

## THE ROSES OF HELIOGABALUS

### *Introduction*

The Roses of Heliogabalus (1888; private collection) is a masterwork by Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836-1912), a Dutch painter and designer who settled in England in 1870 becoming naturalised in 1873,<sup>1</sup> and knighted in 1899. The 1870s was precisely the decade when the British Empire was most fully established in the popular consciousness, following the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1867. Alma Tadema's paintings of ancient Greece and Rome had many resonances for the Victorians, for whom Imperial Rome provided one possible model,<sup>2</sup> just as the literature of ancient Greece had provided exemplars in education, and even morals.<sup>3</sup> The Roses of Heliogabalus was commissioned for the then colossal sum of £4,000 by the building contractor, Sir John Aird, Bt. (1833-1911),<sup>4</sup> who was created a baronet in 1901 for services to the British Empire. Alma Tadema himself went so far as to declare that, "the influence of the Roman civilization lives still, and we are benefited by it more than we are aware of, and the dream of the great rulers has ever since been the reconstruction of the Roman Empire."<sup>5</sup>

### *Alma Tadema's career*

Alma Tadema was the most successful, certainly in financial terms, of all Victorian artists, his popularity leading to his election as a Royal Academician in 1879, a knighthood in 1899, and even more remarkably to his appointment to the newly-instituted Order of Merit by King Edward VII in 1905. He assisted in designing the decorations for the Coronation of Edward VII in August 1902, a ceremony which he attended. He visited Sandringham more than once, while the King came on several occasions to Alma Tadema's house where he and Queen Alexandra admired his The Finding of Moses (1904; private collection). This was commissioned by Sir John Aird to commemorate the dedication ceremony of the Assiut and Aswan Dams for the construction of which he was responsible. Aird invited Alma Tadema to Egypt to attend the ceremony which he did in the company of Winston Churchill. Following his death at Wiesbaden in 1912, Alma Tadema was buried in the crypt of St Paul's Cathedral alongside Turner, Landseer, Leighton, Millais, and Poynter.

Despite these honours, he was modestly born in 1836 in the village of Dronrijp, Friesland, Holland, as the son of a notary who died when he was four. He was trained as a painter in Belgium at the Antwerp Academy of which the Director was Baron Gustav Wappers, who also taught Ford Madox Brown, and led the move away from the neo-classicism of Jacques-Louis David to a revival of the older Dutch and Flemish Masters. Alma Tadema was also influenced by Louis Jan de Taeye, Professor of Archaeology at the Academy, and a practising artist, with whom he lived and worked from 1857-59. He then entered the studio of Baron Henri Leys (1815-69), a Belgian patriot, under whom he worked on the monumental fresco cycle for Antwerp Town Hall, producing paintings of nationalist intent which gloried Flemish and French mediaeval history from the Merovingian period onwards. However, Alma Tadema also learned from Leys the

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<sup>1</sup> In 1873 he changed the spelling of his Christian name to Lawrence. He had already changed it from Lourens to Laurens on arriving in Antwerp in 1852.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Jenkyns, Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance, London: Harper and Collins, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See Richard Jenkyns, The Victorians and Ancient Greece, Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> On Aird, see Robert K. Middlemas, The Master Builders, London: Hutchinson, 1963.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Alma Tadema, "Marbles: Their Ancient and Modern Application", Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, vol. xiv, January 1907, pp. 169-80.

importance of research so as to achieve historical accuracy in the portrayal of details such as dress and furniture.

On his first visit to London for the International Exhibition of 1862, he visited the British Museum where he saw the Elgin Marbles and the Egyptian antiquities. This led him to produce a number of paintings of ancient Egypt with authentic architectural settings, while a meeting with the painter, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), in Paris in 1864, encouraged him to move in the Néo-Grec direction. On his marriage to a French woman in 1863, he spent his honeymoon in Italy where he had intended to study Early Christian churches, but was swept off his feet by the classical remains in Rome and Pompeii. He was especially impressed by the sculpture and the objects from the everyday life of the ancient world in the museums of Rome and Naples. These filled him with a determination to learn all about the life of the Romans. Just so had Edward Gibbon, a hundred years earlier, been stimulated to the creation of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire by a moment of concrete specificity when he was confronted by the physical remains of the Roman world: "It was at Rome, on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing amid the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind."<sup>6</sup>

