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# Contents

## Introduction:

The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses and Beyond, Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi

## Laboratories of Creativity:

The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses and Beyond, Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi

## What Do We Want from Artists' Houses?

*A Reflection*, Christopher Reed

The Resistant Materiality of Frederic Leighton's Arab Hall, Mary Roberts

The Atmospherics of Leighton House, Jonathan Law and Mary Roberts

## "A Door of Hell":

Thresholds, Crisis, and Morality in the Art of Gilbert and George in the 1970s, Gregory Salter



# Introduction: The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses and Beyond

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## **Cite as**

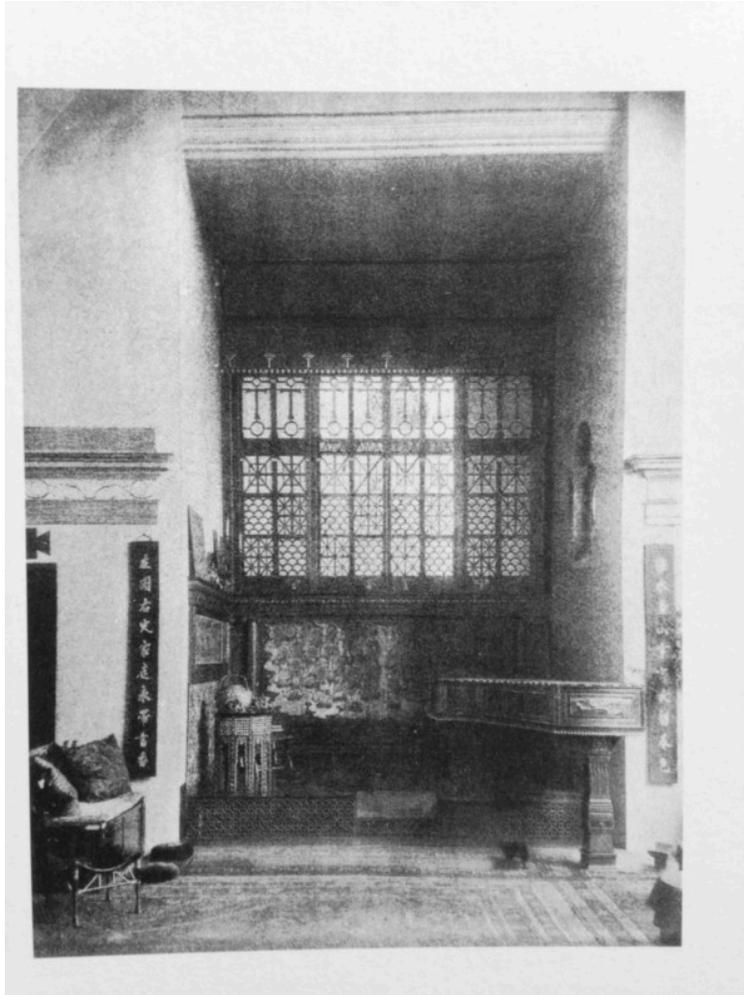
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Why should Lawrence Alma-Tadema give the title *In My Studio* to one of his three contributions to the Royal Academy exhibition of 1893 (Fig. 1)? Without the title, casual viewers might interpret the painting as one of the artist's well-known scenes of everyday life in classical antiquity, although they would soon start to wonder about some of the details—particularly the sumptuous textile that occupies centre stage, in fact a rose-red velvet cloth from India, perhaps part of the trappings for a ceremonial elephant, with extravagant borders embroidered in silver and gold.<sup>1</sup> In one sense, the title clears up the mystery: everything we see in the painting is plausible decoration for a London artist's studio at the end of the nineteenth century. Admittedly, this is rather a grand studio, which might be one reason for the title. The artist is letting us know that he is successful enough to afford luxuries from around the world and across history—not only Indian textiles but also Chinese paintings, Byzantine glassware,<sup>2</sup> and Mexican onyx in the elaborate, Roman-style window. At the same time, though, he is introducing viewers to the fantasy world, or dreamland, within which his paintings are imagined. The female figure in classical drapery can easily be explained as one of Alma-Tadema's models, pausing from her labours to enjoy the scent of the roses in the glass vase—a bravura display from the painter of *The Roses of Heliogabalus*. Yet in this magical environment, light can transform appearances as it modulates across the onyx window, glints in gold thread or on the burnished brass step, and models the fragility of a rose-petal or a girl's flesh. Who can say that she is not a ghost or revenant from the ancient world of the artist's pictures, come to life in modernity like Arria Marcella in Théophile Gautier's Pompeian ghost story, or Gradiva in the tale made famous by Sigmund Freud?<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *In My Studio*, 1893, oil on canvas, 59.8 × 44.5 cm. Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty. Digital image courtesy of Ann and Gordon Getty.



**Figure 2.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema's studio alcove, 17 Grove End Road, reproduced in *The Architect*, 31 May 1889.

Without the title, there is no particular indication that the painting represents an artist's studio. Unlike the photographs of studio interiors that were proliferating in the illustrated magazines of the period (many of which are reproduced in the contributions to this group of articles and features in *British Art Studies*), there are no obvious signs of artistic work: no easels, palettes, or newly completed pictures on display for sale. This studio is clearly part of a house, the artist's domestic as well as working space, and an aspect of the painting's fascination is the sense of penetrating a secret or private enclave, "in my studio". It is true that photographs of the studio alcove, within which the scene is set, had already appeared in the press (Fig. 2). Someone who had visited the house might know that the alcove provided a platform for the distinguished musicians who played in the Alma-Tadema family's celebrated musical evenings, and that the Indian cloth conceals a piano, the leg of which emerges somewhat incongruously beneath the shimmering folds. If they knew the house well, they might guess that the

classically draped and coiffed figure has just emerged from the models' dressing room, accessed by a door immediately to the left of the scene we see. Magical as this environment appears, it is also a scrupulously exact record of a real London interior, as accurate in circumstantial detail as Alma-Tadema's archaeologically exact reconstructions of ancient interiors were reputed to be.

We begin with *In My Studio* because it adumbrates many of the ideas we wish to explore in this group of contributions on the artist's studio-house. Distinctive as the interior of a highly successful artist at the peak of Victorian prosperity and power, the scene also hints at the guises or roles that the studio-house might assume at any number of times and places: living space as well as workplace, experimental laboratory, spur to creativity, or *Gesamtkunstwerk*. No wonder, then, that this painting served as a key or signature image for the exhibition project and symposium that gave rise to this online publication.

The exhibition, *Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity*, was initiated by the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the capital of the Dutch province of Friesland, in the far north of the Netherlands, and Lawrence Alma-Tadema's home town. From its genesis in 2013, the project began to grow in scope and ambition under the guidance of the museum's head of collections, Frank van der Velden, and its curator, Marlies Stoter. They aimed to celebrate their local artist, but they also wanted to tell a new story about him. Thanks to a generous benefactor, the Fries Museum—Friesland's largest museum of art and history—had a brand-new building with glamorous cinema facilities; thus the staff were particularly interested in exploring the influence that Alma-Tadema's paintings were known to have had on depictions of antiquity in both European and Hollywood cinema, but which had never been properly researched. Alma-Tadema is best-known as “the archaeologist of artists”,<sup>4</sup> the painter of scenes from ancient everyday life informed by new data from the vast archaeological excavations of the second half of the nineteenth century. This approach had been thoroughly explored in the first modern exhibition devoted to Alma-Tadema, organized by Edwin Becker, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Julian Treuherz for the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam) and the Walker Art Gallery (Liverpool) in 1996–1997. While we did not wish to neglect that story in the new exhibition, we were also determined to avoid a simplistic presentation of Alma-Tadema's pictures as merely “Victorians in Togas”.

The Fries Museum had a distinctive angle on the subject: in 1935, it had received a bequest from Alma-Tadema's daughter, Laurence, which included numerous items from the family's two London studio-houses. That chimed with our own interests, as curators and art historians, in the artist's studio as an environment or laboratory for art-making. Once the museum had

engaged the two of us as guest curators, it became clear that our team needed a third guest curator familiar with the films and film-makers inspired by Alma-Tadema's "deep staging" and meticulous research of settings, costumes, and props: Ivo L. Blom, a film scholar at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit.

Thus, we started with germs of ideas that at first seemed rather random and oddly assorted. The investigation of the studio-houses also called attention to the artist's family. While it had always been known that Alma-Tadema's second wife, Laura Theresa Epps, was a practising artist in her own right, it was only with the rise of feminist art history that this started to seem important. Moreover, Alma-Tadema's younger daughter, Anna, as well as two of Laura's sisters and several cousins of Lawrence's, were also artists, while the elder daughter Laurence was a widely published author; with other friends, they were collaborators in creating the Alma-Tademas' studio-houses. From these disparate germs, some intriguing questions started to emerge. What if the studio-houses were not just signs of the wealth and success of the male artist, Lawrence Alma-Tadema? What if they could be described, more intriguingly, as collaborations between Laura and Lawrence Alma-Tadema that resulted not so much in luxury houses as in Total Works of Art—three-dimensional spaces for art-making and artistic experience? And what if it was such an approach to lived experience—being surrounded by, moving through, and living in an artistic space—that was inspirational for the creators of early cinema?

We had the sense, then, that there was a new story to tell—but how to realise it in the exhibition space? In fact we were soon working with three very different spaces, as plans developed for the exhibition's tour. It began in Leeuwarden in a purpose-built museum building just three years old (on view there 1 October 2016–7 February 2017), then travelled to the Belvedere, a Viennese royal palace of the early eighteenth century (23 February–18 June 2017). The final venue was a historic house, Leighton House Museum in London (7 July–29 October 2017). While this studio-house belonged not to the Alma-Tademas, but rather to their contemporary and friend Frederic Leighton, we felt that the exhibition had itself come home: the domestic scale and nineteenth-century interiors suited the works exhibited and the ideas about the artist's studio-house that we were exploring.

The exhibition came to an end in October 2017, yet the wider questions and issues it raised were beginning to display ramifications. That month, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art generously hosted *Alma-Tadema: Antiquity at Home and on Screen*, a two-and-a-half-day symposium that allowed further discussion and debate, focused on the idea of the artist's studio-house. It was convened by the Centre's Deputy Director for Research, Dr Sarah Victoria Turner, and ourselves. On the first half-day (Thursday, 19 October 2017), we invited curators, scholars, and students to share their

research and ideas in an afternoon workshop. So many colleagues accepted our invitation that we were obliged to limit each speaker to a mere five minutes and one slide. The result was an exhilarating sequence of images and ideas that ranged far and wide, both intellectually and geographically. In this issue of *British Art Studies*, we aim to recapture the sense of discovery that made that workshop so exciting, and also to make the speakers' contributions available to wider audiences. We are delighted that twenty-four of our fellow workshop contributors have agreed to take part here in the form of a *Conversation Piece*.

The Paul Mellon Centre welcomed an even larger group the next day for a programme of nine talks by scholars from around the world. Launching that event was a plenary lecture by Prof. Christopher Reed (Pennsylvania State University) posing the question "What Do We Want from Artists' Houses?" In the afternoon, came a plenary lecture by Prof. Mary Roberts (University of Sydney) about the "resistant materiality" of Leighton's Arab Hall. Reed and Roberts have contributed extended essays on these topics for this issue of *British Art Studies*. The keynote papers served as ideal "bookends" for what proved to be a stimulating day of fresh research and spirited discussion, and so we are pleased to publish both of them in this issue. In addition, video recordings of all of the papers presented that Friday are available to [watch online](#). The symposium continued on Saturday, 21 October at the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image, where Ian Christie (Birkbeck) and Maria Wyke (University College London) convened a programme of eight papers focused on the theatre and film productions inspired by Alma-Tadema's vision. We are currently exploring opportunities to publish elsewhere the remaining papers delivered on 20 and 21 October, all of which would enhance the global dialogue which we hope this group of articles and features in *British Art Studies* will spark.

Readers may of course choose to read the twenty-six contributions here in any order they like, but we have arranged them in geographical sequence, starting in London and then moving farther afield. We have begun that ordering with the focus of the exhibition itself: the studio-houses of Laura and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, their family and friends. <sup>5</sup>

## **The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses**

As many of the contributions here demonstrate, the illustrated interviews with artists that proliferated in the later Victorian press provide the modern scholar with treasure troves of information about particular studio-houses, including images. More importantly, these articles document the centrality of the studio-house to art world customs, artistic practice, and the lives of artists. When Lawrence Alma-Tadema was interviewed at home in 1899, he explained how important his studio interiors were to his practice as an artist:

I have always found that the light and colour in a studio had a great influence upon me in my work. I first painted in a studio with panels of black decoration. Then in my studio in Brussels I was surrounded by bright red, and in London—at Townshend House, Regent's Park—I worked under the influence of a light green tint. During the winter I spent in Rome in 1875-76—when I was obliged to leave my London house by the destructive effect of the Regent's Canal explosion—I tried the effect of a white studio. Now, as you see, the prevailing hue is silvery white, and that, I think, best agrees with my present temperament, artistically speaking. <sup>6</sup>

The convention in such interviews—dramatically unlike their equivalents today—was to avoid reference to the artist's personal life. Thus, the family was off-limits and Alma-Tadema speaks of himself alone, but that is misleading: from the start, the studio-houses were places for social interaction with family and friends, and there is abundant evidence that their design was a collaborative effort.

Thus, the story begins with Alma-Tadema's first wife, Marie Pauline Gressin Dumoulin de Boissard; on their honeymoon trip to Pompeii, in 1863, Alma-Tadema became fascinated by the everyday life, the domestic environments and household possessions, of the ancient Romans. When the couple moved to Brussels in 1865, they painted the studio walls red, the characteristic colour of Pompeian wall painting. The only record of the studio itself is a painting of Pauline with her mother and first daughter, Laurence, in the red interior ([Fig. 3](#)); Pauline is pregnant with the second daughter, Anna. However, the pictures Alma-Tadema painted there were obviously inspired by the frescoed interiors of Pompeii. Here there is a relatively straightforward relationship among the colour scheme of the paintings, the colour and light in the studio, and the historicism of the pictures as recreations of domestic life in Roman antiquity.



**Figure 3.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *My Studio*, 1867, oil on panel, 42.1 × 54 cm. Collection of Groninger Museum, Groningen (1903.0002). Digital image courtesy of Groninger Museum.

Then tragedy struck: Pauline died in 1869. There was a total change of environment when Alma-Tadema moved to London with his two daughters and fell in love again, with the seventeen-year-old Laura Theresa Epps; they married in the summer of 1871. Together, Laura and Lawrence created not just a studio, as in Brussels, but a whole studio-house: Townshend House, at the north gate of Regent's Park. Laura's role in the design and decoration has been forgotten (until now) by art historians, but it was specifically acknowledged in early articles on the house.<sup>7</sup>

At Townshend House, there was a new colour key: a light silvery green. The impact of this colour-scheme on Alma-Tadema's paintings was striking: they are still set in Roman antiquity, but they abandon the Pompeian red, and with it the small-scale domestic interior—to go outdoors and upscale, or into public and urban spaces such as the Roman baths and Forum. The paintings were made in a studio that is now known only through illustrations, paintings, and photographs. In a painting by Laura's sister Emily Epps Williams, a view into Lawrence's studio (Fig. 4), up a short flight of steps, captures the sense of moving through the narrow corridor into the light space of the studio beyond. The wall and ceiling decorations of the studio, by the artist himself, were historicizing, based on Pompeian wall paintings, and the studio was adorned with numerous ancient artefacts.

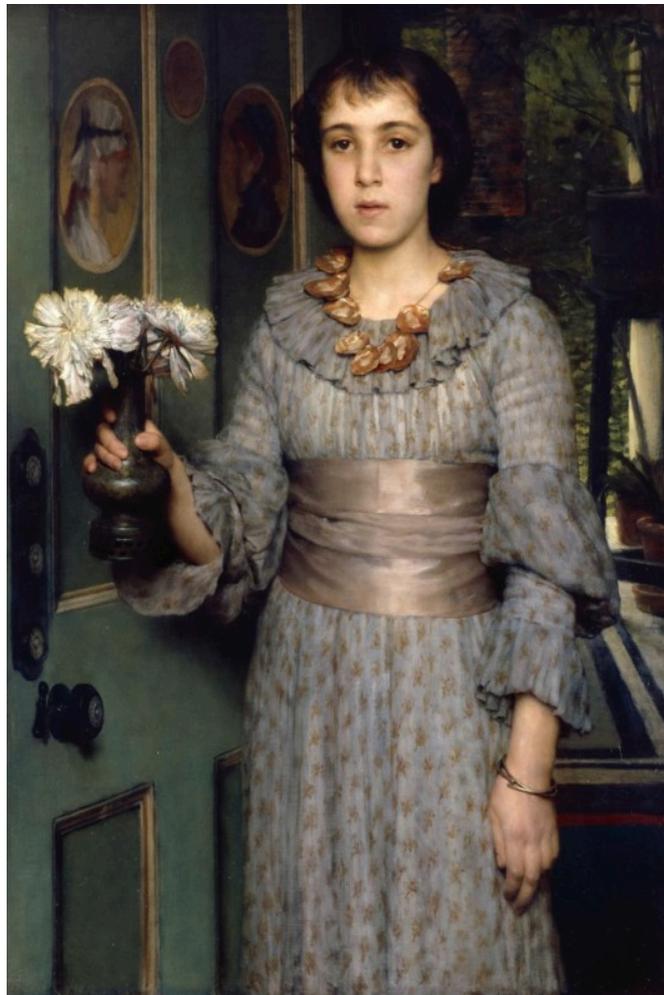
Laura's studio was downstairs and it was composed of a sequence of compartments, opening one from the next and into the conservatory; its decorations were much wider-ranging than those of Lawrence's studio and included Japanese fans, Spanish leather, Dutch furniture and tiles, tatami matting, flowering trees and plants, a Roman fountain, Chinese lanterns, and an Indian grass hammock.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this should be described as a woman's space, where Laura's work as an artist and household manager intersected and interpenetrated with one another. That also made it architecturally innovative in its open plan and fluid movement through space.

It seems to have been Laura, too, who made a crucial breakthrough. Lawrence sometimes represented the house interiors as backdrops for portraits—see, for example, Fig. 5, in which he depicts his daughter Anna entering the library at Townshend House. As we have seen, the colour key



**Figure 4.**  
Emily Epps Williams ,  
The Studio,  
Townshend House,  
1883, oil on panel,  
81.28 × 16.51 cm.  
Collection of J.J.  
Fitzpatrick. Digital  
image courtesy of J.J.  
Fitzpatrick.

and light effects of the house had an influence on the general appearance of his subject pictures, but the interiors were not actually represented in those pictures. In Laura's paintings, however, there is a new idea: the house interiors generate ideas for narrative scenes that take place within them. An example is the watercolour of 1881, *May I Come In?* (Fig. 6). The figure is in historical costume, so we are seeing an imaginary scene from the Dutch seventeenth century, but the interior is derived from Townshend House, the pale colours of which are evident in the tatami matting and the woodwork; a distinctive innovation was the practice of setting tall thin paintings into the vertical panels of the doors. Many of Laura's works display an interest in doorways and thresholds—liminal spaces, or spaces one moves through: these begin to develop ideas about movement *through* space that become increasingly important in the Alma-Tademas' later work.



**Figure 5.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Miss Anna Alma-Tadema*, 1883, oil on canvas, 113 × 78.5 cm. Collection of Royal Academy of Arts, London (03.908). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London.



**Figure 6.**

Laura Alma-Tadema , *May I Come In?*, 1881, watercolour with pencil, gum arabic, and scratching out on paper, 25.1 × 16.8 cm. Private Collection, England. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

The interiors were designed to provide vistas from room to room and to encourage movement from space to space, as seen in three extraordinary watercolours made by the teenaged Anna Alma-Tadema: of the study, the drawing room, and the magnificent “Gold Room” (Figs [7](#), [8](#), and [9](#)). In the Gold Room, for example, a double arched opening entices the visitor to cross the threshold, marked by a magnificent Chinese silk curtain and a bust of Antinous (probably a replica of an ancient object); beyond are a Byzantine-style piano and an earlier version of the Mexican onyx window that we have already seen in the alcove of *In My Studio*. This is not a period room: the profusion of objects emanates from a dizzying variety of historical and geographical origins.



**Figure 7.**

Anna Alma-Tadema, Interior of the Gold Room, Townshend House, circa 1883, watercolour with scraping over graphite on paper, 53 × 35.9 cm. Collection of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (81-30/86). Digital image courtesy of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.



**Figure 8.**

Anna Alma-Tadema, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Study in Townshend House, London, 1884, brush and watercolour, pen and brown and black ink, graphite on paper, 33 × 45 cm. Thaw Collection, Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, New York (2007-27-72). Digital image courtesy of Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum.



**Figure 9.**

Anna Alma-Tadema, *The Drawing Room, Townshend House*, 1885, watercolour over pencil and pen and ink on card, 27.2 × 18.7 cm. Collection of Royal Academy of Arts, London (08/3530). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London.

It is likely that Anna's watercolours and the tall thin panels representing Townshend House interiors, by Emily Williams and others, were made when the family already knew they were moving to another house. They commemorate the interiors that the family gave up, voluntarily, so they could create a new studio-house, with enhanced possibilities for the exploration of space, light, and movement: "Casa Tadema", as it soon became known, at 17 (now 44) Grove End Road, St John's Wood. Indeed the panels were given a space of their own, as though to embed the memory of the previous house in the new one. Their format derives from the idea of painting on door panels first tried at Townshend House, and also from the narrowness of Asian scroll paintings (the Alma-Tademas collected Asian artworks assiduously). The right panel seen in Laura's watercolour, *May I Come In?*, is by Alma-Tadema's artist-cousin Sientje Mesdag, who with her

husband Hendrik Willem Mesdag were also creating a studio-house in The Hague (now the Museum Mesdag). Sientje's panel and the white-painted settle with a black spherical ball-finial, seen to the left of the watercolour, were reinstalled in the Hall of Panels at Grove End Road (Fig. 10). Other artist-friends were asked to add to the array, which eventually numbered forty-five (seventeen of which we were able to trace for the exhibition; twenty-eight remain to be discovered). Thus the Hall of Panels, explored in Arnika Groenewald-Schmidt's contribution to the Conversation Piece, embeds the memory of an entire circle of working artist-friends.



**Figure 10.**

Rudolph De Cordova, *The Hall of Panels*, 1902, in "The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Hall" by Rudolph De Cordova, *The Strand Magazine* (December 1902): 615.



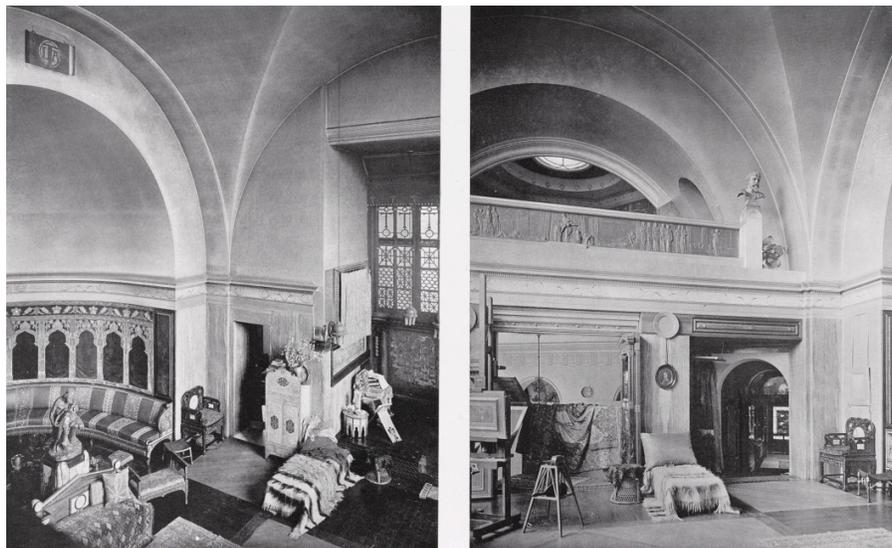
**Figure 11.**

Chair, adorned with the intermingled initials “LAT” and “LTAT”, after 1886, wood and cane, 83 × 43.5 cm. Private Collection, England.

Even more than the first studio-house, Casa Tadema was “signed” all over, and in various ways, by the artist-couple who created it—including by inserting their initials on every conceivable surface throughout the house and garden. Previous scholars have often noticed the initials—“LAT”—and commented on how insistently they inscribe the identity of “Lawrence Alma-Tadema” on the surfaces of the house. Amazingly, no one noticed (until now) that “Laura Alma-Tadema” had the same initials: visitors who deciphered the initials were seeing *both* artists, intertwined (Fig. 11). The garden, inherited from the previous owner of the house, James Tissot, was also a space for art-making; both Tissot and Alma-Tadema took inspiration from their gardens in creating paintings, much as Claude Monet would do at Giverny from 1890 onwards. For insights on the similarities and distinctions between Alma-

Tadema and Tissot (both of these émigré artists were trained in Antwerp), see the contributions from Melissa Buron, Krystyna Matyjaszkiewicz, and Charles Martindale.

There may have been four artist's studios in Casa Tadema: studios for Anna Alma-Tadema and Emily Williams, by then widowed, as well as the two better documented studios of Lawrence and Laura. His studio was a double-height space reminiscent of a Byzantine basilica or a Roman bath, with round vaults and a semi-dome clad in shimmering aluminium (Figs [12](#) and [13](#)); hers, a recreated Dutch interior or perhaps more like an antique shop filled with historic panelling, glass, furniture, and bric-a-brac (Figs [14](#) and [15](#)). In this studio, Laura painted her fascinating responses to the Dutch seventeenth-century artist Johannes Vermeer—an artist just being “rediscovered” in her generation; Laura was one of the first to explore his art through her own work.



**Figure 12.**

“The Studio from the Balcony” and “The Studio” from Rudolf Dircks, “The Later Work of Sir L. Alma-Tadema O.M., R.A., R.W.S.”, in *The Art Annual* (supplement to *The Art-Journal*), London, 1910. Collection of University of Amsterdam, Bijzondere Collection (UBM: Z 1101). Digital image courtesy of University of Amsterdam,.



**Figure 13.**

Nicolaas van der Waay, Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Studio at 17, Grove End Road, circa 1890-1891, brush and grey ink, grey wash, heightened with white on paper, 25 x 35 cm. Collection of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden (PTII-1482). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden / Collection Het Koninklijk Fries Genootschap / Conserved with support of the Wassenbergh-Clarijs-Fontein Foundation.



**Figure 14.**

Laura Alma-Tadema's Studio at 17, Grove End Road, *The Architect*, 31 May 1889.



**Figure 15.**

Nicolaas van der Waay, *The Studio of Mrs Laura Alma Tadema (with view to the boudoir)*, circa 1890–1891, brush and grey ink, grey wash, heightened with white on paper, 38 × 25.5 cm. Collection of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden (PTII-1485). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden / Collection Het Koninklijk Fries Genootschap / Conserved with support of the Wassenbergh-Clarijs-Fontein Foundation.

Now, and apparently under Laura's influence, Alma-Tadema was beginning to use the spaces of the house, not merely as backdrops, but to generate ideas for composition, lighting, movement through space, and dramatic action in his pictures—the “look” that would have such an influence on the development of cinema. In views of the new studio can be seen the sheen of the semi-dome, as well as the different levels and light sources that create views and vistas, constantly changing as the visitor moves around them.

That brings us back to the painting with which we began: *In My Studio*, which shows a corner of the studio space quite literally. The Mexican onyx window has been transported from the Gold Room at Townshend House and enlarged to suit its new surroundings; the piano from the Gold Room is under the gold-embroidered textile. This painting also moves the story beyond the Alma-Tadema household. Alma-Tadema gave *In My Studio* to Frederic Leighton in return for Leighton's contribution to his Hall of Panels, a tall, thin composition with a subject both classical and romantic: Psyche preparing to take her bath in Cupid's palace (Fig. 16).<sup>9</sup> The paintings exchanged by Leighton and Alma-Tadema are records of a friendship and of a shared interest in classical antiquity. They were also embedded concretely in the artists' studio-houses. Leighton's *Bath of Psyche* became part of the physical fabric of Casa Tadema, while the corner of Alma-Tadema's studio, represented in his painting, was transported into Leighton's house, where it can be seen in photographs of Leighton's Silk Room (Fig. 17).



**Figure 16.** Frederic Leighton, *The Bath of Psyche*, circa 1887, oil on canvas, 81.3 × 16.5 cm. Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty. Digital image courtesy of Ann and Gordon Getty.



**Figure 17.**

Frederic Leighton's Silk Room with, *In My Studio*, hanging above the sofa's right arm

## The Studio-House in Wider Perspectives

Research into the Alma-Tadema studio-houses could expand almost infinitely. Not only are there abundant visual records and verbal accounts of the houses and the life within them; their interiors influenced works of art in a variety of media by the Alma-Tadema family and many other artists. The 1913 sale catalogue enumerates 1,511 objects from the house, many of which have fascinating stories of their own. By drilling deep, research on artists' studio-houses (the Alma-Tademas' and others) can reveal a great deal about taste-making, collecting, artists' lives, and of course studio practice, including the roles of models and assistants; for example, an article published just last year by Lara Perry examined the census records for twenty-one artistic London households ranging in date from 1861 to 1901.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it should not surprise us that Laura Alma-Tadema was never described as an artist in the census, despite the fact that she was conducting a successful career from the same address as her more famous husband.

One key inspiration for our project was the exhibition curated in 2013–2014 by Margot Th. Brandlhuber at another of the great studio-houses of the late nineteenth century, that of Franz von Stuck in Munich.<sup>11</sup> Her show centred on the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, using twenty different sites in Europe,

the USA, and North Africa as examples of this international phenomenon. Explored alongside the Villa Stuck were Casa Tadema and Leighton House, as well as the studio-houses of such disparate figures as John Soane, Claude Monet, Gustave Moreau, Fernand Khnopff, Kurt Schwitters, and Georgia O’Keeffe. In the catalogue that accompanied *In the Temple of the Self: The Artist’s Residence as a Total Work of Art*, Brandlhuber and her fellow contributors address a range of issues that shed light on the Alma-Tademas’ homes. One key feature is cosmopolitanism: through their extensive travels, wide-ranging artworld contacts, and close reading of art periodicals distributed internationally, the Alma-Tademas knew exactly how other leading artists were designing and promoting their studio-homes throughout the Western world. The competition for prestige, and thus sales, among Europe’s leading artists was fierce, so it made sense that such figures as Hans Makart (Vienna) and Mihály Munkácsy (Paris) created luxurious studio-houses exhaustively covered in the press and visited by the “right” people. Lawrence caught the bug quite young, in fact: the *Conversation Piece* contains a contribution by Jan Dirk Baetens documenting the Dutchman’s first-hand experience in the 1850s and early 1860s with the extraordinary studio-house of his teacher in Antwerp, the history painter Henri Leys. Even less opulent sites attracted attention, including the Paris houses of Eugène Delacroix and Ary Scheffer (the latter is now the Musée de la Vie Romantique). Another contributor here is Caroline van Eck, who explains how the fading painter Antoine Wiertz managed to receive, from the Belgian government, a large house and studio in Brussels in which to live and work.

Brandlhuber highlights another crucial aspect of the leading studio-houses—their suitability for seeing and being seen. Particularly apposite is a description of Gabriele d’Annunzio’s famous house overlooking Lake Garda, the Vittoriale degli italiani, which he occupied from 1922 until his death in 1938. (The writer openly admired Lawrence Alma-Tadema, particularly in the 1880s and 1890s).<sup>12</sup> The scholar Jens Malte Fischer observed that a visitor to this extraordinary villa:

moves like a flaneur on the “stage”, perambulating different styles, periods, cultural spheres and military events ... bombarded with ever-changing impressions, he turns into the actual performer who moves in shifting reflections and positions around this total work of art, thereby becoming part of it.<sup>13</sup>

Quite rightly, scholars have long emphasized the performative aspect of the leading artist—such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema or Frederic Leighton—welcoming rich and influential guests to his studio-house to admire the art, often accompanied by an entertainment or meal. Yet perhaps too little scholarly attention has been paid to the way such visits made the

*visitor* feel, to how he or she might have behaved differently in this setting towards the host, other visitors, or the “outside” world after returning home. Fortunately, many accounts of visits to Townshend House and Casa Tadema exist in both published articles and private correspondence, yet these have not been systematically examined and would surely reward such an effort. Taking such an approach would also enhance our understanding of how the Alma-Tademas’ immersive decors—not just their immersive artworks—inspired leading theatre artists (and ultimately film-makers) to “borrow” their *mises en scène*.

Cosmopolitan as they were, the Alma-Tademas were completely invested in the lively world of British contemporary art centred on London. Thus, at least ten of the twenty-six contributions in this group of articles and features highlight aspects of London studio-house life, ranging from the expected (e.g., Tissot, Leighton, Rossetti) to the surprising (J.M.W. Turner, William Goscombe John, Briton Riviere). We are especially pleased that Jo Banham focused her attention on a mysterious watercolour by Dewey Bates, showing a notably self-possessed woman admiring a portrait that may well depict herself; such an image underscores the agency of the female eye that must have been so palpable in the Alma-Tademas’ homes. Here, Banham notes, “his sitter is the social equal—perhaps the superior—of the artist, her face is turned away, and it is she who is engaged in looking at—maybe judging—the artist’s skills.” <sup>14</sup>

Finally, it is a sign of how robust studio-house scholarship is today that this issue contains two pieces pointing clearly towards the future. Daniel Robbins, Senior Curator at Leighton House Museum, brings us up-to-date on an imminent redevelopment scheme that will allow that institution to serve and educate visitors and researchers even more effectively. The significance of Leighton House as a rare survival of a leading artist’s vision is underscored by Mary Roberts’ investigation of its Arab Hall, and now we are excited to imagine other topics that will be explored once the museum facility has been improved. Ranging beyond England, Nicholas Tromans (until recently, Curator at the Watts Gallery in Surrey) introduces the Artist’s Studio Museum Network, which now encompasses more than 150 European single-artist museums. <sup>15</sup> Many of these sites are enjoying growing audiences not only because the artists highlighted there were talented, but also because the public increasingly values their special status as places where creativity happened. In our era of logo-emblazoned mediocrity, ever more people yearn to encounter authenticity and the making of art by hand, to enhance their own life experience by standing where a unique individual conceived and executed artworks that continue to inspire today’s artists and audiences. Encouragingly, the European network now has a counterpart in the United States—Historic Artists’ Homes and Studios. <sup>16</sup> Already the members of these

organizations are sharing their research, strategies, and collection highlights. We hope that the papers published here will inspire further collaboration in this rapidly evolving area of both art history and the museum profession.

## Footnotes

- 1 No. 1238 in Hampton & Sons, *Catalogue of the well-known and interesting collection of Antique Furniture and Objets d'Art formed by the Late Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A.*, 1913. We are grateful to Charlotte Gere for noting the cloth's similarity to Indian objects on display at the V&A and therefore likely to be familiar to the audiences of the period. For the identification of this and other objects, see the entry on the painting by Julian Treuherz in Edwin Becker and others, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, exhibition catalogue (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Liverpool: Walker Art Gallery, 1996), 250.
- 2 The bowl with blue rim and gold centre, at top right, is actually a copy of a Byzantine object (no. 178 in Hampton & Sons, *Catalogue*).
- 3 Both Théophile Gautier's short story, "Arria Marcella: Souvenir de Pompéi" (1852) and Wilhelm Jensen's novel *Gradiva* (1902) revolve around the modern reappearance (real or imagined) of a female figure from ancient Pompeii. Freud analysed Jensen's story, inspired by a bas-relief of a striding female figure, in his famous essay "Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*" (first published in German as "Der Wahn und die Traüme in W. Jensen's *Gradiva*", 1907).
- 4 The phrase was widely used; see, for example, Georg Ebers, *Lorenz Alma-Tadema: His Life and Works*, trans. Mary J. Safford (New York: W.S. Gottsberger, 1886), 33; and "The Archaeologist of Artists", *The Nation* (New York), 16 September 1886, 237-238.
- 5 For a fuller account, see Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi (eds.), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity*, exhibition catalogue (Munich: Prestel, 2016).
- 6 Frederick Dolman, "Illustrated Interviews: LXVIII Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema", *Strand Magazine* 18 (1899): 612.
- 7 See, for example, Wilfrid Meynell, "Mr. Alma-Tadema Seven Years Ago and Now", *Magazine of Art* 4 (1881): 95.
- 8 See Mrs [Mary Eliza] Haweis, *Beautiful Houses; Being a Description of Certain Well-Known Artistic Houses* (New York: Scribner & Welford, 1882), 24-25.
- 9 The format of the panels in the Alma-Tademas' Hall was, then, the origin of one of Leighton's most famous compositions, *The Bath of Psyche*, later executed at large scale and now in the Tate collection.
- 10 Lara Perry, "The Artist's Household: On Gender and the Division of Artistic and Domestic Labour in Nineteenth-Century London", *Third Text* 31, no. 1 (2017): 15-29.
- 11 Margot Th. Brandlhuber and Michael Buhrs (eds.), *In the Temple of the Self: The Artist's Residence as a Total Work of Art, Europe and America 1800-1948* (Munich: Villa Stuck/Hatje Cantz, 2013).
- 12 Giuliana Pieri, "D'Annunzio and Alma-Tadema: Between Pre-Raphaelitism and Aestheticism", *Modern Language Review* 96, no. 2 (April 2001): 361-369.
- 13 Jens Malte Fischer, *Richard Wagner und seine Wirkung* (Vienna: Zsolnay Verlag, 2013), cited in Brandlhuber and Buhrs, *In the Temple of the Self*, 10.
- 14 Jo Banham, "The Studio and Bohemia", in Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi, "Laboratories of Creativity: The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses and Beyond", *British Art Studies* 9, doi:[10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-09/conversation](https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-09/conversation) .
- 15 See Artist's Studio Museum Network, <http://artiststudiomuseum.org>.
- 16 See the Historic Artists' Homes and Studios program (HAHS), <https://artistshomes.org>.

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# Laboratories of Creativity: The Alma-Tademas' Studio-Houses and Beyond

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## **Introduction**

This *Conversation Piece* highlights the range of new research discoveries that are being -- and are still to be -- made about artists' studio homes. This conversation was first aired in a workshop at the Paul Mellon Centre in October 2017 when a group of invited curators, scholars, and students shared their research about the Alma-Tadema studio-houses, exploring how they were designed, used and re-used, unearthing many tantalising links to other studio-houses created or inhabited by artists of the previous, contemporary, and next generations. This *Conversation Piece* aims to recapture the sense of discovery that made that workshop so exciting, and also to make the speakers' contributions available to wider audiences. It is coordinated by Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi, who have published an [extended introduction to the topic](#) in this issue.

Response by

**Charlotte Gere**, Independent Historian

### ***An Artistic Interior* by Jan Frans Verhas**

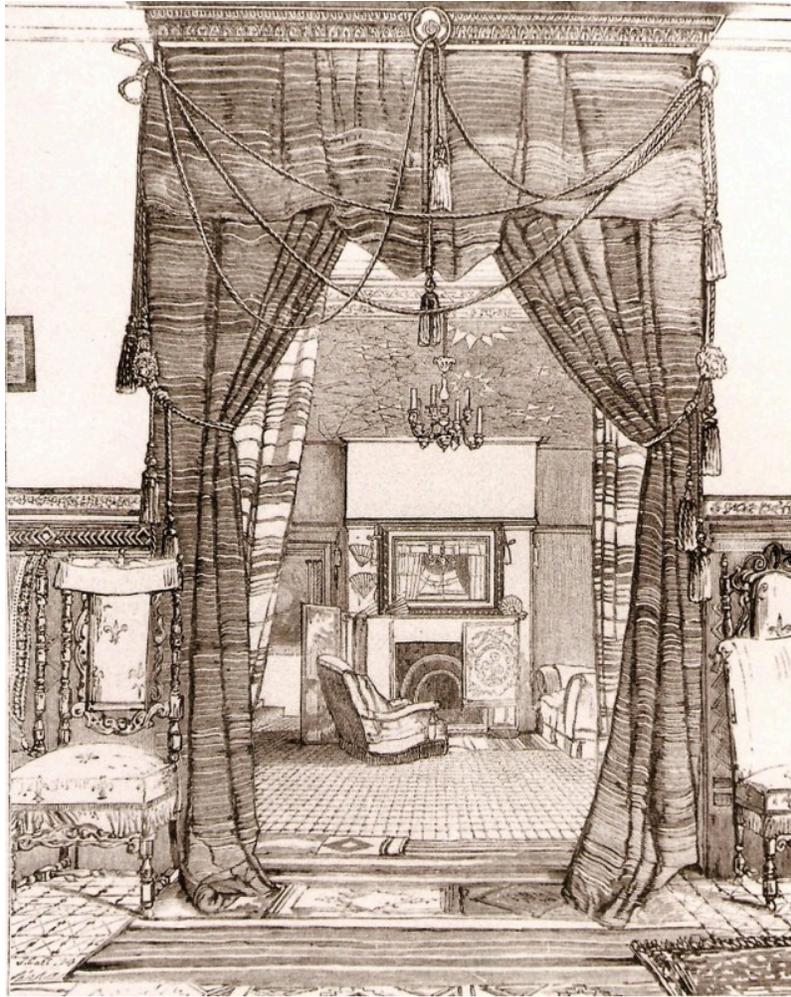
Living in Melbury Road, Holland Park, in 1958 was an education in aesthetic studio-houses at a time when they were quite unknown and unappreciated. The leases were coming to an end and the houses, many of them in a poor state, were threatened with demolition. They were lived in by old ladies and bedsitting tenants, often only three or so owners after the original inhabitants had departed. Getting an order to view the property when it was for sale was the way inside William Burges' Tower House, and very grim it was, almost completely vandalized with the gilding dimmed and carvings littering the floors. Leighton House was all strip lighting and plasterboard, so there was no reason to visit. The ruinous Casa Tadema in St John's Wood, carved up into flats, was still just about recognisable.

