



1
Red Marble Labrum (Basin) with a Base in the Form of Scylla, before 79 CE and early 19th century
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2
Bronze Candelabrum with Four Ornamental Oil Lamps from the House of Pansa at Pompeii, before 79 CE
© Luciano Pedicini/Archivio dell'Arte



3
Reproduction of a Roman Bowl from the Hildesheim Treasure (before 79 CE), second half of the 19th century
Photo courtesy of the Spurlock Museum



4
Marble Cartibulum (Decorative Table Supports) from the House of Cornelius Rufus at Pompeii, before 79 CE
© Luciano Pedicini/Archivio dell'Arte



5
Joseph S. Wyon and Alfred B. Wyon, after Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Gold Snake Bangle*, about 1874
Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The dossier exhibition *Alma-Tadema and Antiquity: Imagining Classical Sculpture in Late-Nineteenth-Century Britain*, June 28–September 28, 2008, was organized by the Hood Museum of Art with the cooperation of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and the Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei. It was generously supported by a grant from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and by the George O. Southwick 1957 Memorial Fund. Special thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts for funding of a planning workshop and technical examinations of the Hood's painting. Thanks in particular to David Getsy, who assisted with the early planning of this project, as well as to a number of other colleagues and scholars: Susan Arensberg, Robyn Asleson, Jeffrey Cadby, Genevieve Liveley, Patricia Mainardi, Benjamin E. O'Donnell, Class of 2008, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Tiziana Rocco, Ann Robertson, Paul Spencer-Longhurst, D. Dodge Thompson, Angela Rosenthal, Malcolm Warner, and Jennifer White.

PRINCIPAL CHECKLIST

Candelabrum with Four Ornamental Oil Lamps Before 79 CE
Bronze with inlaid silver, overall height: 46 in.; base: 5 1/8 x 20 7/8 x 18 1/2 in.
Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale; inv. 4563

Cartibulum (Decorative Table Supports) from the House of Cornelius Rufus at Pompeii Before 79 CE
White marble, 32 1/4 x 37 3/8 x 8 in. and 32 1/4 x 37 3/8 x 8 5/8 in.
Pompei, Ufficio Scavi; inv. 43371A-B

Labrum (Basin) with a Base in the Form of Scylla Before 79 CE (basin) and early 19th century (base)
Red marble, 35 x 39 3/8 in.
Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale; inv. 6862

Joseph S. Wyon, British, 1836–1874, and Alfred B. Wyon, British, 1837–1884, after Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Dutch active in Britain, 1836–1912
Snake Bangle, about 1874
Gold, approx. 9 x 3 x 3 in.
London, Private Collection

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema
The Sculpture Gallery, 1874/75
Oil on canvas, 88 x 67 1/2 in.
Hanover, New Hampshire, Hood Museum of Art; Gift of Arthur M. Loew, Class of 1921A, P.961.125

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema
A Sculpture Gallery, 1875
Oil on panel, 30 1/4 x 23 1/4 in.
Rochester, New York, Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester; Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 89.45

Reproduction of Roman Bowl with Minerva and Owl (before 79 CE), second half of the 19th century
Metal, 12 1/2 x 9 7/8 x 2 3/4 in.
Urbana, Illinois, Spurlock Museum at the University of Illinois; 1914.11.0029