By 1863, Alma Tadema had already begun to acquire early photographs of Egyptian art, but he now began the systematic collection of architectural and archaeological photographs of Greek and Roman buildings and decoration, on which he was to base much of his art for the rest of his life.<sup>7</sup> His career was now promoted by the influential Belgian-born picture dealer, Ernest Gambart (1814-1902),<sup>8</sup> who acted as his agent by commissioning over seventy paintings on a rising scale of payment, mostly depicting life among the wealthy classes of the Roman world. Such subjects appealed to their successors in Victorian England and America, the nouveau riche clients at whom Alma Tadema aimed most of the over four hundred paintings he produced during his long career. Such collectors were doubtless flattered by the way in his paintings suggested evidence of classical learning on their own part.<sup>9</sup>

In his Pompeiian phase between 1865 and 1870 his paintings for Gambart included Catullus at Lesbia's (1865, whereabouts unknown), Preparations for a Feast in a Pompeiian House (1866, Sterling and Francisca Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.), In the Peristylum (1866, whereabouts unknown), Sculpture Gallery in the Time of Augustus (1867, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts), A Roman Lover of Art (1868, Yale University), and A Roman Family at Dinner (1873, William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow). Such work constitutes an unequalled image of Roman domestic architecture and decoration. Its historical accuracy partly depended on the modern science of photography which was being harnessed by archaeologists. This undermines the widely-held assumption that academic painters saw the camera as their arch enemy. It was a natural development from the neo-classicism of the eighteenth-century, when

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Gibbon, Memoirs of my Life and Writings (1796), ed. A. Cockshut and S. Constantine, Keele University Press 1994, p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> 168 volumes of his photographs are now in the Alma-Tadema Collection, Birmingham University. For those of Athens, see Richard Tomlinson, The Athens of Alma Tadema, Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> See Jeremy Maas, Gambart, Prince of the Victorian Art World, London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> On a related topic, see Dianne Macleod, Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of Cultural Identity, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

painters, sculptors, and architects attempted to return to the origins of art through study of the products of the new archaeology, notably at Pompeii and Herculaneum.<sup>10</sup> The architect and student of decoration, Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt (1805-86), observed of Alma Tadema as early as 1869: "That painter knows more of Roman architecture than any Roman architect at any period."<sup>11</sup> Alma Tadema himself later claimed that, "I know Pompeii by heart, and have devoted many hours to exploring it, especially during the years 1863 and 1884."<sup>12</sup>

When the Franco-Prussian war broke out in July 1870, Alma Tadema left his home in Brussels where he had lived since 1865, and settled in London where he continued to collect and commission photographs from firms in Paris and Italy as well as in London. As part of his identification with the ancient Roman world, he numbered his paintings in Roman numerals from November 1872, eventually reaching Opus CCCCVIII. Significantly, he chose to base his paintings not on the myths and legends of Greece and Rome which featured in the Olympian paintings of Frederick Leighton and G.F. Watts,<sup>13</sup> but on the daily life of the ancient world as reflected in the letters of Cicero or the younger Pliny. His Sculpture Gallery in the Time of Augustus derived from The Last Days of Pompeii (1834), the popular novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-73).

While learning from the technical resources of traditional Dutch painting, he also contrived to invest his domestic scenes with the heady glamour which had previously been reserved for mythology. His scenes of domestic life, of public events, and of ritual, rich with glistening marbles and swirling draperies, set beneath eternally blue skies, were closely echoed in the paintings of his hugely popular contemporaries, Sir Frederick Leighton (1830-96), elevated to the peerage in 1896; Edward Poynter (1836-1916), knighted in 1896, made a baronet 1902; and Albert Moore (1841-1893). Sensual images of nudity often featured in the work of these artists, but only in the portrayal of women, not of men.

After the death of Alma Tadema's first wife, he married in 1871 the painter and illustrator, Laura Theresa Epps (1852-1909), and moved to Townshend House, Regent's Park (since demolished). With the help of George Aitchison, R.A. (1825-1910), and William Burges (1827-81), he remodelled this so as to provide a series of eclectic interiors including a lavish Pompeiian studio, which was a three-dimensional expression of his paintings. He was, indeed, awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1906 for his consummate depiction of ancient architecture. In 1886 he moved to the former home of the French artist, Jean-Jacques Tissot, no. 17 (now 44),

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<sup>10</sup> Sources consulted by Alma-Tadema included François Mazois, Le Palais de Scaurus, ou description d'une maison romaine, Paris 1819, dedicated to the architect Charles Percier, and François Mazois and Franz Gau, Les Ruines de Pompéi, 4 vols, Paris, 1812-38, of which vol ii was devoted to "Habitations". Mazois provided representations and reconstructions of Roman interiors including furniture, mosaics, lamps, and wall-paintings of which vols. ii-iv of Les Ruines de Pompéi contain lavish colour plates. Such works had led to the remarkable Maison Pompéienne, Avenue Montaigne, Paris (1855), by Alfred-Nicolas Normand for Prince Jérôme Napoléon.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Richard Phené Spiers in "Archaeological Research in the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema", Architectural Review, vol. xxxiii, March 1913, p. [45].