In view of the wealth of surviving artists' houses, choosing to discuss Lawrence Alma-Tadema's former home in Regent's Park, Townshend House, of which no trace remains, is little short of perverse. But, over time, an impressive quantity of evidence for its interiors has emerged. The painting by Jan Frans Verhas illustrated here was advertised for sale by the dealer Christopher Wood in 1990 as "An Artistic Interior", signed and dated 1870 (Fig. 1). It compares closely with the illustration of the curtained opening to the two drawing rooms on the first floor of Townshend House in Daniel Moncure Conway's book *Travels in South Kensington*, published in 1882 (Fig. 2). Because both the painting and illustration repeat exactly the relative positions of the two layers of striped door hangings, a connection with some phase of Townshend House seemed indisputable.



**Figure 1.**

Jan Frans Verhas, *An Artistic Interior*, 1870, oil on panel, 59 × 85.7 cm. Private Collection, New York. Digital image courtesy of Kevin Noble Photography.



**Figure 2.**

Townshend House Interior, illustration in Daniel Moncure Conway, *Travels in South Kensington* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882).



**Figure 3.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Woman and Flowers*, 1868, oil on panel, 49.8 × 37.2 cm. Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (41.117). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The painting is dated 1870, but Alma-Tadema moved into Townshend House only upon his marriage to Laura Epps in the summer of 1871. So, although unarguably an Alma-Tadema interior, Verhas' image poses more questions than it answers—and the workshop audience had many suggestions. There are differences, most strikingly the fitted patterned carpet in the painting and the dado, now topped by a miniature cast of the Parthenon frieze (a detail, much remarked, of the Townshend House décor) in Conway's illustration. Although hardly legible here, the Parthenon cast is described in Conway's text.

The room in the painting must be at ground level because it leads to a conservatory. In 1870, the painting's date, Alma-Tadema was living in Frederick Goodall's house at 4 Camden Square with his two small daughters

and his sister, Artje, who had accompanied him to London.<sup>1</sup> Artje is portrayed in Alma-Tadema's 1868 painting, *Flowers* (Fig. 3), which Verhas shows in reproduction to the left of the curtained opening, and she may also be the seated figure in his painting. The striped curtains (possibly North African) are known to have been among the chattels shipped from Brussels to London in the autumn of 1870.

Although his book was not published until 1882, Conway's drawing appears to date from before the remodelling of Townshend House (1875–1876) after the Regent's Canal explosion of October 1874. A painting by Nellie Epps, dated 1873 and illustrated on page 81 of the exhibition catalogue, shows that the Japanese tatami matting "dado" in the Verhas painting was by then in the ground floor "Dutch Room"; the woven basket chair had migrated to Alma-Tadema's studio (illustrated on page 121). During the remodelling, the double drawing room opening was altered and the striped curtains were not re-hung in that position.

If Verhas' interior is, uniquely, the Camden Square house, it shows the remarkable lengths Alma-Tadema was prepared to go to adorn a house he rented only briefly. When Christopher Wood advertised it in 1990, the painting had no recorded history; he sold it to a private collector, who has recently allowed it to be photographed. In time, some puzzling aspects may be resolved, but for the moment, it is almost certainly a sublime addition to the small number of images we have of Alma-Tadema's sister Artje.

Response by

**Stephanie Moser**, Professor and Head of Department of Archaeology,  
University of Southampton

### **An Aura of Antiquity: Archaeology and the Ancient World in Alma-Tadema's Studio-Homes**

During his lengthy and highly productive career, Lawrence Alma-Tadema established distinctive strategies to communicate the rich beauty of antiquity. Chief among them was the detailed representation of archaeological elements, which promptly became the hallmark of his paintings. While it is reasonable to assume that the accurate portrayal of ancient material culture bolstered the veracity of Alma-Tadema's interpretations of the past, his use of archaeology serviced other important aesthetic agendas. With their highly decorative qualities and finely crafted appearance, domestic antiquities became a unique lens through which Alma-Tadema expressed and conceptualised beauty.

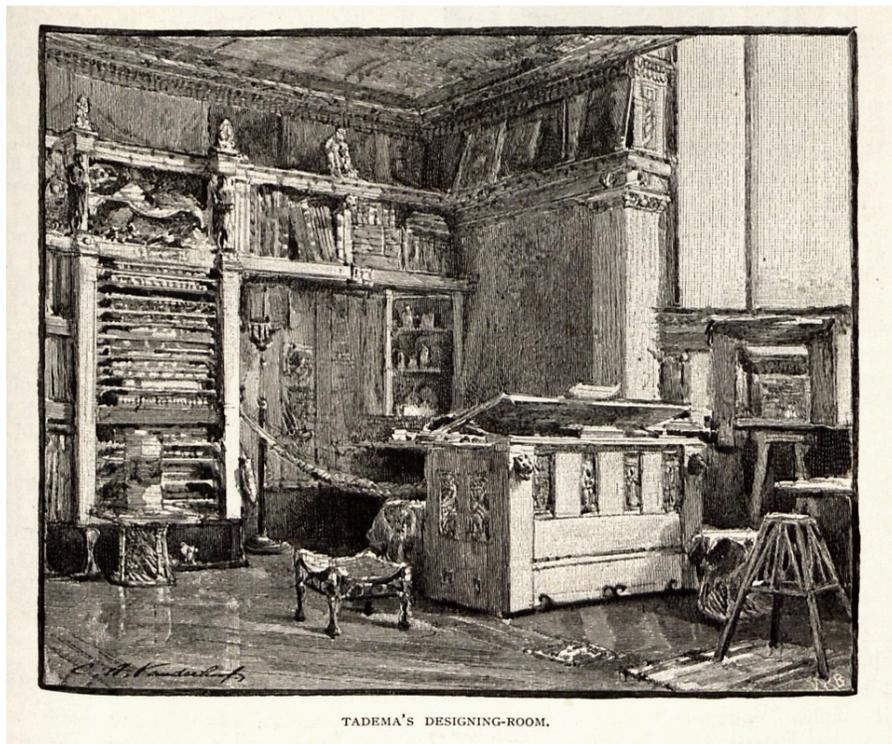
Integral to his approach and working methods was the central place accorded to archaeology in his studios and homes. In my recent study of Alma-Tadema's engagement with archaeology, four key elements were examined: his portfolios of photographs and drawings; his library; the studio props he amassed; and the interior decoration of his homes. Intimately related and dependent on each other, these aspects of his working practice testify to an intense and sustained engagement with archaeology.

From early in his career, Alma-Tadema adopted a comprehensive and systematic approach to collecting, studying, and ordering materials upon which he based his paintings of life in antiquity. In addition to his extensive collection of photographs of archaeological sites, monuments, and artefacts, he made numerous sketches of archaeological objects and copied many illustrations from key archaeological texts. Although compositional and figure studies by Alma-Tadema exist, these are far outnumbered by his drawings of archaeological materials, including architectural features, household wares, dress, hairstyles, and other "accessories". His unique archive of 164 portfolios now at the University of Birmingham's Cadbury Research Library, organised according to ancient cultures and subjects, closely informed the construction of his paintings, revealing the extent to which he immersed himself in the material world of antiquity.

Also fundamental to Alma-Tadema's preparatory work was his extensive archaeological library. Containing more than 4,000 books, excavation reports, and periodicals relating to the study of ancient civilisations, this library was widely recognised to be of great importance and had its own dedicated

rooms in Townshend House and then at Grove End Road. As with the portfolios, Alma-Tadema started to acquire archaeological books early in his career and the immense collection that he accrued testified to his serious interest in familiarising himself with major findings.

The studio props, antiquities, and collectibles in the possession of Alma-Tadema were another critical part of the suite of materials he drew upon when creating paintings. While he is well known for decorating his homes with an abundance of “beautiful things”, the extent to which Alma-Tadema paid homage to the material culture of the ancient world in his own environment also served to inform his art. Of particular note are the reproductions of antiquities he commissioned; his Egyptian stool—copied from an example in the British Museum—always remained a favourite in his studios. Indeed, it appears in the centre foreground of the highly characteristic illustration reproduced here (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4.**

Cosmo Monkhouse, Illustration of Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Studio, in "Some English Artists and Their Studios" by Cosmo Monkhouse, *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 24 (1882): 567.

Response by

**Caroline Dakers**, Professor of Cultural History at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of Arts the Arts, London

## **Alma-Tadema's Dutchness**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema was Dutch, but as soon as he married Laura Theresa Epps in 1871, he applied to Queen Victoria for the right to live in Britain for the rest of his life. He did this so that he could become a Royal Academician; he knew there was a rule that: "no foreigners are admitted members of the Academy". Three years after he became a British denizen, Alma-Tadema was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy.

Meanwhile, under her husband's tutelage, Laura adopted his Dutch artistic roots: she painted Dutch interiors and her studios in Townshend House and later Grove End Road were furnished with Dutch pieces, some of which had belonged to Alma-Tadema's mother. Alice Meynell noted: "in details of domestic life, Dutch habits, Dutch furniture, and Dutch dress ... Mrs Alma-Tadema ... has surrounded herself."<sup>2</sup> He, on the other hand, advanced rapidly within the British art establishment painting reconstructions of ancient Rome and Egypt. He became a full Royal Academician in 1879 and, on 24 May 1899, he was knighted in the Queen's birthday honours. He was the first artist from the continent to have been knighted for over a century.

A banquet at London's Hotel Metropole was organised in Alma-Tadema's honour, but by the time it took place, on 4 November, Britain was at war with the Dutch Boers in South Africa. The situation was not easy for Alma-Tadema. He had never lost his Dutch accent, and indeed, it was the subject of jokes. Comyns Carr commented, rather patronisingly, "he never acquired complete mastery over our language".<sup>3</sup> While the Dutch government remained neutral during the fighting, many Dutch people sympathised with the Boers. The sculptor Edward Onslow Ford served as master of ceremonies at the dinner and proclaimed that: "nationality in the world of art counts for very little".<sup>4</sup> The painter Henry Woods, however, commented unkindly, in private, "I wonder how many relatives Sir Tadema has in the Transvaal? I cannot make it out why he was knighted."<sup>5</sup>

By January 1900, the British were struggling against the Boers and their Maxim machine guns. J.W. Waterhouse encouraged his colleagues to donate their paintings to the Artists' War Fund Exhibition at the Guildhall Art Gallery, which would raise money for widows and the wounded. Everyone obliged, including Alma-Tadema, Poynter, Herkomer, Sargent, and even the Queen, who provided two etchings. The show was opened by her daughter, Princess

Louise. The paintings on view were auctioned by Christie's. Alma-Tadema's *A Flag of Truce*, reflecting his passionate desire for an end to the conflict, reached the highest price at £441 (Fig. 5). In it, he shows a woman, looking rather like his elder daughter, Laurence, raising a vase of white lilies beneath his studio's silvered apse.



**Figure 5.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Flag of Truce*, 1900, oil on panel, 44.5 × 22.2 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

After the relief of Mafeking on 17 May 1900, news filtered in of the terrible treatment of Boer wives and children in British concentration camps; thousands were dying of disease and malnutrition. There were no street parties when peace was finally made in 1902. Another painting of flags was completed soon after in Alma-Tadema's house, this time by his daughter Anna (Fig. 6). This contribution to the family's hall of panels is small in scale, but it nonetheless drew the attention of *The Strand Magazine*:

there is in [the painting] a conceit as beautiful as it is refined ... the lowermost flag is that of Holland, which no-one needs reminding is the country of Sir Lawrence's birth. Adorning the flag is a laurel wreath surrounding the initials LAT, and the whole world has united with the country of his birth in offering him that recognised mark of greatest distinction. <sup>6</sup>

Alma-Tadema and his daughters had all become British, yet Anna chose, here, to emphasise her father's Dutch origins, even in the aftermath of the Boer War. There is no British flag depicted in the painting.



**Figure 6.**

Anna Alma-Tadema, *Flags*, circa 1902, oil on panel, 86.7 × 12.4 cm. Private Collection, England. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

Response by

**Donato Esposito**, Independent Art Historian

## **The Place of Drawing in Alma-Tadema's Studio Practice**

Little is known of Lawrence Alma-Tadema's studio practice. Beyond his large working archive at the University of Birmingham, comparatively few drawings of any kind survive. The recent appearance of a cache of six related chalk drawings from his youth has provided new insights into Alma-Tadema's working practice, particularly in the period before his permanent move to London in 1870. In 1905, his biographer Percy Cross Standing (1870–1931) remarked on the pronounced early success of Alma-Tadema's ancient Egyptian subjects: "So careful at all times about detail, he took extraordinary care in the preparation of his preliminary sketches for these [Egyptian] pictures."<sup>7</sup>

The group of rediscovered drawings matches Standing's description of the care Alma-Tadema undertook in the preparation of these (and by extension other) early compositions. They descended through his brother-in-law Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), were later sold, and eventually came onto the art market in 2017.<sup>8</sup> They date from 1857–1858, when the artist lived in Antwerp; having brought them to London, he kept them until his death in 1912.

One of the finest works in the group is a drapery study executed in graphite on brown paper and reworked with red and white chalk; it is inscribed by the artist's daughter Anna Alma-Tadema "for the Contrary Oracle" (Fig. 7). No such subject is listed in Vern G. Swanson's *catalogue raisonné* of Alma-Tadema's paintings (1990), and it is unclear if such a work was ever begun, or if it might have been destroyed by the artist. The drawing depicts the lower half of a male figure wearing a striped tasselled garment, fastened at the waist with a large knot; an auxiliary study of a knotted piece of fabric is indicated to the left of the larger one. The verso of the sheet depicts three studies of a male figure holding a distaff. The remaining drawings in the group are drapery studies executed in the same medium.



**Figure 7.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Study of a male figure wearing a striped tasseled garment and two pieces of fabric (recto), circa 1857–1858, graphite with red and white chalk on brown paper, 31 × 19.3 cm. Private Collection.

Despite their interest as early demonstrations of his fine draughtsmanship, this intriguing group of drawings raises the thorny question of process in Alma-Tadema's studio. His impressive *oeuvre* of more than 400 paintings seems to have been developed without much recourse to preparatory drawings. This set him apart from such contemporaries as Edward John Poynter (1836–1918), who drew feverishly throughout his long career, even after he scaled down his output in the wake of administrative appointments to the Royal Academy and National Gallery in the 1890s.

Alma-Tadema's sister-in-law Ellen Gosse (1850–1929) had privileged access to his studio and observed him at work; she noted his Continental practice of producing an *ébauche* on the blank canvas (or panel), painted in a "thin oil-colour of some neutral colour", which was subsequently covered over as the

painting developed.<sup>9</sup> Occasionally an unfinished or abandoned work reveals this confident, fluid modelling in a “neutral colour”, which was typically brown or olive green. However, the question remains: did Alma-Tadema abandon his early practice of producing multiple drawn (or painted) studies? Many might have been made, but few survive.

Response by

**Carolyn Dixon**, Independent Art Historian

## **The Epps Family Screen**

When my father, Dr Toby Epps, occasionally mentioned his “French Granny”, I wish I had paid more attention. I cannot remember a single story about her, which is a pity because there she is in the centre of the Epps Family Screen, painted by Laura and Lawrence Alma-Tadema (Fig. 8). Anne Marie Camille Epps (née Linton) was the daughter of the engraver Henry Duff Linton. She became the wife of Laura Alma-Tadema’s oldest brother, Hahnemann, who appears beside her on the screen. I remember my aunt, Camille Epps, telling me how she hated holding his hand when she was about four and he was an old man. She thought his hand was like a dry bird’s claw.



### **Figure 8.**

Laura Theresa Epps (later Alma-Tadema) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, The Epps Family Screen, 1870–1871 (unfinished), oil on canvas on wood frame, six hinged panels, each 182.9 × 78.7 cm. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (W.20-1981). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

The screen is interesting in many ways. First, it is a beautiful, useful object decorated with painting and writing. Across the top in Gothic script on a gold background runs an inscription promoting family unity. Then there is the subject of the painting, the Epps family all grouped around the dining room table. The family included five daughters and three sons; two of the sons were doctors, but the oldest, my ancestor Hahnemann, worked in the cocoa

business. My father remembered as a small boy visiting the cocoa factory on the site of London's Shot Tower; in 1951, the Festival of Britain was held there. He remembered being sick on his way home because everyone had given him chocolate to eat!

From left to right on the screen are shown first the patriarch Dr George Napoleon Epps with his wife Anne Charlotte (née Bacon). Then there is a panel with two blank spaces, which I believe may have been for two of the four children of Hahnemann and his wife. Next comes a shadowy figure in black in the background; in front of the table, we see the beautifully painted back of a lady in a golden silk dress. It would be natural to suppose that Emily Epps Williams, by this time already a widow, is the one in black and Ellen (Nellie) Epps is in gold, but here the word "Emily" appears under the figure in gold.

Then comes Charles Pratt and his wife Amy (née Epps), then Louisa Hill (née Epps) holding her baby Charlotte (Lotty) with her husband Roland Hill. Next is Frances Epps (née Hall) and her husband Dr Washington Epps, then Laura in a green dress. In the background is Lawrence Alma-Tadema; the couple on the extreme right are Dr and Mrs Franklin Epps.

The screen is an early and rare example of Laura and Lawrence's collaboration. It was commenced in 1870 when her father, Dr George Napoleon Epps, refused Alma-Tadema permission to marry Laura, his seventeen-year-old daughter, who was sixteen years younger than the Dutch artist. But it was acceptable for Alma-Tadema to teach the young Laura how to paint. This enabled the couple to get to know each other better while Laura became an accomplished artist.

The Epps Family Screen remained unfinished by the time they married in 1871.

Response by

**Shelley Hales**, Senior Lecturer in Art & Visual Culture, University of Bristol

### **Reminiscences of the Roman House**

The impluvium and shrine of the atrium at Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's home at Grove End Road are perhaps typical of the frequent references to antiquity in the late nineteenth-century studio-houses of London ([Fig. 9](#)). These came at the end of a century of intense interest in the role of Pompeian domestic art and architecture as a template for design in modern life. This progressed from the interiors of the earlier century to full-scale model reconstructions (such as the Pompeii Court of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham) and painted imaginations of a lived antiquity, all of which developed alongside, and themselves helped shape, the continued excavation, publication, and reconstruction of the ancient sites.



**Figure 9.**

Nicolaas van der Waay, *The Little Courtyard at 17, Grove End Road*, circa 1890-91, brush and grey ink, grey wash, heightened with white on paper, 38 x 25.5 cm. Collection of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden (PTII-1486). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden / Collection Het Koninklijk Fries Genootschap / Conserved with support of the Wassenbergh- Clarijs-Fontein Foundation.

The appeal of exploring these influences is not to “source spot” ancient inspirations for their own sake, but to decipher how such traces were the products of a circuitous and mediated route back to antiquity. Studio-houses such as those of Leighton or Alma-Tadema helped to create a decidedly nineteenth-century antiquity that achieved acceptance through accordance with contemporary taste and claimed authenticity through visitors’ familiarity with its modern sources, which were sometimes simultaneously inspiration for, and products of, the studios. They created spaces which both validated

and were validated by those outputs. The rose petals scattered around the impluvium here, for example, evoke those that smother the emperor's guests in *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, as painted in this very house in 1888.

A particular affordance of the studio-house space is the way it takes its place among all these referents as the spot at which it becomes possible to live in rather than simply gaze at the ancient past. Further exploration shows that the authenticity of most studio-houses' engagement with the ancient domestic interior lay not in the fullness or fidelity of reconstruction, but in the way that eclectic references to different spaces and times created an ambiance around their inhabitants, whose private lives and public personae—living present and painted past—melded into one. The result is an ambiguous, heterotopic space that created an environment in which the theatrical is never simply reduced to theatre, allowing the successful performance of an inhabited antiquity and an embodied and sensorily rich lived encounter. The scent and organic nature of the petals evoke in the most immediate terms not only the process of composing the famous painting but likewise the actual Roman banquet itself. From this point of view, we might reconsider our tendency to model such spaces in purely material ways as reconstructions of a pre-existing past in order to consider them, as contemporary observers put it, as “reminiscences”: memories triggered (in fact created) in the present.

Enriching our understanding of these reminiscences becomes more pressing not only because they have inevitably shaped how our generation “remembers” antiquity, but more importantly because the same gestures of remembering through reconstructing were being practised on the “real” ruins of the Roman world at this time, literally re-remembering that past.

Response by

**Marlies Stoter**, Curator at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden

### **Antiques and Antiquities in the Studio-House: Looking for Answers**

In 1913, the furnishings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's studio-house in Grove End Road were auctioned off *in situ*. The painter's last will declared that his daughters Laurence and Anna were entitled to remove their personal belongings beforehand. An artist herself, Anna also inherited the contents of her stepmother Laura's studio. But the remainder of the lavishly furnished house had to be sold, with the proceeds going into a trust fund intended to support these two unmarried daughters for the rest of their lives.

The auction catalogue lists the Alma-Tademas' now widely dispersed belongings, which demonstrate how thoroughly Lawrence's personal life was interwoven with the creation of his studio-houses and his working methods as a painter-archaeologist. In the catalogue, for example, we find a list of Alma-Tadema's silver objects. Some were replicas of the Hildesheim Treasure of Roman silver discovered in 1868; these have been in the collection of the Fries Museum (Leeuwarden) since 1935, when Laurence donated them. One of Alma-Tadema's favourite Hildesheim items was the Hercules Bowl, which depicts the infant hero strangling serpents ([Fig. 10](#)). The artist always kept this bowl close by in his studio and depicted it many times in his paintings. (It hangs by the window in his sister-in-law's depiction of Alma-Tadema's studio in 1883, illustrated here, [Fig. 11](#)). Engraved at the bottom of the shallow bowl is TRÉSOR D'HILDESHEIM FAC-SIMILE GALVANIQUE CHRISTOFLE & CIE. Also custom-engraved there is *L Alma Tadema*. When you hold a real object like this in your hand, you start seeking answers to questions like: Why the Hildesheim Treasure? Why Christofle? Where did Alma-Tadema buy these replicas? Perhaps in Paris?



[View this illustration online](#)

**Figure 10.**

Christofle, Silver-plated electrotype replica of the Hercules Bowl (recto and verso), 21.6 cm (diameter) x 5.6 cm (depth). Collection of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden (QM08702). Digital image courtesy of Museum of Friesland, Leeuwarden.

My curiosity to learn more about Alma-Tadema's inclusion of Hildesheim replicas in his paintings from 1872 onward led to the discovery that hundreds of cast-iron versions were sold to the interested public, mostly Germans, in the years before the Parisian firm Christofle could make new and better versions through silver-plated electrotyping. While preparing an essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity*, the British scholar Alistair Grant learned that the French could supply these replicas to the South Kensington Museum just as easily as their English competitors Elkington could. Thus, Alma-Tadema, as a regular visitor to that museum, bought his expensive replicated antiquities close to home and used them again and again.

This is just one example, and there are many more on the horizon. As we locate more of the objects enumerated in the 1913 auction catalogue, it would be ideal to bring them together in a virtual world—a database to which we all could add information, and around which we could discuss issues and raise questions of mutual interest.

The Alma-Tadema project has also inspired me to consider the furnishings of the studio-house of the painter Christoffel Bisschop (1828–1904). Bisschop was an important member of The Hague School specialising in genre and historical scenes. In 1882, he and his English wife Kate Seaton Foreman Swift bought a new villa in the dunes between The Hague and Scheveningen, an area where other Hague School painters settled as well. Like their neighbours (and Alma-Tadema's cousin) Hendrik Willem Mesdag and his artist-wife Sientje,<sup>10</sup> the couple divided their time between collecting antiques and making art. The Bisschops' home became a point of interest to many visitors, including Queen Sophie of Württemberg. In their paintings, both of the Bisschops often depicted beautiful objects of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that they had collected themselves.

After Christoffel Bisschop's death, the villa's furnishings were installed in five large rooms inside the Fries Museum; this suite was opened to the public in 1914. In 2013, however, the museum moved to a new state-of-the-art building and thus had to break up the only artist's residence in the Netherlands still intact in a museum. On the positive side, this situation now



**Figure 11.**  
Emily Epps Williams ,  
The Studio,  
Townshend House,  
1883, oil on panel,  
81.28 × 16.51 cm.  
Collection of J.J.  
Fitzpatrick. Digital  
image courtesy of J.J.  
Fitzpatrick.

gives scholars an opportunity to look more closely at the objects themselves. These include the beautiful tapestries that once hung in Bisschop's studio: in 1914, the writer of a newspaper article suggested they had come from a castle in Utrecht. This is just one example of the pleasant scholarly journeys that lie ahead as we unravel the Bisschops' studio-house.

Response by

**Arnika Groenewald-Schmidt**, Assistant Curator at the Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna

### **The Hall of Panels at “Casa Tadema”: A *Liber Amicorum* on the Wall**

In 1902, Rudolph de Cordova published an illustrated article titled “The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s Hall” (Fig. 12).<sup>11</sup> It focuses on the paintings, which eventually numbered forty-five, inserted in the wainscoting of the anteroom to Alma-Tadema’s studio at 17 (now 44) Grove End Road, London. These pictures, painted by friends and family members—including such famous figures as Frederic Leighton, E.J. Poynter, and John Singer Sargent—were gifted to Lawrence and his wife Laura over more than two decades. While exchanging works was a common practice among artists, the tokens of friendship assembled in this hall were more unusual and particularly special, as each artist had responded to the challenge of a peculiar vertical format roughly 81cm in height to fit the panelling.



**Figure 12.**

Rudolph De Cordova, The Hall of Panels, 1902, in “The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s Hall” by Rudolph De Cordova, *The Strand Magazine* (December 1902): 615.

One wonders what triggered this particular project and what the ensemble might say about artistic friendships, network dynamics, and artists' self-representation. While de Cordova notes that the panels were "evidence of the esteem and affection Sir Lawrence's fellow artists entertain for him", <sup>12</sup> the critic Cosmo Monkhouse suggested in 1882 that the earliest panels were given to Laura for her studio in Townshend House, the Alma-Tademas' first London home:

In the next small room ... the panels of the door ... as well as those between the columns of the temple-like press in the corner, are being painted with landscape, each by one of the artist's friends, Mesdag, Boughton, Bastien-Lepage, etc. <sup>13</sup>

Corroborating this is Laura's watercolour *May I Come In?* (1881), which depicts a door with two painted panels including *A Scene in Drenthe* by Sientje Mesdag-van Houten, providing a *terminus ante quem* for the first works (Fig. 13). <sup>14</sup>



**Figure 13.**

Laura Alma-Tadema , *May I Come In?*, 1881, watercolour with pencil, gum arabic, and scratching out on paper, 25.1 × 16.8 cm. Private Collection, England. Digital image courtesy of Private Collection.

The wainscoting, including the semi-circular structure Monkhouse had described, was transferred to the new house in Grove End Road—nicknamed Casa Tadema—where it was again extended to allow more works to be added.<sup>15</sup> A photograph published in *The Architect* in 1889 reveals several empty spaces to the right of the fireplace, a central feature flanked by panelling presenting twelve paintings either side. The photograph illustrating de Cordova’s article suggests these were filled by 1902. According to de Cordova, “each picture was painted to fill its own particular niche in the wall of the house beautiful at St. John’s Wood where Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema lives.”<sup>16</sup> Yet photographs reveal that at least one panel, Alfred Parsons’ *Apple Blossoms*, changed position between 1889 and 1902. Further research

may reveal whether the arrangement was established primarily for aesthetic reasons or whether the renown of a given artist might have determined a more or less prominent position.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that Alma-Tadema's peers considered it a great honour to be part of his circle, probably not least because he was one of Britain's most fashionable artists. The Alma-Tademas kept open house and often entertained colleagues, friends, and clients. Due to the central position of the hall—connecting the dining room, the library, and Laura's atelier with Lawrence's studio—the panels would have been seen by all visitors, effectively creating a stage for the promotion of the artists included in this ensemble, as well as for their hosts' self-representation. Taking the Hall of Panels, its reception, and the stories behind the individual contributions as a starting point for an in-depth exploration of the Alma-Tademas and their network of friends and clients would make a valuable contribution to research on the artists, and would also provide new insights on the practice of artistic exchange.

Response by

**Charles Martindale**, Emeritus Professor of Latin, University of Bristol

### **House and Garden: A Painting by Edith Corbet**

At Bonhams London on 11 July 2012, a painting was offered for sale as “A London Garden”, with no explanation given of this title’s source ([Fig. 14](#)). It is signed “Edith Corbet” and dated 1911. Edith Corbet (née Edenborough) married two painters from the group known today as the “Etruscan” School: first, Arthur Murch; and then, Matthew Ridley Corbet, who died in 1902. The Corbets lived in St John’s Wood at 54 Circus Road—just around the corner from Casa Tadema in Grove End Road. Edith was an accomplished artist whose work was commended by the Etruscans’ leader, Nino Costa, with whom she had sketched in Italy.



**Figure 14.**

Edith Corbet, *The Garden at 17 Grove End*, (original title, if any, unknown), 1911, oil on canvas, 62.2 × 45.8 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of The Maas Gallery, London / Bridgeman Images.

At Bonhams, the painting was bought by the London dealer Rupert Maas, who subsequently identified its setting as one of Lawrence Alma-Tadema's houses, albeit the wrong one. It is, in fact, the house in Grove End Road glimpsed from the garden. We can see steps leading up to the entrance, the pool, and part of the classicizing ironwork pergola installed by the house's previous occupant, the artist James Tissot, which recalls the stone colonnade in Paris' Parc Monceau, and which features in several of his paintings and prints. The pool contains irises and reeds, the latter perhaps an echo of those in John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*—so often invoked by later artists, including J.W. Waterhouse.

I interpret this painting as an homage to Alma-Tadema's classicism, even though the brushwork is more like Waterhouse's looser style than Alma-Tadema's tighter, more precise handling. Note the three sculptures, two of them certainly classical; the bust on the post at the top of the steps may depict Alma-Tadema himself. The large central statue is the famous sculpture traditionally known as the *Cincinnatus*.

Did Corbet paint what she saw, or did she reorganize for effect? We have photographs of this spot from earlier years, as well as Nicolaas van der Waay's brush-and-ink drawing (ca. 1891), which shows the *Cincinnatus* on the left-hand post. His is a fairly small version, whereas the one in Corbet's painting looms rather large—but that could be primarily a matter of perspective.

Corbet's painting evokes a strong sense of expectancy, of something magical about to happen. How are we to interpret the figure of a young woman, half hidden in the trees at right, perhaps in classical dress? Could she evoke Laura, the artist's beloved wife, who predeceased him in 1909? Or could she be a Roman woman, a revenant like Gautier's Arria Marcella or Jensen's Gradiva, immortalized in Freud's famous essay of 1907? Some nineteenth-century scholars believed that the *Cincinnatus* was really a Hermes fastening his sandal; they included the famous archaeologist Adolf Michaelis. And one of the functions of Hermes was to guide the dead, so perhaps he is bringing this woman back to life.

If there is ambiguity, it might recall Alma-Tadema's own painting *In My Studio*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1893, which Corbet might later have seen hanging in Leighton House (Fig. 15). In that picture, we must again decide if we see a contemporary model or a figure from the classical past; indeed, the two figures are similar in costume and hairstyle. In 1910, the year before Corbet's painting, Alma-Tadema exhibited *The Voice of Spring* at the Academy, where the statue also seems almost alive—more alive in some respects than the living people (Fig. 16). There is a similar sense of expectancy, but also of sadness and loss; the young woman sitting alone on the bench has likewise been associated with the deceased Laura.



**Figure 15.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *In My Studio*, 1893, oil on canvas, 59.8 × 44.5 cm. Collection of Ann and Gordon Getty. Digital image courtesy of Ann and Gordon Getty.



**Figure 16.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Voice of Spring*, 1910, oil on panel, 48.8 × 115 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Bridgeman Images.

Response by

**Melissa Buron**, Director of the Art Division at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

## **Grove End Road: A Tale of Two Artists**

Visitors who flock to traverse the famous zebra crossing in front of the Abbey Road Studios in St John's Wood in homage to The Beatles usually walk right by a studio-house that accommodated two of Victorian London's most productive immigrant artists. Number 44 (formerly number 17) Grove End Road was home to the Frenchman James Tissot (1836–1902) and then to his Dutch-born colleague Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912). There are intriguing similarities between the lives of these artists and yet their most important point of connection is arguably the house they both inhabited.

Tissot's residence was sold after he returned to Paris following the death of his muse, model, and companion, Kathleen Newton, in 1882. For Alma-Tadema, the ghosts of Tissot and Newton may have haunted his years at Grove End Road even after he transformed it into "Casa Tadema" following extensive renovations and expansion. Despite these changes, the studio-house's interior served as a recognizable setting for many Alma-Tadema compositions (e.g. *In My Studio*, 1893), as it had previously for Tissot paintings like *Hide and Seek* (ca. 1877). The grounds featured prominently in Tissot works such as *View of the Garden at 17 Grove End* (ca. 1882), and the cast-iron colonnade around a pond (based on one in Paris' Parc Monceau) appears in compositions such as *Holiday* (ca. 1876) and *Quarrelling* (ca. 1874–1876). (Edith Corbet's atmospheric painting of the garden during Alma-Tadema's ownership is illustrated in [Charles Martindale's commentary](#).)

The lives of Tissot and Alma-Tadema share notable overlaps: born in the same year, both studied with the painter Henri Leys in Antwerp; both were foreigners in London; and both spent productive years in Grove End Road. Their respective residencies there had distinct differences, however. While Alma-Tadema hosted lavish parties with the house as a stage setting, Tissot fostered an aura of secrecy around his domestic affairs. It was rumoured salaciously by one biographer that Tissot kept Newton so sequestered at home that only the artist's friend Paul Helleu had seen her in person—by accident when he inadvertently opened the door to her room as she was undressing.<sup>17</sup> Alma-Tadema lived a respectable bohemian life as husband and father, while the bachelor Tissot cohabited out of wedlock with the divorced Newton, using her two children as models in staged scenes of domesticity.

Today, a blue plaque commemorates Lawrence Alma-Tadema's years of residence at the Grove End Road studio-house (1886-1912) (Fig. 17). A passing pedestrian might never know that Tissot once inhabited the same house, since he is not yet recognized with a corresponding commemoration. Although the building has changed dramatically in the intervening years, perhaps a new plaque will someday supplement the story of the *two* artists who lived consecutive creative lives in Grove End Road.



**Figure 17.**

English Heritage, SIR LAWRENCE ALMA-TADEMA O.M. 1836-1912 Painter lived here 1886-1912, ceramic, blue plaque erected by English Heritage in 1975 at 44 Grove End Road, St John's Wood, London, NW8 9NE, City of Westminster. Digital image courtesy of Peter Trippi

Response by

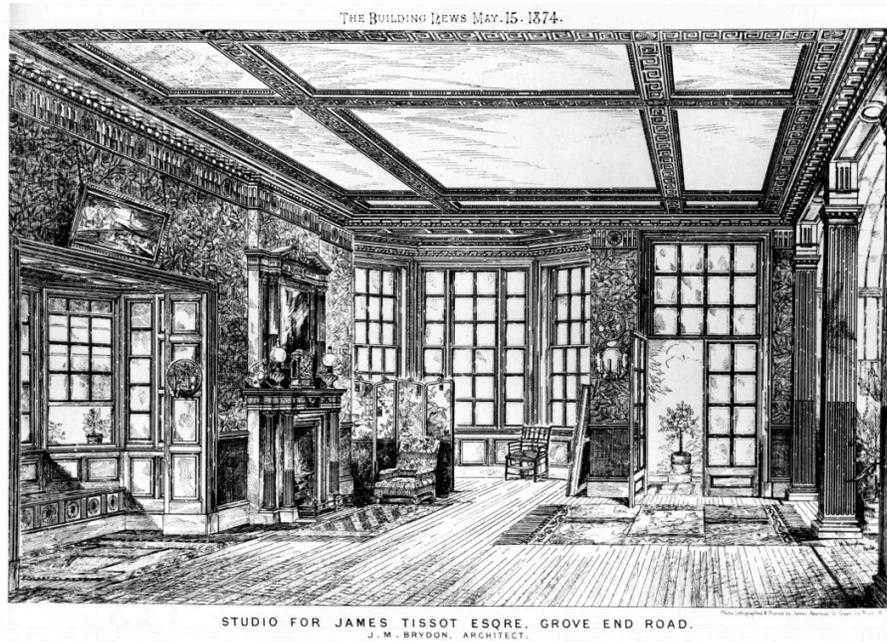
**Krystyna Matyjaszkiewicz**, Independent Art Historian and Curator

### **James Tissot's Studio-Houses**

For some years, I have been researching the work of the anglophile French artist James Tissot (1836-1902), who created a succession of studio-houses. His homes and collections were an inspiration for, and the subject of, many of his images.

In Paris, Tissot had a small English-style villa, located off the Avenue de l'Impératrice (now Avenue Foch), with a comparatively modest conservatory and garden. The house no longer exists but parts of it were used by Tissot as settings for his pictures. In them, we are able to see room interiors, furniture, and fittings, including newly imported items from Japan and China, as well as eighteenth-century European pieces.

When Tissot settled in London after the Franco-Prussian War, his house and garden at 17 Grove End Road, St John's Wood, were equally conducive to work. The paintings created there provide so much detail that the art historian Mireille Galinou and the illustrator Stephen Conlin have reconstructed how the house and gardens looked before and after the artist's additions. The latter included a large studio and conservatory extension, designed by the Scottish architect John McKean Brydon, and various plantings, trellises, and colonnades outdoors (Figs. [18](#) and [19](#)).



**Figure 18.**

John McKean Brydon, Studio for James Tissot Esq., Grove End Road, in *Building News*, 15 May 1874, 526.



**Figure 19.**

James Tissot, *Afternoon Tea (or In the Conservatory)*, circa 1874, oil on canvas, 38.4 x 51.1 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Christie's Images.

Tissot's Paris home had been modelled externally on "English villas", but inside it was fitted out in French style. Some French elements were then echoed in the London house, including French windows and the plantings and colonnaded pool of Paris' Parc Monceau. In these ways, each house became a "home-from-home" of favourite things from the other side of the Channel. In building his London studio, Tissot also took the opportunity to incorporate a favourite English element: a bay window modelled on ones seen in Thames-side taverns, providing the artist with a much-loved picture setting on his own doorstep. Lawrence Alma-Tadema, the house's next owner, relocated this bay window when he had the building greatly enlarged between 1883 and 1886. Traces of Tissot's interior fittings can be seen in some of Laura Alma-Tadema's paintings. His plant-filled conservatory remained, just inside the Alma-Tademas' new entrance, and the garden spaces stayed as Tissot had left them. (For details on the latter, see [Charles Martindale's contribution](#).)

There is still much to be explored relating to the spaces Tissot depicted, his choices of setting and props, and his working practices in the various studios. We know, for example, that he used the additional garden studio he built at Grove End Road to prepare and print his etchings, and we can speculate that he also made his cloisonné enamels there. After Tissot's return to Paris in 1882, and during his subsequent visits to the Holy Land, we have descriptions of how Tissot worked on illustrating the life of Christ. His illustrations for the Old Testament, uncompleted at his death, were partly done in Tissot's final studio, again designed by Brydon, at the Château de Buillon, the artist's country house near Besançon in south-eastern France. His additions there were in a rustic "English cottage" style, including the gardens that were barely established when Tissot died there suddenly in 1902.

Response by

**Madeline Boden**, Doctoral Candidate in the History of Art Department,  
University of York

### **Leighton House: Private Collection and Public Display**

Upon completion of the Arab Hall in 1878, journalists were invited to Leighton's studio-house to marvel at this "remarkable museum", where a visitor could "study Orientalism and become infused with the best influences of Eastern art and decoration."<sup>18</sup> As the writers moved beyond the Arab Hall into different rooms, their commentaries reveal a tangible appreciation for the sheer number of Eastern "things" displayed across the house—ceramics, tiles, bronzes, textiles, and carpets—an appreciation impossible today for one simple, frustrating reason: the original collection was broken up and sold off after Leighton's death in 1896, and much of its inventory remains untraced. The dispersal of this collection has obscured the fact that Leighton collected prodigiously during his trips to Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and Algeria. A crucial visual element of Leighton House has been lost because we are not able to see this multitude of objects *in situ*.

However, by tracing and reimagining many of these objects back into the house through use of the 1896 Christie's auction catalogue and museum records, we can see parallels emerging that reveal Leighton House as a key site in the network of artists' studio-houses across London. It was, moreover, on a par with the national museums and private collections that were, at this same moment, forming Britain's finest Eastern ceramic collections.

Previous interpretations of Leighton's studio-house have assumed that it conforms to the allegiance to Far Eastern (Japanese and Chinese) objects traditionally associated with Aestheticism and the House Beautiful. To see Leighton's collection, instead, in the light of his travels in the Near East and North Africa can therefore transform our understanding of his interior design. This new perspective draws on Mary Roberts' very persuasive idea of networked objects, which traces "the mobility of art works across cultural boundaries".<sup>19</sup> Bought and brought back across land and sea, these objects were transformed and recontextualised as they travelled; their identity remained both unstable and contested during their time at Leighton House.