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

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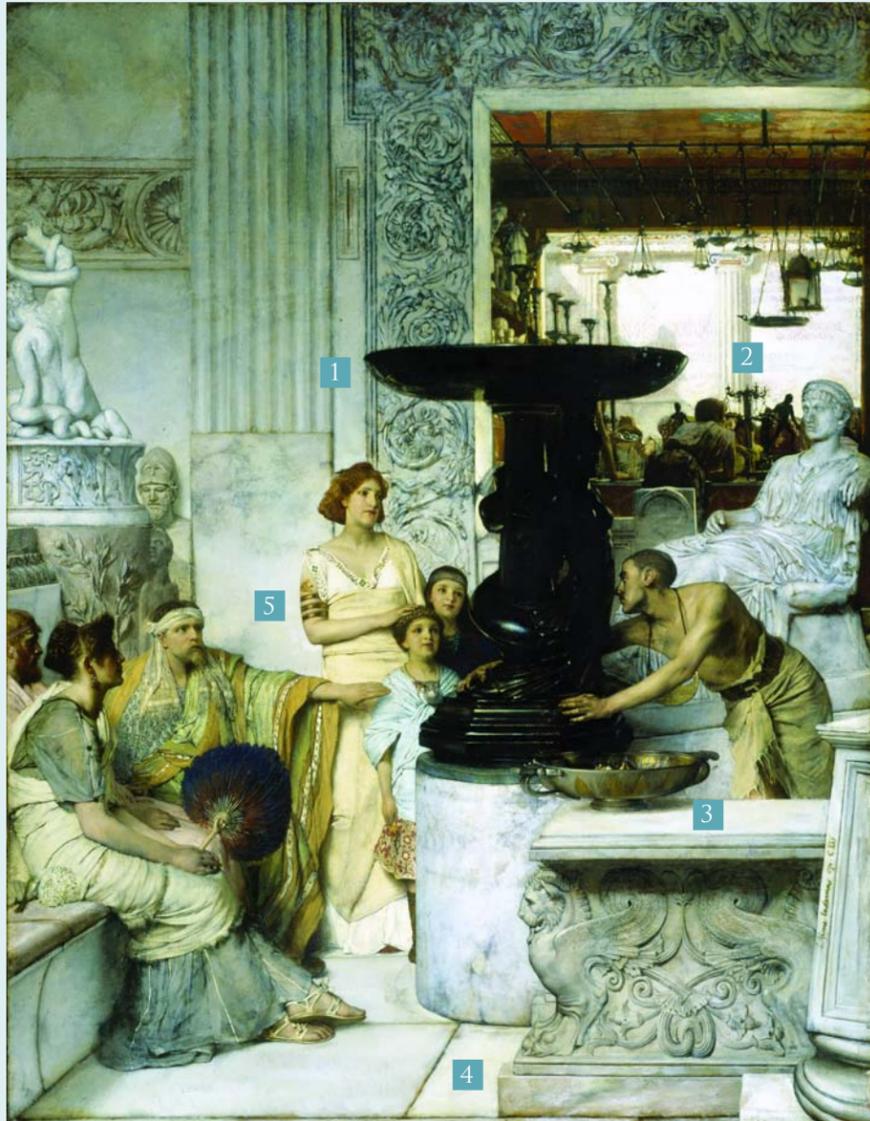
ALMA-TADEMA AND ANTIQUITY

IMAGINING CLASSICAL SCULPTURE IN LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN



HOOD MUSEUM OF ART
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

ART, ARCHEOLOGY, AND ANTIQUITY IN *THE SCULPTURE GALLERY*



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Sculpture Gallery*, 1874/75
Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel

The accuracy of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's (1836–1912) technique and the complexity of his conception for *The Sculpture Gallery* are revealed through juxtaposition with original antique marbles and bronzes and other related objects. This comparison reinforces the opinion of the Victorian-era critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), who observed that the picture demonstrates the painter's exceptional "artistic skill and classic learning, both in high degree."

Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's largest painting, *The Sculpture Gallery*, was exhibited at the Paris Salon and the Royal Academy in Berlin in 1874 and at the Royal Academy in London in 1875. Measuring over nine by seven feet in its impressive frame, the picture was one of the artist's most ambitious compositions. As an extraordinary work of illusionism, it recreated with archeological precision Roman architecture, sculpture, and decorative objects. Alma-Tadema had examined many of the depicted ancient works of art during his visits to Pompeii and Naples in the 1860s, and he recorded a number of them in sketches and photographs. As a result of these careful studies, he produced not only a sumptuous arrangement of antique objects in an exquisitely rendered interior but also a highly innovative painting. Instead of drawing attention to the sculptures' significance as timeless ideals, Alma-Tadema emphasized their role in an original, daily setting. His uniform treatment of both utilitarian and luxurious objects undermined the traditional hierarchies that ranked decorative accessories as inferior to fine art. The marbles and bronzes were no longer presented as emblematic artifacts of a revered, quasi-mythical Golden Age but rather as integral features of everyday life in ancient times.

The modern representation of quotidian scenes in antiquity has a long cultural tradition dating back to the late eighteenth century. As early as 1787, upon visiting a museum outside Naples filled with recently excavated artifacts from Pompeii and other nearby archeological sites, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) marveled especially at the decorative objects that "were part and parcel of their owners' ordinary life. They quite changed my picture of Pompeii. . . . These objects were not made merely for

use but were decorated with art and grace" (*Italian Journey*, 211). Nearly a half century later, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's (1803–1873) pioneering novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) provided detailed accounts of daily routines and surroundings in the ancient city. He meticulously described fictional domestic interiors, personal effects, and clothing based on actual buildings and items uncovered at the site: "Through the dimness of the room glowed brightly the vivid and various colourings of the wall, in all the dazzling frescoes of Pompeian taste. . . . Near at hand, on another table, was a silver basin and an extinguished lamp, of most exquisite workmanship" (195–96).