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Alma Tadema, "My Reminiscences", Strand Magazine, vol. xxxvii, 1909, p.290.

<sup>13</sup> See Christopher Wood, Olympian Dreamers: Victorian Classical Painters, 1860-1914, London: Constable, 1983.

Grove End Road, in St John's Wood, then the hub of artistic society in London, where Gambart had already made his home.

Alma Tadema rebuilt Tissot's house on the most lavish scale, again from his own designs but now with technical assistance from his neighbour, the architect Alfred Calderon.<sup>14</sup> They created an exotic and eclectic setting which, with its fountains and mosaics, was even richer than Townshend House and rivalled in elaboration the remarkable house which George Aitchison had built for Frederick Leighton in Holland Park Road. Though Alma Tadema's new house contained an atrium and impluvium with triclinium-couches, he returned to his Early Christian sympathies for the design of the studio, which boasted an apse, a dome of polished aluminium, walls of sea-green Siena marble, and a marble floor so highly polished that visitors were made to wear special slippers before setting foot on it.<sup>15</sup> A wealthy and cosmopolitan figure who entertained the artistic and musical society of London in this palace of art, Alma Tadema had by now travelled far from the provincial flatlands of Friesland where he had been brought up.

It was in this magnificent new studio that Alma Tadema now painted The Roses of Heliogabalus in 1887-88. Before turning to an analysis of it, we should understand Alma Tadema as part of the Aesthetic Movement of the 1870s and 80s. A leading role in this was played by Walter Pater (1839-94) whose novel, Marius the Epicurean (1885), Alma Tadema must have read with enthusiasm. It is a languid, aesthetic romance woven around Roman religion and philosophy, expressed in terms of refined sensuality, in which the young Marius, having studied Plato's Phaedrus, "must be 'made perfect by the love of visible beauty'."<sup>16</sup> Pater's well-informed description of architectural backgrounds and rituals were found helpful by Alma Tadema in the composition of paintings such as The Roses of Heliogabalus and Spring (1895; J. Paul Getty Museum Malibu).

On the gilded frame of Spring Alma Tadema inscribed lines from a poem written in honour of Edward Burne-Jones by Algernon Swinburne, both high priests of the Aesthetic Movement. Though the painting appears superficially innocent, it has recently been shown that the bronze votive plaque being carried aloft at the centre of the composition contains a Latin inscription from erotic verses by Catullus dedicating a grove to Priapus.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a medal depicting Priapus in a shrine is appended to this plaque. Thus, Alma Tadema contrived to turn a parade of schoolgirls into a priapic celebration! As the author of a recent monograph on this painting observes, "At first glance, so archaeologically exact, so beautiful and innocent, Spring turns out on closer examination to be illusionary, historically confused, and mischievously immoral."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> A set of thirty drawings for the house, signed by Alma-Tadema, with Alfred Calderon as witness, is at the RIBA Drawings Collection.

<sup>15</sup> Three drawings of it by J. Elmsly Inglis are reproduced in the special issue on Alma-Tadema in The Art Journal, 1886, pp. 1-32, the best record being the seven photographs. reproduced in The Architect, 31 May & 7 June 1886. See also, Giles Walkley, Artists' Houses in London, 1764-1914, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994, pp. 127-31.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Pater, Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas, 2 vols, London: Macmillan, 1885, 1910, vol. i, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> The identification was made in a letter of 9 February 1984 by J.G. Fitch, University of Victoria, to Burton B. Fredericksen (Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, Department of Paintings, Files).

<sup>18</sup> Louise Lippincott, Lawrence Alma Tadema: Spring, Malibu: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1991, p. 71, which records the astonishing amount of archaeological knowledge and research required for a single painting.

Alma Tadema could, of course, be frankly pornographic, as in his incredible painting, In the Tepidarium (1881, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). He must also have known of the homosexual inclinations of Swinburne, Pater, and so many of their followers into the 1890s. Their tastes gave them a special feeling of identity with the social life of Greece and Rome, while aestheticism suggested a further liberation from conventional morals.<sup>19</sup> Though there is no reason to suppose that Alma Tadema had any homosexual leaning himself, his large photographic collection contained photographs of nude or semi-nude boys posing amid the ruins of Pompeii.<sup>20</sup> Like Leighton and Watts, Alma Tadema was a religious agnostic whose paintings thus normally have an amoral quality, for he was always attracted by the purely aesthetic allure of what he depicted. This recalls Marius the Epicurean who was attracted by the poetry of the liturgy of the Mass in the Catholic church, though remaining loyal to his sophisticated paganism.