**Figure 20.**

No. 34 - The Staircase, in *The Life and Work of Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton, Bart* edited by Mrs A. [Leonora] Lang (London: Art Journal Office, 26, 1886).

For a brief time in 1885, when he loaned them to a public exhibition at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, Leighton's ceramics were co-opted into the narratives of display and interpretation that national museums and private collectors were formulating around Near Eastern art. Leighton's ceramics were displayed for the first time with labels, written by fellow artist and traveller Henry Wallis, that designated them as "Rhodian", "Iznik", and "Persian"—all terms with contested definitions being debated through the texts written by the lenders to such exhibitions. Leighton's objects, while in his studio-house, eschewed the taxonomic impulse: his alternative mode of presentation there integrated the collection as a curated studio-house display, inexorably tying it to the domestic interior (Fig. 20).

How does Leighton's engagement in the emerging popularity of collecting Eastern ceramics change our view of his house? Most obviously, and maybe in keeping with the Alma-Tademas' project, Leighton House was not only a space where works of art were created but where works (importantly, not paintings) by non-British artists were displayed. The collection also allowed

Leighton to express a different side of his cosmopolitanism—that of the artist-traveller and adventurer akin to Captain Richard Burton or Austen Henry Layard, thereby implicating his Aestheticism in a previously unaccounted-for Imperial mode. Most interesting, perhaps, is the way in which the studio-house is opened up in far more global ways.

Response by

**Stephen Calloway**, Art Historian and Exhibitions Curator

## **Rossetti at Tudor House**

Dante Gabriel Rossetti first took an interest in interior decoration while he occupied rooms at Chatham Place in Blackfriars. In a letter, he described and sketched an ambitious design for wallpaper:

I shall have it printed on common brown packing paper and on blue grocer's paper, to try which is best. The trees are to stand the whole height of the room, the stems and fruit will be Venetian red—the leaves black. The effect of the whole will be rather sombre but I think rich also. <sup>20</sup>

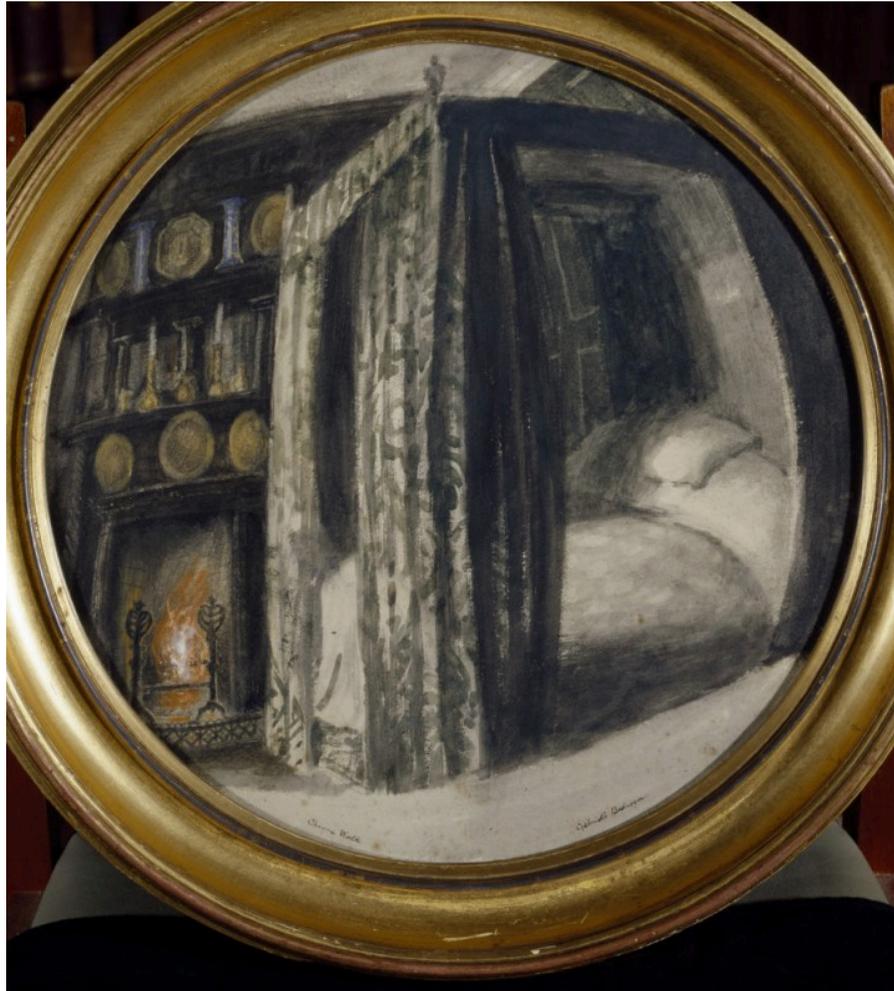
Rossetti was also involved with William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones in creating “medieval” painted chairs and cabinets for their Red Lion Square rooms and in the more fully realized schemes of furnishings for Morris's Red House. These enthusiasms found a more commercial expression in the friends' collaboration as “art workmen” in “The Firm” (the company Morris & Co.).

Following his wife Elizabeth Siddal's death in 1862, Rossetti leased Tudor House on Cheyne Walk in Chelsea, intending to share it with his brother William Michael, the writer Algernon Swinburne, and the writer George Meredith, who described it as “a strange, quaint, grand old place, with an immense garden, magnificent panelled staircases and rooms—a palace.” <sup>21</sup> Rossetti began to decorate the house, painting the panelling in rich blues and greens (prophetic of “Aesthetic” taste) and filling the rooms with highly miscellaneous collections of old furniture, pictures, china, and other objects.

Henry Treffry Dunn, who became Rossetti's studio assistant, described his first sight of the artist's bedroom:

I thought it a most unhealthy place to sleep in. Thick curtains, heavy with crewel work in designs of print and foliage [sic] hung closely drawn round an antiquated four-poster bedstead. This he had bought out of an old furniture shop somewhere in the slums of Lambeth (if not a dealer's make-up it certainly looked old enough to belong to the period). A massive panelled oak mantelpiece reached from the floor to the ceiling, fitted up with

numerous shelves and cupboard-like recesses, all filled with a medley assortment of brass repoussé dishes, blue china vases filled with peacock feathers, oddly-fashioned early English and foreign candlesticks, Chinese monstrosities in bronze, and various other curiosities. <sup>22</sup>



**Figure 21.**

Henry Treffry Dunn, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Bedroom at Tudor House, 16 Cheyne Walk, 1872, watercolour on paper, 33.5 cm (diameter). Collection of Wightwick Manor, West Midlands, National Trust (NT 1287978). Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images.

Some visual evidence survives. Illustrated here is Dunn's watercolour study (Fig. 21); it shows the bedroom mantelpiece reflected in a convex mirror and was apparently made in preparation for painting the similar reflection in a convex mirror seen in Rossetti's painting *La Bella Mano* of 1875. Dunn's more famous interior views of Tudor House were painted in 1882 as records immediately before its contents were dispersed at auction following

Rossetti's death. The sale catalogue for that dispersal provides crucial documentation of Rossetti's collection and today some objects with established (or reputed) Tudor House provenance can be identified.

After Rossetti's breakdown in the mid-1870s, few people outside his immediate circle visited Tudor House, yet its fame continued to grow. His taste in furnishings and, in particular, his combination of objects from different periods and cultures was influential and much imitated among the Aesthetes. In his Rossetti monograph (1895), Marillier explained it thus:

Rossetti in spite of his entire indifference to the outside public, had a wonderful way of infecting it with his own predilections and taste. ... He had borne a leading share in the Morris decorative movement; and now he was destined to pave the way for the modern craze for old oak furniture and blue china. Bric-à-brac was not of much account in England when Rossetti first began rummaging the dealers' shops ... it was a purely original idea in those days to buy up old furniture for use, and to enrich the walls of a house with ... treasures from Japan. Those who follow the fashion today do it in many cases vulgarly and unintelligently, turning their houses into museums of costly and incongruous objects. So far as decoration went Rossetti knew to a hairbreadth what would harmonise and what would not ... his judgment was a touchstone. <sup>23</sup>

Response by

**Barbara Bryant**, Independent Art Historian and Consultant Curator

## **Artists on Display**

Celebrity artists of the later Victorian era required statement residences to conduct their careers and their lives; their studio-houses are a cultural phenomenon that merits investigation from diverse perspectives using a range of resources. Reconstructing and reimagining lost houses can be achieved with historical evidence including architectural drawings, archival photographs, illustrations, and descriptions in the contemporary periodical press. The afterlives of these multifaceted buildings offer compelling evidence of artistic legacies and changes in taste.

In 1874, when George Frederic Watts commissioned the architect Frederick Pepys Cockerell to construct a studio-house in Melbury Road, Holland Park, he did so to promote his career and to keep pace with his artist friends Frederic Leighton and Valentine Prinsep living nearby. After enjoying success at the inaugural Grosvenor Gallery exhibition, then at a one-man show with another planned, Watts decided to expand his studio-house in 1881: he employed Leighton's architect George Aitchison to add a large picture gallery, which he intended to open to the public.

The image of Watts illustrated here appeared in the lavish volume *Artists at Home* (1884), which contained photographs by J.P. Mayall and text by F.G. Stephens (Fig. 22).<sup>24</sup> Quite rightly this image has become synonymous with the artist and his aspirations, but having become overfamiliar, it now needs unpacking and contextualizing. With Watts's studio-house no longer extant, investigating its physical set-up has required close study of the relevant primary sources. In its final incarnation, the house contained studios for painting and for sculpture, as well as the glass-roofed gallery with dark vermilion red walls.



[View this illustration online](#)

**Figure 22.**

Photogravure after J.P. Mayall's photograph, G.F. Watts in the Little Holland House Gallery, in F.G. Stephens (ed.), *Artists at Home* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884). Digital image courtesy of Watts Gallery Archive.

Its architectural plan reveals a route for visitors from the front entrance directly into the gallery, thus ensuring its separation from the house's domestic areas and workspaces. Watts carefully controlled—one might say curated—the display of his own art from the 1880s onwards. The varied hang implied the totality of his output, while the inclusion of oil sketches and unfinished works helped viewers follow his process, underscoring the notion of an artist as a creator, or even as a genius, at work. This gallery became the key to Watts' status, functioning as a stage for his performance as an artist, a place where he constructed his self-image. No other artist in London had a comparable arrangement.

Other artists' studio-houses of the period embodied related themes of display, celebrity, and self-fashioning. Leighton acquired and carefully arranged his collection of historical and contemporary artworks<sup>25</sup> within what Jason Edwards has called this artist's "encrypted environment".<sup>26</sup> Designed by Richard Norman Shaw, Frank Holl's *Three Gables* (1882) is no longer extant,<sup>27</sup> another victim of the lack of regard for Victorian architecture in the mid-twentieth century. Fortunately, a wealth of material, including Shaw's beautiful architectural drawings, show the exterior and interior of the house, revealing it as a place of work and sociability. Finally,

Mortimer Menpes' Japanese-themed house in Sloane Square, Chelsea, was a bizarre example of one artist staging Japonisme as a professional and lifestyle choice in London during the 1890s. <sup>28</sup>

Response by

**Kate Nichols**, Birmingham Fellow in the Department of Art History, Curating and Visual Studies, University of Birmingham

### **Animals in the Studio-House**

“Workshop” is an exceedingly applicable name for the studio which has seen the birth of many of Mr Riviere’s pictures. It may at once be said that it is not the studio of a Leighton or an Alma Tadema. The floor is utterly devoid of luxurious and costly carpets and rugs. Dogs and horses, sheep and pigs, are not calculated to improve the quality of an expensive carpet, or add to its lasting capabilities. The floor is elaborately decorated with scratches from many a dog’s paw and horse’s hoof. <sup>29</sup>



**Figure 23.**

After Frank Dudman for J.P. Mayall, Briton Riviere, photograph, in F.G. Stephens (ed.), *Artists at Home* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884), plate 20, photogravure, 1883, 21.6 × 16.4 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery (NPG Ax27831). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.

The animal painter Briton Riviere's London studio was consistently characterised as austere and distinct from those of his non-animal painting contemporaries, and the destructive capabilities of his non-human models were a regular feature of discussion. Located at 82 Finchley Road, his house also contained a more conventional area where Riviere posed as painter in the photographs that illustrated these articles (Fig. 23), as well as a straw-bedded stable zone for his models, sadly never shown in the photographic record. Yet even without the straw-strewn floor, the more presentable end of Riviere's studio visible here is distinct from those of his artistic colleagues, with its disembodied animal skins and skeletons.

The absent animal modelling area dovetails with my own research into absences in artists' studio-houses. To what extent is it possible to uncover the agency of artists' models in general—and animal models in particular? How did these actors assert their presence? Riviere's animal subjects are said to have physically impacted upon the studio, their living, stamping, scratching, and defecating bodies reshaping the visual and olfactory experience of a studio-house. <sup>30</sup>

Riviere's studio, however, was just a small part of his process, for he painted only domestic animals there. Famously, he sketched more exotic species at London Zoo, which was in walking distance of his studio-house. Some of these animals did eventually enter his studio as cadavers to be dissected, articulated, and used for anatomical study—as shown in this photograph.

Many of these animals had arrived in London as by-products of imperial endeavour, and my research into animals in studios is part of a broader project that explores the global and specifically imperial contexts of the making and reception of nineteenth-century painting. Natasha Eaton has considered how the presence of pigments on an artist's palette, as she puts it, "raw and rare substances from across the globe that wait to be transformed ... invites us to think through imperial networks and their coming together, their assemblage as paint to be (re)mixed." <sup>31</sup> Similarly, the nineteenth-century studio-house was a metropolitan crucible where not just the local and global materials of art might come together, but also where the domestic and exotic flora and fauna of Britain and its empire were assembled and rendered anew on canvas or in clay.

Response by

**Melanie Polledri**, Doctoral Candidate in the History of Art Department,  
University of York

### **Framing Networks: The Artist's Studio**



**Figure 24.**

Bedford Lemere & Co., London, William Goscombe John in his upper studio, St John's Wood, London, date unknown, photograph. Digital image courtesy of National Museum Wales, Cardiff.

Taken during 1930s, Bedford Lemere & Co.'s photograph encourages us to consider the extent of the Welsh-born New Sculptor William Goscombe John's networks—as a Royal Academician, as a patriotic Welshman, and as a son of the British Empire (Fig. 24). It shows John sitting crossed-legged, nonchalantly reading a book in his upper studio. Devoid of any workman-like paraphernalia, which was confined to his workshop below, this hallowed space was reserved for the hosting of auspicious events, such as the John family's musical evenings attended by the great and the good of St John's Wood, London, and farther afield. Presenting the ageing sculptor centre stage, surrounded by art objects that span the Empire, the photograph charts John's fifty-year career, mapping his networks from Paris, Rodin, and the promotion of sculptural modernisms at the National Museum Cardiff, to wider debates on centre-periphery and artist-artisan.

Through John, these objects evoke Bruno Latour's non-human "actants", as they articulate and disseminate specific national and international knowledge, politics, and power relations.<sup>32</sup> To pick just a few, John's *The Elf* (1898, at far right in the photograph here), deposited as his Diploma work at the Royal Academy upon election as a Royal Academician, connects him to English, Welsh, and Scottish art institutions. The *Drummer Boy*, a statuette-sized model from the King's Regiment monument in Liverpool (1904, left of *The Elf*) connects John with the South African Wars, the Belgian Congo, Empire, and Welsh nationalism, as well as the soap magnate, William Hesketh Lever and the ethnographic sculptor Herbert Ward. Of the two equestrian models, the *Tredegar Monument* (1906–1910, centre), a launch pad for works such as the *Viscount Minto* (left of the *Drummer Boy*), takes John on an imperial journey from Cardiff via London to Calcutta. The *St John the Baptist* (1894, centre) forges links to Rodin, Paris, and the Marquess of Bute's homes at Cardiff Castle and Regent's Park. Alfred Gilbert's prominently placed *Icarus* (far left) and *Head of Girl* (left of *Viscount Minto*, both 1884), reflect Parisian and Renaissance influences, and tie John to the New Sculpture scene in London. Juxtapositional relationships also emerge: John's *Boy Scout* (1910, centre right), while formally mirroring Gilbert's *Icarus*, evokes Empire, the First World War, and Wales. Alluding to John's homoerotic sensitivities, the *Boy Scout* partially obscures John Singer Sargent's watercolour of a reclining male nude (ca. 1900).<sup>33</sup> These, as part of a central subgroup, including John, the *Tredegar Monument*, and the *St John*, contribute to debates on imperial masculinities.

Within this interior, these art-historical and geo-political landscapes are drawn centripetally to John. The transnational and global become local; objects, locations, and geographies—as sites for production, exhibition, and representation—are brought together within one imperial frame at the heart of Empire.<sup>34</sup> Yet, simultaneously, they radiate centrifugally outwards beyond these boundaries. In untangling such interwoven connections, new relationships emerge that help us consider the broader implications of late nineteenth-century imperial networking practices that connected people, places, and institutions.

Response by

**Jason Edwards**, Professor of Art History, University of York

### **Eternal Treblinka? The Unaesthetic Interior, or, Turner's Cats**

William Leighton Leitch provided a suggestive account of Turner's studio-house in Queen Anne Street, London, after he visited it in the mid-1840s, paying particular attention to the resident cats. Lost in a reverie, Leitch recalled suddenly "feeling something warm and soft" moving across the back of his neck and shoulders, and, turning his head, he found a "most peculiarly ugly", "dirty whitish", "broad-faced cat", with its "fur sticking out", and whose "pinky" eyes "glared and glimmered" at Leitch in an "unearthly manner". Leitch put up his hand to "shove the creature away", and, in so doing, let his umbrella fall, startling four or five other cats, by then moving about his legs in an "alarming way". Leitch "did not like the thing at all", so picked up his umbrella and made for the door, quickly getting to the foot of the stairs. On looking back, he saw a number of cats at the top glaring at him, every one "without a tail". <sup>35</sup>

That Turner owned Manx cats is a perhaps surprising thing to draw attention to in an essay on artists' studio-houses (Fig. 25). But the way Turner prioritized his cats should give us pause for thought. After all, Leitch also documented that Turner's *Fishing upon the Blythe-Sand* (1809) was not well "looked after", and "served as the blind to a window that was the private *entrée* of the painter's favourite cat, who one day, indignant at finding" it in her way, "left the autograph of her 'Ten Commandments'" on it. <sup>36</sup> Whilst Leitch was appalled, Turner did not mind the cat's scratching or spraying, saying to his housekeeper, "Oh, never mind". His lack of irritation encourages us to rethink Victorian studio-houses in more *humanamimal*, rather than *anthropocentric* terms. After all, Turner not only had cats, and frequently depicted animals in his pictures, but self-consciously employed whale oil and beeswax in his paint, and used brushes made of hog-, badger-, and horse-hair. Whilst such "raw" animal materials are the conventional stuff of a painter's trade, Turner's cats, and the birds who flew in through the skylight and took up residence in the studio, inspire us to think about questions of artistic/animalistic co-agency. If the pigeons crapped involuntarily on the canvases, the cats knew what they were doing when they scratched or scented the pictures, and Turner did not mind, or relished, their cooperation.



**Figure 25.**

Joseph Mallord William Turner , Study of a Sleeping Cat, circa 1796-1797, chalk and watercolour on paper. 23.8 × 27.8 cm. Collection Tate, London (D40247). Digital image courtesy of Tate Images.

In this moment of unprecedented extinction, we need to pay more attention to the ghosts of animals littered across art history, and to crediting their co-agency. Otherwise we will be even more guilty, than we are already, of contributing to the “eternal Treblinka” going on around us, every day. <sup>37</sup>

Response by

**Joanna Banham**, Director, Victorian Society Summer School

## **The Studio and Bohemia**

*The Portrait* (1880) was painted by Dewey Bates (1851–1898), a little-known and only moderately successful artist who was born in Philadelphia, studied in Antwerp and Paris, and settled in England in 1878 (Fig. 26). His depiction of a comparatively modest painting room provides a useful counterpoint to the opulence characteristic of wealthy Victorian artists' "Show Studios". More significantly, this representation of artful disarray relates to contemporary literary and visual narratives about artists and Bohemia.



### **Figure 26.**

Dewey Bates, *The Portrait*, 1880, watercolour on paper, 22.9 × 33 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Peter Nahum, Leicester Galleries.

The domestic character of Bates' interior reminds us that most artists adapted rooms in houses as their studios; the inspiration for this scene may well have come from Bates' own workspace. He rented several accommodations during his first years in London, all in Fitzrovia and Bloomsbury, areas affording cheap rents and thus popular with artists. Or this interior may have been based on an upstairs room in the detached villa in Streatham where Bates lodged between 1879 and 1881.

Yet it would be naïve to imagine that this interior has not been assembled carefully: it contains a plethora of objects emphasising its owner's affiliation with the fashionable aesthetic style. Japanese influences are especially prominent in the painted screen, prints, and De Morgan-esque tiles set into the fireplace. The luxurious textile draped over the easel, the richly embroidered cushion, and the reproduction of Giambologna's *Mercury* are equally striking signifiers of refined artistic taste. The tools of the painter's profession are also much in evidence: the easel, palette on the wall, colours on the floor, brushes and sketches on the table, and many paintings propped against walls. A particularly intriguing feature at far right is the framed painting standing on its side—a miniature replica of *The Portrait* itself.

By 1880, similar Japanese and aesthetic accessories were routinely associated with artistic interiors and appeared in images of studios belonging to, for example, Alma-Tadema, Tissot, Eakins, and Chase. But the influence of the artistic milieu of Paris, where Bates had trained, and of the proliferating literary narratives about artists and Bohemia were arguably more significant. These two strands came together in fictional accounts like Du Maurier's *Tilby* (1890), which echoed the formula of social, sexual, and creative freedom first established in Henri Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1850). Thereafter, countless novels described the lives of tortured geniuses indifferent to convention; studios that were the antithesis of ordered domestic taste became a cliché of the genre.

Finally, *The Portrait* can be read as a commentary on class, gender, and the act of looking. The room is modest and untidy but not impoverished or squalid. The champagne bottle, playing cards, and long-stemmed pipe denote a bachelor Bohemianism, but the invitations on the mantelpiece suggest an existence by no means outside the realms of feminine and fashionable society. The costly and exotic objects, artfully strewn around the room, reveal the artist's refinement, not his disregard for beauty. And, despite the many signifiers of masculinity, the interior appears both decorative and feminine, not least due to the prominence given to the elegantly dressed woman scrutinising another woman in the portrait on the easel. Women in depictions of studios were usually models, often half-dressed, displayed for the artist's and viewers' inspection. Bates' painting presents a refreshing reversal of these roles. His sitter is the social equal—perhaps the superior—of the artist, her face is turned away, and it is she who is engaged in looking at—maybe judging—the artist's skills.

Response by

**Jan Dirk Baetens**, Assistant Professor, Radboud University Nijmegen

***Come Dine Without Me: The Dining Room in the House of Henri Leys* by Henri De Braekeleer (1869)**

In 1869, the Belgian Henri De Braekeleer made a painting of the dining room of his uncle and teacher (and Alma-Tadema's former teacher), the celebrated history and historical genre painter Henri Leys (1815–1869) (Fig. 27).<sup>38</sup> It was commissioned by Leys' close friend and dealer Gustave Coûteaux following his unexpected death a few months earlier. Coûteaux may have seen it as a tribute, but he undoubtedly also recognised its commercial potential. This room was famous for its historicising murals executed by Leys himself in the late 1850s and early 1860s. It had long attracted artists, critics, and other admirers from across Europe and would continue to do so. A few years before Leys' death, the powerful Anglo-Belgian dealer Ernest Gambart had joined with the French publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis to finance a series of etchings by Félix Bracquemond after the murals.<sup>39</sup> Only one etching was completed, but Gambart managed to buy a set of five replicas of the murals, made by Leys himself, which he then exhibited for sale at his London gallery.<sup>40</sup> Photographs of some of the replicas had also been published by the Parisian entrepreneur Louis Martinet, while the Belgian photographer Edmond Fierlants sold them in various formats.<sup>41</sup>



**Figure 27.**

Henri De Braekeleer, *The Dining Room in the House of Henri Leys*, 1869, oil on canvas, 67 × 84 cm. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp (1358). Digital image courtesy of The Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp / Photo: Hugo Maertens

De Braekeleer painted what initially seems to be a faithful, almost photographic, depiction. Not unexpectedly, it draws attention to the historicising decor and especially the murals, which take up roughly one-third of the composition. Yet there is more here than meets the eye. Although little happens in De Braekeleer's *œuvre* of hushed interiors, they often seem to evoke another dimension, perhaps some mysterious haunting presence, or a life they lead on their own. As Alison Hokanson has explained, De Braekeleer's interiors, including this one, seem to anticipate symbolist notions that would gain currency in Belgian avant-garde circles only in the 1880s and 1890s, especially in the work of Xavier Mellery.<sup>42</sup> In particular, his scenes indicate a remarkably early interest in the symbolist idea of "the soul of things", the ungraspable spirit of inanimate objects, including the interiors such objects adorn, formed by memories of the humans who occupied them.

*The Dining Room in the House of Henri Leys* is also a very personal tribute from De Braekeleer to his mentor. As such, it is a meditation on the (im)possibility of bringing the past back to life, as Leys' historicising art had once done. The murals in Leys' dining room are a good example. They show the preparations for a feast in a sixteenth-century city, with people walking to the festivities, calling at their host's house, and being greeted by him and

his family. Yet the feast itself is not depicted, and its absence implicitly invites Leys' own guests to bring the narrative to a close in modern time: to participate in the invisible feast in his sixteenth-century-styled room. Thus, the past could actually be recovered in one's lived experience.<sup>43</sup>

Such a resurrection is no longer possible in De Braekeleer's painting. The dining room is abandoned; the skewed perspective seems to elongate it, emphasising the emptiness. Absence is underscored by suggestions of recent human activity: the table's casters indicate it has just been moved to the left. Pushed against the walls, the chairs are strikingly empty. What remains are the whispering ghosts in Leys' murals, though there too the impossibility of bringing back the past is stressed. Leys portrayed himself and his family above the fireplace at far left in De Braekeleer's painting. De Braekeleer, however, framed his scene in such a way that they are just outside the composition: even in paint, Leys cannot be brought back. Coûteaux, upon seeing this painting or a sketch for it, instructed De Braekeleer to add one or more figures, but the artist apparently declined or could not comply.<sup>44</sup> Absence, it seems, was essential in this painting.

*The Dining Room*, then, is not a mere document, but a complex work of art that can be considered a commercial venture, a proto-symbolist scene, and a personal mourning. Many nineteenth-century representations of artists' studio-houses are cherished primarily for their documentary value. Only rarely do we take them as significant works of art in their own right. De Braekeleer's scene perhaps suggests that we should do so more often.

Response by

**Morna O'Neill**, Associate Professor of Art History, Art Department, Wake Forest University

### **Edwardian *Homage: The Artist's Studio and the Art Dealer***

In 1909, the Irish artist William Orpen commemorated a gathering of friends with this painting, *Homage to Manet* (Fig. 28). Six men sit or stand around a table ready for tea, posed beneath a painting by the French Impressionist artist Edouard Manet, his 1870 portrait of his student Eva Gonzalès. The group includes Orpen's fellow artists Philip Wilson Steer, seated at the table below the painting, and Walter Sickert, standing off to the right. They are joined by the artist and influential art teacher Henry Tonks, the art critic and curator D.S. MacColl, and the Irish novelist and art critic George Moore. They listen as Moore reads from his *Reminiscences of Impressionist Painters* (1906), which recounted his youthful friendships in Paris, especially with Manet. The one who listens most intently, hand to his head in concentration, is the one who made this homage possible: the art dealer, collector, and philanthropist Hugh Lane. He purchased the painting in 1906 from the Parisian art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel and loaned it to Orpen to hang in his studio.



**Figure 28.**

William Orpen, *Homage to Manet*, 1909, oil on canvas, 162.9 × 130 cm. Collection Manchester Art Gallery (1910.9). Digital image courtesy of Manchester City Galleries / Bridgeman Images.

The physical space of *Homage* is that of Orpen's own studio in South Bolton Gardens, Kensington, where he worked between 1906 and his death in 1931. Lane lived in the rooms below Orpen's studio from 1906 to 1909. An air of easy familiarity with masterpieces is evident in Orpen's painting: the Manet presides over comfortably upholstered furnishings, a casually discarded hat and gloves, and the table set for tea. Orpen's painting treats Manet's portrait as part of an ensemble in the same way that interior design displays paintings in relation to decorative and functional objects—it is this kind of associative property of the artist's studio that Theodor Adorno highlights in his essay "Valéry Proust Museum". The studio is the place of art's immediacy, where it is protected from the "barbarity" of the museum. <sup>45</sup>

Recent scholarship has turned to the domestic interior as a generative site for cultural meaning, addressing the ways in which the decoration of the private interior was a means of formulating the public self.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, the combination of public business and private life in the formulation “artist’s studio-home” contradicts the prevailing interpretation of the domestic interior as a retreat from the public self. Walter Benjamin, for one, opposed the office and the drawing room. While the office was “reality”, the domestic interior was a “phantasmagoria”, the realistic illusion of another world, another state of being: “the private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions” that his life can escape commodity culture and the marketplace.<sup>47</sup> Recent scholarship has returned to Benjamin’s insight to address the role of the domestic interior in the construction of masculinity even as it has reiterated his central claim: the domestic interior is a retreat from the world of work for the modern man.<sup>48</sup> Yet the artist in his studio-home made “the illusion” of the domestic interior central to his business.

Response by

**Caroline van Eck**, Professor of Art History and Director of Studies at King's College, University of Cambridge

### **The Wiertz Museum, Brussels**

In 1851, when he was forty-five, the painter Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865) obtained from the Belgian government a large house and studio in Brussels in which to live and work. By this time, Wiertz seemed to have a great future behind him. Born to poor parents, his artistic talents had been discovered while he was in his teens, and in 1821, he obtained a stipend from King William I of the Netherlands to study at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. In 1832, Wiertz won the Prix de Rome, which enabled him to spend three years in that city. The major work he produced there, the colossal *The Greeks and Trojans Fighting over the Corpse of Patroclus* (1836), was refused for the Paris Salon of 1838 and was greeted elsewhere only with ridicule.

Upon his return to Brussels, Wiertz developed several highly original strategies to transform this failure into triumph. Establishing his own museum was central to this plan. He embarked on a systematic series of emulations of historical painters (Rubens, Michelangelo) and genres (altarpieces, portraits, historical scenes, heroic and allegorical sculpture). As Wiertz put it in his autobiography: “Peintre, il avait pris Rubens pour émule, sculpteur, il veut s’attaquer au Laocoon” [“As a painter, he decided to emulate Rubens, as a sculptor he wanted to take on the Laocoon”].<sup>49</sup> After his failure at the Paris Salon, he refused to compete for commercial success in the usual way: rather than selling his works, he displayed them in his studio-museum. Thus, this space became the means through which Wiertz could achieve several aims at the same time. First, to establish himself as his country’s leading artist, an ambition which the government of the recently formed Kingdom of the Belgians supported wholeheartedly. Second, to avoid having to deal with the art trade, the public, or the Brussels and Paris Salons, all of which he professed to despise equally; instead, he sought to control his own image and critical fortunes. And finally, to offer tangible proof of his conviction that Brussels, not Paris, was the centre of the artistic world: “Bruxelles capitale, Paris province”, as he put it in one of his manifestos.

Wiertz left his museum to the Belgian state on condition that the building and collections would never be changed (Fig. 29). It remains open to the public, displaying the large paintings that are decaying rapidly because his experiments with oils dried out too quickly. Also on view are Wiertz’s smaller portraits, plaster and terracotta sculptural models, and highly original paintings that comment on social and political events such as the French Revolution, Napoleonic wars, and famines that regularly plagued Belgium.

Although Wiertz saw himself as the artistic heir to Rubens, in many respects his subjects, political engagement, and colossal ambition make him closer to Victor Hugo, who for some time was a fellow citizen of Brussels, and who created several artist's houses himself.



**Figure 29.**

Interior of the Wiertz Museum, *Elsene, Brussels*. Digital image courtesy of Musées Royaux Des Beaux-Arts de Belgique / Photo: Alfred de Ville de Goyet

Response by

**MaryAnne Stevens**, Independent Art Historian and Curator

### **Astruptunet: Home and Farmstead of the Artist Nikolai Astrup (1880–1928)**

Located in Western Norway, Astruptunet was created from 1912 by the Norwegian artist Nikolai Astrup (1880–1928) (Fig. 30).<sup>50</sup> Astrup sought to craft a distinct visual language reflecting the deeply felt experience of his childhood landscape of Jølster, seen through recollection and memory; his engagement with the emerging modernisms of the early twentieth century; and his response to the call for national political, social, and cultural identity. He achieved these through his increasingly non-naturalist, expressionist painting, his highly innovative and experimental woodcuts, and his creation of Astruptunet.



[View this illustration online](#)

#### **Figure 30.**

Astruptunet (Jølster, Sogn og Fordane, Western Norway), photographed in 2015 from above, looking north across Jølstravatnet towards Ålhus, where Nikolai Astrup had lived from 1882 to 1911 (his studio is on the top floor of the right-hand building). Digital image courtesy of Oddleiv Apneseth, 2015.

Perched precariously on the north-facing slope of Jølstravatnet, the artist's home was the product of bringing together eight old, local, wooden buildings to create four elements, the largest of which also accommodated the studio, completed two years before Astrup's death. The garden and farmstead consisted of sculpted turf walls and terraces on which fruit bushes and rhubarb grew, plots for the cultivation of vegetables, an apple and cherry orchard, flower beds and meadows, and an inner and outer field on which goats and a small number of cows would graze. Astrup also created a grotto adjacent to one of the three streams that tumbled down the steep mountainside, planted fruit and birch trees at the property's lower access to

intimate entry into his personal “paradise”, pruned birch trees to open up views across the lake to embrace “borrowed” landscapes, and pollarded alders to transform them into “troll” trees.

While the individual dwellings accommodated Astrup’s fast-growing family and proclaimed his, and his wife Engel’s, commitment to the revival of traditional Norwegian arts and crafts, the garden and farmstead provided food for the family, supplied the subjects for his paintings and prints over the last fourteen years of his life, became a refuge for local plants endangered by modern farming practices, and hence implied a statement about national identity. While other artists at the turn of the nineteenth century—including Claude Monet, Joaquín Sorolla, Max Liebermann, Henri Le Sidaner, and Emil Nolde—also created gardens in order to control nature, the subject of their art, Astrup had a uniquely radical agenda which combined the functional with the aesthetic, the ecological with the proclamation of national identity.

Response by

**Daniel Robbins**, Senior Curator, Leighton House Museum

## **Leighton House Museum and Holland Park's Other Studio-Houses: Future Developments**

Over the course of the twentieth century, two additions were made at the eastern end of Leighton House Museum, the studio-home of the painter Frederic, Lord Leighton (1830–1896). In the late 1920s, a local family named Perrin funded the construction of a two-storey exhibition gallery. Then, as part of post-war restorations, the outdoor space beneath Leighton's first-floor winter studio was in-filled to form toilets, a kitchen, and collection store. Amounting to 43 per cent of the total facility, these two additions mask the original east elevation of the house and are no longer fit for purpose.

Recently, with the support of the Friends of Leighton House, the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a scheme has been developed to refurbish entirely the so-called "Perrin Wing" ([Fig. 31](#)). This 1920s structure will be re-purposed as the main point of entry into the museum, allowing the cloakroom, shop, reception, and catering functions to be moved out of the historic house, thus reducing pressure on its fabric. Leighton's morning room and winter studio will then be restored and re-presented. The 1950s in-fill will be removed entirely, revealing the original cast-iron columns that supported the winter studio, the now-concealed doorway used by the artist's models, and other hidden architectural features. The resultant space will be enclosed in glass, creating a flexible facility (illustrated here) that looks onto the garden and the surrounding houses. A new basement will be created beneath it, combining visitor facilities with a dedicated collection store and drawings gallery, allowing selections from the museum's holding of more than 700 Leighton drawings to be shown.



**Figure 31.**

Building Design Partnership, Architect's rendering of the new "Orientation Room", Phase 3 Restoration, Leighton House Museum. Digital image courtesy of The Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea / BDP Architects.

While this project centres on the much-needed enhancements for visitors, including disabled access to all public areas, it will also allow the museum to reposition itself in relation to the remarkable group of purpose-built artists' studio-houses that surround it. Almost all were built in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. With the exception of the home of painter Colin Hunter, lost in the Second World War, and that of G.F. Watts, tragically demolished in the early 1960s to make way for a block of flats, these houses remain. Though privately owned, they reveal much about the personalities, domestic circumstances, and working practices of the artists who commissioned them and, more broadly, the wealth and status enjoyed by successful artists of this period. The lack of display space within Leighton House has always limited opportunities to present this story, preventing visitors from appreciating its rich and fascinating context.

Following the completion of the project in 2021, this will no longer be the case. New displays within the refurbished wing will present examples of work by the "Holland Park Circle" held in the reserve collection, supplemented by new acquisitions and interpretation, including a short film. Archival material currently in the Local Studies section of Kensington Central Library will be relocated to join the Leighton House and 18 Stafford Terrace archives at the museum. A new guide and app will encourage visitors to take a walking tour encompassing the other houses, and regular guided tours of the neighbourhood will be offered.

In the longer term, a series of in-focus exhibitions and publications will become part of the museum's programme, exploring each of the artists and their houses in turn. With planning and funding decisions anticipated in

Summer 2018, Leighton House is on a path to become “the museum of the Holland Park Circle”, a gateway to the discovery of this unique enclave of artists’ studio-houses.

Response by

**Nicholas Tromans**, Programme Director, Christie's Education, London

## **Watts Gallery and the Single-Artist Museum**

Once the habit had been developed of artists being posthumously canonised by Art History and institutionalised in survey museums, it did not take long for artists themselves to take matters in their own hands and begin establishing public collections of their work. The impetus to this new strain of museum-making was given by the secessionist mood of the later nineteenth century, under which doing-it-yourself was a watchword and getting back to the land, in one way or another, went with the throwing off of the academies. Until recently, I served as curator at one such museum, the Watts Gallery at Compton near Guildford, in what is—still, just—the Surrey countryside, where George Frederic Watts (1817–1904) owned a second home from 1891 ([Fig. 32](#)).



**Figure 32.**

The Watts Gallery, Compton, near Guildford. Digital image courtesy of Watts Gallery.

Watts never fitted into any canon—he made a point of sidling away from any association he felt likely to recruit him—and he succeeded in convincing his numerous admirers that he was a very great and an utterly unique genius. His much younger second wife, the designer Mary Watts, built up, in pharaonic fashion, a tomb-museum complex in the years leading up to her husband's death in 1904; it was completed just in time for that event. Whether this enchantingly eccentric institution (as it was in the twentieth

century) held back or expanded the reputation of the art of Watts is open to debate, although I believe that is beside the point. The Watts Gallery was a classic example of a new type of museum, which was in itself a dynamic creative endeavour, quite aside from the fluctuations of the artist's "critical fortune".

As the Watts Gallery sought over recent years to piece back together the full complex left by Mary Watts, after its collapse in subsequent decades, we looked about us for peers—other artists' house-museums—from which to learn. There seemed relatively few exemplars in the UK, but many in continental Europe. We set about identifying and contacting them, and these efforts resulted in the Artist's Studio Museum Network, which holds occasional gatherings and is represented by a website with more than 150 European single-artist museums.<sup>51</sup>

These places are remarkably little studied by museologists, but I would suggest they deserve scholarly attention, apart from their undeniable charm for visitors. There is, furthermore, an intriguing super-league within this category that threatens, paradoxically, to outgrow neighbouring museums that offer massively broader collections and programming. Think, for example, of the Van Gogh Museum or the huge new Munch Museum: not house-museums but national institutions successfully projecting an entire culture through the lens of a single painter-celebrity.

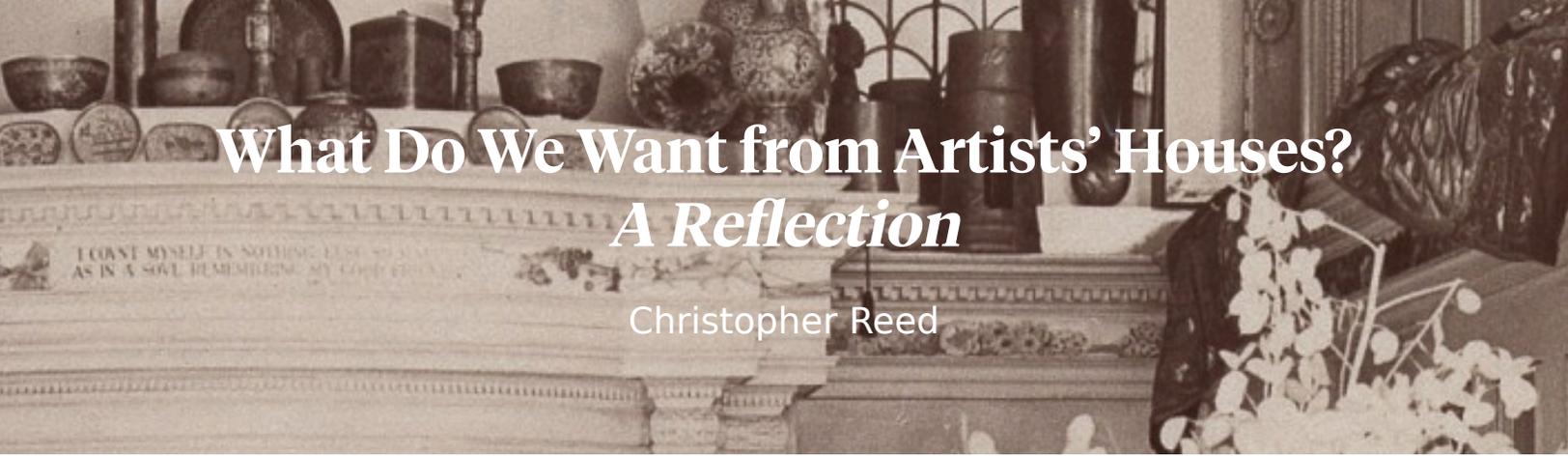
The personality museum, in which the whole artist can be encountered—failures as well as triumphs within the *oeuvre*, embarrassing affiliations and relationships alongside avant-garde friends—is not merely a kitsch footnote to the history of art. Rather, it is one way to restore the creative spark to a global museum culture that is arguably losing its diversity and sense of risk.

