her female followers. The Greek names of the women she mentions in her verse are written on the benches. The painter uses all the ingredients that were then making his success: the raised platform overlooking a sunny Mediterranean landscape, the refined marble and the coloured draperies. Sappho's type is clearly Asiatic, which research on the poet made more acceptable. Indeed, Sappho herself refers to her raven hair in her poetry. Nevertheless, a European type—blond, light-brown or red hair and pale or rosy carnations—is conveniently used for the other figures.
- 23 Yet, Alma-Tadema has placed some elements that allude to gender and sexuality which largely went unnoticed despite their disconcerting potential. At first glance the picture seems to suggest that Alma-Tadema has endorsed the image of the poetess in love with a man. Sappho and Alcaeus are associated by their similar black hair and dark carnation and by the imaginary line between their gazes, which also denotes Sappho's attraction for

him and his music. She rests her chin on a cushion that holds the laurel crown potentially destined for him while the winged bronze sculpture that decorates the foot of the lectern represents victory offering a crown. Since Antiquity, many authors have overemphasized Sappho's heterosexual relation with Alcaeus so as to cover the themes of female homoeroticism or of female poetic creativity (Barrow 2001, 95). Alma-Tadema's treatment seems to accord with this image: Sappho is deprived of the attributes of the poetess and turns her back to her female companions. Contrariwise, a terracotta plaque that had entered the British Museum in 1842 (*Sappho and Alkaeos*, terracotta relief plaque, c. 480-460 BC, Melos, British Museum) shows Sappho singing to Alcaeus, her *barbitos*—a stringed instrument—clearly identifying her as a poet.

- 24 Underneath the apparently heterosexual presentation of Sappho, what is still at stake here is lesbianism and female artistic emancipation. Alma-Tadema was familiar with the theme of sapphism through his readings of Swinburne, a poet he particularly appreciated and often quoted in his works (Stephens 17; Barrow 2001, 152; Swanson 1990, 10). He thus subtly alludes to an alternative vision of Sappho. In her poems, Sappho emphasizes artistic creativity and expresses physical desire for her young female companions. The painter shrewdly hints at the relationship between Sappho and her community of loving and intellectually-minded women. Many Greek vases represent Sappho reading to her disciples, some of them resting a hand on another attendant's shoulder—a gesture which the young blond girl standing next to her reproduces. This figure is modelled on the Sappho Eresia (Roman copy of a Greek original of the 5th c. BC, Capitoline Museum), who has the same oval face, elongated neck and tresses and whose curling hair evokes the flower crown in the picture. Despite the presence of a man, the painter shows a community of women governed by artistic, intellectual as well as affectionate relations.
- 25 A further gendered subversion surges up. Sappho is plunged in an intent and appreciating contemplation of the poet, which is echoed by the pleased gaze of the girl to her left and the concentrated stare of a woman behind her. However, the figure next to that woman seems to be absorbed in contemplating her neighbour; as for the figure on the right, she looks elsewhere, as if uninterested by Alcaeus's declamation. Moreover, the two sculpted busts in the background—one of them clearly that of a woman—meaningfully turn their backs to him. Some classical authors indeed say that Sappho rejected Alcaeus.
- 26 The poet's posture and gestures would in fact not have looked manly according to the criteria of the time. His pink tunic associates him to the feminine, while the fact that he plays music to women makes him passive and exposes him to female judgment. The visual motif of the rhyton placed under his chair, whose opening is turned towards the female figures, seems to symbolically echo his attitude of openness to their verdict. For Goldhill the work points to "acts of interpretation, appreciation and performance" (66) and it is "an eroticized scene of poetic performance" (67). But Goldhill also emphasizes the role of silence in the picture: the poet is separated from Sappho by a wide empty space in the middle of the canvas, which to him raises interrogations about the possibility of reading desire in the painting. This leads him to wonder whether a modern viewer's desire to construct the Victorians' reception of Antiquity as a "scene of desire" may affect our own reconstruction of this reception (83).
- 27 However, this empty space—and the resultant absence of heterosexual desire—does function as a space that perhaps allows the possibility of same-sex desire. More than that, it emphasizes the value and solidity of female critical arbitration and distance towards male achievement. Alcaeus's instrument depicts a male figure playing the cithara to an