Alma Tadema's aesthetic hedonism is suggested by the fact that, in order to achieve an accurate depiction of the intense luxury of the late Roman empire in the Roses of Heliogabalus, he ordered the weekly delivery to his studio of roses from the Riviera for four months during the winter of 1887-88.<sup>21</sup> He cannily let this fact be known as a way of increasing the allure of the painting by hinting at its expense.<sup>22</sup> The importance for Alma Tadema of this bizarre painting is suggested by the fact that, at seven feet wide by over four feet high, it is large by his standards. These proportions must have been chosen to give it a compellingly panoramic shape which was not achieved again until the "Cinemascope" of modern films. Indeed, his heady evocation of the ancient world inspired many of the film directors responsible for the classical epics of Hollywood from D.W. Griffith's films, Intolerance (1916), with its gigantic neo-Babylonian sets, and Ben Hur (1926), to Cecil B. De Mille's Cleopatra (1934) and The Ten Commandments (1956).

Alma Tadema had led the way in the stage sets he designed for Sir Henry Irving: notably for his dramatisation in 1896 of Charles Kingsley's novel of 1851, Hypatia; for his Cymbeline in 1897, and for his Coriolanus in 1901. He also designed the sets for Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's production of Julius Caesar in 1898, of which Tree's wife, Maud, wrote: Sir Alma Tadema not only designed and with his own hands draped every dress in the play, but also with his own hands made phalerians, shields, armours and insignia. I can see him now, in the Property Room, showing exactly how the faggots borne by the red lictors should be bound; I see him drawing the letters of the S.P.Q.R. that were lifted aloft by the Roman Guards.<sup>23</sup>

Even more striking were his lavish scenes for Irving's Coriolanus, commissioned in 1881, but not staged until 1901 at the Lyceum Theatre.<sup>24</sup> Attracting much attention,

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<sup>19</sup> See Dennis Denisoff, Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Lawrence Alma Tadema, "Marbles: Their Ancient and Modern Application", Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, vol. xiv, January 1907, pl. on p.177. See Russell Ash, 1973. p.37.

<sup>21</sup> Lionel Lambourne, Victorian Painting, London: Phaidon, 1999, p. 294.

<sup>22</sup> His friend, Sir Percy Cross Standing, claimed in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A., London: Cassell, 1905, that "he literally had a model for each individual blossom" (p. 118).

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Beerbohm Tree: Some Memories of Him and His Art, Collected by Max Beerbohm, London: Hutchinson, n.d. (c.1917), p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Phené Spiers, "The Architecture of 'Coriolanus' at the Lyceum Theatre", Architectural Review, vol. x, July 1901, pp. 3-21.

these were made the subject of an article by the architect Richard Phené Spiers (1838-1916), Master of the Architecture School of the Royal Academy. Trained at the Ecole des-Beaux-Arts in Paris, Spiers' own profound knowledge of antique architecture enabled him to appreciate the research which Alma Tadema had undertaken into Etruscan architecture over a period of twenty years in order to give accuracy to his breathtaking scenery for Coriolanus. He studied the latest archaeological excavations at Volterra, Cerveteri, and Vulci, as well as the Lycian tombs in Asia Minor, also acquiring information from books and museums. Phené-Spiers hailed the result as "a virtual revelation" of Etruscan architecture.<sup>25</sup> Always noted as an artist for his brilliant handling of light, he was revolutionary in his use of electric light for the Coriolanus sets where his sunrise and moonlight effects caused the audience to gasp. He also designed furniture and costumes, including that of Ellen Terry as Imogen in Cymbeline, as well as a range of Roman dresses for Liberty & Co., known as "à la Tadema", which became influential on contemporary fashion.

Even in his lifetime, his paintings had often been more popular with the general public than with sophisticated art critics. John Ruskin was entertainingly critical of his work, complaining in his Slade Lectures at Oxford in 1884 of his figures with their "universal crouching or lolling postures", and warning his audience that, "there is a fallacy in his classic idealism, against which ... it is necessary that you should be gravely and continuously warned"; at the same time, he could not resist praising "the gradual increase of technical accuracy, which attends and enhances together the expanding range of his dramatic invention."<sup>26</sup> No less hostile was Helen Zimmern who complained in 1902 that "he painted these accessories with even more care than he bestowed upon his men and women, as if they interested him more ... Flowers had impressed his imagination and gained preference over the human beings with whom they were associated".<sup>27</sup>

After his death, his paintings fell so completely out of favour that even on the occasion of the Tadema exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1913, Roger Fry (1866-1934), the pundit of Post-Impressionism, asked witheringly, "How long will it take to disinfect the Order of Merit of Alma Tadema's scented soap?"<sup>28</sup> The nadir was reached in 1960 when The Roses of Heliogabalus, which cost £4,000 when commissioned in 1888, had to be withdrawn from a sale in which the highest bid was £105. In the same year, Messrs M. Newman offered The Finding of Moses free to any museum in the world who cared to take it. None did, but the revival of sympathy for Victorian art and architecture from the 1960s led to the publication of the first serious modern article on Alma Tadema in 1962, though its author could still regret that he was "the most ridiculed painter of the nineteenth century, as well as the least written about."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The ten scenes were painted from Alma-Tadema's designs by three experienced scene-painters.