## Footnotes

- 1 An earlier version of this feature, amended on 12 June 2019, misstated the address for the house of Frederick Goodall. It was 4 Camden Square, not 31 Camden Square.
- 2 Alice Meynell, "Laura Alma Tadema", *The Art-Journal* (November 1883): 345.
- 3 J. Comyns Carr, *Coasting Bohemia* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), 32.
- 4 Vern G. Swanson, *The Biography and Catalogue Raisonne of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Garton & Co., 1990), 85.
- 5 Henry Woods to Luke Fildes, 15 December 1899, in Correspondence of or concerning Luke Fildes, National Art Library MSL/1972/6970-6972.
- 6 R. de Cordova, "The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Hall", *The Strand Magazine* 24, no. 144 (December 1902): 622.
- 7 Percy Cross Standing, *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema OM, RA* (London: Cassell & Co., 1905), 33–34. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has, for example, a graphite study for the painting *Egyptian Chess Players* (1865, private collection).
- 8 Stephen Ongpin, *Master Drawings 2017* (London: Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, 2017), nos 25–30.
- 9 Ellen Gosse, "Laurens Alma-Tadema", *Century Magazine*, February 1894, 493. I am grateful to Stephanie Moser for this reference.

- 10 The demolition of historic churches and public buildings around this time made it easy for artistic Dutch people to acquire artworks, antiques, and artefacts inexpensively. The Mesdags created a museum of fine art next door to their home, but the furnishings of their home were dispersed at auction in 1903, anticipating the similar dispersal of the Alma-Tadema collection a decade later.
- 11 Rudolph de Cordova, "The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Hall", *Strand Magazine* 24 (December 1902): 615-630. An updated version of this article was published as "The Hall of Panels in the House of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R.A.", *Scribner's Magazine* 49, no. 3 (March 1911): 299-314.
- 12 De Cordova, "The Hall of Panels in the House of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R.A.", 299.
- 13 Cosmo Monkhouse, "Some English Artists and Their Studios", *Century Magazine* 24, no. 4 (August 1882): 566.
- 14 De Cordova, "The Hall of Panels in the House of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R.A.", 308. A colour illustration of *A Scene in Drenthe* appears in Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi (eds.), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity* (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 93, Fig. 112.
- 15 Compare the engraving in Monkhouse, "Some English Artists and Their Studios", 564, with the photograph at the Archives of American Art of the *Interior of Grove End Road, House of Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, ca. 1902. See <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/interior-grove-end-road-house-lawrence-almatedema-3182>. I would like to thank Charlotte Gere for drawing my attention to this photograph.
- 16 De Cordova, "The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Hall", 615.
- 17 Reminiscence from Jacques-Émile Blanche cited in James Laver, *'Vulgar Society': The Romantic Career of James Tissot, 1836-1902* (London: Constable & Co., 1936), 39-40.
- 18 Maurice B. Adams, *Artists' Homes: A Portfolio of Drawings Including the Houses and Studios of Several Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (London: BT Batsford, 1883), 5.
- 19 Mary Roberts, "Networked Objects," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2013): 570.
- 20 Rossetti to William Allingham, ca. 20 January 1861, in William E. Fredeman (ed.), *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002-2015), Vol. II, no. 61(5), 342-343.
- 21 Meredith to Captain Frederick Augustus Maxse, in W.M. Meredith (ed.), *Letters of George Meredith*, 2 vols (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), Vol. 1, 73.
- 22 Rosalie Mander (ed.), Henry Treffry Dunn, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and His Circle* (Westerham: Dalrymple Press, 1984), 24. Dunn's *Recollections* were first published in an edition (London: Elkin Mathews, 1904) in which both William Michael Rossetti and the editor, Gale Pedrick, introduced numerous changes to the writer's manuscript version. Lady Mander's edition cited here restores Dunn's original text from his notebooks.
- 23 Henry Currie Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of His Life and Art* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1899), 121-122.
- 24 This image also appeared on the cover of Barbara Bryant, *G.F. Watts in Kensington: Little Holland House and Gallery*, Studies in the Art of George Frederic Watts 3 (Compton: Watts Gallery, 2009).
- 25 Barbara Bryant, "An Artist Collects: Frederic Leighton as a Collector of Paintings and Drawings", in Daniel Robbins (ed.), *Closer to Home* (London: Leighton House Museum, 2010), 22-29.
- 26 Jason Edwards, "The Lessons of Leighton House: Aesthetics, Politics, Erotics", in Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (eds.), *Rethinking the Interior: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts, 1867-1896* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 97.
- 27 Barbara Bryant, "The Private and Public Life of Frank Holl: The Journey from Camden Town to Hampstead and Surrey", in Mark Bills, *Frank Holl: Emerging from the Shadows* (Compton: Watts Gallery, 2013), 55-73.
- 28 Barbara Bryant, "An English Kubla Khan: Mortimer Menpes and His Japanese House of Flowers in London", in Margot Brandlhuber and Michael Buhrs (eds.), *In the Temple of the Self: The Artist's Residence as a Total Work of Art* (Munich: Villa Stuck and Hatje Cantz, 2013), 152-165; Barbara Bryant, "Kubla Khan in Chelsea: 'Japanese Menpes' at 25 Cadogan Gardens", in Julie Robinson (ed.), *The World of Mortimer Menpes: Painter, Etcher, Raconteur* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2014), 152-161.
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- 30 C. Lewis Hind, "Painters' Studios", *The Art-Journal* (May 1890): 138.
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- 32 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 33 Sargent gifted this painting to John.
- 34 See Martin Muller, "Assemblages and Actor-networks: Rethinking Socio-material Power, Politics and Space", *Geography Compass* 9 (1) (2015): 27-41. doi:[10.1111/gec3.12192](https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12192) [accessed 10 September 2017].
- 35 Quoted in Anthony Bailey, *Standing in the Sun: A Life of J.M.W. Turner* (London: Tate, 2013), 83.
- 36 Bailey, *Standing in the Sun*, 83.
- 37 I borrow the phrase from Charles Patterson, *The Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern, 2002).

- 38 Herwig Todts, *Henri De Braekeleer 1840–1888* (Antwerp: Royal Museum of Fine Arts, 1988), 104–105; Mark-Edo Tralbaut, *De Braekeleeriana: Archivalia, Rariora en curiosa in verband met leven en werk van de Antwerpse kunstschilder* (Antwerp: Stad Antwerpen, 1972), 38–39.
- 39 Catherine Méneux, “France-Belgique: Les échanges entre graveurs à l’eau-forte 1860–1890”, *Nouvelles de l’estampe* 35, no. 151 (1997): 7.
- 40 Jan Dirk Baetens, “The Belgian Brand: Ernest Gambart and the English Market for Nineteenth-Century Belgian Art, c. 1850–1870”, *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis—Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire* 92, no. 4 (2014): 1291.
- 41 *L’Album: Recueil de photographies des chefs-d’œuvre de l’art contemporain publié par Louis Martinet* (Paris: Durand-Ruel, 1860), n.p.; Edmond Fierlants, *Catalogue des œuvres publiées par la Société Royale Belge de Photographie* (Brussels: L. Truyts, 1865), 77.
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- 43 Jan Dirk Baetens, “Alma-Tadema in Antwerp: The Legacy of Henri Leys”, in Elizabeth Prettejohn and Peter Trippi (eds.), *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity* (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 46.
- 44 Receipt with handwritten note dated 23 November 1869, Gustave Coûteaux archives, File Henri De Braekeleer, 12. Brussels, Archives of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium.
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- 47 Walter Benjamin, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century”, (1935), in Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 8–9.
- 48 See, for example, Temma Balducci, Heather Belnap Jensen, and Pamela J. Warner (eds.), *Interior Portraiture and Masculine Identity in France, 1789–1914* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); and John Tosh, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
- 49 Antoine Wiertz, *Oeuvres Littéraires* (Paris: Librairie Internationale, 1870), 458.
- 50 For more information about Astruptunet, please visit <http://artiststudiomuseum.org/studio-museums/astruptunet/>.
- 51 See the Artist’s Studio Museum Network, <http://artiststudiomuseum.org/>.



# What Do We Want from Artists' Houses? *A Reflection*

Christopher Reed

## **Abstract**

*This article, based on a plenary lecture for the conference Alma-Tadema: Antiquity at Home and on Screen, explores the attractions of the artist's house as a site of display in the late Victorian era, the early twentieth century, and today. Comparing the houses of Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Frederic Leighton with Charleston Farmhouse, home of the Bloomsbury artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, I invoke the comments of viewers from Walter Sickert to Patti Smith in order to examine the relationship between the look of surfaces and viewers' perceptions of psychological depth.*

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## Eminent Victorians Observed

It might be said that I approach an exhibition of Lawrence Alma-Tadema's paintings at Leighton House <sup>1</sup> from enemy territory: more specifically, from the precincts of the famous—or notorious—Bloomsbury group. Bloomsbury's members, I'm afraid, consistently cast their influential promotion of modernism as a form of antagonism toward eminent Victorians such as Leighton and Alma-Tadema. <sup>2</sup> Thus, it was that in 1912 Vanessa Bell—who had stayed in London to recuperate from illness, while her husband and children went to his parents for the Christmas holidays—was visited by her fellow painter Duncan Grant. Describing Grant's visit in a letter to her husband, Bell wrote that he:

lay on the floor and talked in a desultory but cheering way of ... how we are to turn my studio into a tropical forest with great red figures on the walls—a blue ceiling with birds of paradise floating from it (my idea), and curtains each one different. This all to cheer us through London winters. Duncan also wants a bath let into the floor, but I told him that was à la Leighton House, which made him rather cross. <sup>3</sup>

This passage exposes what seems to be a blind spot at the core of Bloomsbury's self-understanding. From our perspective a century later, it seems clear that the group's embrace of a Fauve-inflected modernism—especially in its extravagant domestic interiors so different from the chrome and leather minimalism later enshrined as the canonic look of the modern <sup>4</sup>—had more in common than they might have wished with the tastes of their Victorian forerunners.

The similarity between Bell's fantasy of a "blue ceiling with birds of paradise floating from it ... to cheer us through London winters" and such Alma-Tadema titles as *Under the Roof of Blue Ionian Weather* suggests shared fantasies not only about Mediterranean culture but, more broadly, about art's association with leisured aesthetic delectation (Fig. 1). We might, for instance, compare Alma-Tadema's painting with one of Bell's depictions of Grant from around the time of her letter. Her *Matisse Room at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* (Fig. 2) shows Grant admiring the blue-skied arcadias rendered by Matisse from one of the Grafton Galleries' tufted settees, which were as much a semi-public site of aesthetic contemplation as Alma-Tadema's marble benches. <sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Under the Roof of Blue Ionian Weather*, 1901, oil on panel, 55 × 121 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 2.**

Vanessa Bell, *Matisse Room at the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, 1912–1913, oil on panel, 50.5 × 60.5 cm. Collection Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Digital image courtesy of RMN / Hervé Lewandowski.

The Alma-Tadema exhibition at Leighton House highlighted another connection between Britain's late-Victorian and pioneer-modernist artists: their attention to the idea of the artist's house. Leighton, Alma-Tadema, and the Bloomsbury artists all created and publicized their domiciles as part of their artistic practice. Their homes became extraordinary sites of collection and display; self-conscious performances of their particular aesthetics; and

testaments to a creativity that seemingly could not be confined in frames or on pedestals, but expanded onto walls and into gardens, making claims for art as a way of life. These ambitions link Bloomsbury with the group's late-Victorian antecedents in a shared—and arguably distinctly British—tradition. But although today Leighton House in London and Charleston Farmhouse in Sussex are both popular pilgrimage sites for those interested in British art, their connections were lost on Bloomsbury and would likely have been lost on Leighton and Alma-Tadema too had they stuck around to comment. I want to take this opportunity to explore the relationship between these artists' houses and our experience of them.

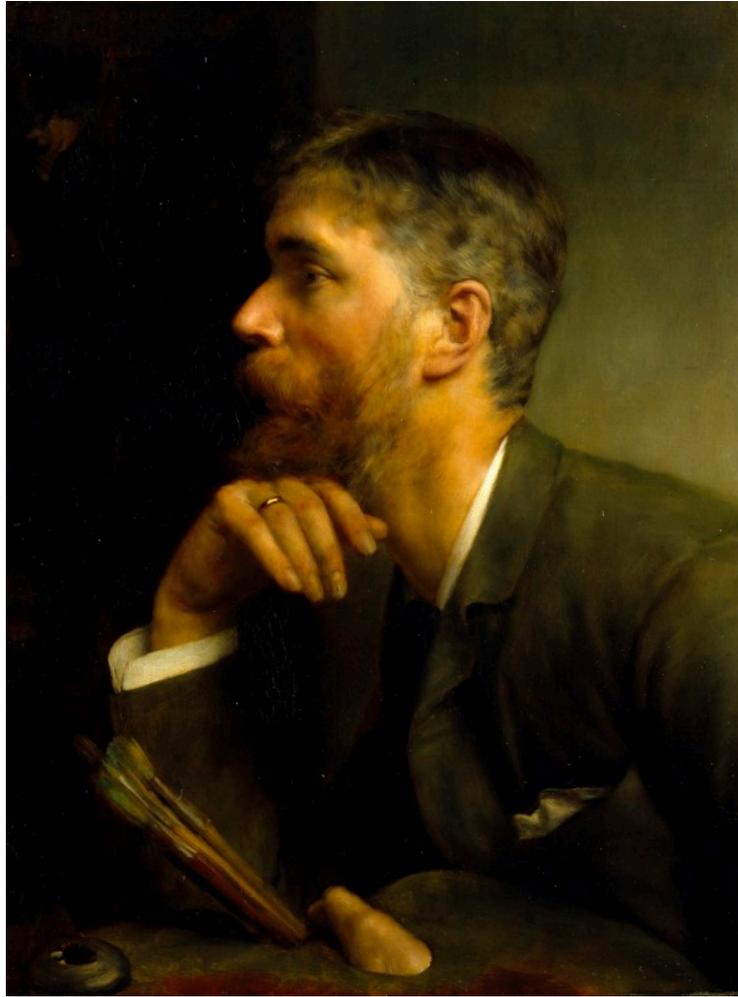
Here I invoke another instance of Bloomsbury's antagonism, this one in the form of an article by Roger Fry, who, with Bell and Grant over the winter of 1912–1913, organized the Omega Workshops to apply Bloomsbury's ideas of modernist aesthetics to domestic interiors. Fry's text appeared in *The Nation* in January 1913, so it shares a moment with the letter I just quoted—and it displays the same prejudices. Here Fry, fresh from debates over the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1912), goaded the art establishment with a rumination occasioned by a retrospective exhibition dedicated to the recently deceased Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Fry opens by asserting his surprise that someone “so little ... alive to me” had actually died, and goes on to complain:

His art ... demands nothing from the spectator beyond the almost unavoidable knowledge that there was such a thing as the Roman Empire, whose people were very rich, very luxurious, and, in retrospect at least, agreeably wicked. That being agreed upon, Sir Lawrence proceeded to satisfy all the futile inquiries that indolent curiosity might make about the domestic belongings and daily trifles of those people. Not that he ever makes them real people ... He does, however, add the information that all the people of that interesting and remote period, all their furniture, clothes, even their splendid marble divans, were made of highly-scented soap.<sup>6</sup>

Fry here diagnoses “The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema” (this is the article's title) as “only an extreme instance of the commercial materialism of our civilization.”<sup>7</sup> His argument is neither innovative nor edifying—though it may be claimed as influential. Attacks on the commercialism of Victorian painters go back at least as far as Oscar Wilde's remark that: “in France every bourgeois wants to be an artist, whereas in England every artist wants to be a bourgeois.”<sup>8</sup> But Fry's claim that Alma-Tadema was “rewarded by a fortune” for appealing to “the culture of the

Sixpenny Magazine” associated with “the half-educated members of the lower middle-class” anticipates the rhetorical strategy of Clement Greenberg’s famous “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939).

There is less to be learned from this all too common spectacle of a bourgeois intellectual claiming avant-garde status by accusing others of pandering to the *polloi* than from the flash of visual analysis Fry offers. Fry’s startlingly apt comparison of Alma-Tadema’s surfaces to “highly-scented soap” may allude to Millais’ commercial association with Pears soap, but is poignant in light of Charlotte Gere’s analysis of the social tensions that beset prominent Victorian painters. Gere traces the phenomenon of the semi-public artist’s house to the custom of Sunday open houses when patrons visited the studios of Academicians to see what they were planning for upcoming shows, and argues convincingly that this form of self-advertisement became the first middle-class aesthetic to challenge aristocratic tastes from below.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, she exposes the paradox that the position in aristocratic social circles of middle-class painters, no matter how prominent, rested on craftsmanship yet required them to efface any evidence that they worked with their hands.<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the finish of Academic painting reads as a register of anxiety.



**Figure 3.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Portrait of Ernest Albert Waterlow, RA, 1889, oil on canvas, 61.1 × 45.9 cm. Collection of Royal Academy of Arts, London (03/660). Digital image courtesy of Royal Academy of Arts, London.

The soap-like smoothness of Alma-Tadema's art, however, condemned it in the eyes of modernists for whom the brushstroke authenticated the defining attribute of art: its status as individual self-expression. To make this case, I'm afraid I must adduce another rude remark about Alma-Tadema, this one from the painter and critic Walter Sickert, who occupied a position both chronologically and ideologically between the late Victorians and the Post-Impressionists. Sickert's review of the Academy Exhibition of 1890 criticized Alma-Tadema's portrait of his fellow Academician Ernest Albert Waterlow (Fig. 3) by complaining of something artificial about its surface:

The ear of this profile is no nearer to the spectator than the nose, nor both than the wall. All he does is to give us a highly polished map of the surface of the sitter's skin ... That this should be so, is, I suppose, the logical consequence of a life-time spent in compiling pictures of Roman life from every document but the essential one, namely, personal observation. <sup>11</sup>

Sickert's complaint, anticipating Fry's, identifies something meretricious in Alma-Tadema's surfaces, which renders his paintings artificial, like scented soap or polished maps, instead of—well, that's the question: Instead of what?

To identify what turn-of-the-century modernists wanted in painting, I turn to another of Sickert's texts: a short essay introducing an exhibition of British Impressionists in 1889. Dismissing competing Pre-Raphaelite criteria, Sickert asks, "If we approach [a] picture, what must it reveal to us on closer examination?" He defends his answer—"Not new facts, certainly, about the subject of the picture"—by invoking exemplary paintings by Velázquez, Whistler, and, perhaps surprisingly, Leighton:

The embroidery on the cloak of Philip IV does not on examination reveal its construction or texture, nor on approaching the portrait of Lady Archibald Campbell, do we find the hairs of the fur cape evident. An examination of the surface of Sir Frederick [*sic*] Leighton's "Summer Moon" (Fig. 4) would reveal no new facts about the sleeping figures that could not be seen at the distance at which the picture is visible as a whole. What is it then that these works all yield in their different ways on nearer examination? It is nothing more than a subtle attribute which painters call "quality" ... A certain beauty and fitness of expression in paint, apparently ragged perhaps, and capricious, but revealing to the connoisseur a thoughtful analysis of the essentials in the production of the emotion induced by the complex phenomena of vision. <sup>12</sup>

This is all a bit vague, and Sickert clarifies nothing by comparing "real quality" to "style in literature." But his key terms—the "production of the emotion" by facture that is "ragged" and "capricious"—suggest struggle, incompleteness, and something not altogether under the artist's control.



**Figure 4.**

Frederic Leighton, *Summer Moon*, circa 1872, oil on canvas. Private Collection, India.

Sickert's argument finds an antecedent, of course, in Whistler's famous riposte to John Ruskin's charge that his paintings lacked finish in which the artist claimed that his seemingly hurried facture displayed "the knowledge I have gained in the work of a lifetime."<sup>13</sup> But this exchange, which took place in 1878, offered learning, rather than affect, as the meaning of the artist's marks. And, as Tim Barringer notes, Whistler had long defended his brushy surface in terms inimical to struggle: "The work of the master reeks not of the sweat of the brow—suggests no effort—and is finished from its beginning."<sup>14</sup> Looking forward, Sickert's ideas play out more explicitly almost four decades later in the opening pages of Fry's adulatory book, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development*.

He has not the gift to seize hold directly on an idea and express it with an emphasis which renders it immediately apparent; he seems indeed hardly to arrive at the comprehension of his theme til the very end of his work; there is always something still lurking behind the expression, something he would grasp if he could ... He often feels his way so cautiously that we should call him timid were it not that his tentatives prove his desperate courage in face of the elusive theme.<sup>15</sup>

Fry expands on the virtues of Cézanne's tentative, struggling method:

Cézanne is so discreet, so little inclined to risk a definite statement for fear of being arrogant; he is so immensely humble; he never dares trust to his acquired knowledge; the conviction behind each brush stroke has to be won from nature at every step, and he will do nothing except at the dictation of a conviction which arises within him as the result of contemplation. <sup>16</sup>

Fry's description of Cézanne's process, in which he eschews the conventions of "acquired knowledge" in order to struggle personally for convictions registered in each brushstroke, served as a template for the appreciation of modernist artists closer to home. The opening line of a review Fry published in 1922 is: "The first quality of Vanessa Bell's painting is its extreme honesty." He goes on to insist that "in her case the virtue shines with a special brightness because she has no trace of what would ordinarily be called cleverness in a painter," which he defines as "the power to give an illusion of appearance by a brilliant shorthand turn of the brush." In short, Bell's struggles are visible. Never attempting to appear anything she is not, Bell "follows her own vision unhesitatingly and confidently ... If the result is not very legible, she never tries to make it out any more definite or more vividly descriptive than it is." Bell's facture—what Fry calls "her 'handwriting'"—"is not elegant. It is slower, more deliberate, less exhilarating," but "She knows that 'handling' and quality of painting are only really beautiful when they come unconsciously in the process of trying to express an idea." <sup>17</sup>

I do not claim to adjudicate Fry's—or Sickert's—critical judgments. Do Vanessa Bell's brushstrokes register honest struggle? Is Leighton's handling more "capricious" than Alma-Tadema's map-like reproduction? As Elizabeth Pettejohn has documented, other critics disparaged Leighton's surfaces, complaining of their "waxiness and over-smoothness." <sup>18</sup> We could chase these claims around forever only to conclude that Sickert's "quality" and Fry's "honesty" lay in the eye of the beholder. But what is clear is that twentieth-century viewers wanted something other than finish in painting, a quality Sickert called "ragged," indicative of struggling and striving. This is what modernists wanted from artists—and thus from artists' houses.

## **Post-Victorian Artists' Houses**

Ragged is an apt word to describe the look of Charleston, the farmhouse shared by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and others in the Bloomsbury Group for six decades starting in 1916. Pioneering an aesthetic later

commercialized as “shabby chic,” Charleston in 1997 became the setting for Annie Leibovitz’s *Vanity Fair* photo session with a suitably disheveled Nicole Kidman.<sup>19</sup> More interestingly, the house became something of an obsession with the “poet laureate of punk,” Patti Smith. Smith’s fascination with the houses of historic figures is registered in photographs she takes with Polaroid Land cameras, manufactured in the 1970s. Smith says that she first took up Land cameras because of the immediacy of their self-developing and printing technology.<sup>20</sup> But she stresses that her photographs are far from spontaneous. “There is very little Polaroid film to be had, so I can’t waste film,” she explains; “I have to think carefully about each picture.”<sup>21</sup> Her exhibited and published photographs—silver gelatin or inkjet prints made from the Polaroids—transform the immediacy of the initial pictures into images that register the limitations of this technology: uncertain focus, stark light/dark contrasts, unexpected aureoles and mists all redolent of older forms of photography. “If somebody asked me what kind of photographer I aspire to be, I would say a nineteenth-century amateur, that’s my goal,” Smith says.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 5.**

Patti Smith, *Le miroir piqué, Charleston*, (also published as *The Pitted Mirror, East Sussex, England*), 2003, gelatin silver print. Digital image courtesy of the artist and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Smith's photographic aesthetic of struggle and imperfection partakes in the values Fry admired in Vanessa Bell's painting and Duncan Grant's theater designs. About the latter, Fry wrote to Bell, "I always like best these things done in an impossibly short time without pretension and with incredible makeshifts which do so much better than the proper thing."<sup>23</sup> These words apply to Charleston—and to Patti Smith's response to the house. Recalling her first visit in 1999, Smith says,

When I came here a few years ago, I felt a real longing to document this place in the same manner that I document my own home because it is very much how I live: books everywhere, things that seem very humble, very sacred ... Art wasn't just a precious thing, art was part of everyday living.<sup>24</sup>

Smith's photographs aestheticize the improvised beauty of Charleston with a power born of her identification—"it is very much how I live"—with the artists who lived there.

Smith's identification with the artists and authors whose homes she photographs is thematized in her images of workspaces (desks and studios) and objects redolent of the human limitations of sleep and death (beds and gravesites). She ascribes her turn to photography as a form of mourning, noting that in the mid-1990s, "I lost my husband, brother, Robert [Mapplethorpe], my young pianist, and my parents."<sup>25</sup> These themes come together in a photograph titled *Le miroir piqué, Charleston* (Fig. 5) that Smith published with this handwritten explication:

The pitted mirror  
In the farmhouse that belonged to the painter Vanessa Bell is the mirror that belonged to her mother. It is so old that the surface is pitted. It is said that her sister Virginia Woolf watched her mother die in this mirror. Virginia, as she was only thirteen, could not bare [sic] to watch her mother die, so she watched her reflection instead.<sup>26</sup>

I am using Patti Smith to exemplify what I take to be our post-Victorian perspective on the idea of the artist's house. When Princeton English professor Diana Fuss went looking into the houses of famous authors for her book *The Sense of an Interior* (2004), she described the "heart" of her project as "the unexplored link between the inner mind and the inner dwelling."<sup>27</sup> What modern visitors look for in artists' houses is "interiority"—interior spaces are read psychologically, as indices of an idea of creativity manifested through perpetual struggle. What Victorian artists' houses seem to offer, in contrast, is a fantasy of surfaces: an ideal of creativity manifested in brilliance, accomplishment, and that magic Victorian term of approbation, "finish." This is as true of the Arab Hall at Leighton House as it was of the Hall of Panels, where visitors were welcomed at Casa Tadema (Figs 6 and 7).



**Figure 6.**  
Frederic Leighton, The Arab Hall, Leighton House, constructed 1877-1881.  
Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.  
Digital image courtesy of Will Price.



**Figure 7.**

Rudolph De Cordova, The Hall of Panels, Casa Alma-Tadema , in "The Panels in Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's Hall" by Rudolph De Cordova, *The Strand Magazine* (December 1902).

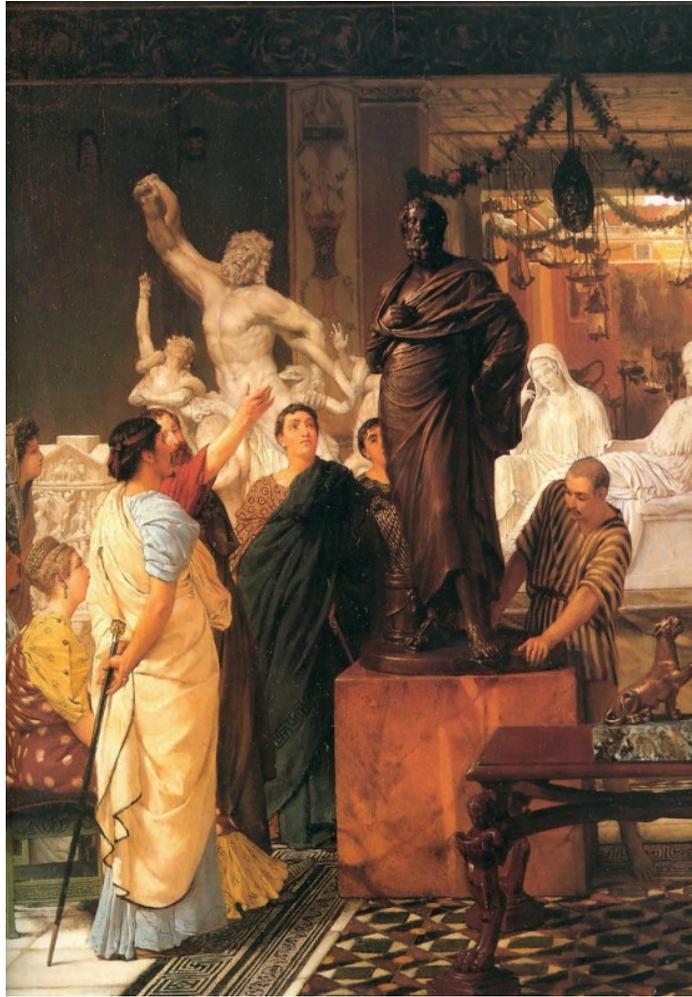
No wonder, then, that Sickert's modernist values prompted him to oppose the preservation of Leighton House:

It will become a white elephant, and in ten years the tired piety will turn to foolishness and embarrassment ... Do not let us consecrate in perpetuity the hotel, now that the brilliant guest has gone. Do not let us prepare for ourselves the sneers of ... a neo-Georgian generation, at the taste, in house decoration, of a late-Victorian President of the Royal Academy. <sup>28</sup>

This prediction introduces Sickert's rumination on the value of Leighton's preparatory drawings, which, he suggests, are superior to the paintings they preceded. Arguing that the artist "lives in his work," Sickert praises Leighton's sketches from the nude as "expressions of emotion by means of poses of the human body," but complains that this "gracious comedy of human passion" is often "sadly obscured by the swaddling of the next stage." Leighton's house, Sickert implies, is like Leighton's draperies: a form of finishing that ends up simply copying from archaeological sources or

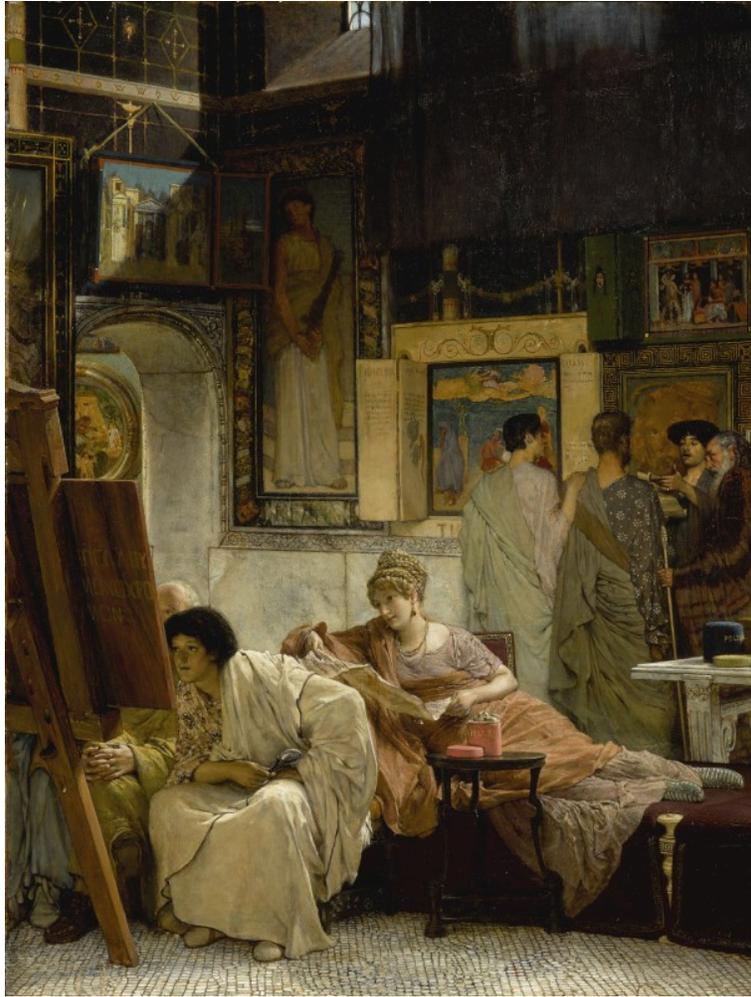
falling “into the indeterminate.” If “the archaeological” is no better than its sources, the “indeterminate” is a rehearsal of contemporary convention so superficial that it “outmodes worse than any crinoline.” <sup>29</sup>

Sickert’s twinned critiques of Leighton House and Leighton’s paintings turn on his complaint that the artist is obscured, rather than revealed, by the aesthetic of his era. Sickert’s demand for an exposed and therefore authentic self (thematized in renderings of the naked body and registered stylistically in “ragged” facture) is starkly opposed to Victorian imperatives that artists represent erudition and decorum (thematized in Greco-Roman subject matter and registered stylistically through glowing surfaces suggestive of scented soap, as if to repel dirt as surely as they mask traces of labor). It is no coincidence that a recurring theme in Alma-Tadema’s art is the admiration of art on these Victorian terms. These paintings propose classical sanction for the admiration of the results of the artist’s labors, rather than the labor itself. In *A Sculpture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus* of 1867 (Fig. 8) and *A Picture Gallery* of 1873 (Fig. 9), for instance, bronze sculptures, with their shiny surfaces, become the paradigm of the completed masterpiece. By contrast, the depicted paintings being admired in Alma-Tadema’s studio scenes are turned away, invisible to our eyes.



**Figure 8.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Sculpture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus*, 1867, oil on panel, 46.9 × 16.5 cm. Collection of Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Digital image courtesy of Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.



**Figure 9.**

Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *A Picture Gallery*, 1873, oil on panel, 76.2 × 59.1 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's, New York.

It was Alma-Tadema's "careful obliteration of all those marks which are left on an object by the processes of manufacture" that Fry condemned as a "shop-finish,"<sup>30</sup> a term that returns in his preface to the first Omega Workshops catalogue. Here Fry describes the convictions of the Omega's modernist artists, who "refuse to spoil the expressive quality of their work by sand-papering it down to a shop finish, in the belief that the public has at last seen through the humbug of the machine-made imitation of works of art."<sup>31</sup> The Bloomsbury artists' many portraits and self-portraits of artists at work are as paradigmatic of their own aesthetic ideals as Alma-Tadema's images of groups admiring finished artworks were of his.

## Reviewing the Victorians

Thus the battle lines were drawn: Victorians versus moderns, with the reflectivity of shiny-smooth “shop-finish” now “seen through” by modern viewers looking for the psychological reflectivity of the striving, struggling artist. This assertion of aesthetic and moral superiority continued to characterize assessments of Victorian art through much of the twentieth century. Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner’s 1984 essay collection, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art*, concludes with a chapter on the “ideology of the licked surface.” Here they describe the “smooth and glossy” surfaces—the “*fini*”—of Academic art as “an estrangement, an alienation, not only from the reality that is represented, but from the reality of art.” Following Fry, they accuse Academic painters of pandering to middle-class taste: “The *fini* became the guarantee for the bourgeois, and especially for the great bourgeois known as the state, against being swindled.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, they charge, this finish is inauthentic:

if the Academic *fini* is work, it is shameful work. It cleans up, rubs out the traces of any real work, erases the evidence of brushstrokes, glosses over the rough edges of forms, fills in the broken lines, hides the fact that the picture is a real object made out of paint.<sup>33</sup>

We have come a long way since 1984. I quote those lines of Rosen and Zerner from Prettejohn’s re-evaluation of Leighton, published in 2000. Prettejohn provocatively flips conventional claims that the blatant brushstrokes and rough edges in paintings in the modernist canon are evidence of an authenticity in which “the physical presence of paint is celebrated” and “the act of painting” is displayed as hard “work like other work (it was often said of Courbet that he painted with a trowel),” to quote Rosen and Zerner again.<sup>34</sup> Instead, Prettejohn argues that the “flaunting” of “artifice” in the surfaces of Leighton’s paintings and sculptures displays an “aestheticist yielding to the material” that, if it is not “modernist heroic struggle,” is evidence of a more profound confrontation with “the impossibility of modernity.” Here Prettejohn quotes a mournful line from one of Leighton’s handwritten notebooks: “We can never be like the ancients—we can no longer be the *unconscious* voice of our times—we are introspective[,] analytic, doubts + self-consciousness beset and hamper us.”<sup>35</sup> This version of Leighton grapples with the doubts at the heart of modernism (and the conundrums central to modernist criticism) concerning the impossibility of achieving authenticity, not to mention the oxymoron of signifying it. Thus, Prettejohn rehabilitates Leighton’s smooth surfaces as signs of a struggle both universal and perpetual. This move allows us to return to the subjects of

Leighton's art—men battling pythons, or Daedalus preparing his son for a doomed attempt to defy the human condition—and to see this iconography as a reflection of struggle. <sup>36</sup>

If this is what we want from artists, it is also what we now seek in artists' houses. Looking around Leighton House, Jason Edwards finds similar iconographies of struggle, which he assesses as reflections of psychological interiority. Leighton's "deliberately partial or self-consciously unsuccessful" pastoralism, Edwards argues, rather than evoking the beneficence of nature, alludes to the struggle for "survival of the fittest" in both the natural world and the competitive Victorian economy. Edwards initially reads the shininess of Leighton House—its "elaborately decorated, coloured and textured, tiled and mosaic surfaces"—as the artist's defensive plea for "visitors to resist a hermeneutics of depth," but "on further reflection" finds an effect "more flirtatious, articulating a pleasurable rather than defensively, self-consciously rather than symptomatically, encrypted environment" in keeping with the house's "sublime, unexpected changes in scale and style, again resonant of potentially unpredictable riches and spaces within Leighton's subjectivity." <sup>37</sup>

Edwards directly engages the modernist correlation of ragged facture with self-expression. Acknowledging contemporaries' accounts of Leighton's "aversion to any process which obtained effects through roughness and inequality of surface," <sup>38</sup> Edwards suggests that "Leighton House's highly textured surfaces ... designed to appeal to the hands, feet and skin more generally" open onto a more intimate sensorium involving touch, sound, and smell—senses that Leighton himself said exercised "extraordinary dominion" over him—so that the sounds of a splashing fountain and the intimations of appetite in the animals and fruits depicted in the décor become an endorsement of Walter Pater's invocations to indulge in Aesthetic pleasure. To judge by the "PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH" signs that today flank the bronze statue that gives its name to Leighton's Narcissus Hall, shininess can indeed function as an invitation to touch (Fig. 10). For Edwards, in conclusion, "Leighton's home reminds us of the importance of discovering, experiencing and articulating our own queerly eclectic, irreducibly idiosyncratic, solitary and collective erotic and aesthetic idioms." <sup>39</sup>



**Figure 10.**

Bronze cast of Pompeian sculpture of Narcissus in the Narcissus Hall, Leighton House, , constructed 1877-1881. Collection of Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Edwards' conclusion returns us to the question posed in my title: What Do We Want from Artists' Houses? The answer is: that depends on who "we" are. Edwards' invocation of an active audience inventing as much as "discovering" its experience of Leighton's "subjectivity" in the spaces and surfaces of this high-Victorian environment echoes—despite their diametrically opposed conclusions—the premises of Fry's condemnation of Alma-Tadema's "shop finish." For Fry, "shop finish," by obliterating the marks of making, corrupts viewers with the "commercial ideal" that "the customer should be saved all trouble," a principle he associates with Kodak camera advertisements that promise: "You press the button, and we do the rest." <sup>40</sup> As Patti Smith's photographs of Charleston demonstrate, however, in the right hands, even a self-developing camera can become a tool for creative identification and interpretation.

At this point, I hope that we have enough critical distance on both the Victorians and the modernists to overcome the investments that prevented them from reading each other sympathetically. For I would argue both that their apparently opposing aesthetics are actually complementary, and that, for good and/or ill, we live in the culture they created. Our lives are torn between aspirations to polished accomplishment on the one hand and experiences of struggle and incompleteness on the other. This is what we want to see reflected in artists' houses—modernist or Victorian. We want them to be places where surfaces—shiny or ragged—invite us to perceive depths conceived as the psychological interiority associated with a creativity we can

imagine ourselves into. It may even be that Victorian audiences saw in shininess something of the same kinds of struggle twentieth-century audiences need rough facture to recognize. Middle-class Victorian viewers—themselves trained in methods of careful rendering that were central for male careers from science to architecture, and for female practices of “drawing room” culture—might have been much more sensitive than we are to the record of facture registered in minute detail and “licked” finish. Be that as it may, what we want from artists’ houses—or what they want from us—are modes of engagement that enact creative identification with surfaces as registers of human depth.

