

LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA

Decadence & Antiquity

Lower Belvedere
24 February 2017 to 18 June 2017



Lawrence Alma-Tadema
Coign of Vantage, 1895
Oil on canvas, 64 cm x 44,5 cm
Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty/Photo: © Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty

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Victorian England was where the Dutchman Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) advanced to become a celebrated artist. His sensual paintings of everyday scenes from antiquity rapidly made him famous beyond the borders of Great Britain. A big solo exhibition devoted to his life and work that has already been successfully presented at the Fries Museum in the Netherlands is now going to honour the artist at the Belvedere in Vienna. The show *Lawrence Alma-Tadema – Decadence & Antiquity* will be on view from 24 February to 18 June 2017 at the Lower Belvedere. Comprising important masterpieces, the presentation will provide insights into both the artist’s career and production and the decadent world of English aestheticism.

The exhibition chronologically traces Alma-Tademas career from his beginnings in the Netherlands to his work in London and his awakening fascination with scenes from antiquity, which eventually became the artist’s conspicuous trademark. His development as an artist was linked to England’s political situation at the time. By the late nineteenth century, the British Empire had arrived at the apex of its power and expansion.

“In Austria, Lawrence Alma-Tadema is little known even among art lovers. I am therefore pleased that we have now succeeded in introducing this artist to a broader public with a large-scale exhibition, thanks to our collaboration with the Fries Museum in the Netherlands and Leighton House Museum in London,” says Stella Rollig, Director-General of the Belvedere and 21er Haus. Connecting up to the successful exhibition *Sleeping Beauty* (Belvedere, 2010), which focused on the impact of masterpieces of Victorian painting on Austrian art, *Decadence & Antiquity* offers an opportunity to broaden the Belvedere’s previous research findings.

Born in Friesland, Alma-Tadema received his education in Belgium before immigrating to London in 1870. He lived and worked there with his two daughters from his first marriage and his second wife, Laura Theresa Epps, who was also an artist. The family’s studio-houses, which the couple furnished together, were of central importance to him. Throughout his life, the artist referred to them as a source of visual

inspiration. The family's last residence, known as "Casa Tadema", was an open house where they regularly held dinners and receptions for their large circle of friends. Among them were many artists who presented the couple with their works as a token of friendship. Alma-Tadema asked for paintings featuring an unusually narrow vertical format, which he brought together in the so-called "Hall of Panels" in his last studio-house. In the end, this collection comprised as many as forty-five vertically mounted pictures. In order to convey an idea of how these works were originally presented, an entire wall of this hall from Lawrence's studio featuring twelve of the panels has been reconstructed for the exhibition at the Belvedere.

Lawrence Alma-Tadema and his wife Laura frequently visited archaeological excavations. The couple shared a passion for collecting objects and furniture from different centuries and cultures. Many of these objects – both originals and copies – can be found in Alma-Tadema's paintings. Fascinated with antiquity, Alma-Tadema brought to life quotidian scenes from ancient Rome, Pompeii, and Egypt in his works. His meticulous studies of ancient objects and buildings contributed to the appeal and credibility of his depictions. Alma-Tadema masterfully rendered surface textures, employed an innovative approach to the handling of space, and added a distinct narrative element to his compositions. Later in his career, Alma-Tadema also took to portraying prominent personalities like emperors and wealthy patricians, such as in his masterpiece *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888).

Alma-Tadema's manner of "archaeological genre painting" greatly impressed his contemporaries and made beholders believe to have gained deep insights into the everyday life and civilisation of antiquity.

Besides painting, Alma-Tadema was also interested in the theatre: in 1901, the artist designed the stage sets and costumes for a performance of Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Coriolanus*. His profound knowledge of classical antiquity helped him transmit a credible picture. Some of the few surviving designs for his theatre architecture will also be on display in the exhibition.

The show also illustrates how Alma-Tadema's work influenced international film producers. Especially filmmakers of epic history films harked back to his compositions for their costumes and film sets, such as in *Quo Vadis* by Enrico Guazzoni (1913) or in *Gladiator* by Ridley Scott (2000).

In late-nineteenth-century art history, Alma-Tadema was regarded as a controversial personality. His work was often denigrated as being cutesy and kitschy. *“However, it becomes obvious from our exhibition that Alma-Tadema and the young Gustav Klimt sought inspiration from similar motifs. By the time Klimt took up his studies at the Vienna School of Arts and Crafts, Alma-Tadema was already an internationally successful artist. As Klimt’s wall and ceiling paintings for the Burgtheater and the Kunsthistorisches Museum demonstrate, several motifs used by Alma-Tadema influenced Klimt’s work before the foundation of the Vienna Secession,”* curator Alfred Weidinger points out.

Lawrence Alma-Tadema received numerous awards and recognitions for his work and rapidly became one of the most sought-after and well-paid artists of his time. Reproductions of his works commissioned by his agent ensured his international fame. On his sixtieth birthday, the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florenz asked him to paint a self-portrait for its famous collection. In 1879 he was admitted as a member to the Royal Academy. Knighted by Queen Victoria in 1899, the artist joined the list of such prestigious Dutch artists as Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck.

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue (published by Prestel). Divided into four big chapters, it examines Alma-Tadema’s life and work and his impact on art history.

A slightly smaller version of the exhibition will subsequently be shown at Leighton House Museum in London.

Complimentary images can be downloaded for press purposes at www.belvedere.at/press.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition title	LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA Decadence & Antiquity
Exhibition duration	24 February 2017 to 18 June 2017
Venue	Lower Belvedere
Exhibits	136
Curators	Alfred Weidinger (Belvedere) Frank Van der Velden, Marlies Stoter (Fries Museum)
Catalogue	<i>Lawrence Alma Tadema. At Home in Antiquity</i> Editors: Elizabeth Prettejohn, Peter Trippi Prestel Verlag, 240 p. ISBN 978-3-7913-6689-0 (English Version) EUR 29,95
Contact	Belvedere, Prinz Eugen-Straße 27, 1030 Vienna T +43 (01) 795 57-0 www.belvedere.at
Opening hours	Daily 10 am to 6 pm, Wednesday 10 am to 9 pm
Regular Entry	€ 12,- (Lower Belvedere)
Guided Tours	T +43 (01) 795 57-134, M public@belvedere.at
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The exhibition is organized by the Fries Museum, the Netherlands.

#AlmaTadema