animal, with a standing female figure who is partly hidden. The inscription reads the name of Apollo and it looks like a scene Alma-Tadema may have seen on vases, which stages Artemis playing with a doe to the music of her brother.² The musical god is a kind of reversed image of the male poet who plays with Artemis, the free goddess who is close to wild animals and abstains from sexual relations with men. The scene pictured on the cithara may thus function as a *mise en abyme* that re-inscribes Sappho's status as an independent woman. The faculties of creative or critical activities are not only a male preserve: if some of these intellectually-minded women listen appraisingly to someone else's art, others are not impressed by the male artist, which suggests female self-sufficiency. As for the inscriptions on the marbled benches, they were originally the names of the illustrious citizens who were allowed to sit in the theatre of Dionysus in Athens, which Alma-Tadema had seen and photographed; but he substituted them with the names of Sappho's companions, some of whom she mentions as her lovers in her poems. The public world of men is thus replaced with a sisterhood of cultured, loving women. Unlike the tragic figure of the Romantic who commits suicide for the love of the seaman Phaon by throwing herself from a cliff;³ and unlike the poignant poetess which the Symbolist Gustave Moreau shows around the 1860s-1870s, who rebels against the constraints that weigh on the human condition, Alma-Tadema's Sappho is engaged in the detached professional evaluation of a male fellow-lyricist. His canvas was less frankly homoerotic than Simeon Solomon's *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene* [fig. 5], which was strongly influenced by Swinburne's poetry and more openly alludes to sapphism and carnal love while linking Sappho with artistic creation, as show the lyre and the crown of laurels. But Alma-Tadema's placing of the names of Erinna and Anactoria in the front bench is a reminder of Swinburne's lyrical heroines.

Fig. 5. Simeon Solomon, *Sappho and Erinna in a Garden at Mytilene*, 1864, oil on canvas, 38.1x33 cm, Tate Britain.

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- 28 The contemporary critics were generally oblivious to that dimension. Many deal with the lack of authenticity of the artefacts or with the fact that the profusion of erudite objects impairs the painting. Comyns Carr finds the switch to *genre* disturbing. Although he praises the "beauty" of the canvas, he appears dubitative as to "the class to which this work belongs"; moreover, he adds that when the painter undertakes "to treat the human form upon the scale of life, he has not always shown a preference for the highest type of beauty" (342). This terminology indicates the expectations that such subjects raised. Still, Carr estimates that *Sappho* is a cut above *genre*, which to his eyes is better as it deals with Antiquity:

The invention of the scene as a whole, the disposition of the figures, the choice of attitude and gesture, are in the highest degree representative of a style of art that has something more than the dignity of *genre*, with something less than the formality of purely ideal design, recalling for us the long-silent life of the past in language that has a familiar and homely accent, and preserving the vivid impression of Nature even in the most elaborate attempts to reconstruct a vanished civilisation. (342)

This approach Carr finds more enjoyable than contemporary classical paintings, whose idealistic aims make more formal and less immediate. However, other commentators were critical of this approach—in particular when it came to Greek subjects. When commenting on a retrospective of the artist's work in 1883, the anonymous critic of the *Art Journal* notes that Alma-Tadema finds "in Rome the home of his art" and "spends upon the empire and the imperial city the uttermost exquisiteness of his touch"; this, to the critic, is an error when it comes to Greece: "the Greek subjects are Roman in feeling, and we are inclined to make no serious distinctions between the pictures of Athens and those of Rome" (35). The term "serious" emphasizes the permanence of a difference of value which is still established between these two subjects. Even more problematic are Alma-Tadema's figures:

[I]t should be understood explicitly that the general lack of attraction in his figures is due to their complete denial of spirituality. Mr. Alma-Tadema has some spiritual passages of living air, spiritual blue skies and seas, and spiritual sunshine, but no spirituality and little intellect in the faces of the men and women of his world. (35)

Such notions as "spirituality" and "intellect" are reminders of the conventions of history painting. Greece is still cloaked with a particular aura. This is what Atkinson deplores when he reviews the 1883 retrospective of the painter's work. His Greece looks too much like the Roman Empire, which connotes debauchery and corruption:

He affects no purity of historic style; terracotta statuettes of Tanagra nowhere carry the spectator to the age of Pericles; and when for once he comes in contact with "Phidias and the Elgin Marble", the figures might be mistaken for stone-masons, and the colouring has a crudity more Gothic than Grecian. The time and style for which his taste has most affinity are not of the Republic but of the Roman Empire, and an age of luxury and an art of decadence find literal transcript. (Atkinson 1883, 402)

The reconstructions of Greece should involve some kind of nobility and ideality which Alma-Tadema fails to achieve—mostly because his Greece is visually modelled on the domestic statuettes of Tanagra rather than on the statuary of Phidias, then considered as the epitome of pure classicism. For Atkinson, Alma-Tadema's reconstructions do not propose an idealized treatment of Greece:

Just in proportion as the public delight to watch page after page of ancient history transcribed upon canvas, does the disappointment grow that the narrative stops short of the culmination in Greece. The reason, however, of the incompleteness is not hard to find. The artist's works are concretions,—they are wrought as mosaics

out of infinite tesserae. Accordingly they come, not as visions of the mind, or as offsprings of the imagination: they do not live as the issues of ideas taking ideal form. (403-404)

The terms here point to the still-pervading idea that Greece should be handled with a classical and idealized treatment, which Alma-Tadema's detailed reconstitutions do not respect. The critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette* also comments on Alma-Tadema's original approach to Antiquity in 1880 in the negative, mostly because he blurs fixed categorizations:

He is the painter of works which are in a sense ideal, yet can be classed for the most part neither with imaginative nor with historical painting; they represent the realistic portrayal of a society long since passed away, which he has made to live again for us by dint of the combination of exceptional executive power with exceptional archaeological study. In this respect, his pictures have been a kind of historic revelation to many people, not of any great events, but of the social aspect and artistic characteristics of a past epoch. (4)

The word "imaginative" was often used in contemporary criticism to refer to Victorian classicism. Alma-Tadema both differs from this pictorial trend and from historical painting, and the reviewer brings him closer to *genre* painting: what is praised is the creation of a visual imaginary stock that also includes the social reality of Antiquity; and yet, making the ancients closer to the Victorians implies the risk that such reconstructions might bring a degraded image of the ancients:

There is, it is true, in general no force of human feeling or character displayed in his figures. Apart from the archaeology, the figures are about on a level in intellectual interest with the vapid dressy type of modern London girl whom M. Tissot delights to paint [...]. (4)

The ancient Greeks and Romans no longer appear as intellectual and moral *exempla* but are compared to the contemporary *femmes du monde* Tissot depicted. This is exactly why the critic of the *Illustrated London News* finds Alma-Tadema's antique figures prosaic and unsuccessful when one of his recurring scenes of idling women is concerned:

We have grown familiar with the graceful attitudes of his female models, and know by intuition what their surroundings will be. The marble terrace bestrewn with cushions and wild beasts' skins, the bronze and silver ornaments, the splashing fountain, and the deep blue sea as an horizon are "properties" which are becoming a trifle hackneyed in this great artist's hands. A picture such as this can possess no human interest; nor would the artist, we presume, have us believe that this scene recalls life in the days of Alcibiades or Peisistratus [...] (738)

- 29 Technical ability does not necessarily confer nobility to the figures. Reconstructing the lives of the ancients, therefore, was still expected to conform to certain conventions. The immense success of Alma-Tadema's reconstructions of Antiquity nevertheless testifies to a contemporary process in art: the disappearance of historical painting and the specificity of the Victorian taste for *genre*.