## Footnotes

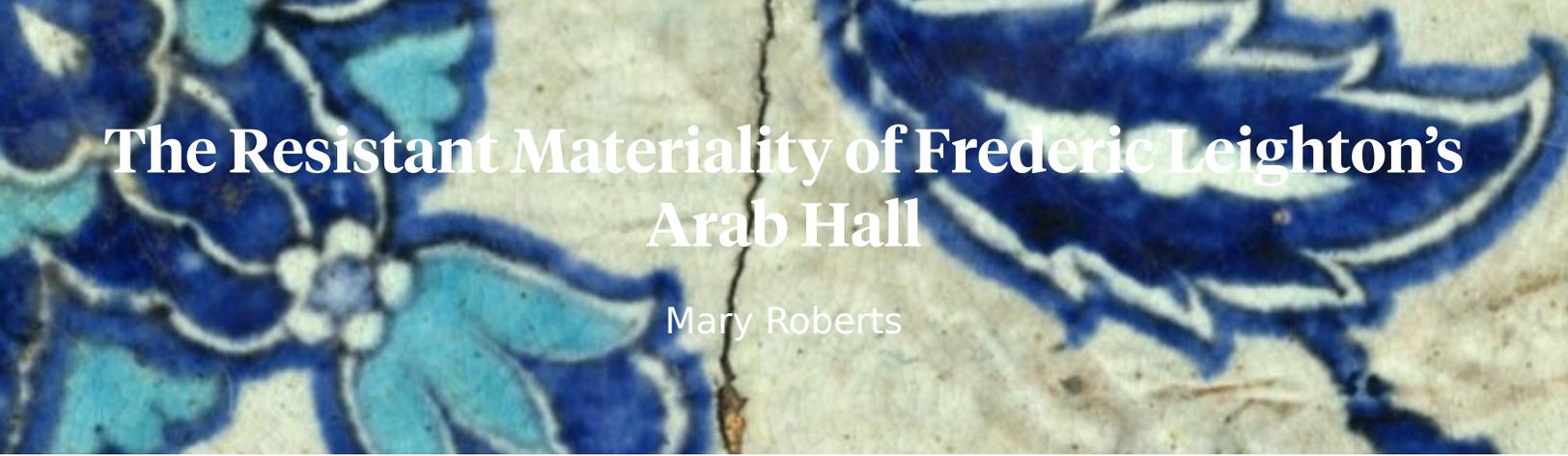
- 1 *Lawrence Alma-Tadema: At Home in Antiquity*, Leighton House, July–October 2017.
- 2 *Eminent Victorians* is the title of Lytton Strachey’s popular collection of short biographies critical of figures revered by the previous generation. Published in 1918, Strachey’s book, in both style and content, helped set the tone for the rebellious youth culture of the 1920s.
- 3 Vanessa Bell to Clive Bell, 27 December 1912, in Regina Marler (ed.), *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 131–132.
- 4 This is the argument of my *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 5 Donated to the French museum system by Fry’s daughter in 1959, this unsigned painting was exhibited as Fry’s work in the 1966 exhibition *Vision and Design: The Life, Work and Influence of Roger Fry, 1886–1934*, but the catalog entry concluded, “This painting, which is unsigned, has recently been attributed to Vanessa Bell.” See Quentin Bell and Philip Troutman, *Vision and Design: The Life, Work and Influence of Roger Fry, 1886–1934*, exhibition catalogue (London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1966). Since then, it has been illustrated widely as Bell’s work, including in the Tate Gallery’s definitive *The Art of Bloomsbury* exhibition of 1999. Bell mentions the painting in the Grafton Gallery in a letter to Fry (17 November 1912, Tate Gallery Archive 8010.8.78), although she does not describe her painting.
- 6 Roger Fry, “The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.,” *The Nation*, 18 January 1913, reprinted in Christopher Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 147–148.
- 7 Fry, “The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.,” 149.
- 8 Vincent O’Sullivan, *Aspects of Wilde* (New York: Henry Holt, 1936), 64.
- 9 Charlotte Gere, *Artistic Circles: Design and Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), 59.
- 10 Gere, *Artistic Circles*, 18.
- 11 Walter Sickert, “The Royal Academy Exhibition,” *Art Weekly*, 10 May 1890, reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63.
- 12 Walter Sickert, “Impressionism,” 2 December 1889, reprinted in *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, 59–60.
- 13 Transcript of the libel trial, *Whistler vs. Ruskin*, quoted in Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2005), 317.
- 14 James Whistler, “Propositions—No. 2” (1834), in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, quoted in Barringer, *Men at Work*, 318–319.
- 15 Roger Fry, *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1927]), 2–3.
- 16 Fry, *Cézanne*, 2–3.
- 17 Roger Fry, “Vanessa Bell and Othon Friesz,” *New Statesman*, 3 June 1922, reprinted in Christopher Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 347–348.
- 18 His “handling has something of waxiness and over-smoothness which leaves the expression of a want of the manliest mastery” (Tom Taylor, “Among the Pictures II,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, July 1868, 151, quoted in Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Morality Versus Aesthetics in Critical Interpretations of Frederic Leighton, 1855–75,” *The Burlington Magazine*, February 1996, 79–86).
- 19 These photographs illustrated the feature “Portrait of an Actress,” *Vanity Fair*, October 1997.
- 20 Patti Smith, *Land 250* (Paris: Fondation Cartier, 2008), 9; Patti Smith, *Camera Solo* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 10. See also the recording of Patti Smith discussing the immediacy of Polaroids, “Land 250 Polaroid Photographs,” *LensCulture*, [www.lensculture.com/articles/patti-smith-land-250-polaroid-photographs](http://www.lensculture.com/articles/patti-smith-land-250-polaroid-photographs). Accessed 18 July 2018.

- 21 Smith, *Camera Solo*, 13.
- 22 "Patti Smith—Charleston House and the Bloomsbury Group," *The Culture Show*, hosted by Charles Hazlewood, BBC 2, [www.dailymotion.com/video/x303bil](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x303bil). Accessed 18 July 2018. See also Patti Smith, *Camera Solo*, 12.
- 23 Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell, 25 July 1924, Tate Gallery Archives, 8010.5.920.
- 24 "Patti Smith—Charleston House and the Bloomsbury Group," *The Culture Show*.
- 25 Smith, *Camera Solo*, 10–11.
- 26 Smith, *Land 250*, 198.
- 27 Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.
- 28 Sickert, "Lord Leighton's Studies", *The Speaker*, 26 December 1896, reprinted in *Complete Writings*, 120–121
- 29 Sickert, "Lord Leighton's Studies," *The Speaker*, 26 December 1896, reprinted in Anna Gruetzner Robins (ed.), *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 120–121.
- 30 Fry, "The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.," 148.
- 31 Roger Fry, Preface to the Omega Workshops Catalogue, 1914, reprinted in *A Roger Fry Reader*, 201.
- 32 Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth-Century Art* (New York: Viking, 1984), 221–222, quoted in Elizabeth Prettejohn, "The Modernism of Frederic Leighton," in David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (eds), *English Art 1860–1914: Modern Artists and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 34–35.
- 33 Rosen and Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism*, quoted in Prettejohn, "The Modernism of Frederic Leighton," 34–35.
- 34 Rosen and Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism*, 223.
- 35 Prettejohn, "The Modernism of Frederic Leighton," 33, 35, and 45.
- 36 Jongwoo Jeremy Kim, for instance, explores Leighton's "ambivalence (fear as well as longing) toward different understandings of men, conditions of their sex, their capacity for bodily desire, and their relations with one another"; see Jongwoo Jeremy Kim, *Painted Men in Britain, 1868–1918* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 9.
- 37 Jason Edwards, "The Lessons of Leighton House: Aesthetics, Politics, Erotics," in Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (eds), *Rethinking the Interior c.1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 95–98.
- 38 Mrs. R. [Emilie] Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton* (London: G. Allen, 1906), quoted in Edwards, "The Lessons of Leighton House," 102.
- 39 Edwards, "The Lessons of Leighton House," 106.
- 40 Fry, "The Case of the Late Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, O.M.," 148.

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# The Resistant Materiality of Frederic Leighton's Arab Hall

Mary Roberts

## Abstract

*Frederic Leighton's Holland Park home, a collaboration with George Aitchison, William De Morgan, and Walter Crane, was one of London's most famous nineteenth-century orientalist interiors. Built between 1877 and 1879, Leighton's Arab Hall houses historic tiles of exceptional quality from İznik, Damascus, and Persia, distinguishing his orientalist project from the homes of his peers.*

*The Arab Hall was conceived as a Gesamtkunstwerk, a secular aestheticist fantasy of suspended time in which historic Near Eastern craft production was synthesized into an harmonious aesthetic present tense. De Morgan undertook the challenge of replicating tile fragments to repair some of these historic panels. In doing so, he submitted to an apprenticeship across time, as the products of his kiln were answerable to the superb precedents of Near Eastern master craftsmen. But the dislocation of these historic tiles is often legible in their fragmentary remnants and scarred surfaces. In this article, Roberts addresses the ways in which this obdurate materiality posed an impediment to an aesthetics of synthesis.*

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## A Door to Nowhere

Upstairs at Leighton House, in the artist's studio, is a door to nowhere (Fig. 1). This oversized aperture was created in 1868 to facilitate the passage of large canvases out of the studio—the processional paintings on which Frederic Leighton (1830–1896) staked his reputation as an ambitious artist. More than ten years earlier, in Rome, Leighton had finished the first of these large works, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna* (Fig. 2), which was later characterized by his peers as “the first result of a cosmopolitan education”.<sup>1</sup> It thematizes art in transit. Leighton rendered a procession through the streets of Florence as Cimabue's painting is carried from the artist's studio to Santa Maria Novella.<sup>2</sup> It is a worldly painting about art history's generational inheritance with the young Giotto walking across the centre of the work, hand in hand with his teacher Cimabue. The radically foreshortened rendition of Cimabue's painting two-thirds of the way across this canvas, a bravura performance of Leighton's skill, was a bold claim for the young British artist's place within this august art-historical lineage.<sup>3</sup> Leighton created a geography of art practice firmly rooted in Western Europe, and this metapainting secured his claim as an ambitious history painter at a time when the efficacy of that genre of art was unsteady.



**Figure 1.** Frederic Leighton's Studio (detail of west wall), Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



**Figure 2.**

Frederic Leighton, *Cimabue's Celebrated Madonna is Carried in Procession through the Streets of Florence*, 1855, oil on canvas, 231.7 × 520.9 cm. The Royal Collection (RCIN 401478). Digital image courtesy of The Royal Collection © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

A photograph of Leighton from the early 1880s (Fig. 3) shows him at work on another of his metapaintings, *Cymon and Iphigenia* (Fig. 4). In execution and theme, it conveys the transformative power of beauty, the motivating impulse of Aestheticism. In Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the brutish Cymon is reformed by his encounter with the beautiful, sleeping Iphigenia.<sup>4</sup> Here transformation occurs at a moment of human passivity. In this otherworldly space, movement is impelled by art, nature, and the inanimate. The painting shifts from the glassy surface of Iphigenia's face and arms—an astonishing transformation of paint into soft flesh—to the painterly texture of the landscape. The drapery of the recumbent Iphigenia radiates as a force field establishing a directional flow into the pool of water that opens into our space, to the lyricism of a drapery in watery suspension at the canvas's bottom edge. The lunar metaphor for awakening, evoked by that ellipsis on the horizon touching the night sky, is accompanied by a mysterious light radiating from Iphigenia onto the base of the tree trunks behind her. The subject of this work is beauty as transformation, and it is elaborated across this painting through poetic effects of colour and light.



**Figure 3.**

Unknown photographer, Frederic Leighton in his studio working on *Cymon and Iphigenia*, Collection of National Portrait Gallery, London. Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.



**Figure 4.**

Frederic Leighton, *Cymon and Iphigenia*, 1884, oil on canvas, 163 × 328 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (210.1976). Digital image courtesy of Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Four years before Leighton created *Cymon and Iphigenia* in his Holland Park studio, the function of the door in its west wall had been obviated by the construction of his orientalist interior, the Arab Hall, between 1877 and 1879 (Figs 5 and 6). The protrusion of this domed structure, sited to the west of the studio, blocked the transit of artworks through the opening. Later, when

prints of Leighton's paintings *Solitude* (exhibition 1890, [Fig. 7](#)) and *The Bath of Psyche* (1890, [Fig. 8](#)) were hung on that door frame, it became an aestheticized threshold. The resolute interiority of *Solitude*, and the concern with verticality and painterly surface in his *Bath of Psyche*, exemplify Leighton's increasing preoccupation with art for art's sake. The contrast between these smaller aestheticist works and his ambitious history paintings is dramatic, but the distinction is by no means absolute. Indeed, as Elizabeth Prettejohn has argued, even Leighton's first processional painting, his *Cimabue*, may be said to aestheticize history painting. This is achieved by reconciling the new historicism of period specificity with the universal claims of a history painting that celebrates the aesthetic realm.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 5.**

George Aitchison, The Arab Hall exterior, street view, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



**Figure 6.**  
The Arab Hall west wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



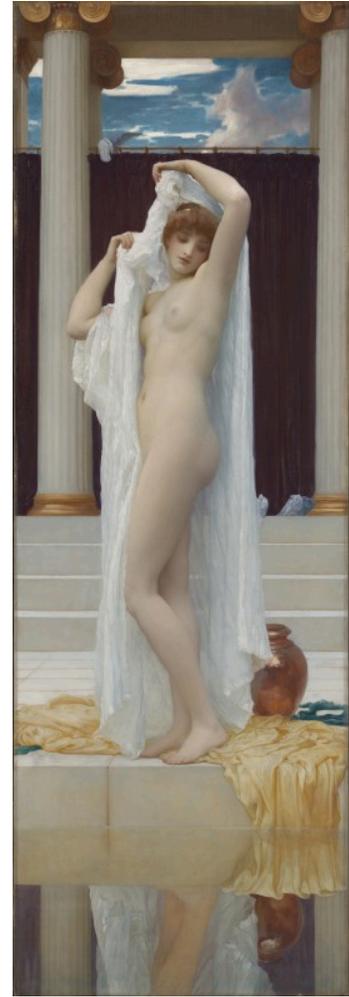
**Figure 7.**

Frederic Leighton, *Solitude*, 1890, oil on canvas, 182.8 × 91.4 cm. Collection of Maryhill Museum of Art, Goldendale, Washington (1965.02.001). Digital image courtesy of Maryhill Museum of Art.

To date, the Arab Hall, an orientalist room whose walls are encased in underglazed tiles from the Near East, complemented by windows shrouded in *mashrabiya* (lattice screens) and capped with a gilded dome, has had a minor place in the study of Leighton's concerns as a painter. With a few notable exceptions, it has been marginal within histories of Islamic art and studies of Orientalism.<sup>6</sup> In the analysis that follows, I suggest that this interior is one of Leighton's most important aestheticist works in which some of his most pressing concerns are played out. The Arab Hall was an experiment in synthesising disparate impulses: between art for art's sake as a withdrawal from the world and cosmopolitan worldliness; between interiority and exteriority; between the collector's historicist impulse towards Islamic art and its synthesis into contemporary British practice. This interior proves compelling precisely at the points where that project of synthesis falters—where historicism strains against the creative ambitions of this space—and we begin to see its disruptive fragments in the work of its British craftsmen.

Throughout this article, I will put Leighton's Arab Hall into dialogue with the other sites of art networking and creation in his home in order to understand the fluid geography of his Orientalism. It is an approach seeking to inventory the historic dynamism of the artist's studio-house and its changing relationship to cultural politics within the British imperial capital and well beyond. Leighton's house was a site of habitation and creative practice as well as an evolving work of art, a place into and out of which objects, artworks, and persons travelled. In this spirit, I read the remnant door frame in Leighton's studio as a marker of the spatio-temporal changes wrought upon this interior through construction of the Arab Hall, and as a reminder that this interpretation of his orientalist addition is attuned to the changing lines of flight within his networked interior.

During his lifetime, visiting Leighton's house became a codified experience through many published accounts. After completion of the Arab Hall, a clear trajectory establishes three zones within the space, each with a distinctive spatio-temporal logic. First, there was the grand studio upstairs at the back of the house, where the work of artistic genius promised to reveal itself through the present tense of artistic production. Given the contingency of the



**Figure 8.**

Frederic Leighton, *Bath of Psyche*, exhibited 1890, oil on canvas, 189.2 × 62.2 cm. Collection of Tate, London (N01574). Digital image courtesy of Tate, London.

painter's output, this was the most changeable of the spaces during his lifetime. Second were those rooms upstairs and down, including the stairwell (Fig. 9), whose walls were adorned with the artworks of others; these spaces situated a worldly Leighton within his local and international professional art networks and staked a claim for his studio-based practice within contemporary debates about painting *en plein air*.<sup>7</sup> Third, there were the Arab and Narcissus Halls (Fig. 10), rooms whose purpose was aesthetic experience. Paintings could not be hung on these walls because they were encased with historic tiles from the Near East. These were otherworldly dream spaces that could transport the visitor out of London.



**Figure 9.**

Photograph of staircase in Leighton House showing where the portraits of Richard Burton and Frederic Leighton were hung during Leighton's lifetime, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



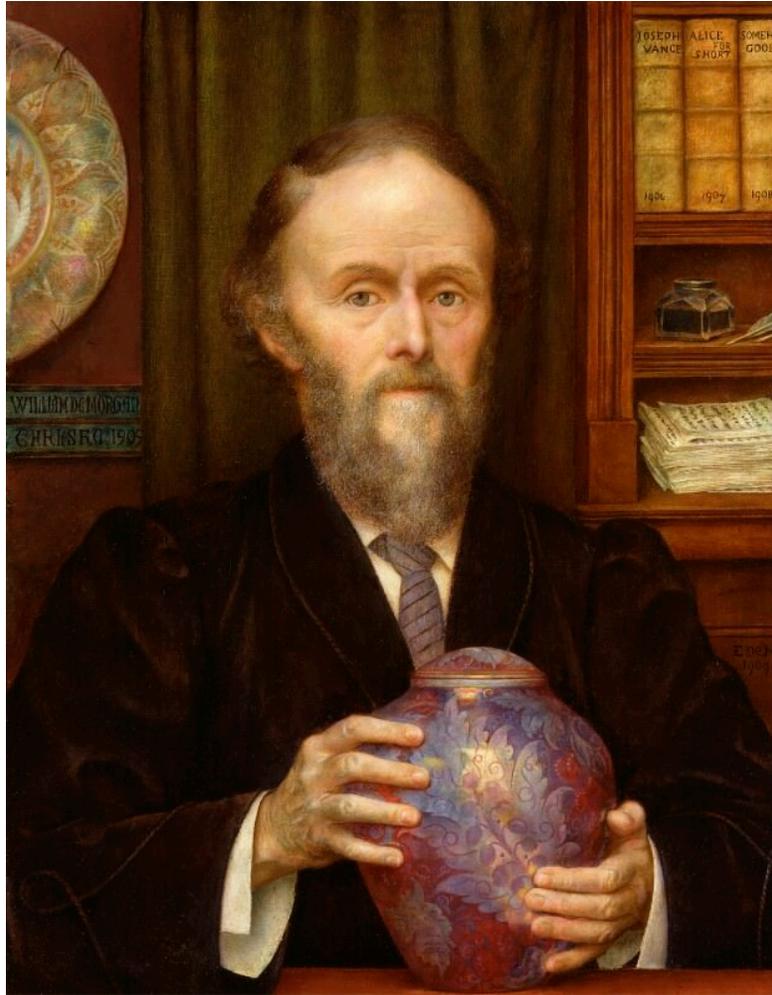
**Figure 10.**

The Narcissus Hall, Leighton House (view of the east wall and staircase), Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

Leighton performed his interior, like a maestro, conducting his visitors through the space, weaving stories of the objects and travels that fuelled his creative practice. In some of these accounts, his affect and sartorial choices were as worthy of artistic note as the interior itself.<sup>8</sup> But I resist a narrative that unifies this interior under the authorial sign of Frederic Leighton. The creation of this space was a collaboration between Leighton, his architect George Aitchison (Fig. 11), ceramicist William De Morgan (Fig. 12), and Walter Crane, among others.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of more than 1,000 tiles from İznik, Damascus, and Persia made by unknown master craftsmen begs the question as to what role their creative practice plays in this space. This article assays the contribution and commitments of this range of practitioners within this creative matrix by exploring the processes of making the Arab Hall. In part, it is an art-historical experiment in looking as a craftsman looks.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 11.** Lawrence Alma-Tadema, George Aitchison, R.A., P.R.I.B.A., 1900, oil on canvas, 151 × 125 cm. RIBA Collections (PCF4). Digital image courtesy of RIBA Collections.



**Figure 12.**

Evelyn De Morgan, William De Morgan, oil on canvas, 1909, 68.8 × 54.8 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG6358). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.

## Collecting and Painting



**Figure 13.**

Frederic Leighton, Portrait of Sir Richard Francis Burton, 1872-1875, oil on canvas, 61 × 51 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 1070). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.

Consider the decade before the Arab Hall's construction, when Leighton was amassing the historic Islamic art that he used to create these rooms. This was also the period in which he worked on a portrait of the renowned Orientalist Richard Burton (Fig. 13). Both became central to Leighton's orientalist Aestheticism. Among the many pieces of Islamic art that Leighton amassed, including stained-glass windows and the *mashrabiya*, I conjecture that it was the historic wall tiles that placed the greatest demands on these British artists. <sup>11</sup>

Sourcing, restoring, and resolving the placement of these tiles within the interior proved most challenging for Leighton and his collaborators. The majority are polychromatic underglaze Damascus tiles, with a smaller number of blue and white underglaze sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

İznik pieces. There are two Persian lustreware tiles (Fig. 14), four Persian figurative tiles (Fig. 15), and one Mamluk underglaze tile. They came from domestic and sacred contexts and were mostly sourced from within the Ottoman Empire. Leighton saw spectacular examples of Ottoman tile panelling during his first trip to Istanbul and Bursa in 1867. In the former Ottoman capital of Bursa he created an oil sketch of the *madrassa* within the Muradiye mosque complex (Figs 16 and 17). The intimacy of this enclosed courtyard setting and the recessed tiled walls resonates with his Arab Hall project. Within the grounds of the Muradiye mosque complex, Leighton probably saw İznik tile panels such as those within the tomb of Sultan Süleyman's son Şehzade Mustafa, some of the most refined Ottoman İznik tile production (Figs 18 and 19).



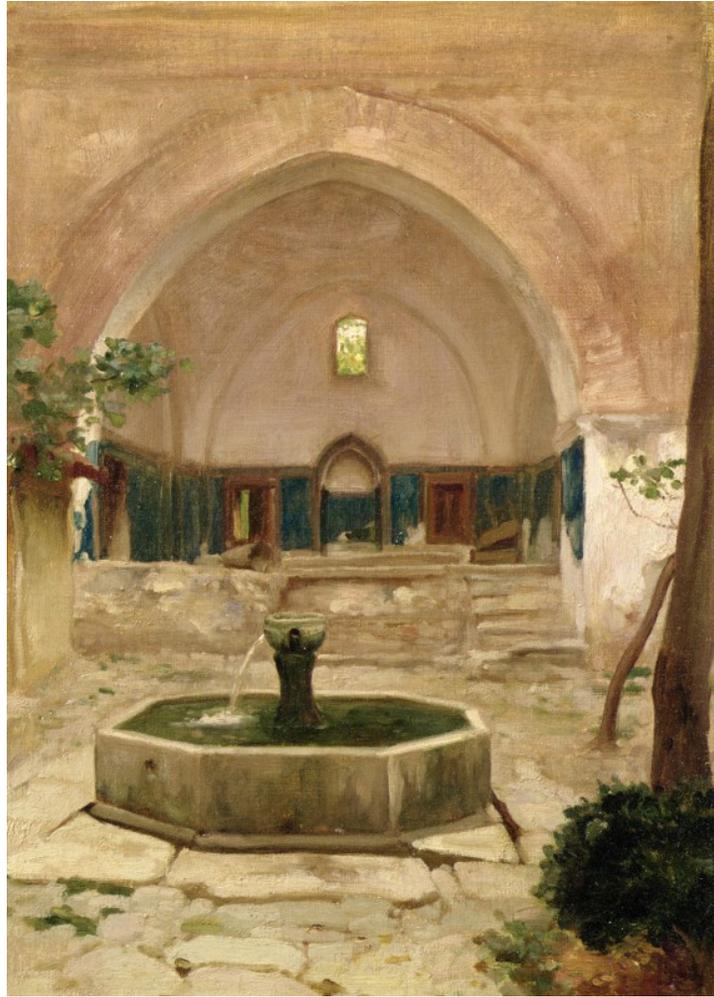
**Figure 14.**

The Arab Hall, Kashan tile, west wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



**Figure 15.**

The Arab Hall, four Kubachi tiles, west wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



**Figure 16.**

Frederic Leighton, Muradiye madrasa courtyard (erroneously titled Courtyard of a Mosque at Broussa), 1867, oil on canvas, 36.3 × 26.4 cm. The Higgins Bedford (P.632). Digital image courtesy of The Higgins Bedford / Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 17.**

View of madrasa courtyard with fountain in the centre, looking towards the domed classroom to the south, Muradiye complex, Bursa, Turkey, 1426-28. Digital image courtesy of Aga Khan Visual Archive, MIT / Photo: Beatrice St. Laurent.



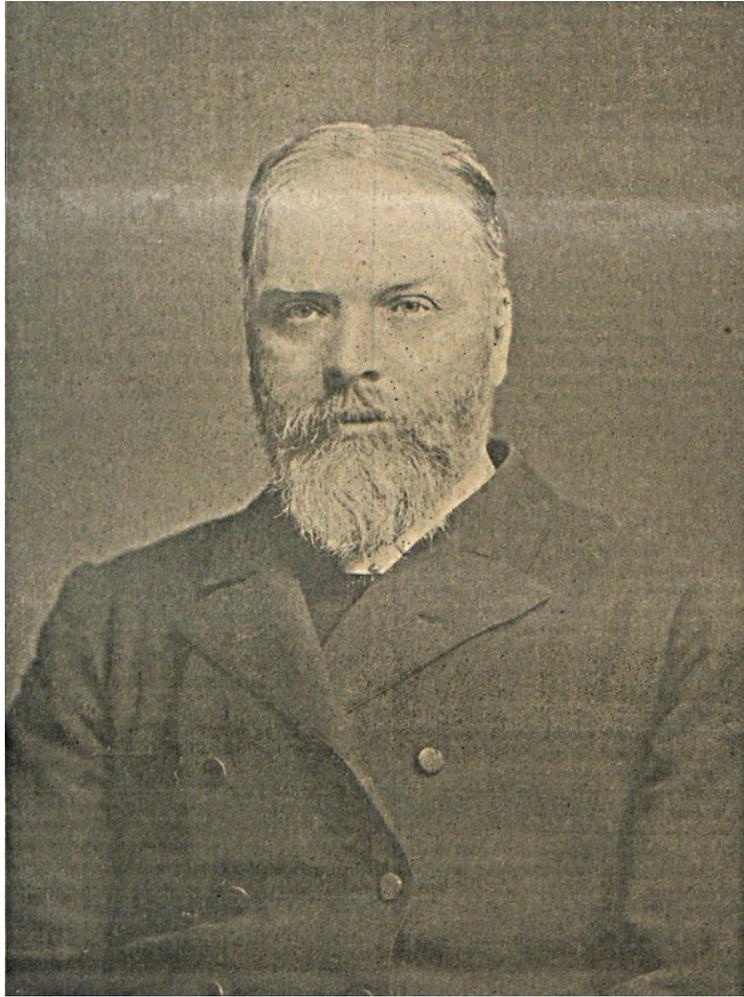
**Figure 18.**  
Interior of Tomb of Sultan Süleyman's son Şehzade Mustafa, Bursa,  
Turkey, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mary Roberts.



**Figure 19.**

Exterior of Tomb of Sultan Süleyman's son Şehzade Mustafa, Bursa, Turkey, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Mary Roberts.

Leighton admired the interiors he saw during his travels in the Near East and even purchased some tiles while abroad. But he quickly realized that in order to get sufficient historic pieces for his interior, he needed access to better local networks.<sup>12</sup> He came to rely on: William Wright (Fig. 20), a missionary and amateur antiquarian based in Damascus from 1865 to 1875; Richard Burton, a diplomat, explorer, and scholar of Arabic culture; and Caspar Purdon Clarke (Fig. 21), a scholar, later keeper and then Director of the South Kensington Museum.<sup>13</sup> The precise locations and transactions for the acquisition of the tiles that fill Leighton House are difficult to determine. This relatively inchoate period for the history of collecting Islamic art compels the art historian to become a travelling detective piecing together dispersed clues. In this context, the question of who valued what and when is both urgent and often elusive.



**Figure 20.**

Unknown photographer, Portrait of William Wright , in *Missionary Herald of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland*, 2 October 1899.



**Figure 21.**

Benjamin Stone, Caspar Purdon Clarke, platinum print, 7 August 1901, 20.3 mm x 15.6 cm. Collection of National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG x44613). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.

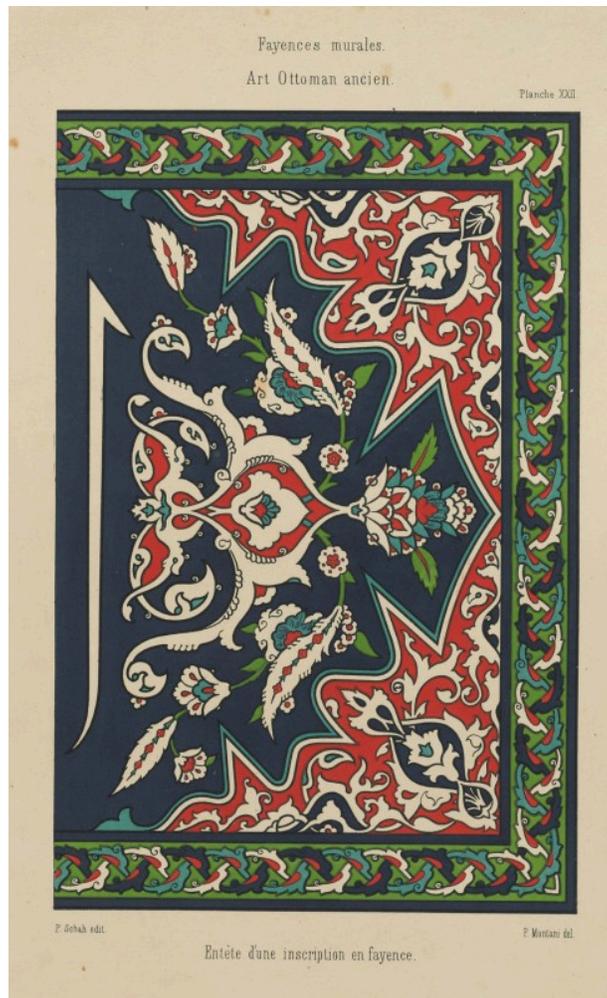
The wall tiles that came from religious structures, of which there are quite a few in the Arab Hall, are the most contentious. Local dealers, officials, and caretakers of such sites sometimes facilitated the dislodgement and sale of tiles. But there was often local opposition to their removal. Although Ottoman legislation during this period was concerned primarily with the unauthorized removal of antiquities from within its domain, objects removed from Islamic religious buildings were not allowed to pass through Ottoman customs.<sup>14</sup> Burton's letter to Leighton discloses the role of local custodians when he writes that his friends, Charles Drake and Edward Palmer, "were lucky enough when at Jerusalem to nobble a score or so from the so-called Mosque of Omar. Large stores are there found, but unhappily under charge of the Wakf and I fancy that long payments would be required."<sup>15</sup> He was referring to the surplus İznik tiles created during Sultan Süleyman's restoration of the

Dome of the Rock (Fig. 22) in the mid-sixteenth century and in the care of its religious foundation. This important Ottoman imperial project was an impetus for expansion in both the ceramic workshops in İznik and tile making in Syria.<sup>16</sup> What Burton elides here in this assessment of local profiteering is the Ottoman Empire's role in the restoration of this historic religious site in the nineteenth century. During this period, a restoration, commenced under Sultan Abdülmecid in 1853, was completed by Sultan Abdülaziz between 1873 and 1875. Restoration of this pre-eminent site was part of Ottoman statecraft and the Empire's increasing administrative centralization of its provinces during the Tanzimat.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Leighton's collecting in the 1870s occurred in the context of a growing recognition of the historic and aesthetic value of Ottoman revetment tiles by Ottoman authorities and intellectuals, a change exemplified by the publication of *L'Architecture Ottomane* in 1873 (Figs 23 and 24).<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 22.**

The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Maureen Ruddy Burkhart Photography.



**Figure 23.**

Victor-Marie de Launay *et al.*, *Usul-i Mi'mari-i 'Osmani* [The Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture] / *L'architecture ottomane* / *Die ottomanische Baukunst*, (Istanbul: Imprimerie et lithographie centrales, 1873), *Fayences murales*, Planche 22. Collection of Fine Arts Library, Harvard University. Digital image courtesy of Fine Arts Library, Harvard University.

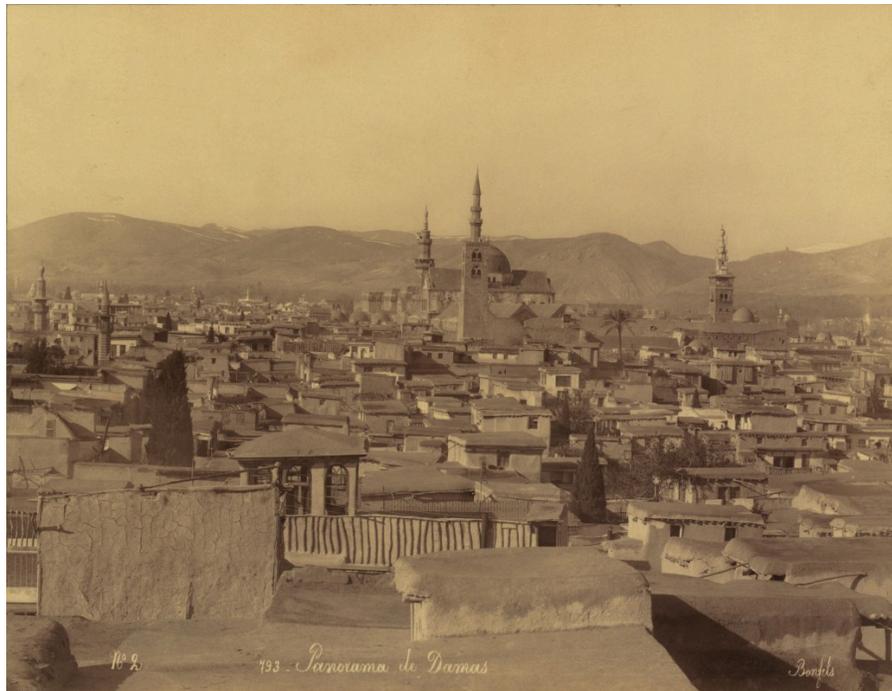


**Figure 24.**

Victor-Marie de Launay *et al.*, *Usul-i Mi'mari-i 'Osmani* [The Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture] / *L'architecture ottomane* / *Die ottomanische Baukunst*, (Istanbul: Imprimerie et lithographie centrales, 1873), *Fayences murales*, Planche 2. Collection of Fine Arts Library, Harvard University. Digital image courtesy of Fine Arts Library, Harvard University.

The majority of Leighton's panels came from Damascus at a time when many historic domestic interiors were dismantled in part to satisfy demand by European collectors (Fig. 25). Burton wrote to Leighton from Damascus on 22 March 1871 offering to "have a house pulled down". Burton also reveals how competitive this market for tiles was because "The bric a brac sellers have quite learned their value and demand extravagant sums for poor articles. Of course you want good old specimens and these are waxing very rare."<sup>19</sup> Burton had been recalled from Damascus by the time Leighton visited the city in 1873, so Leighton reciprocated his friend's efforts to procure these rare tiles with the gift of an oil sketch of the diplomat's former home in Damascus (Fig. 26). In 1873, his local host was instead the long-standing Damascus resident, William Wright. At this time, the city was still reeling from the effects of the political upheavals of the 1860s.<sup>20</sup> Wright recognized that these tumultuous political circumstances conditioned the supply side of

this local market for historic items, noting that: “the spoils of the late massacre were still in concealment ... Through friends, however, [Leighton and I] got access to several stores of gold-embroidered fabrics and costly oriental robes”. Wright’s knowledge “of the ancient pottery kilns at Damascus, where the inimitable *kishani* wares had been baked” gave Leighton access to “tiles and plates and long-necked jars with blue ground and white flowers, and during the spare hours of a few weeks Leighton was able to lay the foundation of his fine collection.” <sup>21</sup>



**Figure 25.**

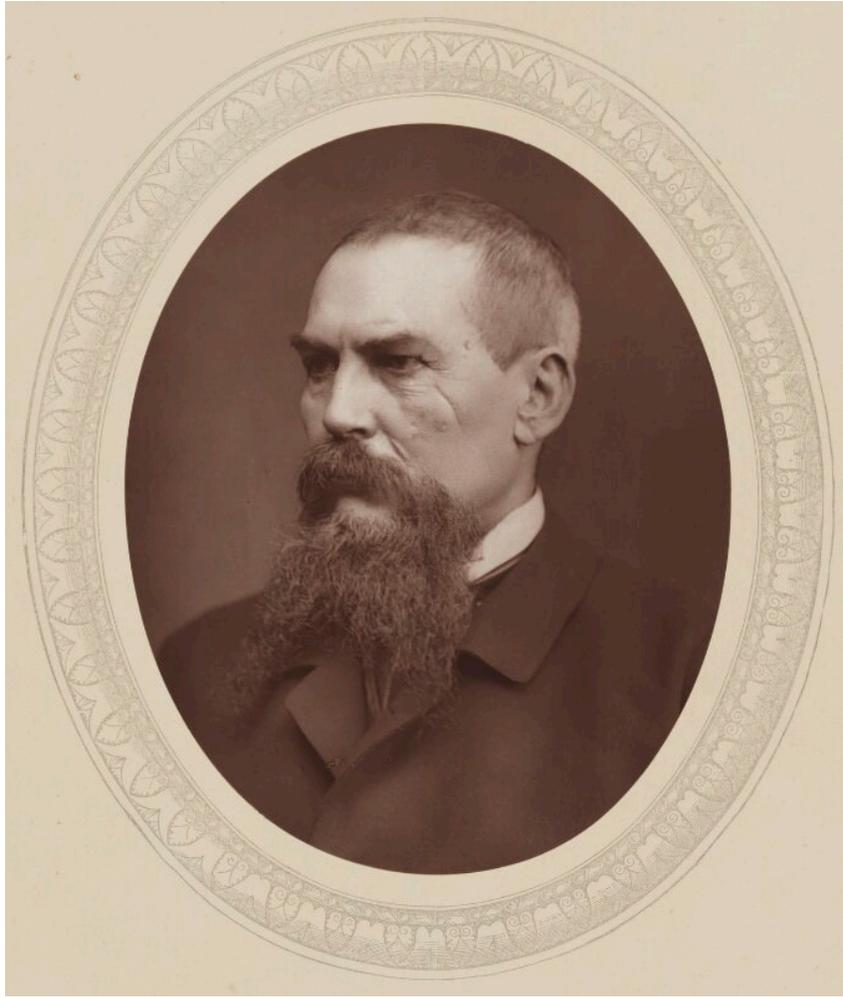
Maison Bonfils, Panorama of Damascus, circa 1867–1899, albumen print. Collection of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington (LOT 13550, no. 252 [P&P]). Digital image courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.



**Figure 26.**

Frederic Leighton, Richard and Isabel Burton's House at Damascus, 1873, oil on canvas, 20 x 23 cm. Richmond Upon Thames Borough Art Collection (LDORL: 00553L). Digital image courtesy of Richmond Upon Thames Borough Art Collection.

These documentary fragments reveal the destruction that was part of this collecting process when it involved wall tiles. It is not the disrupted integrity of the local structures that concerned these men, but rather that the damaged fragments would not suit Leighton's purpose.<sup>22</sup> Burton reported from Trieste on 13 July 1876 that: "the tiles are packed, and will be sent by the first London steamer—opportunities are rare here. Some are perfect, many are broken, but they will make a bit of mosaic after a little trimming."<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 27.**

Lock and Whitfield, published by Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, Sir Richard Francis Burton, published 1876, woodburytype, 11.2 × 9 cm. Collection National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG Ax17479). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.



**Figure 28.**

Peter Lely, Portrait of Oliver Cromwell, 1650, oil on canvas, 73.5 × 61 cm. Collection of Palazzo Pitti, Florence (Inv. No. 408). Digital image courtesy of DeAgostini Picture Library / Scala, Florence © 2018.

When this letter arrived in London, Leighton was basking in the critical success at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of his portrait of Burton. Rendering the battle-scarred face of this Orientalist adventurer took many years to complete, over which time Burton's scar, resulting from a Somali attack in Berbera in 1855, became crucial to Leighton's aesthetics. Comparing Burton's photographic (Fig. 27) and painterly scar reveals the painter's editorial process, as one rather than three scars are visible.<sup>24</sup> Leighton's isolated painted scar maintains a sinuous line that elegantly contours the left cheek, widening and softening as it joins the dark shadow of Burton's cheekbone. It is an aestheticized wound. The red skin pleats time and space; it is an affective intensification in paint that compels the viewer's gaze through visceral proximity to adventure and risk.