<sup>26</sup> "The Art of England", in E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, The Works of Ruskin, 39 vols, London: George Allen, 1908-12, vol. xxxiii, 1908, p. 319.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Zimmern, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, London: George Bell, 1902, pp. 50-1. This was markedly different from her eulogistic essay, "Lawrence Alma-Tadema: His Life and Work", published as a special supplement in the Art Journal, 1886, pp. 130-2.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Fry, "The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.", The Nation, 12, no.16, 18 January 1913, p. 667.

<sup>29</sup> Mario Amaya, "The Roman World of Alma-Tadema", Apollo, December 1962, pp. 771-78.

Within a decade, taste had changed so much that The Roses of Heliogabalus fetched £28,000 at a sale at Sotheby's, New York, in 1972,<sup>30</sup> while at the end of the 1980s The Finding of Moses was privately offered for sale in London at over a million pounds.<sup>31</sup> Today, Alma Tadema's paintings are distributed world-wide in public and private collections in Australia, Canada, India, South Africa, and the USA, and, in Europe, in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, and Spain.

*The Roses of Heliogabalus*

The Roses of Heliogabalus was commissioned, as we have already noted, by John Aird (1833-1911), a successful constructional engineer who formed a large collection of modern British paintings in his London mansion at 14, Hyde Park Terrace. His tastes were extremely eclectic, resulting in a collection which included paintings by leading artists as varied as Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-82), John Waterhouse (1849-1917), Luke Fildes (1844-1927), Marcus Stone (1840-1921), Sir Frederic Leighton (1830-96), and Sir Frank Dicksee (1853-1928), as well as Alma Tadema. A contemporary account of the collection includes an illustration of one of the five first-floor drawing rooms in which The Roses of Heliogabalus has pride of place, though it contrasts oddly in subject matter with Dicksee's Chivalry (1885; private collection) over the chimney-piece in which a maiden bound to a tree is about to be rescued by a knight in armour. The author of the article was a little puzzled by The Roses of Heliogabalus in which "the guests ... peep through the shattered roses here and there with singular and, in some cases perhaps, grotesque effect", but explains of the paintings in Aird's collection that, "many of them have owed their execution to his own suggestion."<sup>32</sup>

Whether the suggestion of the theme of Heliogabalus was due to Aird or to Alma-Tadema we cannot know, but it is one which will have been attractive to both men who enjoyed luxurious life styles at a time when London was the richest capital in the world. Living in magnificent style, Aird "modelled himself, consciously or not, on the ideal of the Renaissance prince",<sup>33</sup> and shared Alma Tadema's interest in the iconography of empire. At one of the constant parties for which Alma Tadema and his wife were noted, "Roman dress was worn ... [and] several of the guests had gilded toenails",<sup>34</sup> while at another fancy dress ball, Alma Tadema wore a toga and was "crowned with a massive wreath of blue-bells".<sup>35</sup>

The sources in ancient Roman literature on which Alma Tadema would have relied for The Roses of Heliogabalus were the accounts of the emperor's life in the Scriptores Historiae Augustae, in Dio Cassius' History of Rome, and in Herodian's History of the Roman Empire. The key passage is the following in the Scriptores: "In a banqueting-room with a reversible ceiling he once overwhelmed his parasites with

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<sup>30</sup> See Russell Ash, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, London: Pavilion Books, 1989, p.[9], and Vern G. Swanson, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Painter of the Victorian Vision of the Ancient World, London: Ash & Grant, 1977, p.7.

<sup>31</sup> Vern G. Swanson, Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, London: Garton & Co., 1990, p. 267.

<sup>32</sup> "The Private Art Collections of London: Mr. John Aird's, in Hyde Park Terrace", Art Union, 1891, pp. 138-39.

<sup>33</sup> Robert K. Middlemas, The Master Builders, London: Hutchinson, 1963, p. 131.

<sup>34</sup> Helen Henschel, When Soft Voices Die: A Musical Biography, London: Methuen, 1949, p. 84.