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NOTES

1. See for example Ingres's *L'Apothéose d'Homère* of 1827 (Louvre), Paul Jourdy's *Homère chantant ses vers* of 1834, (Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris), Eugène Thirion's *Homère dans l'île de Scyros* of 1864 (Musée Greuze, Tournus) and Auguste Leloir's *Homère* of 1841 (Louvre).
2. A 5th-century black figure amphora in the *Musée des Antiquités* in Rouen contains a strikingly similar scene, except that Apollo is standing and the animal turned to the right.
3. See Antoine-Jean Gros's *Sapho à Leucade* of 1801 (Musée Baron-Gérard de Bayeux), Théodore Chassériau's *Sapho* of 1849 (Musée d'Orsay), Jules-Élie Delaunay's *Sappho* and *Sappho embrassant sa lyre* (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Brest) of 1876 or Charles Mengin's *Sappho* of 1877 (Manchester Art Gallery).

ABSTRACTS

This article addresses Alma-Tadema's reconstructions of scenes set in ancient Greece. His Greek subjects raise issues pertaining to the transition in the contemporary pictorial context from history painting to historical *genre*. Alma-Tadema was influenced by the Flemish genre painters and by the French *Néo-Grec* movement and his reconstructions of Greek history are in fact everyday-life scenes. They privilege social experience over noble action and simple emotions over elevated sentiment, and so fitted the Victorian taste for *genre*. Yet perusal of the critical reception of his works shows that the commentators still established distinctions between Greek and Roman subjects—notably because Greece was still expected to conform to a number of aesthetic conventions as well as to gendered or racist considerations. Moreover, because Alma-Tadema and a number of critics frequently established analogies between the ancients and Alma-Tadema's contemporaries, the painter in fact held an ambiguous mirror up to his contemporaries. His reconstitutions of Greece tackle unorthodox sexual mores and depicted physical types that were perceived as inappropriate for the Greeks. They therefore went against the aesthetic codes that subsisted when representations of the Greeks were concerned, which

raised aesthetic and ideological expectations that were less prominent in the case of Roman subjects.

Cet article se propose d'aborder la question de la reconstruction de scènes situées dans la Grèce antique par le peintre Alma-Tadema. Les sujets grecs d'Alma-Tadema reflètent des enjeux liés à la transition, dans le contexte pictural de l'époque, de la peinture d'histoire à la peinture de « genre historique ». Influencé par les peintres de genre flamands et par les Néo-Grecs en France, Alma-Tadema propose des reconstructions de l'histoire grecque qui sont en fait des scènes de la vie quotidienne en Grèce. Elles privilégient l'expérience sociale par rapport aux nobles actions et les émotions simples par rapport aux sentiments élevés, et s'adaptent ainsi au goût victorien pour la peinture de genre. Cependant, l'étude de la réception critique de ses œuvres montre que les commentateurs opéraient des distinctions entre les sujets grecs et romains, la Grèce faisant encore l'objet d'attentes sur le plan esthétique mais aussi en termes de genre et de considérations racistes. En outre, parce qu'Alma-Tadema et une partie des critiques établissaient des analogies entre les anciens et ses contemporains, le peintre tendait en fait un miroir ambigu à ceux-ci. Ses reconstitutions de la Grèce abordaient en effet des mœurs sexuelles jugées scandaleuses ou montraient des types physiques perçus comme inappropriés pour les Grecs. Elles dérogeaient donc aux codes esthétiques qui perduraient dès lors que la représentation concernait ce sujet précis de la Grèce, alors que les attentes sur le plan esthétique et idéologique semblent avoir été moins marquées pour les sujets romains.

INDEX

Mots-clés: antiquité, peinture victorienne, peinture de genre, peinture d'histoire, Grèce, Rome

Keywords: antiquity, Victorian painting, genre painting, historical painting, Greece, Rome

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