Burton's skin is a bravura demonstration of Leighton's impasto brushwork and subtle colouring that invokes skin marked by age and adventure. Some saw an historic precedent in Lely's portrait of Cromwell with its dermal anomalies (Fig. 28).<sup>25</sup> Others asserted that the portrait's "strength of character" injected vigour into Leighton's practice. *The Saturday Review* wrote that: "To gain power, he exchanges his usually smooth surface for a rough texture loaded with pigments which stand out in absolute relief; thus extremes meet."<sup>26</sup> Even the critic, who found fault with "a certain shininess of superficial effect", subscribed to a notion of the painting's living skin, conjecturing that this defect in the work "will perhaps wear off in time".<sup>27</sup> Such entanglements of paintings and bodies anticipate Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). The portrait was even said to have had a redeeming effect on Leighton's much criticized large processional painting, *Daphnephoria* that he also exhibited in 1876 (Fig. 29). *The Graphic* wrote that it was:

one of the most vigorous and masculine portraits of the year. Something may be due to the strength of the subject, but the painter should have his share of the credit, all the more that the "Daphnephoria", gracefully decorative as it is, shows exclusively the less manly ... side of Mr. Leighton's art.<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 29.**

Frederic Leighton, *The Daphnephoria*, 1874-1876, oil on canvas, 231 × 525 cm. Collection of Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool (LL 3632). Digital image courtesy of Lady Lever Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool / Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 30.**

George Frederic Watts, Portrait of Frederic Leighton, 1871, 64.5 × 52 cm. Collection of Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

The Burton portrait lends our cosmopolitan painter a stern worldliness. Risk has become red paint, in layered substrata on canvas that are now the rugged beauty of both Burton and Leighton. No wonder Leighton continued to hold this portrait close, hanging it in his stairway near a portrait of himself by George Frederic Watts (Fig. 30). Visitors encountered it as they moved between the artist's Arab Hall and his studio. During Leighton's lifetime, the portrait remained in his possession; it was understood by the Burtons that this important work would eventually be left to the nation.

An illustration of the Burton portrait on an easel in Leighton's studio published in the *Building News* of December 1876 (Fig. 31) is a provoking condensation of ideas about the aesthetic work of this portrait. Here the painting has picked up speed through its dramatically foreshortened

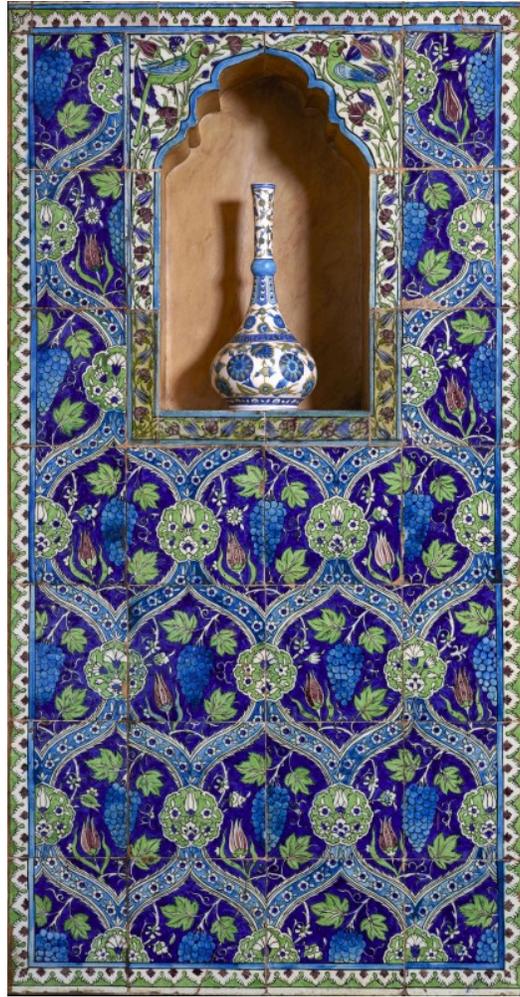
incarnation cutting its way through the left side of the image, converging at the edge of the door used to remove large paintings, as if poised to leave the studio through this aperture. The portrait seems to have taken the place of his large canvases in its ambitions and its effects in the world.



**Figure 31.**

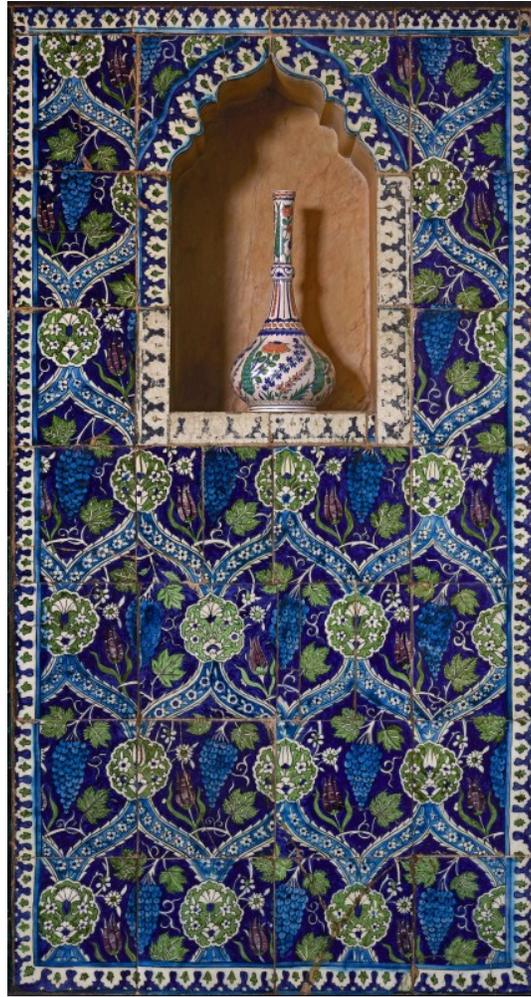
The Studio of Fredk Leighton Esqre R.A., in *The Building News*, 22 December 1876. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.

In the same month that this illustration was published, Caspar Purdon Clarke set out on a purchasing trip to the Near East.<sup>29</sup> He augmented the South Kensington Museum's holdings of what was becoming the most significant collection of Damascus tiles outside Syria. He also purchased the two late sixteenth-century Syrian tile panels that were used to establish symmetry on the west wall of the Arab Hall (Figs 32 and 33). By this time, Leighton had what was needed to create his orientalist interior, and so building commenced in 1877.



**Figure 32.**

The Arab Hall (left face), Syrian tile panel, west wall. Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



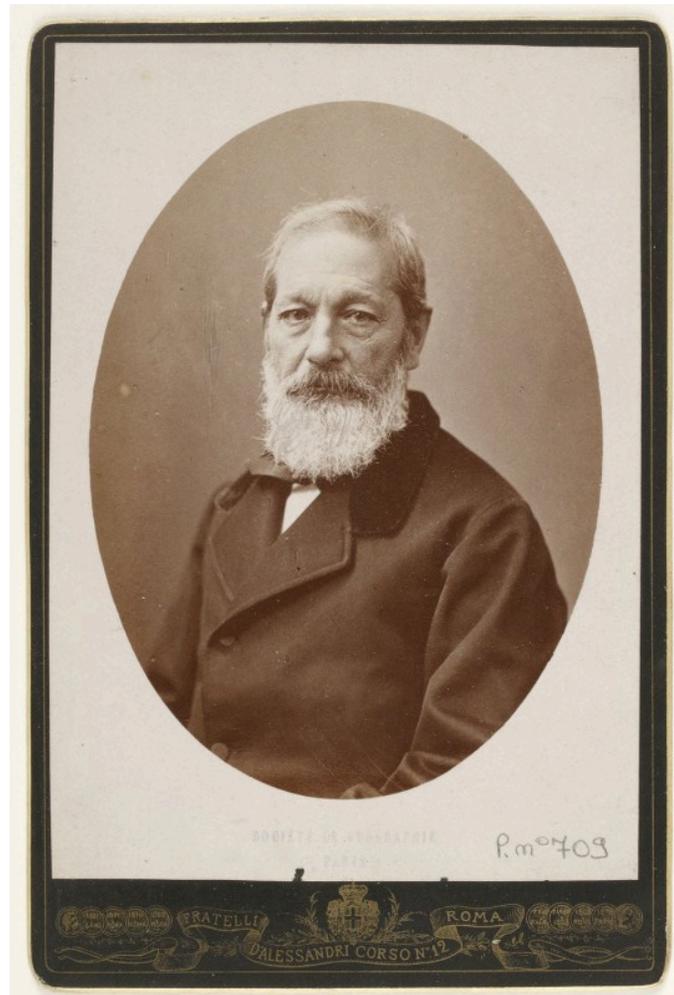
**Figure 33.**

The Arab Hall (right face), Syrian tile panel, west wall. Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.

## **Fictional Histories and Failures in Translation**

Numerous visitors to Leighton's house assumed the famous Nasrid Alhambra Palace in Granada was the inspiration for the Arab Hall. Others, who were better informed, understood that La Zisa, the twelfth-century Arabo-Norman summer palace in Palermo, was the main prototype.<sup>30</sup> Leighton's artistic centre of gravity was Italy, so it is not surprising that medieval Palermo was the template for his orientalist interior.<sup>31</sup> Palermo was a port city, a long-standing site of cultural traffic across the Mediterranean. Its hybrid aesthetic forms were rendered part of Sicily's picturesque history in nineteenth-century British illustrated travelogues. But La Zisa was an unsteady historical referent, for its cultural attribution had been a matter of academic dispute

since the late eighteenth century. Its historiography has elements of yet another academic detective story with counterfeited documents, fictional histories, and failures in translation.



**Figure 34.**

Fratelli d'Alessandri, Michele Amari, 1882, photograph. Collection of Bibliothèque nationale de France BnF (SG PORTRAIT-709). Digital image courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France BnF.

Disagreements hinged on whether this structure was built during the period of Islamic or Norman rule in Sicily. In 1795, the prevailing opinion that it was a Muslim palace was unsteady and Professor Giuseppe Vella was convicted of counterfeiting the Arabic documents on which his attribution was based.

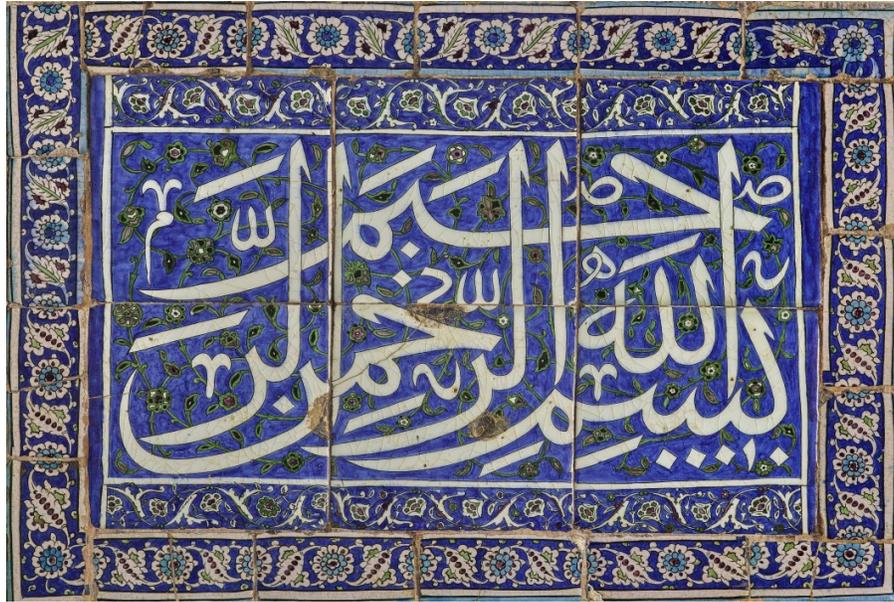
<sup>32</sup> From then on, debates focused on the damaged kufic inscriptions—untranslated, they self-evidently declared it an Arab building. In 1827, however, Salvatore Morso threw the Muslim origins into doubt, convinced he had deciphered the name of the Norman King Roger in the kufic, though his translation later proved incorrect. <sup>33</sup> The puzzle was finally

solved by Michele Amari (Fig. 34), whose accurate translation established that the building was erected under the patronage of the Norman King William I and completed by his son William II. Amari's findings were disseminated in his book *The Arabic Epigraphs of Sicily* published in 1875, two years before the Arab Hall was built.<sup>34</sup> When British readers encountered Gally Knight's rendition of the site in 1838, they understood that they were looking at the villa of a Moorish prince (Fig. 35).<sup>35</sup> Within a few decades, however, it became a legacy of the Norman conquest, thus bringing the structure a little closer to home through links to Britain's own Norman history.



**Figure 35.**

The Hall in the Palace of La Ziza Palermo, in *Saracenic and Norman Remains to illustrate The Normans in Sicily* by Henry Gally Knight (London: John Murray, 1840). Digital image courtesy of MIT Libraries.



**Figure 36.**

The Arab Hall, north wall (left face), Panel of six calligraphic tiles, the bismillah, Damascus mid-sixteenth century, with a border of seventeenth-century tiles. Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.

Just as classical Ottoman architecture and its tiled ornament were embraced by the Ottoman Imperial authorities in the 1870s—part of a new historicism that bolstered the Ottoman Imperial self-image—so too La Zisa was being remade for the project of Sicilian patriotism by Michele Amari. He was a man of the barricades as well as a scholar, an Italian nationalist who worked in exile in Paris after his involvement in the 1848 uprisings. Amari supported Sicilian resistance to Bourbon occupation. La Zisa and other Arabo-Norman structures were entangled in these nationalist aspirations that evolved as the political events of the Risorgimento unfolded. In Amari's writings, they stood for Sicily's unique character due to its variegated Mediterranean history.

Today, La Zisa is understood to have been made by Muslim craftsmen working under Norman patronage.<sup>36</sup> Recently, divergent academic interpretations of the building have pivoted around patterns of cross-cultural transfer. Within histories of Islamic art, the prevailing view that Muslim influence was evidence of a unidirectional cultural transfer to Sicily from centres of the Islamic world is being challenged by the notion that these patterns of translation were multidirectional, as ornamental forms in Palermo appeared in later buildings in Damascus and Cairo.<sup>37</sup>

By the time building commenced on Leighton's Arab Hall in 1877, the attribution puzzle had been solved, but the rich narrative of the interpretive instabilities of this transcultural architecture pertains to our thinking about

the imaginative geography of Leighton's hall. In particular, the Arabic inscriptions (Fig. 36) hover between decoration and legibility, depending upon the visitor's linguistic skills.



**Figure 37.**

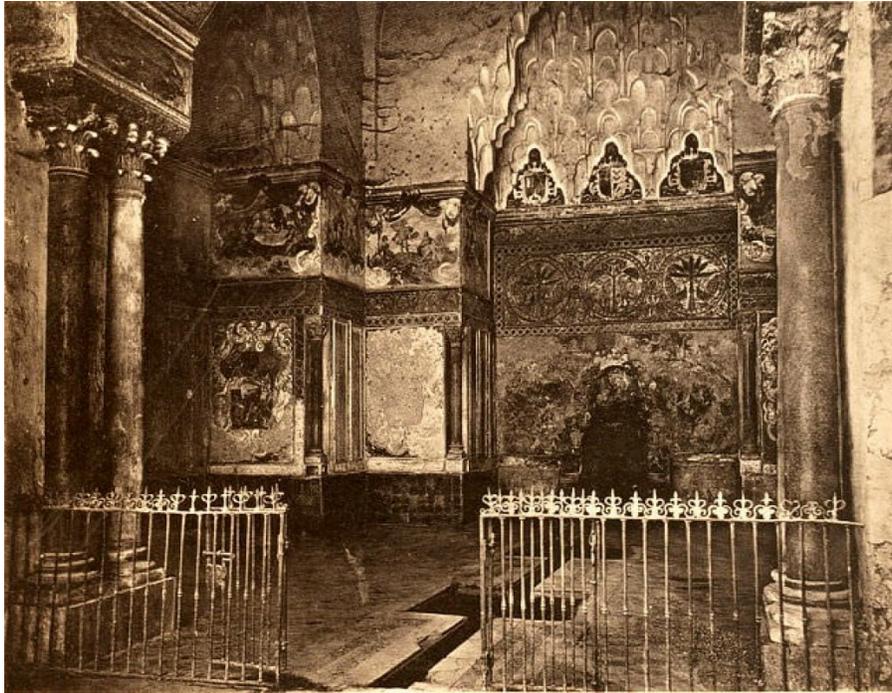
Main Reception Hall, La Zisa, Palermo, photograph. Digital image courtesy of Catherine Blake.

While drawing on the geometry of La Zisa's Fountain Hall, Aitchison created an interior with a more internally focused logic. The self-contained pool in the Arab Hall retreats from its urban context, whereas La Zisa's water channels flowed into a garden (Figs 37, 38 and 39). So too the complex geometry of the *muqarnas* that finesses the transitions between wall and ceiling in La Zisa has been reduced to truncated horizontal fragments.<sup>38</sup> Aitchison disdained slavishly copying past styles, and so the interior is a synthesis derived from multiple Mediterranean sources.<sup>39</sup> Leighton distanced himself from realist Orientalism, insisting he did not intend to become "a painter of Bedouins".<sup>40</sup> As Leighton saw it, in his Arab Hall, historic fragments were put into service: "for the sake of something beautiful to look at".<sup>41</sup> An historicist impulse of admiring collected treasures is ideally subsumed within aesthetic experience.



**Figure 38.**

Giuseppe Incorpora, La Zisa Castello Saraceno, Palermo, circa 1860-1879, photograph. Collection of Canadian Institute of Photography, National Gallery of Canada. Digital image courtesy of Canadian Institute of Photography, National Gallery of Canada.



**Figure 39.**

View of the central hall of La Zisa, in *Meisterwerke saracenischnormannischer Kunst in Sicilien und Unteritalien* by T. Kutschmann, Berlin, 1900, plate 21. Digital image courtesy of The Medieval Kingdom of Sicily Image Database, Duke University, <http://kos.aahvs.duke.edu/> (CC-BY-NC 4.0 license).

## An Aesthetics of Synthesis

Published accounts by visitors disclose the experiential poetics of this Orientalism. For them, the Arab Hall functioned as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that existed under the impulse of the beautiful. In 1882, Mary Eliza Haweis offered an aestheticist reading of this space, not dissecting the interior but instead evoking its points of interest. Beginning in the Narcissus Hall, she declared it a compelling affective interpretation of the classical theme that eschews narrative in favour of dispersed colour and light. Haweis praised its poetic originality: it is not:

repeating point-blank the hackneyed tale, or showing the fair boy adoring his mirror'd self in the "*lily-paven lake*", but just recalling it piecemeal—the lilies in the pavement, the shining lake above [in the gilded ceiling], and all the joy and sorrow, the luxury and pain of his loneliness and aberration, told by the colours, the purple and the gloom, and by the boy's own attitude. <sup>42</sup>

Architecture becomes an experience of pure colour. She continues:

The deep shades of the corners are filled with tarsia work and porcelain; but, as in a well-coloured picture, these are absolutely subservient; and the impression given is purple, like a Greek midnight, circling round a point of softest green (the bronze boy), and falling into a warm grey on the floor. <sup>43</sup>

This reading of a narcissistically absorbing interior, where abstracted effects of light and colour are more compelling than narrative, accords with the aesthetic experience Leighton evoked in his odalisque painting, *Light of the Harem* (1880, Fig. 40), which was created in the studio upstairs after the construction of his Arab Hall. This painting withholds the mirrored image of our absorbed odalisque and instead shows us the fascinating colour and pattern of the fabric she holds; our eye is drawn downwards to the exquisitely embroidered sleeve of her gown and onwards to the back of the beautiful gold embroidered cloak of her young assistant. Fields of patterned paint are the subject of this work. This painting was on the easel in Leighton's studio when the American writer Julian Hawthorne visited, and for him the painting anticipated a luxurious aestheticist interior (as if it were incomplete without it). He expressed a desire "to own that picture, with a house suitable to put it in" and later speculated that "perhaps it hangs in the smoking-room of some American millionaire". <sup>44</sup>



**Figure 40.**  
Frederic Leighton, *Light of the Harem*, 1880, oil on canvas, 152.4 × 83.8 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Julian Hartnoll / Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 41.**

Frederic Leighton, *Sun Gleams* (Arab Hall), 1884, oil on canvas, 83.82 × 40.64 cm, in *The Art-Journal*, 1891, 139. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board.



**Figure 42.**

The Arab Hall, west wall, niche Left side, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.

*Sun Gleams (Arab Hall)* of 1884 is the only painting in which Leighton directly rendered his Arab Hall as a site for his aestheticist experiments (Fig. 41). At some stage in its creation, Leighton must have moved from his studio down into the Arab Hall to render the tile panel in the north wall alcove (Fig 42). Unlike other realist renditions of tiled interiors by Orientalist painters such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, John Frederick Lewis, or Frank Dillon, Leighton renders his tiles in thick impasto.<sup>45</sup> In doing so, he repairs the tiles on canvas and harmonizes a panel that had been assembled in the Arab Hall from disparate tiles. The cascading fabric that flows from the recess of the alcove past the odalisque's foot and out of the picture on the lower left, binds persons and things in a dreamy, painterly ambience that has parallels with Julian Hawthorne's evocation of the state of reverie experienced by his female companion, Eustacia, in the Arab Hall. She longed to recline with her guitar in one of its alcoves. This absorption in a timeless and placeless orientalist

dream space was interrupted by colonial economic realities in the British imperial capital: fellow visitor M.P. George Otto Trevelyan broke the spell by inviting Julian Hawthorne and Eustacia to that evening's parliamentary debate about the costs of the Afghan War. <sup>46</sup>

In his account of the Arab Hall in 1881, Wilfrid Meynell imagines a Persian man of taste; like Leighton's odalisques, he is an abstracted person from a mythical Near East. The figurative tiles prompt him to reflect on their origin in another interior commissioned by this "long dead and gone Moslem, who owned a stately pleasure-dome like this of Sir Frederic Leighton's, who had cultivated tastes and was a patron of the arts." <sup>47</sup> This ghostly "Persian patron", vague and timeless, forms a counterpoint to Persian art patronage under the Qajars, a contemporaneous modernizing project accompanied by texts that position its rulers within a historically specific lineage. So too does this unnamed Persian contrast with the visceral immediacy of Burton's portrait in the nearby stairwell.

In the Arab Hall, abstract effects of colour are staged through an orchestration of light. The gilded dome dissolves the weight of architecture as stained-glass windows transform light into coloured gems (Fig. 43). In 1892, Harry How conveyed the visual and aural dimensions of this experience:

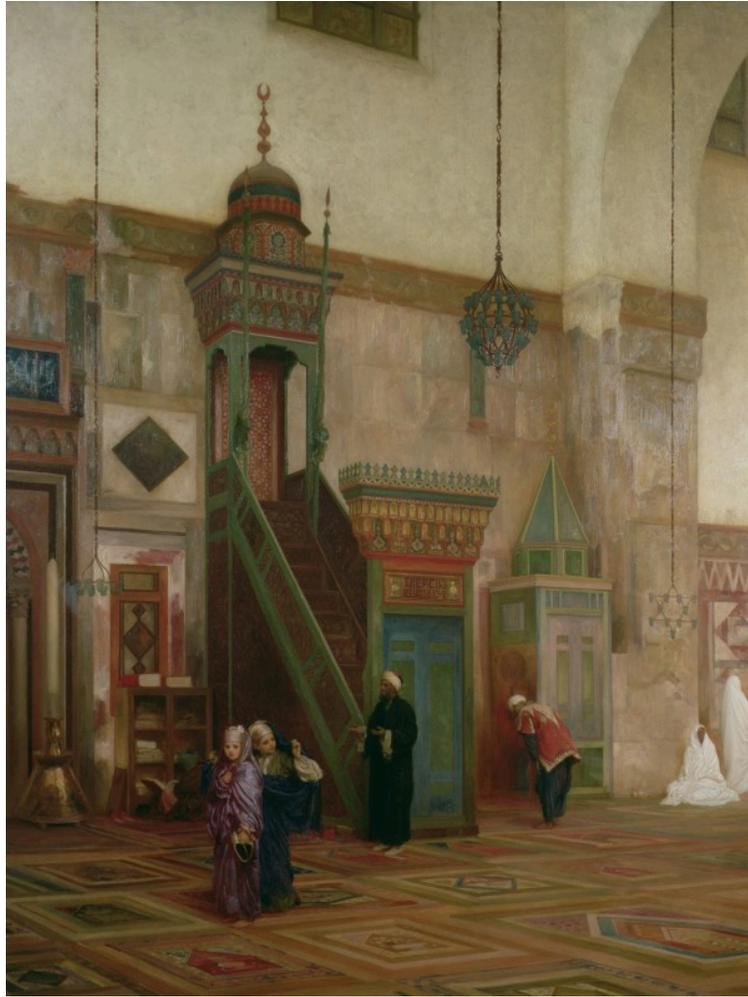
I stand beneath the great gilt dome, and the sun which is shining causes it to sparkle with a thousand gems. On looking up the dome seems to lose itself far away, so delicate and ingenious is the construction and colouring of it. It is a place in which to sit down and dream, for there is not a sound except the gentle splashing of the spray from the fountain. <sup>48</sup>

There are numerous precedents for the poetics of light in Islamic religious structures, where architectural effects of radiance were often accompanied by images of the hanging lamp in a niche and calligraphic inscriptions of the "Light Verse" from the Qur'an (Sura 24:35) linking luminosity, Allah, and paradise. Leighton saw mosques and tombs where such messages were architecturally encoded. After visiting Damascus in 1873, he celebrated the effects of light and colour in that city's Great Umayyad Mosque in his painting of its *qibla* wall, *Portions of the Interior of the Grand Mosque of Damascus* (1873-1875, Fig. 44). <sup>49</sup>



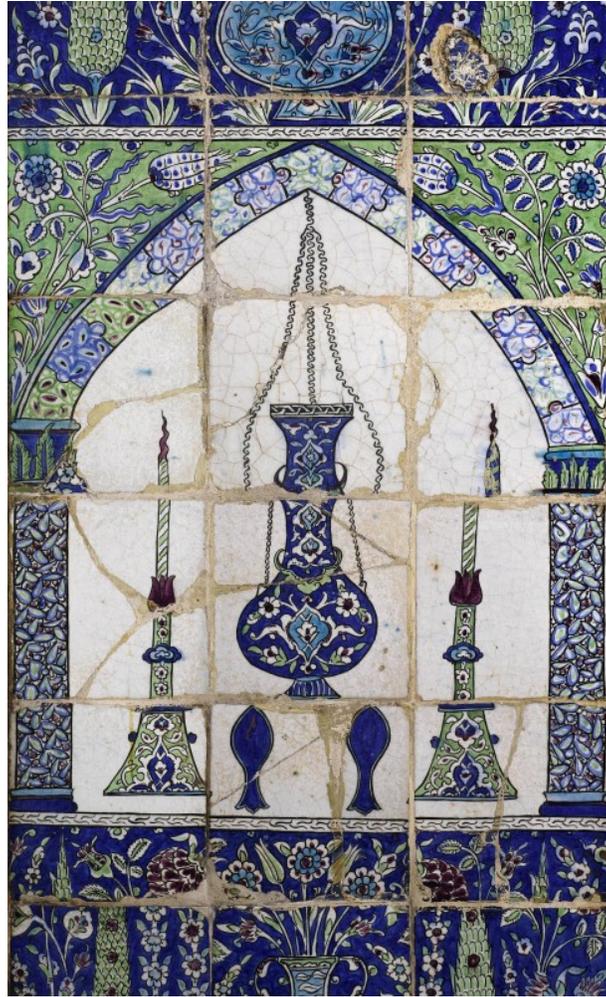
**Figure 43.**

The Arab Hall, dome, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



**Figure 44.**

Frederic Leighton, Portions of the Interior of the Grand Mosque of Damascus, 1873-1875, oil on canvas, 158.1 x 122 cm. Collection of Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, Lancashire (PRSMG: P366). Digital image courtesy of Harris Museum and Art Gallery / Bridgeman Images.



**Figure 45.**

The Arab Hall, Mosque lamp panel, east wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.

The mosque lamp panel on the east wall (Fig. 45) brings this Islamic iconography into the Arab Hall, while displacing its numinous connotations in favour of secular Aestheticism. Close scrutiny shows that it is an amalgam formed from a larger series of panels. The disjointed candle on the right, the discontinuous chain suspending the lamp in the middle, and the disrupted left curve of the arch speak to the ruptures of this transposition. But those inclined towards an aestheticist reading of the Arab Hall saw no such disjunctions. For them, synthesis in this interior created a harmony that dissolves temporal distance between the historic tiles and the contemporary British interior. The French architect Auguste Choisy expressed this effect of collapsed time, writing that: “the harmony is so perfect that one asks oneself if the architecture has been conceived for the enamels or the enamels for the hall.” <sup>50</sup>

## The Craftsman and the Scar

While the reception hall at La Zisa provided a regular geometric template for harmonizing the historic tiles that were transposed into this modern interior, the tile panels have an ontology of stasis that is to be reckoned with. Ceramic vases, jugs, and other products of the Damascus and Iznik potters kilns were designed to be on the move, whereas wall tiles created for specific sites have a greater resistance to mobility. The Arab Hall's tile panels were contrived for other interiors, and there are many partial panels in this room. Their history of dislocation from other walls is legible in their fragmentary remnants and scarred surfaces. This obdurate materiality posed an impediment to an aesthetics of synthesis.

Meynell understood this challenge when he wrote that:

the task of adapting separate pieces to the walls without breaking the design, after the chances and hazards of collection and transportation, was no easy matter ... Often, of course, a tile necessary to the continuity of the pattern was wanting, and there was then nothing for it but to call in modern Occidental skill. This has been supplied by Mr. William de Morgan (son of the late famous mathematician), whose labours and successes in the arts of pottery and porcelain are well known, and who has produced imitations of the Cairene tiles which for lustre and colour are scarcely to be distinguished from the originals. <sup>51</sup>

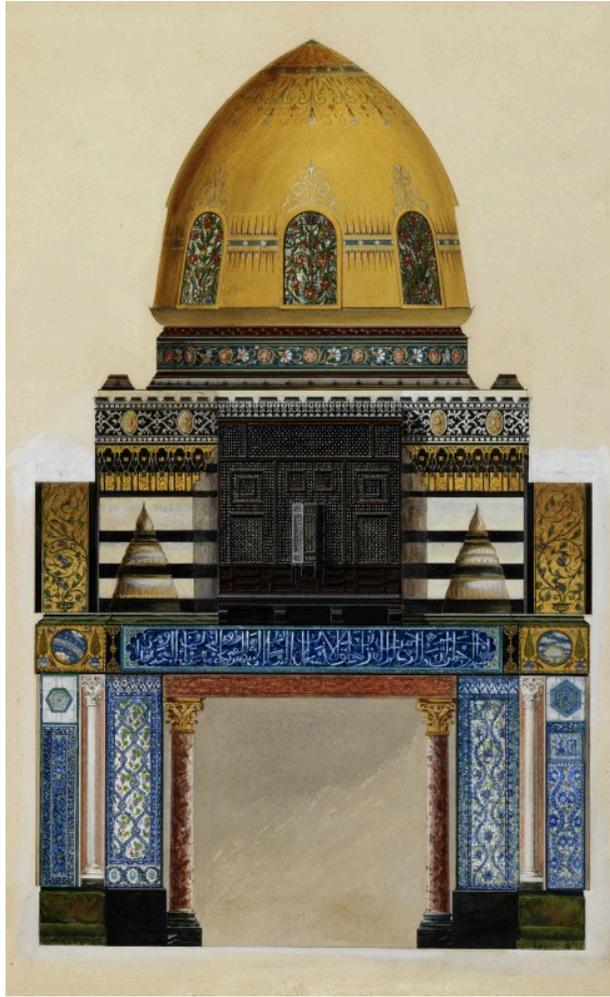
De Morgan, however, was not convinced that his work on this project was an unmitigated success. <sup>52</sup> In order to understand the craftsman's misgivings, we need to look closely at the imperfections on the east wall.

The visitor initially experiences the coherence of tile panels because those on the west wall, first encountered upon entering the Arab Hall, are the most intact. Aesthetic synthesis is a harder ask from the vantage point of the east wall (Fig. 46), where the signs of the struggle to craft the Arab Hall are barely concealed. Aitchison's drawing shows he distilled his own version of this east wall, changing the configuration of panels and restoring multi-tiled panels back to a unified design (Fig. 47). The panel on the right-hand pillar in Leighton House, for example, appears on the left wall in Aitchison's drawing; he added two more rows of the ogival blue lattice and replaced the misfit tile, second from the bottom, that interrupts the flow of this pattern. The panel on the inner right in Aitchison's drawing has no equivalent in the Arab Hall. The uniformity in his delicate illustration suggests that Aitchison might have preferred to have the interior made of entirely new tiles by De Morgan.



**Figure 46.**

The Arab Hall, east wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



**Figure 47.**

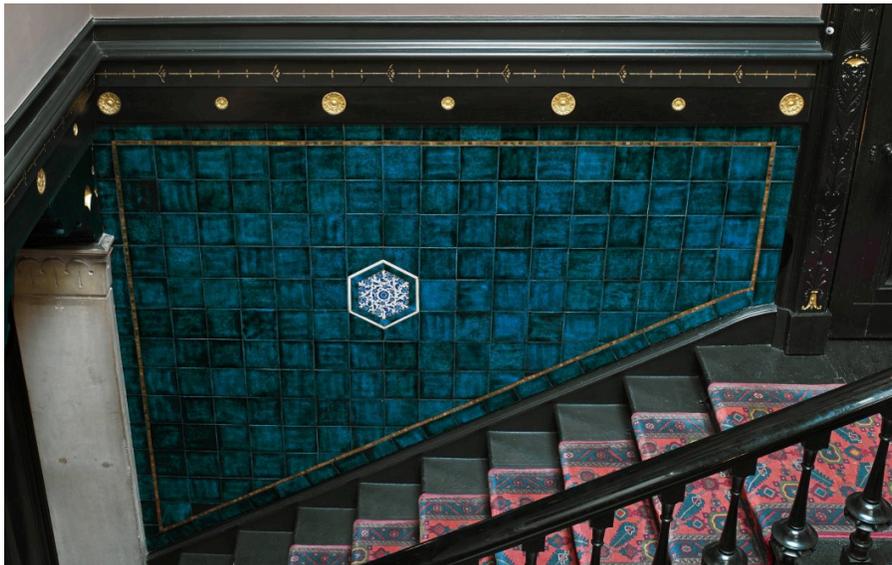
George Aitchison, Presentation drawing of the East elevation of the Arab Hall interior, watercolour on paper, 1879–1880. RIBA Collections (SC124/4(3)). Digital image courtesy of RIBA Collections.

Leighton, however, valued the quality of this period of Islamic art and wrote to his father of the “intense and fantastic gorgeousness” of the old interiors he saw in Damascus in 1873.<sup>53</sup> For him, this collaboration to harmonize old and new tiles could well have resonated with his own struggles with painterly process upstairs in the studio in which the meticulous labour of the multi-stages of making his paintings was ideally subsumed by the apparent effortlessness of the finished work.

De Morgan’s work in the Arab Hall was undertaken at a relatively early stage of a career that is notable for an experimental working process. He submitted to the task of replicating glaze effects of historic ceramics with the goal of eventually creating new designs. His greatest challenge was Persian lustreware. In 1892, he delivered a lecture on this topic. The first part is a

history of lustre glaze, the second advice to other ceramicists, recounting failed experiments to replicate the finest Persian techniques. In this essay, there is a marked shift in tone from the certainty of the historian to the provisional present tense of the experimental craftworker.<sup>54</sup> There is plenty of evidence of this experimental mode in the Arab Hall and his results are there to be tested against their historic precedents.

In Leighton's interior, De Morgan embarked upon a number of quite different tasks. He created all of the new peacock-blue tiles that harmonise the diverse historic tiles (Fig. 48). He also undertook the task of creating a synthesis from disparate borders, repeating modules, and unified-field tile panels as, for example, with the mosque lamp panel. Some of the other panels that had arrived in the British capital in a ruinous state necessitated that De Morgan engage in the more difficult task of replicating tile parts and their glazes in order to repair them. Replicating existing work is no easy task, even for an experienced ceramicist, and the results in the Arab Hall demonstrate varying degrees of success. By undertaking this work at a relatively early stage in his career, De Morgan submitted to an apprenticeship across time, as the products of his kiln are answerable to the superb precedents of the absent master craftsmen.



**Figure 48.**

The Stairwell, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.

De Morgan achieved some impressive results. With the lunette on the south wall (Fig. 49), for example, he created the two central blue tiles that are hard to distinguish from the originals. With others, he took creative licence. As

Venetia Porter observes, the lions attacking onegers at the base of the Syrian tile panel on the South wall of the Arab Hall—unlikely inclusions in Syrian tilework—are probably transposed from Persian sources (Fig. 50).<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 49.**

*The Arab Hall*, lunette made in Damascus, south wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.



**Figure 50.**

*The Arab Hall*, Syrian tile panel, south wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Although it does not have the polychromatic range of the Damascus panel that we have just been considering, the large İznik tile pair on the east wall (Fig. 51) presented a more exacting challenge. De Morgan created the triangular fragment for the upper right corner of the left tile in an effort to complete the pair. He made a pretty good approximation, one that only an experienced ceramicist could produce; from a distance, in the muted light of the Arab Hall, it harmonises. But if we look more closely, we see the shortcomings of his response to this technical challenge.



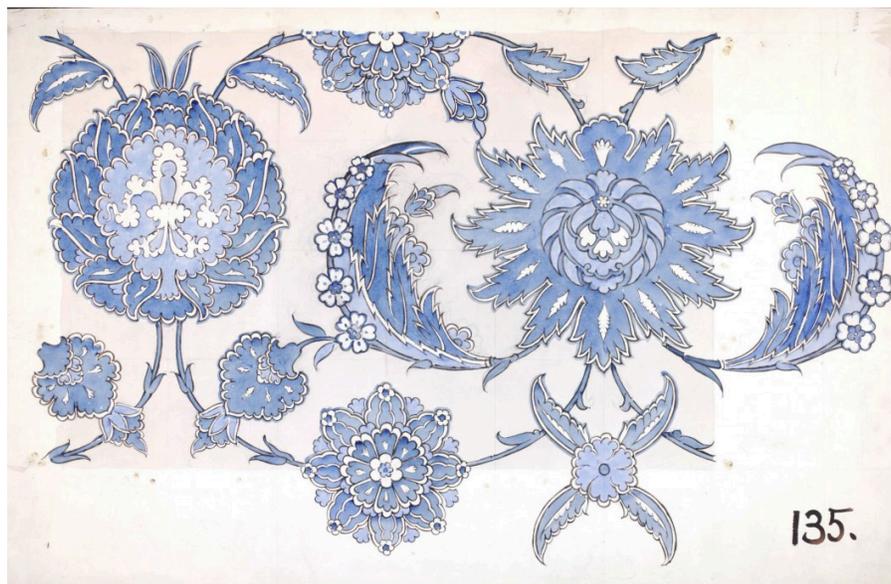
**Figure 51.**

*The Arab Hall, Iznik tile (pair), east wall, Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow Photography.*

Considering the material evidence allows us to reconstruct De Morgan's process of creating the repair fragments. The initial challenge was to create the shape of this tile insert, to judge the correct size allowing for shrinkage of the base in the first firing. The shortcomings at this stage are evident in the band of grouting that De Morgan overpainted after the panel was attached to the wall. It was an intervention to minimize the visual impact of this scar, one that has deteriorated over time. The next challenge was to match the creamy white glaze by modifying the stark white of a tin glaze base. Next, De Morgan made the continuous pattern across the fragment, diluting his cobalt glaze to varying strengths to create the pattern of spiralling vines and flower heads. It probably involved multiple glaze firings. De Morgan would have had no way of knowing how many firings the Iznik potters had undertaken to achieve their delicate patterns. His is not a bad effort, but close inspection of the results suggests it was a humbling process. Judgements had to be made as to how much to dilute the cobalt blue to match the colour range in the Iznik original. On the top left of the fragment, there are patches where the cobalt is too concentrated. At this stage, the potter is working intuitively, working blind, because the layers of glaze colour that he lays down prior to the firing bear no relation to the colour that will appear from the kiln. Despite his best efforts, and perhaps notwithstanding preliminary glaze tests, the effects of the firing were hard to predict: the bleeding of some of De Morgan's lines are likely the result of firing at a temperature that is slightly too high. As a result, he failed to achieve the crisp edges of the Iznik ceramicists. The tips of the leaves on these tiles reveal most clearly the sure hand of the Iznik glaziers, something that De Morgan has not executed with the same finesse.

De Morgan experimented over an extended period to create the replacement pieces for the Hall and discarded many of his failed attempts. When he looked at these walls, with the eyes of a maker, the shortcomings would have been as obvious to him as the seamless repairs he had created working with this fine collection of historic tiles by Near Eastern master craftsmen—even more so for the man who would eventually become one of Britain’s most successful ceramicists, renowned for his spectacular glazes. The aestheticist fantasy of synthesis, of rendering the distant historic time of production into a harmonious aesthetic present tense, is harder to sustain when reading these surfaces from the perspective of the craftsman. For De Morgan, it seems such imagined harmony could only really be achieved through his drawings.