<sup>35</sup> Sir Percy Cross Standing, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A., London: Cassell, 1905, p. 123.

violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death, being unable to crawl out to the top."<sup>36</sup> In addition, there was the account in Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, but this did not include the episode of the suffocation by violets which was recorded only in the Scriptores Historiae Augustae. However, Gibbon elegantly summarised the accusing accounts of Heliogabalus in ancient literature in passages such as the following: "the confused multitude of women, of wines, and of dishes, and the studied variety of attitudes and sauces, served to revive his languid appetites ... A capricious prodigality supplied the want of taste and elegance."<sup>37</sup>

In Alma Tadema's painting, the youthful emperor reclines in golden robes on a couch inlaid with mother-of-pearl at a sumptuous, marble-topped, bronze table, laden with fruit. The banquet is presumably taking place on the Palatine on the eastern spur of which Heliogabalus had built a Temple of Sol Invictus. The marble platform on which the table and couches are set is flanked by columns of richly veined polychromatic marble, for Heliogabalus is recorded as having "used Lacedaemonian stone and porphyry to pave the open spaces in the Palace".<sup>38</sup> Whole roses and rose-petals are released on the guests from a velarium<sup>39</sup> which is itself also descending on them, its loops hanging free.

Incense burns in a great silver bowl on a tripod stand, for "he always sat among flowers or perfumes of great value ... and would have perfumes from India burned without any coals in order that the fumes might fill his apartments."<sup>40</sup> A maiden in a leopard skin plays the double-pipes or auloi, reminding us that Heliogabalus "could sing and dance, play the pipes, the horn and the pandura."<sup>41</sup> Before he became emperor, "he was the first commoner to cover his couches with golden coverlets ... [and] to use silver urns and casseroles, and vessels of chased silver."<sup>42</sup> Alma Tadema accordingly includes such covers on the couch in the right foreground and costly plate below the tripod on the left. In the centre background is a prominent statue of Dionysus, now in the Vatican, with a panther and a youthful faun companion, hinting at the homo-erotic tastes for which Heliogabalus was noted.

Alma Tadema evidently based Heliogabalus' clothes on the accounts of the ancient authors who wrote, "he would wear a tunic made wholly of cloth of gold",<sup>43</sup> or "the most expensive types of clothes, woven of purple and gold".<sup>44</sup> Alma Tadema did not, however, attempt to imitate "his face [which was] made up more elaborately than a modest woman would have done," for "He used to go out with painted eyes and rouge

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<sup>36</sup> Scriptores Historiae Augustae, 3 vols, Loeb ed., London and Cambridge, Mass., 1960, vol. iii, p. 149.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. J. B. Bury, London: Methuen, 7 vols, 2000, vol. i, p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Scriptores Historiae Augustae, ed. cit., p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> A miniature version of the great canvas canopy which protected the audience in Roman amphitheatres from the sun. In 1890 Alma Tadema made a study of the velarium of the Colosseum which he believed had its highest not its lowest point at the centre. This contradicted the depiction of it by painters such as Gérôme who showed it sinking in the middle.

<sup>40</sup> Scriptores Historiae Augustae, ed. cit., pp. 165-67.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 171. The pandura is a kind of lute.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., pp. 143-44.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>44</sup> Herodian, Loeb ed., 2 vols, London and Cambridge, Mass., 1970, p. 39.



on his cheeks, spoiling his natural good looks by using disgusting make-up."<sup>45</sup> The almost bored and joyless detachment of Heliogabalus contrasts with the more debauched tone of his two male companions. Since "at his banquets he preferred to have perverts placed next to him",<sup>46</sup> the figure next to him may be Zoticus, an athlete from Smyrna, the son of a cook, with whom he was supposed to have gone through a nuptial ceremony, and who consequently exercised considerable patronage at the court. It is possible that Heliogabalus' mother, Soaemias, may be amongst the group of four women in intimate proximity on the right, one or more of whom may have been his real wives. The man with yellow plaited hair who is gazing up at Heliogabalus from the roses on the extreme right may be his friend Hierocles, a Carian slave who became a chariot driver. Heliogabalus, we are told, had initially been attracted to him by his "crown of yellow hair."<sup>47</sup>

Alma Tadema was also happy to diverge from the accounts in the ancient authors where, for example, we are told that the emperor "had couches made of solid silver for use in his banqueting-rooms".<sup>48</sup> Alma Tadema's couches are of bronze inlaid with mother-of-pearl which he rightly thought would be more painterly and exotic. In a more important variant, he made the offending flowers roses, not violets. We may note here that he could cite as evidence the claim that Heliogabalus "used to strew roses and all manner of flowers ... over his banqueting rooms, his couches and his porticoes".<sup>49</sup> Probably more important is the influence of Pater's Marius the Epicurean in which roses were seen as symbolic of the beauty and luxury of ancient Rome. Pater evoked the city by referring to "the heat and roses of a Roman July",<sup>50</sup> describing Marius as occupying "his own Epicurean rose-garden",<sup>51</sup> and others sitting "above the fragrant borders of a rose-farm, on the marble bench of one of the exhedrae for the use of foot-passengers."<sup>52</sup> The text is liberally sprinkled with references to the role of "rich-scented flowers" in Roman life, including "rare Paestum roses",<sup>53</sup> and to the religious ceremonies which featured the "threefold veneration of their visible images, by flowers, incense, and ceremonial lights".<sup>54</sup>