Soon afterward, due largely to the success of Bulwer-Lytton's novel, Pompeian-inspired decorations became increasingly popular throughout Europe. This stylistic trend reached its zenith at the International Exhibition of Arts and Industries, held in England in 1854, which featured a full-scale ancient interior modeled on residential architecture unearthed at Pompeii. As one of the early guidebooks noted, "The paintings and decorations were copied after originals found in the destroyed cities," allowing visitors to experience firsthand "the manner of life" in antiquity (Scharf 1854: 86).

Similarly, Alma-Tadema's earliest representations of ancient themes did not highlight the magnificence of classical monuments but instead wealthy Roman citizens pursuing daily activities: working, shopping, dining, and relaxing. His initial study of Pompeii and its artifacts occurred during a trip to Italy in 1863. The journey from Antwerp, where the Dutch-born artist had trained, included a stop in Paris. There he saw the work of the *néo-Grecs*, a group of French painters who sought to depict everyday, anecdotal subjects associated with ancient Greek and

Roman culture, often emphasizing realism, sensuality, and eroticism. Once he arrived in Italy, especially in Pompeii, Alma-Tadema became fascinated by antique ruins and relics. He documented numerous structures and objects through freehand drawings as well as photographs—some showing him surveying and sketching. Soon afterward, combining the latest archeological research with popular, everyday subject matter, Alma-Tadema embarked on the creation of a series of paintings depicting the luxurious surroundings and familiar experiences of provincial life in antiquity. By the late 1860s, he began to exhibit these works regularly in London, where he settled permanently in 1870.

At the center of *The Sculpture Gallery* a slave, identifiable by the crescent-shaped plaque hanging from his neck, displays a dark-colored *labrum*, or basin, decorated with the mythological creature Scylla. Admiring the work on the left is an aristocratic family—comprised of portraits of Alma-Tadema, his wife and children, and his brother- and sister-in-law—surrounded by identifiable works of art. In the background, a small shop window opens onto a marketplace for decorative utilitarian and small-scale objects. An unusual detail is the inclusion of handwriting on the distant public wall, which imitates actual graffiti found on the buildings of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Many of these features reappear in a smaller version of the painting, prepared the same year and later used as the model for a large engraving by Auguste Blanchard (1819–1898).

For the critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), who saw the large version of the painting at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1875, the picture was a biting commentary on the acquisitive nature of ancient Romans and their supposed inability to distinguish between decorative works and art of true distinction. According to this point of view, the family was enraptured by the dazzling scale of the *labrum* while ignoring the more artistically and historically

significant marble sculptures that encircled them, such as, on the left, a bust of Pericles, and, on the right, a seated statue of Agrippina. This explanation of the subject drew on the observations of the Roman writer Pliny the Elder (23/24 CE–79 CE), who complained that his contemporaries were more interested in the cost of a work than in its artistic value (see, for example, *Natural History* 34.5 and 35.50, cited in Prettejohn 1996: 182–83).

Over the course of the next several decades, *The Sculpture Gallery* was exhibited throughout Europe and at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Critics continued to praise the painting for "its unique skill of execution, its scientific accuracy of detail, [and] its wonderful colouring," which "carried the spectator into the inner home life of the Romans" (D'Anvers 1899: 185–88). Similar comments were made by the young Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938), who saw the picture at the Esposizione Nazionale in Rome in 1883 and noted its "perfect finish and total absence of brush work" (cited in Pieri 2001: 364). Yet the uniformity of its treatment of disparate motifs and materials led some observers to criticize the lack of a central theme or action—a hallmark of traditional history paintings (cited in Zimmern 1902: 30).

Ultimately, Alma-Tadema's painting was considered a tour de force that combined the contemporary taste for everyday scenes with an archeological exactitude in order to produce a sophisticated work of art. It also served as a remarkable example of the artist's ability to render convincingly an assortment of materials through the application of carefully executed brushstrokes. As Ruskin observed at the time of its first public viewing in England, the picture demonstrated Alma-Tadema's exceptional "artistic skill and classic learning, both in high degree" (1875: 16).

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