The Victoria and Albert Museum holds one of De Morgan’s few surviving working drawings related to the Arab Hall commission (Fig. 52).<sup>56</sup> Here he has worked with the İznik tile fragments, distilling them into a continuous pattern unbroken by the original tile segments and later fractures. He has replicated the tile pair and extended beyond them to conjure the larger pattern, thus gesturing towards the wall of the tomb of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari in Eyüp, Istanbul (Fig. 53), in which other panels of the same tiles are still to be found. These tile panels are on the interior and exterior of that tomb, one of the city’s most venerated religious sites.<sup>57</sup> Two further İznik tiles from the series are in the Victoria and Albert Museum and three are in the British Museum.<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 52.**

William De Morgan, Design for tilework, date and dimensions unknown. Collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.1383-1917) Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**Figure 53.**

Exterior wall of the Mausoleum of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, *in the Courtyard of the Eyüp Sultan Mosque* Digital image courtesy of Mary Roberts.

De Morgan's drawing shows that he has discovered that in order for the pattern to be continuous, there has to be a reversal of the tiles in every second row. He went on to replicate this pattern in a tile series now in the collection of the De Morgan Foundation (Fig. 54). Like Aitchison's drawings of the Arab Hall, De Morgan's work on paper aspires to distil wholeness, but De Morgan's drawing does so by imagining another wall in Istanbul into being, of which the Arab Hall pair is but a metonymic fragment.



**Figure 54.**

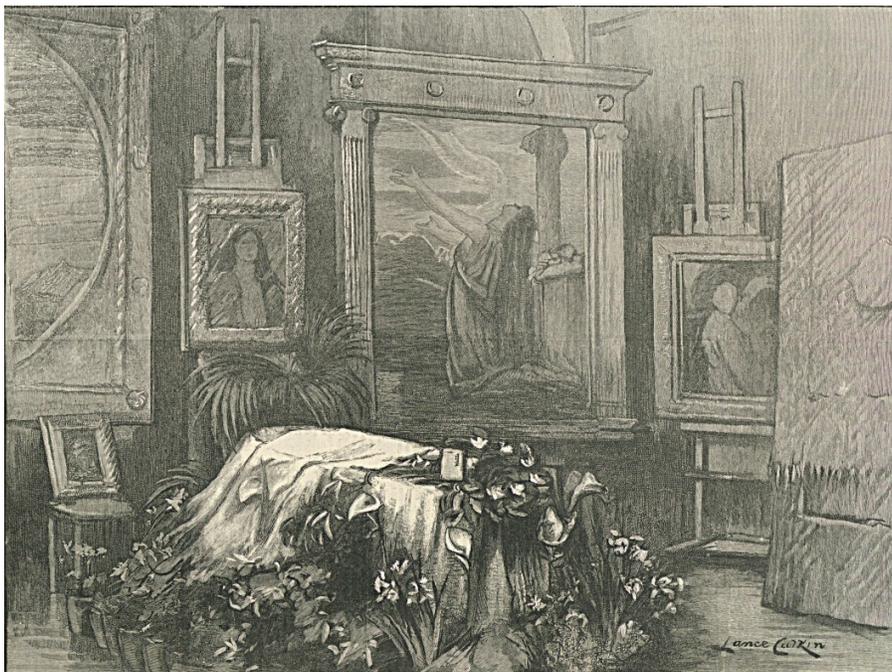
William De Morgan, Composite image of tiles forming part of a panel, a design copied by William De Morgan from the İznik tile pair on the East Wall of the Arab Hall, Sands End Pottery, Fulham, 1888-1897, glazed earthenware, each tile 15.2 cm. Collection of the De Morgan Foundation (WDM\_TO353 to WDM\_TO358). Digital image courtesy of De Morgan Foundation.

Like Burton's portrait, scarring was part of an aesthetics of beauty in the Arab Hall. But these are different scars in paint and grout with their own material and aesthetic logic. Where Burton's scar signified orientalist agency, De Morgan's ceramic scars are more equivocal, marking the effort to repair and its failure. The scars within the Arab Hall signal a desire to resolve an aesthetic distance between past and present, as these British artists collaborated to equal and surpass their historic sources by synthesizing early modern Eastern material culture into contemporary British Aestheticism. But the brokenness opens a wound that cannot be healed. In failed synthesis, there is an irruption of the past into the present. Early modern Islamic art is not locked out of modernity and predictably, chronologically, consigned to the past of art's history; instead, through aesthetic judgement, agency is on the side of the early modern and decline on that of contemporary British craft. Here is early modern Islamic art's resistant materiality.

### **Melancholy Time and the Orientalist Interior**

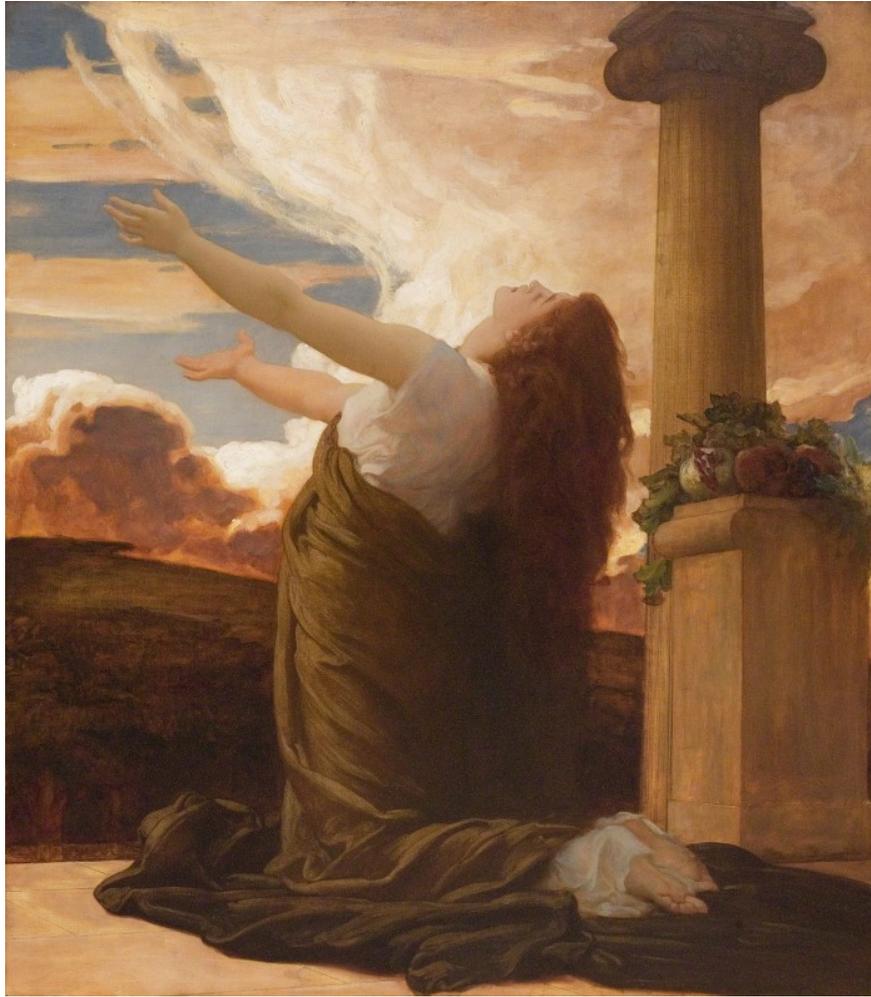
Throughout this essay, I have been moving between paintings created upstairs and the Arab Hall downstairs at Leighton House. So let's ascend the stairs once more in 1896, just after Leighton's death, when artworks were placed around his coffin in the studio (Fig. 55). Moving up the staircase, we

pass the portrait of Burton, whose heroic imperfections were a mark of Leighton's cosmopolitanism. In the studio itself, on the right of Leighton's encased body is *Clytie*, his great allegory of the pain of lost love (Fig. 56). It was incomplete at the time of Leighton's death. Earthbound on her knees, Clytie is an embodied evocation of imminent metamorphosis, on the verge of transforming into a rooted sunflower. She would be cursed to forever follow the sun god Apollo, but severed from actual union. The sadness of desire is embodied in the deathly green on the underside of those arms whose top edges are still momentarily warmed by that sky's compelling radiant impasto. Apollo in paint, human longing for art's enduring beauty, moving towards sunset. At that moment, in that place, this unfinished painting painfully encapsulates Leighton's aesthetics. Perhaps more optimistic is the work facing his coffin, not a classical narrative but one from an imagination cast further east. The open radiant beauty of his *Fair Persian* (Fig. 57) holds illusive promise.



**Figure 55.**

Lance Calvin, The Late Lord Leighton Lying in State in his Studio in Holland Park Road, sketch in *The Graphic*, 1 February 1896, 129.



**Figure 56.**

Frederic Leighton, *Clytie*, 1895, oil on canvas, 156 × 137 cm. Collection of Leighton House Museum, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (LH3015). Digital image courtesy of Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



**Figure 57.**

Frederic Leighton, *The Fair Persian*, unfinished, 1896, in *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton* by Emilie Barrington, Vol. 2, between page 324 and 325 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1906).

This was a temporary installation, a halted work in progress. Leighton's body and artworks left this space. Burton's portrait entered the National Portrait Gallery, where it still hangs, enshrining the now ambivalent heroism of the man that, since the publication of Edward Said's book in 1978, has come to stand for the most exploitative impulses of European Orientalism.<sup>59</sup> *Clytie* restlessly travelled the world, including a journey to Australia in the early 2000s, where I first felt her consuming sadness, returning eventually to the walls of Leighton House, where she now rests. And in what seems like a fitting twist of fate, the *Fair Persian's* whereabouts are unknown.

But what of those tiles and the Arab Hall downstairs? Most of the contents of the home were dispersed in the sale of 1896. The fate of Leighton's house was uncertain upon his death. The tiles remained *in situ* due to the efforts of

loyal supporters, who championed the preservation of his home as a museum on the basis of its aesthetic merits and national value. The most hyperbolic claim for Leighton’s Arab Hall as the high point of his Aestheticism came from Purdon Clarke, who wrote that the Arab Hall is “the most beautiful structure which has been raised since the sixteenth century”. In her pitch for preservation of the artist’s home, Emilie Barrington added, “[the Arab Hall] would alone make the preservation of the house as an effective medium for education in the beautiful a necessity to any truly art-loving people.”<sup>60</sup> These comments dramatize how far Leighton’s reputation fell in the twentieth century. His particular version of Aestheticist formalism didn’t meet the criteria of modernist art histories. It was Edward Burne-Jones—the most serious contender among the British Aestheticists for a place within this modernist canon—who articulated unease at the configuration of historic tiles in the Arab Hall; as he put it: “all those splendid things from the East built up in such a silly way.”<sup>61</sup>

Burne-Jones expressed what Leighton, Aitchison, and De Morgan would have seen as the most troubling potential consequence of their Arab Hall—that the displaced and damaged tiles might exceed the aesthetic value of this modern British interior. Like these historic tiles and, for some, because of them, aestheticist synthesis in Leighton’s Arab Hall proves to be a fragile proposition.

## Footnotes

- 1 Philip Gilbert Hamerton (ed.), “Etchings from Pictures by Contemporary Artists. XII. Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton, P.R.A., Portrait of Captain Burton Etched by Leopold Flameng”, *The Portfolio: An Artistic Periodical* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1879), 2.
- 2 The painting on which this is based is now understood to be *Rucellai Madonna* (Florence, Uffizi Gallery) by Duccio, not Cimabue. Elizabeth Prettejohn proposes that the anomalies in Leighton’s rendition of the work may suggest that he was aware of the uncertain attribution and deliberately represented a generic Madonna and Child; see Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Aestheticising History Painting”, in Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (eds.), *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 107, note 6.
- 3 Emilie Barrington, *The Life Letters and Work of Frederic Leighton*, Vol. 1, (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 128–196. See Elizabeth Prettejohn’s subtle analysis of the foreshortening in Leighton’s modern history painting, a “tour de force of the modern painter’s artistry” that prioritizes the altarpiece’s aesthetic power, as a “crafted object”, over its devotional content. This is matched, it is argued, by the subordination of the bishop to the artist in the procession. Prettejohn, “Aestheticising History Painting”, 89–110.
- 4 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, Day 5, Story 1, trans. Wayne A. Rebhorn (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2013), 390–393. For an analysis of this painting in relation to the themes of sleep and death in Leighton’s art, see Keren Hammerschlag, “The Deathly Sleep of Frederic Leighton’s Painted Women”, *Women: A Cultural Review* 23, no. 2 (2012): 201–215.
- 5 Elizabeth Prettejohn, “Aestheticising History Painting”, 92–95.
- 6 The literature on Leighton House is extensive including key scholarship on the house that has emerged from the museum itself. See, for example, Stephen Jones, *Leighton House Museum* (London: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, n.d.); Daniel Robbins and Reena Suleman, *Leighton House: Holland Park Road, Kensington* (London: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2005), and *Closer to Home: The Restoration of Leighton House and Catalogue of the Reopening Displays 2010* (London: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, 2010). Other important writings in this extensive corpus are: Louise Campbell, “Decoration, Display, Disguise: Leighton House Reconsidered”, in Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (eds.), *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 267–293; and Martina Droth, “Leighton’s House: Art in and Beyond the Studio”, *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 4 (2011): 339–358. On Leighton’s Arab Hall in the context of his Orientalism and Aestheticism, see Tim Barringer, “Orientalism and Aestheticism”, in Zeynep Inankur, Reina Lewis, and Mary Roberts (eds.), *The Poetics and Politics of Place: Ottoman Istanbul and British Orientalism* (Istanbul: Pera Museum [University of Washington Press], 2011), 251–252.

- 7 Droth, "Leighton's House", 355. On this issue of artistic labour, see also Tim Barringer, "Leighton in Albertopolis: Monumental Art and Objects of Desire," in Barringer and Prettejohn (eds.), *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 135-168.
- 8 In 1881, Wilfrid Meynell unified the distinct spaces of studio and Arab Hall under the persona of Leighton: 'If the studio is interesting as containing the *genius loci*, the divan is, as we have said, a treasury of research and taste', Wilfrid Meynell, "The Homes of Our Artists: Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton's House in Holland Park Road," *The Magazine of Art* 4 (1881): 172. See also Julian Hawthorne, *Shapes that Pass: Memories of Old Days* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), 175. On Leighton's self-presentation, see Andrew Stephenson, "Leighton and the Shifting Repertoires of 'Masculine' Artistic Identity in the Late Victorian Period", in Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (eds.), *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 221-246.
- 9 The sculptor Joseph Edgar Boehm created the capitals for the columns in the Arab Hall. It is uncertain whether or not Leighton visited La Zisa, in Palermo, although his sketches of the capitals in La Zisa's Fountain Hall suggest that he did. The Royal Academy holds Frederic Leighton, Sketchbook, 06/1139, which has two drawings of capitals from La Zisa's Fountain Hall (06/1140 and 06/1142) and an initial sketch for design of the Arab Hall (06/1145).
- 10 So too the hundreds of objects in this space from many cultures made their own demands on artists and viewers. They were dispersed in the posthumous sale of 1896, see *Catalogue of the Collection of Old Rhodian, Persian, Anatolian and Hispano-Mauro Pottery, Bronzes and Oriental China, Inlaid Furniture, Persian Prayer Rugs and Costumes, Also the Contents of the Studio of The Right Hon. Lord Leighton of Stretton, P.R.A., D.C.L., L.L.D.*, Christie, Manson and Woods, London, Wednesday 8 July and two following days, 1896. There were further sales of his paintings and library.
- 11 The stained-glass windows, which William Wright acquired "from a mosque in Damascus" for Leighton were, "supplemented and matched by coloured glass made in London". William Wright, "Lord Leighton at Damascus and After", *The Bookman*, March 1896, 184. The *mashrabiya* is thought to have come from a Cairo mosque. Although Aitchison suggests it came from Damascus: George Aitchison, "Lord Leighton, P.R.A. Some Reminiscences", *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* 3 (1896): 265.
- 12 The catalogue of the Burlington Fine Arts Club exhibition of 1885 reveals that Leighton purchased a considerable number of ceramic vessels in Rhodes (items 341, 400, 434, 435, 440, 441, 442, 448, 452, 453, 454, 458, 459, 460, 461, and 463). Other pieces were purchased by Leighton in Damascus (item 524) with one (item 540) listed as "obtained by Sir F. Leighton from a family at Baalbec" and others are listed as "Obtained through Rev. Wright" (items 532 and 559). *Burlington Fine Arts Club: Catalogue of Specimens Illustrative of Persian and Arab Art Exhibited in 1885* (London: Metchim and Son, 1885). Leighton did not exhibit any wall tiles at this event but George Aitchison exhibited a number of them from Damascus and Persia. In Istanbul, Leighton could have obtained individual pieces through antique dealers in the Grand Bazaar, and in Pera and through other commercial sources on his travels, but obtaining large multi-tile panels was a greater challenge. Correspondence and reports in the Victoria and Albert Museum archives reveal that Caspar Purdon Clarke had extensive knowledge of the private collectors and dealers in Istanbul and elsewhere across the region. Leighton's collecting by proxy was initiated in conversation with Richard Burton when the two men met in the spa town of Vichy in 1869. See Letter from Richard Francis Burton to Frederic Leighton, Damascus, 22 March 1871, Leighton House Archives, Acc No. 2000/31 (L.H. 1/1/5/B30).
- 13 In the 1870s, Caspar Purdon Clarke was undertaking purchasing missions for the South Kensington Museum and was later appointed a junior Keeper. He rose through the ranks from Assistant Director to Director.
- 14 By the 1890s (and probably earlier), Caspar Purdon Clarke was well aware that the Ottoman Customs authorities would not permit tiles or other items from historic religious sites to be taken out of the Ottoman Empire. Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, SF516 Purchases by Officers on Visits Abroad, Part III 1896-1898, MA/2/P7/3. In 1896, Clarke circumvented these Ottoman customs requirements by removing Ottoman tiles on a British naval ship. Mary Roberts, "Artists, Amateurs and the Pleated Time of Ottoman Modernity", in Dan Karholm and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology, and Anachrony* (London: Routledge, 2018), 79-100.
- 15 Letter from Richard Francis Burton to Frederic Leighton, Damascus, 22 March 1871, Leighton House Museum archives, Acc No. 2000/31 (L.H.1/1/5/B30).
- 16 Julian Raby, "From Pottery to Tiles: Süleyman the Builder," in Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby (eds.), *Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London: Alexandria Press, 1989), 218-221; and Walter B. Denny, *Iznik: The Artistry of Ottoman Ceramics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).
- 17 The Tanzimat is the period of westernizing reforms from 1839-1876 and is characterized by a range of state-sponsored modernizing initiatives ranging from administrative organization to fashion reform. The Dome of the Rock's nineteenth-century restoration is part of a longer history of changes to the building; see Beatrice St Laurent, "Restorations of Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock and Their Political Significance, 1537-1928", *Muqarnas* 10, Essays in Honor of Oleg Grabar (1993), 76-84; Beatrice St Laurent, "The Dome of the Rock and the Politics of Restoration", *Bridgewater Review* 17, no. 2 (December 1998): 14-20; Beatrice St Laurent, "From Bursa to Jerusalem: From Yeşil Türbe to the Dome of the Rock", in Selim Karahasanoğlu and Deniz Cenk Demir (eds.), *History from Below: A Tribute in Memory of Donald Quataert* (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2016), 335-357; Gülrü Necipoğlu, "The Dome of the Rock as Palimpsest: Abd al-Malik's Grand Narrative and Sultan Süleyman's Glosses", *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 17-105.
- 18 Victor-Marie de Launay et al. *Usul-i Mi'mari-i 'Osmani [The Fundamentals of Ottoman Architecture]/ L'architecture ottomane/ Die ottomanische Baukunst* (Istanbul: Imprimerie et lithographie centrales, 1873). See Ahmet Ersoy's study of this book and its significance for the rise of the "Ottoman Renaissance" during the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz: Ahmet A. Ersoy, *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2015). On the collection and display of Islamic art in Istanbul in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, see Wendy Shaw, "Islamic Arts in the Ottoman Imperial Museum, 1889-1923", *Ars Orientalis* 30 (2000): 55-68.

- 19 Letter from Richard Francis Burton to Frederic Leighton, Damascus, 22 March 1871, Leighton House Museum archives, Acc No. 2000/31. (L.H.1/1/5/B30).
- 20 Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *An Occasion for War: Civil Conflict in Lebanon and Damascus in 1860* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994) and Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism", *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (June 2002): 768-796.
- 21 Wright, "Lord Leighton at Damascus and After", 184. For a study of the changing urban fabric of Damascus in this period, see Stefan Weber, *Damascus: Ottoman Modernity and Urban Transformation (1808-1918)*, Proceedings of the Danish Institute in Damascus V, Damascus, 2009, 2 vols; Stefan Weber, "Images of Imagined Worlds: Self-Image and Worldview in Late Ottoman Wall Paintings of Damascus", in Jens Hanssen, Thomas Philipp, and Stefan Weber (eds.), *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002), 145-171.
- 22 Richard Burton to Frederic Leighton, Damascus, 22 March 1871, Leighton House Museum archives, Acc No. 2000/31. (L.H.1/1/5/B30).
- 23 Burton continues that these tiles: "illustrate the difference between Syria's and Sind's. They are taken from the tomb (Moslem) of Sakhar on the Indus. I can give you analysis of glaze if you want it—but I fancy you don't care for analyses. The yellow colour is by far the rarest and the least durable apparently. The blues are the favourites and the best." Letter from Richard Francis Burton to Frederic Leighton, Trieste, 13 July 1876, Leighton House Archives, Acc. No. 2000/32 (LH/1/1/5/31). This letter indicates Burton's perception that there is a difference between his own historical and technical interest in the tiles and Leighton's Aestheticist disposition towards them. As well as creating the oil sketch of the Burton's house, while in Damascus, Leighton created his poetic rendition of the city's intense colours at dusk in his oil sketch *Damascus: Night*, also known as *Eastern Scene with a Minaret*, 1873.
- 24 For an analysis of Richard Burton's numerous photographic portraits, see Julie Codell, "The Conceit of Burton's Scar: Orientalism as Identity and Transgression", in Joan DelPlato and Julie F. Codell (eds.), *Orientalism, Eroticism and Modern Visuality in Global Cultures* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 115-140.
- 25 Applauding the portrait, the critic for the *London Daily News* invoked an historic precedent by suggesting that Burton had "taken a hint from Cromwell and insisted on having that side of his face painted which shows a deep gash. It is a face full of determination." "Royal Academy Exhibition, Third Notice", *London Daily News*, 6 May 1876. The critic is referencing a well-rehearsed anecdote in which Oliver Cromwell is reputed to have insisted to his portraitist Peter Lely: "Mr Lely, I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me, otherwise I never will pay a farthing for it." Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (London: Alexander Murray, 1871 [1786]), 226. It was an economical reference for the Victorian critic, where Burton's dermal anomalies simultaneously become an index of mimetic veracity and heroic character. But Cromwell's sitting was an imperfect analogy. Leighton may have been working under the opposite instruction from his notoriously irascible sitter. According to his wife Isabel, Burton was anxious that the painter not render him ugly. "Richard was so anxious that he should paint his necktie and his pin, and kept saying to him every now and then, 'Don't make me ugly, don't, there's a good fellow'." Isabel Burton, *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton, K.C.M.G., F.R.G.S.*, Vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1893), 596. At this precarious moment in Burton's rocky career, it was a plea to Leighton, the darling of the art establishment, to ennoble him in paint. By his own admission, Burton was an unlikely candidate for Leighton's brush, which dwelled in the realm of the beautiful. Yet the transaction turned out to be mutually beneficial. William Wright narrates a similar story about the transaction in Leighton's studio, but in his version, while uttering these words, Burton deliberately made a series of horrendous grimaces, thus parodying the process where the sitter is conventionally required to perform their most flattering self. "Leighton wished to do justice to the great rugged head, but Burton would look up with a face contorted almost beyond recognition, and with mock gravity, implore the artist to make him nice." Wright, "Lord Leighton at Damascus and After", 184-185. This version is equally viable given Burton's studied posturing as an institutional outsider. Between the two accounts Burton emerges as a characteristically unreliable historical subject.
- 26 *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* 41, 3 June 1876, 713.
- 27 *The Daily News*, 6 May 1876.
- 28 *The Graphic*, Saturday 13 May 1876, 471.
- 29 Clarke was authorized to spend up to £250 during this trip for purchases on behalf of the museum. Purchases by Officers on Visits Abroad, Part I 1863-1894, MA/2/P7/1, SF516, December 1876.
- 30 Monkhouse, for example, writes that the dome recalls the Alhambra Palace, Cosmo Monkhouse, "Some English Artists and their Studios", *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* 24 (1882): 555. George Aitchison notes the influence of La Zisa in his article, Aitchison, "Lord Leighton, P.R.A. Some Reminiscences", 265.
- 31 Leighton writes to his sister from Algiers in 1857: "I shall spend my next winter in my dear, dear old Rome, to which I am attached beyond measure; indeed, Italy altogether has a hold on my heart that no other country ever can have (except, of course, my own)." Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, Vol. 1, 19, Note 1.
- 32 For a study of shifting approaches to the Islamic legacy in Sicily and its relationship to evolving notions of a shared Italian identity, see Silvia Armando, "The Role and Perception of Islamic Art and History in the Construction of a Shared Identity in Sicily (1780-1900 ca.)", *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome LXII*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 5-40. For an account of Vella's forgery and its implications for Sicilian historiography, see Karla Mallette, *European Modernity and the Arab Mediterranean: Toward a New Philology and a Counter-Orientalism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 65-73.
- 33 Salvatore Morso, *Descrizione di Palermo antico ricavata sugli autori sincroni e i monumenti de' tempi*, (Palermo: Lorenzo Dato, 1827), 163-208.

- 34 Michele Amari, *Le epigrafi arabiche di Sicilia: Trascritte, tradotte e illustrate* (Palermo: S.F. Flaccovio, 1971 [1875-1883]), 66-83.
- 35 Gally Knight understood it was a Saracenic structure, the villa of a Moorish prince, but that the marble pillars and figural mosaics in the reception hall were the work of the Normans. Henry Gally Knight, *The Normans in Sicily: Being a Sequel to 'An Architectural Tour in Normandy'* (London: John Murray, 1838), 269-275. William Henry Bartlett also understood it to be an Arab structure, modified by Norman King Roger, *Pictures from Sicily by the Author of Forty Days in the Desert* (London: Arthur Hall, 1853), 160-162.
- 36 Wolfgang Krönig, "Il Palazzo reale normanno della Zisa a Palermo: Nuove osservazioni", *Commentari* 26 (1975): 229-247; and Giuseppe Bellafore, *La Zisa di Palermo* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1994).
- 37 Doris Behrens-Abouseif, "Sicily, the Missing Link in the Evolution of Cairene Architecture", in U. Vermeulen and D. De Smet (eds.), *Egypt and Syria in the Fatimid, Ayyubid, and Mamluk Eras: Proceedings of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd International Colloquium Organized at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in May 1992, 1993, and 1994*, Vol. 1, (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1995), 285-312. For analysis of Sicily's Islamicized Norman court, see Lev A. Kapitaikin, "Sicily and the Staging of Multiculturalism", in Finbarr Barry Flood and Gülru Necipoğlu (eds.), *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2017).
- 38 George Aitchison was among a group of British architects who were very interested in the *muqarnas* (stalactite) architectural form but were unable to fully understand or construct it. They were humbled by the complexity of a form that master craftsmen in Persia and other parts of the East were still able to execute. See Moya Carey's analysis of British architects' status anxiety and the RIBA meeting records of 1881, where George Aitchison recounted Purdon Clarke's first-hand description of craftsmen working to create a *muqarnas* vault in Persia. Moya Carey, *Persian Art: Collecting the Arts of Iran for the V&A* (London: V&A Publishing, 2017), 58.
- 39 George Aitchison, "The Advancement of Architecture", *The Builder*, 2 February 1895, 79.
- 40 Letter from Frederic Leighton to Eduard von Steinle, 3 September 1857, see Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, Vol. 1, 296.
- 41 Hawthorne, *Shapes that Pass*, 138. In 1888, Leighton spoke about the ennobling beauty of the interior. In the same lecture, he wrote in praise of Persian culture: "Whosoever, for instance, has wondered at the work of Persian looms, or felt the fascination of the manuscripts illuminated by the artists of Iran, or noted the unflinching grace of subtle line revealed in their metal work, will feel that for this race also the merit of a work of art did not reside in its category, but in the degree to which it manifested the spirit which alone could ennoble it, the spirit of beauty." published in "Art Congress in Liverpool. Presidential Address by Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton", *Liverpool Mercury*, 4 December 1888. See Moya Carey's important recent study of British attitudes to Persian culture in the nineteenth century. Carey, *Persian Art*.
- 42 Mary Eliza Haweis, "Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton's House", *Beautiful Houses; Being a Description of Certain Well-Known Artistic Houses* (London: Sampson Low, 1882), 4.
- 43 Haweis, "Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton's House", 4-5.
- 44 Hawthorne, *Shapes that Pass*, 177. It should be noted that many smoking rooms in this period were Eastern themed, with tiles that were thought appropriate because they did not absorb the smell of smoke. In the context of this entanglement of odalisque paintings and the interior, it is worth remembering, as Wilfred Meynell records, that Leighton owned "An engraving of Ingres 'Harem' ... some sketches for which are in Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton's library—hang[ing] near the door." Meynell, "The Homes of our Artists," 170.
- 45 This painting adorned the walls of the back drawing room in the home of engineer and M.P. John Aird and is illustrated in his interior. See J.F. Boyes, "The Private Art Collections of London. Mr. John Aird's, in Hyde Park Terrace," *Art Journal*, May 1891, 139.
- 46 "The place was magnificent; the glory and delicacy of Moorish Spain were in it. "Oh, for a guitar in one of these alcoves!" murmured Eustacia. There were many alcoves round the walls, each with abundant silken cushions, on which to recline and gaze up at the Moorish arch overhead, and be dreamily aware of an impassioned girl beside you! But January London was on the other side of the wall, and just then in popped a visitor - none other than George Otto Trevelyan ... "I'm on my way to the House; a debate on who should pay for the Afghan War ..." He urged us all to come with him ... I felt that romance and beauty were ended for the day." Hawthorne, *Shapes that Pass*, 178-179.
- 47 Meynell, "The Homes of our Artists," 174.
- 48 Harry How, "Illustrated Interviews: No. XIV.—Sir Frederick [sic] Leighton, P.R.A.", *Strand Magazine*, 1892, 128-129. Mrs Haweis also waxed lyrically about being in the Arab Hall. Hers is another poetic aestheticist reading of the aural and visual effects of this space.
- 49 Among his many sources of inspiration in the Near East, Leighton was impressed by the effects of light in domestic interiors in Algiers in 1857: "The rooms ... open on the corridors and have no windows (except little peeping holes) on to the street; they are consequently always wrapped in a sort of clear, cool, reflected twilight that is inexpressibly delightful and soothing in hot, glaring weather ... You would have laughed to see your son lolling on a Turkey carpet and puffing away at a long pipe." Leighton letter to his mother, Algiers, Monday 29 [sic] 1857, Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, Vol. 1, 301-302; Leighton dates this letter as "Monday 29 1857"—he was in Algiers in September that year, so it may in fact have been Tuesday that month.
- 50 Auguste Choisy, "The Late Lord Leighton's House", *The Times*, 27 April 1896, 12. Emilie Barrington quotes Choisy's interpretation of the house in her article in defence of its preservation, Mrs Russell [Emilie] Barrington, "Lord Leighton's House and What It Contains," *The Magazine of Art*, January 1899, 529, and reprints this article in her biography of Leighton, quoting Choisy again in Chapter 4, Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, Vol. 2, 221 and 362-363.
- 51 Meynell, "The Homes of our Artists," 174.

- 52 William De Morgan is understood to have been frustrated by this job. It cost £500 more than he was paid. It seems that these frustrations stemmed not just from the financial loss incurred (De Morgan was not a man to curtail himself by cost). He was a perfectionist in his working process, so this frustration is as likely to have been caused by the challenge of replicating the historic tiles and some of the technical deficiencies of his repairs. Unfortunately, De Morgan left no account of the processes involved in production of these tiles. In her biography of William and Evelyn De Morgan, Anna Marie Diana Wilhelmina Stirling (Evelyn's sister) writes about the Arab Hall project. It was his wife Evelyn's capital that continued to prop up the business financially: "she devoted unhesitatingly to the support of the fluctuating business", A.M.W. Stirling, *William de Morgan and his Wife* (London, Thornton Butterworth, 1922), 204.
- 53 Frederic Leighton, Letter to his father, Damascus, 18 October 1873, transcribed in Barrington, *The Life, Letters and Work of Frederic Baron Leighton of Stretton*, Vol. 2, 208.
- 54 William De Morgan, "Lustre Ware", Paper delivered to the Society of Arts, 31 May 1892, published in *Journal of the Society of Arts*, 24 June 1892. Reprinted in Mark Hamilton, *Rare Spirit. A Life of William De Morgan, 1839-1911* (London: Constable, 1997), 194-205.
- 55 Onegers are a feature of pre-Islamic iconography in Iran that was revived in the nineteenth century. Venetia Porter, "William De Morgan and the Islamic Tiles of Leighton House", *The Journal of the Decorative Arts Society 1850—the Present* 16 (1992): 77.
- 56 It may have been made at the time De Morgan was working on the Arab Hall or later, when he created his own version of this tile pattern.
- 57 It is likely that these tiles were moved to the walls of this tomb from another monument; see Walter Denny, "Dispersed Ottoman Unified-Field Tile Panels", *Mouseio Benaki 4 2004* (2005): 149. On the significance of this religious site for Ottoman statecraft in the imperial capital, see Gülru Necipoğlu, "Dynastic Imprints on the Cityscape: The Collective Message of Imperial Funerary Mosque Complexes in Istanbul," *Colloque Internationale: Cimetières et traditions funéraires dans le monde islamique, Institut Français d'études Anatoliennes, Istanbul, September 29-30, 1991*, Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont (ed.) (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1996), 23-36.
- 58 Three of the same tiles were bequeathed by John Henderson to the British Museum, object number 1878,1230.534. Two of the same tiles were acquired in 1892 for the South Kensington Museum: Victoria and Albert Museum number 1684:1892. Necipoğlu, "Dynastic Imprints on the Cityscape", 23-36.
- 59 "What we read in his [Burton's] prose is the history of a consciousness negotiating its way through an alien culture by virtue of having successfully absorbed its systems of information and behavior ... the voice of the highly idiosyncratic master of Oriental knowledge informs, feeds into the voice of European ambition for rule over the Orient." Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 196.
- 60 Barrington, "Lord Leighton's House, and What It Contains", 531.
- 61 "And they could not be moved without endangering them. It's a great shame," Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *Burne-Jones Talking: His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved by His Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, Mary Lago (ed.) (London: John Murray, 1982), 102.

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# The Atmospheric of Leighton House

Jonathan Law and Mary Roberts

## Abstract

*This Cover Collaboration seeks to convey the atmospheric materiality of the studio-home of Frederic Leighton in the Holland Park area of West London. Five short films made by Jonathan Law highlight particular features of Leighton House, including the tiles of the Arab Hall imported from Turkey and the Middle East, the glittering golden chandelier, the sonorous tinkle of the fountain, and the peacock-inspired colours and textures of the interior design. The films are accompanied by texts chosen by Mary Roberts, author of an article on "The Resistant Materiality of Frederic Leighton's Arab Hall" in this issue of British Art Studies.*

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[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 1.**

Jonathan Law, *The Boy-Narcissus*, film, 1 minute 6 seconds, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art with support from the staff of Leighton House Museum, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 2.**

Jonathan Law, *The Great Gilt Dome*, film, 1 minute 4 seconds, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art with support from the staff of Leighton House Museum, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 3.**

Jonathan Law, *The Fountain*, film, 51 seconds, 2018. Digital image courtesy of  
Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art with support from  
the staff of Leighton House Museum, The Royal Borough of Kensington and  
Chelsea.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 4.**

Jonathan Law, *Pattern*, film, 1 minute 25 seconds, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art with support from the staff of Leighton House Museum, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.



[Watch Video](#)

**Figure 5.**

Jonathan Law, *Other Spaces*, film, 1 minute 28 seconds, 2018. Digital image courtesy of Courtesy of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art with support from the staff of Leighton House Museum, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

# “A Door of Hell”: Thresholds, Crisis, and Morality in the Art of Gilbert and George in the 1970s

Gregory Salter

## Abstract

*This essay considers the art of Gilbert and George in the 1970s in relation to the concept of the threshold. The threshold is used as a means of addressing the shifting, and potentially disintegrating, boundaries of space, politics, morality, and society that are represented with reckless ambiguity in Gilbert and George's pictures. The Human Bondage series is read in the context of the artists' adoption of right-wing imagery and rhetoric in their works and interviews, alongside the emerging and overlapping categories of skinheads, gay culture, and punk. The Dirty Words series is read in terms of its ambiguous spatial, racial, and political connotations. This analysis places Gilbert and George's 1970s work more firmly in the context of a pervading sense of crisis in 1970s Britain. More broadly, it argues for reading artworks that embrace right-wing imagery with an attention to their workings, and a watchful sense of how they move between positions, spaces, and ideologies before our eyes. These pictures speak—urgently, perhaps, to us in 2018—of fascism's return, the banal slippage into its imagery and rhetoric, marking its presence at the heart of British history.*

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## Gilbert and George, Morality, and Thresholds

In an interview in the mid-1980s, Gilbert and George reflected on questions of morality, behaviour, and social order in their art:

Gilbert: Morality—what is good and what is bad. And it changes every day. The shifting of good and bad—what one accepts today, and the next day one doesn't accept any more.

George: That we're able to sit here without crazy armies coming through the window is, in fact, something that people have culturally insisted on having a government arrange for them. It wouldn't be like that if people didn't insist. And in some places they don't. <sup>1</sup>

Gilbert and George have consistently claimed that the question of morality has been a key concern for them as artists. Gilbert's focus here on the way in which morality might shift from one moment to the next is a particularly useful approach for thinking about the artists' output in the 1970s, as they moved away from their performances as the Singing Sculpture and adopted their now familiar, large-scale, framed photographic "pictures". <sup>2</sup> In these works, the artists embraced abject and alienated states, extreme politics, crude and offensive graffiti, and violence as a way of reflecting on the fluctuating nature of morality. As the decade wore on, they increasingly incorporated the words and imagery of the far-right as well as racial slurs into their work.

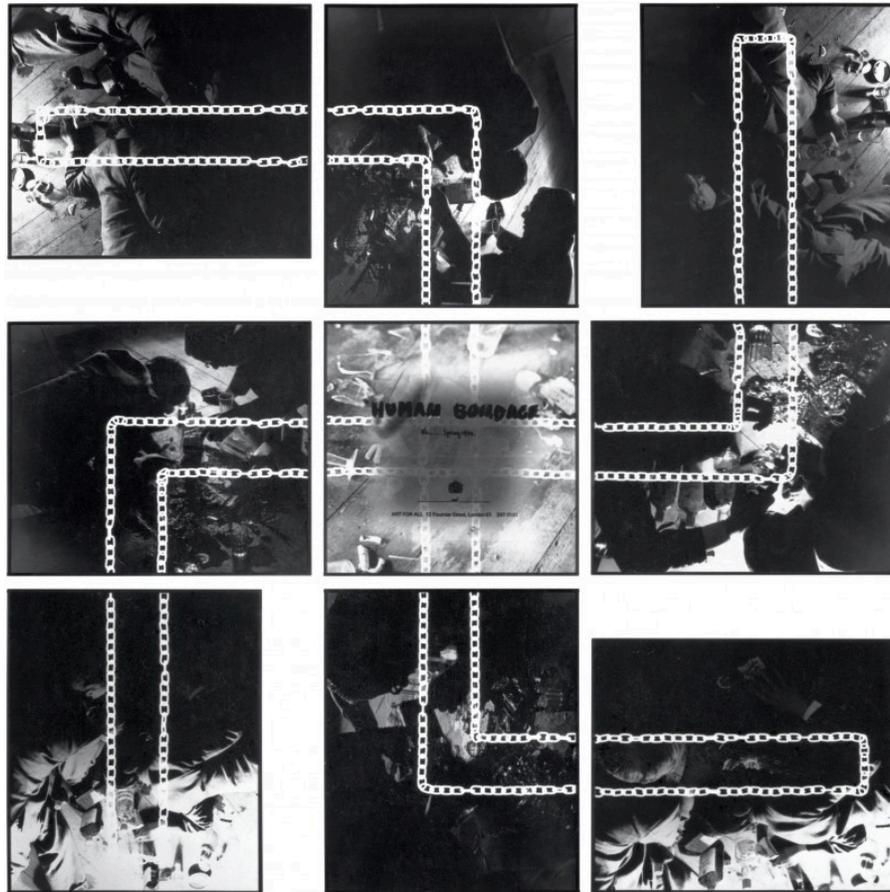
It is crucial that George takes up this question above by referencing the home. For Gilbert and George, home has—famously—been Fournier Street in East London since 1968, where they rented a floor in one of the Georgian terraces there before buying the whole house in the 1970s and gradually renovating it. Publicity photographs of the artists still often depict them in this space. In the interview, George imagines the breakdown of morality in society with the image of "crazy armies coming through the window"—a sudden, violent breaking of the boundary between the private space of the home and the world outside. The crossing of the threshold—the entrance to a home or room—becomes a moment of social collapse or, at least, shifting definitions of behaviour and everyday life. The threshold itself is a space of in-betweenness and evokes a state of liminality, "poised upon uncertain ground, to be leaving one condition ... and entering upon another" as Carolyn Heilbrun puts it, noting its inherent lack of clarity and unsteadiness. <sup>3</sup> In anthropological terms, the threshold has been considered as a rite of

passage, from one life stage to the next; in Arnold Van Gennep's work, society was akin to a house in whose rooms and doorways we move over our lifetimes.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, these liminal states are dangerous—they are when individuals or societies are at their most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> The threshold, then, is a site of potential, a state and a space that might, as Subha Mukherji has termed it, enable a kind of “wakeful seeing” but also one of chaos and collapse.<sup>6</sup>

This essay takes up questions of morality and society in Gilbert and George's art via the concept of the threshold. It explores their sombre and, at times, recklessly ambiguous art of the 1970s through these terms in order to place this work in the context of home, identity, and the perceived political and cultural crisis that characterised this era of British history. It also explores, more broadly, how we might deal with artworks that place extreme right-wing or racist imagery at their heart. Across this decade, Gilbert and George position themselves on the threshold—of home, behaviour, society, and morality—and appear to speak, albeit with some opacity, of the potentials, fears, and politics of this liminal state.