Two passages in Marius the Epicurean which could have been a model for The Roses of Heliogabalus were, "The temples, wide open, with their ropes of roses flapping in the wind against the rich, reflecting marble, their startling draperies and heavy cloud of incense, were but the centres of a great banquet...";<sup>55</sup> and the description of the table of "a certain aristocratic poet", where

The crystal vessels darkened with old wine, the hues of the early autumn fruit - mulberries, pomegranates, and grapes that had long been hanging

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 67 and 57.

<sup>46</sup> Scriptores Historiae Augustae, ed. cit., p. 131.

<sup>47</sup> Dio's Roman History, 9 vols, Loeb ed., London and New York, 1927, vol. ix, p. 467.

<sup>48</sup> Scriptores Historiae Augustae, ed. cit., p. 147.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>50</sup> Pater, op. cit., vol. ii, p. 12

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 14,

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 144. This is close to scenes including exhedrae in Alma Tadema's Under the Roof of Blue Ionian Weather (1901, Private Collection), and The Voice of Spring (1910, Private Collection).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., vol. i, p. 185

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., ii, p. 199.

under careful protection upon the vines, were as much a feast for the eye, as the dusky fires of the rare twelve-petalled roses ... [guests] reclined easily on their cushions of German eider-down, spread over the long-legged, carved couches ... [listening to an] acroama - a musical performance ...<sup>56</sup>

Not only The Roses of Heliogabalus but The Oleander (1882; private collection), and Spring (1895; Getty), and The Flower Girl, are held together with flowers, but rose garlands also feature prominently in Antony and Cleopatra, Caracalla and Geta, and God Speed! 1891.<sup>57</sup> His studio opened into an internal galleried conservatory and had doors opening directly on to his garden.

The Roses of Heliogabalus was widely admired, especially for the artist's technical mastery, one critic being impressed by the fact that "all the difficult silver-work, marble and mother of pearl with all their complexity of reflected lights and cross-colouring ... were painted in on 'Varnishing Day' at the Royal Academy ... [while] the artist, pipe in mouth, and without model or study of any kind, was keeping up a lively conversation..."<sup>58</sup>

However, the depiction of an orgy in which the emperor and his companions look on with pleasure while their guests are suffocated to death might be supposed to have been found shocking by the Victorians. It may be surprising, therefore, that it was not thought shocking enough. The distinguished art critic, Harry Quilter, for example, criticised Alma Tadema for bowdlerising the subject. He complained that it was "not perhaps the most edifying of subjects for a great painter, even if rightly understood, but at all events one which might have made a grand picture, not without a stern moral lesson." Criticising the roses for falling "in great solid lumps", he considered this to be "but a Whiteley<sup>59</sup> kind of Heliogabalus - an emperor of furniture and bric-à-brac, and his revelry that of a schoolboy's play." He believed that, instead, the artist should have conveyed "the recklessness, the mad, lustful impression of this debauch."<sup>60</sup>

In his pioneering reappraisal of classicism in Victorian painting, William Gaunt also complained, like Quilter, that Alma Tadema had overlooked Gibbon's emphasis on the crazy side of Imperial life, its blood lust and decadence, and instead had "dulcified" it.<sup>61</sup> Yet, to a twenty-first-century eye, there is more than a hint that, in their abandoned poses, the guests are enjoying a final moment of sensual pleasure as they swoon at the heady scent and soft texture of the rose-petals. What neither Quilter nor Gaunt seem to have considered is that Alma Tadema may well have been aware that the unbelievably scandalous accounts of the activities of Heliogabalus in the ancient authors are almost certainly exaggerated, having been promoted for political ends. The relatively peaceful atmosphere of his painting could thus be interpreted as a corrective to their exaggerations. Moreover, he certainly portrayed the darker side of Roman life in paintings such as A Roman Emperor, A.D. 41 (1871; Walter Art Gallery, Baltimore),

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., vol. ii, p.78.

<sup>57</sup> The headings under which Alma Tadema arranged his huge collection of photographs included one called "Flowers."

<sup>58</sup> Marion Harry Spielmann, "Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R.A.: A Sketch", Magazine of Art, vol. xxi, Nov.1896-April 1897, p. 48

<sup>59</sup> A famous department store in Victorian London.

<sup>60</sup> Harry Quilter, Preferences in Art, Life, and Literature, London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892, pp. 372-73.

<sup>61</sup> William Gaunt, Victorian Olympus, London: Jonathan Cape, 1952, p. 170.

where Claudius cowers behind a curtain in front of Caligula's murdered body. His two paintings of An Audience at Agrippa's of 1876<sup>62</sup> and 1879 also suggest bribery and corruption as being at the heart of the ancient world.

One of the most imaginative aspects of Alma Tadema's provocative Roses of Heliogabalus is that we initially respond with unqualified pleasure to the loveliness of the rose-petals which seem merely part of a light-hearted game. More recent critics than Gaunt have, indeed, noted the "bizarre discrepancy between the visual luxuriance of the pink rose-petals and the moral anarchy of the subject-matter".<sup>63</sup> The disturbing nature of the painting, its moral ambiguity, is also heightened by a technique often deployed by Alma Tadema in which he "places figures at the periphery rather than at the centre of his pictures."<sup>64</sup>

We might relate The Roses of Heliogabalus to Alma Tadema's later painting of Heliogabalus' putative father, the Emperor Caracalla, in Caracalla and Geta (1907; private collection). This depicts the gala given in the Colosseum in AD 203 given by Septimius Severus on the occasion of his bestowing the title of Antoninus Caesar on his son Bassianus, better known as Caracalla. Alma Tadema shows both Caracalla and his younger brother Geta, whom he later murdered, as young men, detached and moody in comparison with their companions. The Roses of Heliogabalus is also recalled by the great garlands of roses which dominate the imperial box, and by the presence of a similar silver incense bowl on a tripod.<sup>65</sup>

In a recent "politically correct" analysis of Alma Tadema, Joseph Kestner makes the stimulating suggestion that, "With the nervous breakdown of his first wife, the recurring illnesses of his second, and the mental collapse of his daughter, it was difficult for Tadema to see classical repose and stability in women."<sup>66</sup> Believing that he frequently showed women as "indolent, narcissistic, self-absorbed", Kestner suggests that, "It was to counteract this madness in his second daughter that Tadema portrayed women's conventional role of passive lover or satisfied mother". It was certainly the case that he frequently used his wife and daughters as models. Kestner considers that The Roses of Heliogabalus and Caracalla and Geta both show a woman "sabotaging the state by her sexuality". Kestner seems to think (despite the quite contrary account in Cassius Dio, 78.2) that Julia Domna, the second wife of Septimius Severus, encouraged Caracalla to kill his brother Geta and to rule alone. On this basis Kestner goes on to say: "At the time of vehement suffrage agitation Tadema in a painting of Julia Domna is making a political statement about the danger of having women in government."<sup>67</sup>

Even if we do not accept this interpretation, it is clear that The Roses of Heliogabalus continues to provoke thought and controversy. No one can deny that it is

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<sup>62</sup> At the Dick Institute, Kilmarnock, Scotland.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Liversedge and Catharine Edwards, eds., Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century, London: Merrell Holberton, 1996, p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> See Vern G. Swanson, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema: The Painter of the Victorian Vision of the Ancient World, London: Ash & Grant, 1977, p. 41, where he also cites Roman Dance as another example of this configuration.

<sup>65</sup> Similar tripods appears A Kiss (1891, private collection), Spring (Malibu, Getty Museum), The Conversion of Paula by St Jerome (1898, Lady Annunciata Asquith, London), and most notably in his last oil painting with an opus number, Preparation in the Colosseum (1912, private collection, USA).

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Kestner, Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical Subject Painting, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, p. 282.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

one of the most arrestingly beautiful yet profoundly disturbing images of Roman imperial luxury, its provocative character being heightened by the fact that it was produced in the greatest, though most short-lived, Empire since the ancient world. It was also deeply part of the artistic and scientific world of its day, blending reliance on the camera with a composition owing something to Alma Tadema's enthusiasm for Japanese art<sup>68</sup> which had been promoted by Thomas Carlyle in opposition to that of Greece. At the same time, Alma Tadema had derived a bright palette from the Pre-Raphaelites, while his concentration on brilliant slices of life is in harmony with the aesthetics of Walter Pater and James Whistler. The ravishing beauty of The Roses of Heliogabalus is unsettling because of the tumbling, anti-classical balance of a composition which hovers between the amoral and the equivocal. This puzzling yet seductive painting is the perfect footnote to a history of its principal subject, the short-lived Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, known to posterity as Heliogabalus.

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<sup>68</sup> On this enthusiasm, see Swanson, 1990, op. cit., p. 41.