### ***Human Bondage and the Swastika***

Across the nine, framed, black and white photographs that make up *Human Bondage No. 5*, 1974, Gilbert and George sprawl on the floor of their Fournier Street home, gingerly pouring each other gin and tonics and passing out amidst discarded bottles and half-empty glasses (Fig. 1). The artists, objects, and space are heavily in shadow, with light, just illuminating the surface of the floorboards, their suits, and the glassware. In the central panel, shards of broken glass suggest the chaotic, destructive fallout of a night of heavy drinking. The photographs are arranged provocatively into the form of a backwards swastika. A chain has been superimposed onto the photographic images and arranged to echo the form of the swastika more explicitly. Similar imagery occurs across the other six works in the *Human Bondage* series, with the artists passed out amidst the detritus of drinking and each work formed into grids that take the forms of swastikas, the shape underlined either by the arrangement of the photographs alongside blank borders or, in *Human Bondage No. 6*, by intertwining pieces of rope.



**Figure 1.**

Gilbert & George, *Human Bondage No. 5*, 1974, mixed media, 175 × 175 cm. Private Collection, London. Digital image courtesy of Gilbert & George. All Rights Reserved, DACS / Artimage 2018. Photo: Gilbert and George Studio.

Gilbert and George’s use of the swastika, nearly thirty years after the end of the Second World War, has been a controversial element of their art. It has been the subject of interviews since the 1970s as critics have sought to understand the reasons for its incorporation into their images made during this period. For their part, the artists claimed that they “used the swastikas as a symbol of human bondage” and they linked this to alcohol: “the sign of a swastika from the recent past meant oppression, total oppression, and we felt that the drink did that”.<sup>7</sup> Alcohol had been a subject of Gilbert and George’s art since early in the decade when they produced *Gordon’s Makes Us Drunk*, 1972, a twelve-minute film that depicted them drinking gin in their Fournier Street home to a soundtrack of Elgar and Grieg (Fig. 2). This marked the start of a destructive, riotous period in their lives and art, as they responded to their initial success in the art world by spending their money on “going out, drinking, getting totally drunk, totally drunk”.<sup>8</sup> In interviews, they have claimed that, before long, this happy drinking was overtaken by a

“big cloud ... all black” of “pain and loneliness”. It is worth underlining that the works produced in this aftermath, like *Human Bondage*, are hardly confessionals—the artists have described these works as “very contrived pieces, very handmade ... None of our works are documentaries” and the rather stilted poses and carefully choreographed chaos and darkness in their pictures attests to this. However, it is fair to say that *Human Bondage* was intended as a reflection on the party turning sour:

That’s why we started to do this chained-up piece; to be fucked, chained into these rooms in Fournier Street, alone, on the floor, drunk, and that’s why we used to call them Human Bondage. The dark comes in towards us every time. Half our body was always in darkness.<sup>9</sup>



**Figure 2.**

Gilbert & George, *Gordon's Makes Us Drunk* (film still), 1972, video, 12 minutes. Collection of Gilbert & George. Digital image courtesy of Film still courtesy of Gilbert & George / Tate.

In *Dark Shadow*, a limited-edition book of words and images produced in the same year, the artists struck a similar tone. Several sections, such as one called “Drunken Chaps”, read like written accompaniments and extensions to the *Human Bondage* series:

Rough suited chaps glide ghostlike through the debris searching for an unbroken glass. Hands are cut and suits are torn before they rest and cast about for interest to combine with rest. The bottles still with contents hang around expecting to be found, shining and happy looking in the dim light. The human bondage of the hour sets in with elegance of necessity. Turning form tattered and tired to the moment the figures relax with the tense enjoyment of twisted ideas and their minds torn. <sup>10</sup>

Here, the figures of Gilbert and George, so carefully and meticulously arranged in the photographs, become “ghostlike”, wounded, dishevelled, and desperate, seeking a necessary release and relaxation in alcohol and the embrace, crucially, of “twisted ideas” and “torn” minds. In this light, the swastika’s relationship to alcohol seems to be one that pivots between the oppressive, binding power of alcohol dependence and, more disturbingly, a symbol of the shaking off of respectable boundaries and limits in this moment of excess.

There is a sense that Gilbert and George were interested, through the *Human Bondage* series and also more widely, in the shifting thresholds of behaviour. Commenting on their embrace of drinking as a subject matter, the artists suggested that such works could be read more metaphorically:

George: ... There are all sorts of things people can be drunk with, and it was a general human statement in a way ... We felt we had to completely destroy ourselves in some way, to find out the worst things about ourselves, all of the worst feelings ...

Gilbert: It was in some ways even like self-flagellation. <sup>11</sup>

We might read *Human Bondage*, then, as seeking to evoke a more general sense of submission—to despair, to power, to the appeal and release embodied in some kind of extreme, whether that be related to politics or alcohol or some other intoxicant. Gilbert and George claimed that the series might also evoke another form of bondage—religion. In an interview with Carter Ratcliff, they underlined the intentionally shifting and ambiguous nature of their use of the swastika and its relationship to Christianity:

George: The Human Bondage pieces show the Christian cross quite often.

Gilbert: And, anyway, the swastika is a version of the cross. The Nazi swastika runs one way, and others run the other way. We have them going both ways. Reversals. We weren't trying to say anything about fascism or the war in particular.

George: You see a swastika and you have this immediate, extremely powerful feeling about what went on all over the world at a certain time ...

We like idea that one could deal with the destructive elements in one's life, in oneself, as human bondage, as something to be accepted. An aspect of life that you needn't avoid at all costs ...

Gilbert: There's no correct political line on our works. We are interested in morality ...

I don't know where we are, politically, because we're not involved with politics. But we have a morality. We are interested in that because we believe that comes through morality—what is good and what is bad. The shifting of good and bad—what one accepts today, and the next day one doesn't accept anymore. <sup>12</sup>

There are a number of implications here that suggest the artists framed their use of the swastika in *Human Bondage* as a means of evoking transition and liminality, between morality and immorality, good and evil, sobriety and drunkenness, selfhood and destruction. We might read the pictures as seeking to reflect on the continued or potential appeal of fascism in the face of hopelessness or wider social crisis, or even as reflections on individuals' potential implication in fascist ideas or tendencies. Gilbert and George breach the moral threshold in *Human Bondage*, we might argue, in order to draw attention to its very fragility.

In the mid-1970s, fascism and far-right politics were enjoying their highest level of popular appeal and political weight in Britain since before the Second World War. This was enabled by an unfurling sense of crisis that gripped British society across the decade, largely seen as indicative of the crumbling

of post-war consensus. Inflation had spiralled since the end of the 1960s, which led to a rise in unemployment (it reached 6.4 per cent in the summer of 1976, the highest since the war) and a series of ongoing, bitter trade union disputes across the decade, particularly in the winter of discontent of 1978–1979. Economic crisis was constant and appeared to signal Britain’s declining power and influence on the world stage: in 1973, the global oil crisis pushed the British economy into recession and led to the end of Edward Heath’s Conservative government, while in 1976 James Callaghan’s Labour government was forced to request a loan of \$3.9 billion from the IMF in order to stabilise the British economy after the pound reached a record low against the dollar. IRA bombings brought domestic terrorism, and Britain’s inner cities were marred by riots, poverty, and high levels of inequality. In this context, where questions of social inequality, immigration, and national identity were high on the political agenda, far-right political parties were able to gain some influence. <sup>13</sup>

The National Front formed in 1967 and grew to gain significant victories in a series of local and by-elections by the end of the 1970s. In the October 1974 general election, they promised “a ban on all non-white immigration to Britain and the repatriation of ‘all coloured immigrants’” and steeped their statements in “the language of patriotism, moral conservatism, and strict social discipline”, focusing on issues like law and order and capital punishment to mask a crudely racist worldview. <sup>14</sup> They produced party political broadcasts and literature, organised processional marches with banners and drums, and their paper sellers were a common sight on street corners, outside football matches, and even at school gates. <sup>15</sup> This far-right actively sought to capitalise on the frustrations and equalities that were widespread in 1970s Britain.

The rising influence of the far-right in contemporary British society was clearly important for the *Human Bondage* series. Gilbert and George’s relationship to these politics has, over their career, become muddled, partly due to over-literal critical responses to their work but also due to their own statements, which are at times ambiguous and at others alarming. In a 1981 interview with Gordon Burn, the artists were asked why they had been labelled by some people as fascists:

George: It’s a life-force. It’s a life-force we accept very much.

Gilbert: You could say that Christian goodness is fascistic. What people used to believe was good—religion—you could say that is fascistic. Many people would say so.

George: I mean, we're only here because of the World War II turmoil of fascism anyway. Life doesn't exist without it ... Without the good works of the people that the extreme left call fascist there wouldn't even be a civilisation. <sup>16</sup>

Statements like this remain rooted in their now familiar sense of shifting morality—fascism is, again, conflated with Christianity—though they appear disturbingly enamoured with its power as a “life-force”. The same interview is marred by racist generalisations about the Pakistani community near their home in East London, and George’s assertion that the artists were “not against people saying” that they were pro-National Front. <sup>17</sup> Four years later, they stated that: “we wouldn’t say we’re not fascists”. <sup>18</sup> George’s former art teacher seemingly reported hearing similar comments: “They said some things that if it had been anyone else, would have made me get up and walk away. But I never understood whether that fascist stuff was just part of the game”. <sup>19</sup> The artists consistently toe the line between explicit right-wing utterances and provocative ambiguity.

A sympathetic reading here might assert that Gilbert and George’s “art for all” philosophy would, by necessity, include the full spectrum of political radicalism that was present in 1970s London. From early in their careers, the artists repeatedly claimed that their work was intended for as wide an audience as possible, beyond what they saw as the elitist confines of an art world still, in the late 1960s, in thrall to modernism. This approach has gone hand-in-hand with their stance that all aspects of their lives and experiences come under the heading of art; as Gilbert put it, simply, “our lives are one big sculpture”. <sup>20</sup> As a result, their art takes in a large variety of subjects, actions, utterances, and experiences, rooted in an attitude where they “accept the whole world”. <sup>21</sup> This is a stance that is as artificial as the works of art they produce and suggests, on the one hand, that their statements require an interpretive approach that bears this artifice in mind. However, at the same time, there is a need to deal carefully with their embrace of extreme right-wing statements and imagery, to trace the specific connotations and resonances it might have held at this moment, and to reflect, more broadly, on how we might speak, responsibly, about the effects of these statements and imagery from our own political moment, while acknowledging the contradictory implications and meanings of the artists’ works and statements. For this, the intersections between Gilbert and George’s use of fascist imagery and other elements of 1970s British culture are crucial, as well as their connections to the concept of the threshold.

## Skinheads and Queerness

In 1974, the year of *Human Bondage*, Gilbert and George recounted how they found themselves in a fight with a group of figures who were emblematic of the widespread sense of “crisis”, violence, and extreme politics in 1970s Britain—skinheads:

Gilbert: Fighting is rather nice. Do you remember when they broke my nose?

George: They were the skinhead types.

Gilbert: Yes, they kicked us in once.

George: It was fun. It was the early days. This was in Finsbury Park, which is very tough. Such a marvellous style of dress they have, the skinheads. Marvellous. Lovely, really. We were their greatest supporters, you know. It's rather unfair they attacked us. Everybody's thinking about this great wave of violence and there are we walking around the streets admiring this amazing style. Splendid.

Gilbert: You never see it any more. Not in the East End.

George: It's a style sported rather heavily by male prostitutes. I think that's the last stronghold of skinheads in London. I don't know why. Gentlemen Prefer Skinheads, or something. <sup>22</sup>

The artists' comments here reveal a complex relationship to skinheads, skinhead culture, and their links to male prostitution. In one sense, they position themselves outside of skinhead culture, as just two victims of a gang who met their fate in a relatively common manner: by straying into a different community (Finsbury Park in North London) and standing out from the crowd (in their suits). At the same time, they frame themselves as admirers of skinheads. In the early 1970s, skinheads had come to signify resistance to the shifting social landscape in Britain (where feminist, anti-racist, and gay liberation movements were gaining prominence), rooted in “conservative discourses of nostalgia and authenticity” that sought to

reassert a supposedly natural, fixed organisation of society.<sup>23</sup> They had also become widely known for the kind of violence that they inflicted on Gilbert and George. This violence had led to a decline in the skinhead subculture at this time, as the artists note, as it pushed original skinheads away from identifying with a movement that appeared to be growing more extreme.

Skinheads had originally emerged in the late 1960s as a working-class branch of the mod subculture, and they took inspiration from the fashion and music of young Jamaican immigrants, who modelled themselves on Jamaican “rude boys”; they were, early on, a multicultural movement. These roots were retained and centred, later in the decade, in Two Tone’s ska/punk/reggae sound and left-wing politics. At the same time, other skinheads became associated with the punk sub-genre Oi! and, more generally, the far-right movements, like the National Front, gaining political and social influence in the inner cities.<sup>24</sup> Gilbert and George’s interest in skinheads, then, finds them engaging with a subculture whose meaning was shifting: between a mainstream association with violence and right-wing politics and increasingly obscured links to black immigrant culture and left-wing politics.

At the same time—and, again, Gilbert and George allude to this—skinheads had become both fashion inspirations and sex symbols in the gay scene. These two seemingly unrelated communities had risen to prominence alongside each other, with the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) forming in 1970 in the wake of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967, just as skinheads became a recognisable subculture. The GLF’s conscious challenging of stereotypes about gay men—as effeminate and middle or upper class, largely—and the general expansion of who might define themselves as gay following liberation led to a “masculinisation” of the gay scene and, eventually, the emergence of the figure of the clone later in the decade (developments that are, of course, not without their politics and problems).<sup>25</sup> Skinhead fashion (button-down or polo shirts, braces, Dr Martens, short hair) began to be fetishised by gay men; a gay publication, *Jeremy, the Magazine for Modern Young Men*, ran its first sequence of skinhead photographs in February 1970, for example.<sup>26</sup> Steadily, some gay men adopted skinhead fashion themselves, and its influence fed into the gay leather and SM scenes during the decade (the more extreme aspects of these scenes also began to appropriate fascistic references, including Nazi uniforms and the swastika).<sup>27</sup> Gilbert and George’s reflections on skinheads above seem to chart this queer development, from violence to objects of desire. Elsewhere, reflecting on what they felt was their own marginal position in the British art world in terms of taste and politics, the artists positioned themselves as skinheads’ allies, saying “We want to be completely outside with—whatyoucall—hooligans and tramps ... We have to be on top of the bus, with the skinheads.”<sup>28</sup> Skinheads appeared in their art,

though without overt fetishisation, in 1980's work *Patriots*, for example, alongside other white young men and one young Asian man, tempering and diversifying an image that could have been read, via its title, as an endorsement of skinhead nationalism, though which still retains an unsettling, tense aura (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.**

Gilbert & George, *Patriots*, 1980, mixed media, 181 x 303 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Gilbert & George.

Though references to skinheads do not appear explicitly in *Human Bondage*, Gilbert and George's active engagement with emerging youth cultures that intersected, unsteadily, with extreme politics, violence, and queerness demonstrates an awareness of the complex relationship between homosexuality and politics at this moment. *Human Bondage* is, after all, a vision of unruly queer domesticity glimpsed through the frame of a swastika; this is a vision that, on the one hand, evokes stereotypes that linked Nazism with homosexuality, while also marking their queer domesticity as different from both from the politically radical approaches to home-making by contemporary groups like the GLF and the conservative respectability of more mainstream gay couples.<sup>29</sup>

To describe Gilbert and George as queer is to use a label that they would likely resist—the artists have consistently rejected being labelled as gay, denied an interest in gay liberation, and refused the idea that they make “gay art”: “We never did gay art, we never did, ever”.<sup>30</sup> At times, they have put forward a fluid if defensive approach to gender and sexuality:

we know much younger friends ... post-G&G people you can call them ... they just don't think of sexuality in divisions ... They don't think "gay" or "straight" or "queer". They don't ask if the friend coming over to dinner is queer or not, it's not an issue.<sup>31</sup>

However, Gilbert and George's preoccupation with skinheads, rooted in violence, clothing, and sex, and their identification with them—"on top of the bus"—suggests solidarity or, perhaps more appropriately, an intentionally unsteady alignment between marginal masculinities. As Murray Healy has argued, skinheads (supposedly working class, socially immobile, violent, right wing) and gay men (supposedly middle class, socially mobile, effeminate, left wing) were, in theory, polar opposites. They were the extremes between which lay acceptable definitions of masculinity; they stand outside of its thresholds though they can seemingly slip and shift between extreme categories, as we have seen, and even invade the safety of mainstream masculinity too.<sup>32</sup> Gilbert and George seemed intent on working across these divisions, shrugging off the "gay" label, openly seeking to embrace right-wing politics and imagery as if not an endorsement then perhaps a provocative expression of the contradictions at the heart of emerging categories and markers of identity. We are left, in *Human Bondage*, with an intentionally troubled, intertwined sense of the artists' relationship with far-right imagery and emerging but fluid definitions of male selfhood.

## **Gilbert and George and Punk**

Gilbert and George's use of the swastika also marks them out as unlikely precursors to another youth subculture movement that would emerge in the years following *Human Bondage*: punk. By late 1976, punk was interpreted as a reflection of the pervading sense of social crisis in British society; it has also subsequently been considered by scholars as a site of resistance to the economic and cultural conditions of the period.<sup>33</sup> The provocative potential of the swastika—and the spectre of totalitarianism more generally—proved particularly fascinating for those involved in punk. Siouxsie Sioux wore an armband with a swastika on it in the early years of her band Siouxsie and the Banshees (Fig. 4). Sid Vicious famously wore a T-shirt with a swastika screen-printed on the front too. These were sold by the Sex Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren (who was Jewish) in his shop Sex on London's King's Road; he reportedly told employees that, if they were asked about this, they were to say, "We're here to positively confront people with the past".<sup>34</sup> There appear to have been a range of reasons why punks decided to wear the swastika, from a sense that they were re-presenting a warning from history, as McLaren claimed, to a sense that it was purely a provocative transgression. Siouxsie Sioux fell into the latter camp:

It was very much an anti-mums and anti-dads thing ... We hated older people—not across the board but particularly in suburbia—always harping on about Hitler, “We showed him”, and that smug pride. It was a way of saying, “Well I think Hitler was very good actually”: a way of watching someone like that go completely red-faced.<sup>35</sup>

More generally, it seems to have been intended as a retort to nostalgia and complacency in the aftermath of victory, particularly as the post-war consensus appeared to be crumbling. It also drew attention to less easily acknowledged aspects of British history, such as the policy of appeasement in the 1930s, Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists, and even, at that very moment, the rising influence of the extreme right.<sup>36</sup> Whether the nuances of these intentions were shared by all and whether the effects achieved amounted to much more than shock and disgust is, perhaps, unlikely. The swastika remains viscerally resistant to these attempts at critique and interrogation. Though Gilbert and George’s use of the swastika occurs a year or two before punk arrives in Britain, they share its appeal to shock, and its potential for critique as well as misunderstanding and ambiguity.



**Figure 4.**

Caroline Coon, Siouxsie Sioux in the Queue at the 100 Club for the First Punk Rock Festival, 1976, gelatin silver print, 30.6 × 24.2 cm. Collection of Caroline Coon. Digital image courtesy of Caroline Coon / Camera Press.

Punk's provocations were also folded into the work of another queer artist in the 1970s: Derek Jarman. His 1978 film *Jubilee* brings Queen Elizabeth I forward in time to the England of 1977, which has been laid to waste by riots and social collapse, to follow the activities of a group of reckless, nihilistic punks made up of women and queer men. The film emerged from Jarman's own social circle beginning to overlap with punk's key figures, and attests to the often-overlooked intersections between queer subcultures and the beginnings of punk. <sup>37</sup>

*Jubilee* demonstrates a similarly provocative interrogation of history and morality to *Human Bondage*; early on, Amyl, one of the band of punks, puts forward her own history lesson:

history still fascinates me—it's so intangible. You can weave facts any way you like. Good guys can swap places with bad guys. You might think Richard III of England was bad, but you'd be wrong. What separates Hitler from Napoleon or even Alexander? The size of the destruction? Or was he closer to us in time? Was Churchill a hero? Did he alter history for the better? <sup>38</sup>

Here, the strict moral boundaries of post-war consensus are actively scrambled. Elsewhere, Amyl both mourns the disintegration of society (civilisation "destroyed by resentment") and welcomes it ("since civilisation itself was always fucking awful for everyone, who gives a shit? We're better off without it"). <sup>39</sup> Punk's nihilistic embrace of ambiguity does not go without criticism in Jarman's film, however. Amyl is eventually recruited by the media mogul Borgia Ginz to perform a reggae-tinged version of "Rule Britannia" in the Eurovision Song Contest. The film culminates in her and her group of punks retreating to Borgia's stately home in Dorset, which has become an independent fascist state (the group are stopped at the border by a customs official who declares "blacks, gays, and jews are banned in Dorset"). They sit on his sofa and watch the *Jubilee* on television with Hitler, as Borgia reflects, "They all sign up in the end one way or another". <sup>40</sup> The punk movement has submitted to the very forces—popular culture and fascism—that it sought to critique (or perhaps, as Jarman suggested, the connections were there all along). <sup>41</sup>

Jarman's film underlines the cultural connections between punk, extremism, queerness, morality, and social crisis in the 1970s that are implicit in Gilbert and George's work. The *Human Bondage* series pivots on a political and cultural threshold that links these elements, creating a web of allusions, signs, identities, and cultures that represents their surprising yet present connections. These pictures operate in a state of chaos and

unreadability—one that, as in Jarman’s film, gestures to capitulation and complicity. In this way, the *Human Bondage* series occupies a true threshold, a liminal political and social state, and requires a reading that addresses its liminality, its vacillation between critique and submission. In 1985, responding to a question about whether they found the 1970s “very depressing”, Gilbert and George said:

We began to realise that it was important for us to respect the misery and death and violence and aggression and other forms as well. You ask most people what they like. They say, well this; and you say, why do you do that? And in the end they just do everything in order to go for a pint of beer on Saturdays. It’s all it boils down to. <sup>42</sup>

Here, the everyday rhythms of life and the reward of alcohol lapse into an unthinking, fascistic ritual. In *Human Bondage*, similarly, the home and the everyday are allowed to contain oppression, subversion, and deviant queerness, alcohol becomes total submission and destruction, and morality shifts into something undefinable. It is the chaotic and ambiguous potential of the threshold, evoking violence, extremity, queerness, rebellion, and personal and domestic disintegration (rather than simply political critique or submission) that emerges, like a question, a threat, a presence, from their work. It speaks, with a kind of clumsy complexity, of the incautiously shifting politics and identities of 1970s Britain, where liberation becomes submission, rebellion becomes capitulation.

### **The *Dirty Words* Series, Race, and Crisis**

As the decade wore on, Gilbert and George continued to register the ongoing social crisis in 1970s Britain and reflect on ambiguous thresholds of behaviour, politics, and selfhood. If the *Human Bondage* series found them trapped, alone together, in their Fournier Street home, then their *Dirty Words* series from 1977 placed the still isolated, enclosed, anxious figures of the artists alongside images of the people, spaces, and objects of the city around them. In these works, the very boundaries of home and not-home, comfort and violence, and, potentially, society and its limits are further undermined. The series is made up of a number of large, gridded panels of photographs. Each of the panels includes images of written graffiti, which are mostly puerile, explicit terms: “fuck”, “cunt”, “scum”, “bummed”, “bollocks”, “suck”, “shit”, “cock”, “queer”, “angry”, and so on (Fig. 5). These were found and photographed on the streets of London. The subject matter of the other images in the panels vary from work to work: they can include further instances of crude, drawn graffiti, Black or Asian men, police officers,

homeless men, male sex workers, soldiers, and views of the spaces of the city, including traffic on the street, sections of buildings, and landmarks on the London skyline. The bodies of the artists are almost always present too, either depicting just their faces, closely cropped, or their whole bodies, looking mournful, muted, and reflective in darkened interiors.

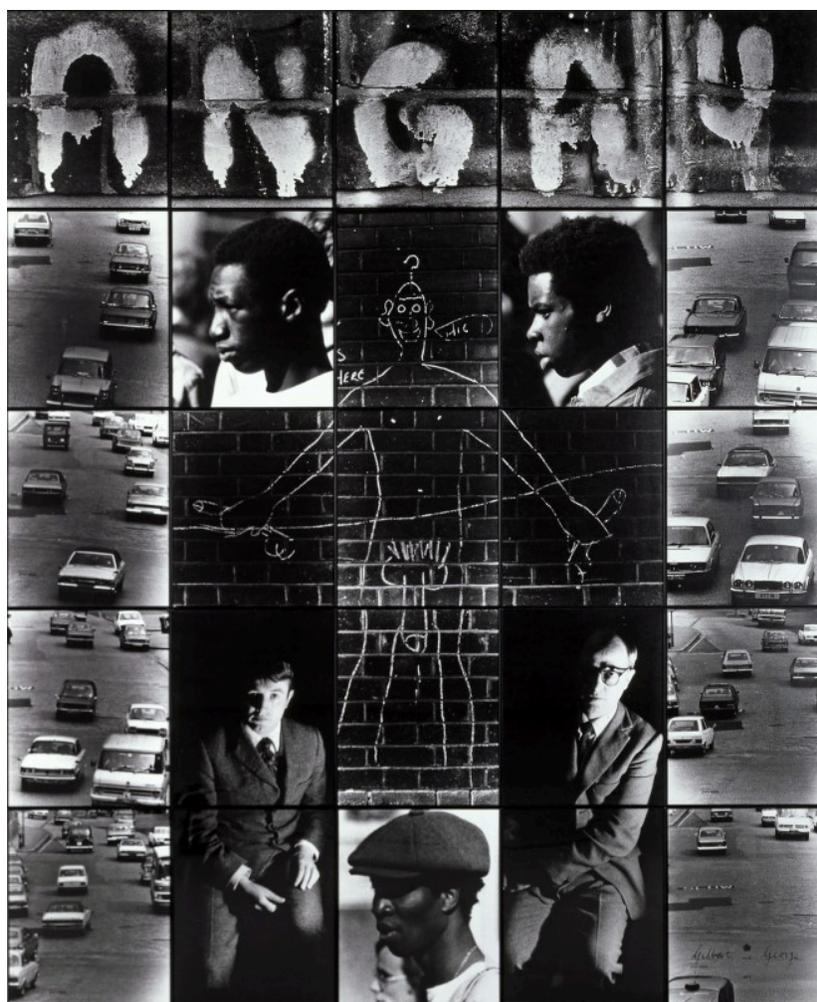


**Figure 5.**

Gilbert & George, *Cunt Scum*, 1977, 16 photographs, black and white, on paper mounted onto board, 241.3 × 200.7 cm. Collection of Tate, London. Digital image courtesy of Tate, London / Gilbert & George.

Particular works from the *Dirty Words* series combine images and text in ways that imply a move across thresholds, between home and society, inner emotion and outer expression, and experience and stereotype. In *Angry*, the letters of the title are enlarged and organised, one per panel, across the top of the work (you can see that they have been daubed over a section of brick wall) (Fig. 6). At the centre of the work is more graffiti—this is a crudely rendered image of a nude male figure that clutches dismembered phalluses

in each hand and lets out a “Hic” in a speech bubble that implies he is drunk. The enlarged genitals and facial features of this drawn figure could suggest that it is a stereotypical and racist representation of a black male. It is surrounded by photographs of other black men, cropped to focus on just their heads. When asked about the inclusion of figures like this in their works at this point, the artists explained that they took photographs of others at a distance, sometimes even using a long lens from within their own home.<sup>43</sup> As the men do not look at the camera here and as we can make out fragments of other figures and the city space behind them, it seems probable that they were captured in a similar way. Gilbert and George, meanwhile, sit in the lower part of the work, again in darkened interior spaces, looking out directly at us. On either side, photographs of cars on the city streets flank the central images.



**Figure 6.**

Gilbert & George, *Angry*, 1977, mixed media, 302 × 252 cm. Collection of Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands, formerly in the Visser collection. Digital image courtesy of Gilbert & George / Photo: Cary Markerink.

The arrangement of the images in this work brings to mind religious works of art. In some respects, the gridded structure, with thick black lines between the images, recall stained-glass windows. However, the composition here looks more like a devotional altarpiece, with the crucified body of Christ replaced with the graffitied body, arms held out in an approximation of a crucifixion pose across five panels that are arranged like a cross. Around him, the black men appear like devotional saints, while Gilbert and George themselves sit at the foot of this crucifixion like mourners or witnesses, making eye contact with us as viewers in a way that echoes the position and gaze of mourners in more traditional altarpieces. The images of traffic running down the side and even the letters of “angry” running along the top act almost like wings. Gilbert and George would not be the first artists in this period of British art to appropriate religious and specifically crucifixion imagery—there were prominent examples in the work of Graham Sutherland, Francis Bacon, and Francis Newton Souza. In this case, there are specific issues around race being addressed in the appropriation of crucifixion imagery through black bodies. Gilbert and George frequently claimed that they were part of a limited group of artists who were “able to accept black people and white people in our work completely on the same level”, and, following their words, it could be argued that this work treats the photographed black men with a sense of dignity, contrasting with their arrangement around the stereotypical and demeaning representation of another black body at the centre.<sup>44</sup> There are, perhaps, elements of cross-identity empathy in the way they present themselves alongside other male bodies.

There is also something intentionally and explicitly provocative about the juxtaposition of graffiti and real bodies, which builds on the immediately controversial use of ‘dirty words’ across the series. The words and images of the graffiti are base, crude expressions or images, easily found but perhaps determinedly ignored by many around the city, as the artists acknowledged:

Gilbert: By putting the word along the top, then something vertical down both sides, it looked like a door. A door of hell.

George: We found much of the graffiti in doorways. In every Western city, you find it immediately, the moment you look. We became interested to know what makes a person do that.<sup>45</sup>

Doors feature prominently in their description: they are thresholds, between one space and another—between an interior and an exterior, for instance, or, as the artists seem to imply here, between this world and a hellish alternative. Again, this term “door of hell” has religious connotations, and

could perhaps be interpreted as a subversive framing of their work as the antithesis of something like Lorenzo Ghiberti's so-called Gates of Paradise for the Florence Baptistery. You can imagine encountering a work like this in a relatively pristine art gallery space, with the door of the *Angry* panel beckoning you into a world of abject existence and base expression.

The threshold of a work like *Angry*—and like all of the *Dirty Words* series—creates a moment of uncertainty, where given boundaries are made to appear as if they are about to fall away. It seems, here, to be both a physical and a psychological state: physically, somewhere between the interior in which Gilbert and George place themselves and the unruly spaces of the city, and, psychologically, somewhere between respectability and the abject, anti-social emotions and representations of the graffiti (bringing to light “what makes a person do that”, as George says, and recalling his invocation of “crazy armies coming through the window” that opened this essay). As I have demonstrated, a fear of social decline and the disruption of boundaries was something that had permeated debates and government policy in Britain in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, as the appearance of post-war consensus disintegrated into anxiety and dissensus.

In this context, institutions and the press placed the blame for the ongoing moment of crisis on particular sections of British society: the “enemy within” in Conservative politician Enoch Powell's paranoid terms, who were supposedly seeking to undermine and destroy British society from the inside. The scapegoats, more often than not, were black citizens. They were a force that had previously been on the “outside” of British society, but who were now more visible and perceived to be growing in number. Black people were policed in an increasingly heavy-handed way, and became the focus of large-scale moral panics: for instance, a crisis around mugging dominated the media and political debate in the early years of the 1970s and black youths were perceived to be the perpetrators.<sup>46</sup> As Stuart Hall argued, moments of panic and continued tension like this speak of anxiety about the thresholds of social behaviour: particular events or groups of people were framed as having the potential to violate, decisively, particular given social thresholds and instigate wider social breakdown.<sup>47</sup>

The figure of the migrant, then—and particularly the black male youth—came to represent “the enemy within” British society, the violent, unemployed cause and symptom of a wider crisis in this period. It was—as Gilbert and George would have been aware—not so long since queer men had been perceived in a similar way: perhaps not as violent, but as deviant figures that threatened the consensus and reconstruction of British society after the war.<sup>48</sup> By the mid-1970s, the black male migrant had taken the place of the queer man (to some extent) as the scapegoat for national crisis, and so there is one sense that *Angry* could be read as an active reflection on

the marginality of black male bodies at this particular moment. However, Gilbert and George's approach to this is, inevitably, contradictory. Their broad imitation of the form, poses, and gestures of a religious altarpiece suggests an intention—which they indicated themselves—of recuperating or elevating this marginal figure. At the same time, however, this elevation is done either at the other end of a long lens camera (with their faces framed like mugshots), or through crude and offensive graffiti. It is further complicated by the way they frame a work like this as a “door of hell”, one that is obviously meant to provoke and to play on the fears of their audience; the works were shown in three groups at contemporary art galleries Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, and New York between 1977 and 1978, but were also, as ever, widely reproduced and circulated in Britain and elsewhere. There is a push-and-pull at work here: a sense of them encouraging us to identify with these marginal figures, to bring real images of them closer to us and to balk at the crude representation of them on the wall, but there is always, still, a distance. These anonymous men, seen from afar, do not make eye contact with us or, by implication, Gilbert and George themselves. This could, in part, be read as a reflection of the experience of the city—how individuals and demographics live alongside one another but might never know each other. At the same time, *Angry* never really resolves satisfactorily: its black male figures are made present, simultaneously close and distant, affirmed and accepted alongside the racist scrawls on the wall and the evocations of the media coverage on “the enemy within”.

The politics of race have been a complex feature of Gilbert and George's art throughout their career—I have already highlighted, for instance, the ambiguity of some of their statements on far-right politics. In 1978—a year after the *Dirty Words* series—the artists produced *Paki* (Fig. 7), a much more overtly insensitive depiction of a South Asian man, with the two artists looking on with a gaze that casts the work's subject as a figure of curiosity. The artists attempted—unconvincingly—to defend their use of the slur as a term of affection; elsewhere, Wolf Jahn has argued that the work presents the figure and the title with a neutrality that might “nullify the generally understood semantic content of the title” (though I would suggest that slurs do not slip so easily into neutrality for those who have been subjected to them).<sup>49</sup> As a result, Gilbert and George's at best clumsy and at worst offensive handling of issues around race at this moment continues to place something of a question mark under their use of representations of black men in *Angry*. The visual linking of black men to the term “angry” treads a fine line in itself: the artists are in danger of evoking the stereotype of the angry black man. So, whose anger is this? Is it the anger of the racially abused black man? The outraged onlooker to racial abuse? Or the British institutions and far-right organisations like the National Front, who sought someone to blame for the apparent decline in British society? It is this

uncomfortable ambiguity that makes works like *Angry*—as well as other *Dirty Words* works—difficult to read as entirely recuperating or elevating its marginal, scapegoated subjects.



PAKI. 1978. 71x59 in. 181x151 cm.

**Figure 7.**

Gilbert & George, *Paki*, 1978, mixed media, 181 × 151 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Gilbert & George.

## Reading Gilbert and George's 1970s Pictures

As viewers, just as with *Human Bondage*, we need to read this ambiguity responsibly; we need to think about how we can respond to a work that seems to reassert the very things it also seeks to critique. It is worth putting *Angry* back in the context of the *Dirty Words* series, which includes slurs directed at gay men (bent, queer, poof), a range of masculinities (South Asian men, the homeless, city workers, sex workers, soldiers, and the police), and slogans that hint at unrest (“smash”, “Communism”, “smash the reds”, “we’re all angry”, an “NF” for the National Front) (Fig. 8). The splashes of red



*Angry* is one “door of hell” in a series of “doors of hell” that purport to beckon us into the all-encompassing social collapse that the black male (among others) was supposedly heralding at this moment. There is a sense, on the one hand, that *Angry* is intended to satirise and critique this sense of crisis. But there is also a sense, on the other hand, that, in re-presenting the stereotypes of the graffiti, in photographing young black men at a distance, and in surrounding them with the chaos of the streets and the word “angry”, the artists are evoking the very outrage and hysteria they sought to undermine. There is little to gain in choosing sides here—either crafting a positive reading of *Angry* or condemning Gilbert and George entirely. As a result, we are left with the chaos of the threshold, sprawled across boundaries: between presence and stereotype, between the outrage and the ridicule of the graffiti image, between photographed black men as attendant angels and mug-shotted criminals, between the anger of the abusers and the abused, between a spirit of redemption and a spirit of hate, between home (where Gilbert and George perch) and the city. The way in which these positions occupy *Angry* all at once is significant and, I think, grimly truthful.

Earlier in the decade, Gilbert and George’s performances of *Underneath the Arches* as singing sculptures had evoked nostalgia for the spirit of wartime consensus then associated with musical hall songs, while also evoking the wartime destruction of homes and lives—both actual and threatened. In this way, the memories and traumas of war were made to linger in the spaces in London and around the world in which *Underneath the Arches* was performed, nearly twenty-five years after the war’s end. A similar push-and-pull of nostalgia and threat was central to the rhetoric of “the enemy within”—the marginal, unruly male figures threatening the perceived post-war consensus of British society. *Angry*’s reckless ambiguity appears to embody the extremes of this moment in a detached manner perhaps only available to white artists both embroiled in but also removed from these debates. But the doubt that is present in this work about Gilbert and George’s intentions might be useful to us, as a means of speaking of ambivalence; of allowing a post-war moment of racism and violence to be visible; to address it and point to its insidiousness, its quietness—the said but not said, the action threatened but delayed. As a whole, the *Dirty Words* series simmers with violence—slogans, battle-ready soldiers, extreme politics—and seems intended, in part, to evoke a war of political and demographic extremes. As ambivalent thresholds, these works gesture to the falsity or fragility of boundaries in post-war Britain. In pleading for a spirit of calm and respect, they also seem about to tip into racism, violence, and chaos. In addressing what is left of consensus, they also appear on the brink of a war that had supposedly been won; in seeking to address the question of home (for the artists and others), they find only instability—the lingering uncertainty and troubling potential of the threshold.

Gilbert and George’s art of the 1970s—particularly the works in their *Human Bondage* and *Dirty Words* series discussed here—raises difficult questions: on how we might read artworks that engage with right-wing and racist imagery inflected by a significant degree of ambiguity, and what purpose this kind of imagery might serve for understanding how representations and history become entangled. There are not straightforward answers here, but instead I have argued that we can read works like these with an attention to their workings—a watchful sense of how they move between positions, spaces, and ideologies before our eyes. In this light, it is the complication of Gilbert and George’s art in this period that can serve as an encouragement towards if not a reconceptualisation then a refocusing of historical and art historical memory towards this complication. In their 1970s work, we are given representations that are imbued with an unsettling potential, that purposefully seek to say the unsaid, that pivot and traverse thresholds that we might wish to ignore. It is not their transgressions that are valuable but their shifting nature, the hinge of their ambiguity that renders them both inscrutable and urgently present. They speak of fascism’s return, the banal slippage into its imagery and rhetoric, marking its presence at the heart of British history and British art history with a sense of its closeness, its possibility, like a “door of hell” that might quietly, unnoticed, swing ajar.

## Footnotes

- 1 Carter Ratcliff, “Gilbert and George: The Fabric of Their World”, in *Gilbert and George: The Complete Pictures, 1971–1985* (Bordeaux: CAPC Musée d’Art Contemporain de Bordeaux, 1986), xxxii.
- 2 Gilbert and George refer to their artworks as “pictures” because they are neither photographs nor paintings; see Jan Debbaut, “Well Then, Let’s Make the World Our Gallery!”, *Gilbert & George: Major Exhibition* (London: Tate Modern, 2007), 9.
- 3 Carolyn Heilbrun, *Women’s Lives: The View from the Threshold* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 1.
- 4 See Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960); and Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*”, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.
- 5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 122.
- 6 Subha Mukherji, *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), xix.
- 7 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), “Art For Art’s Sake: From an Interview with Jim Shelley 1987”, in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 170; and Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), “The Fundamental Gilbert and George: 1997”, in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 291.
- 8 Violette and Obrist, “The Fundamental Gilbert and George”, 292.
- 9 Violette and Obrist, “The Fundamental Gilbert and George”, 292.
- 10 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), “Dark Shadow”, in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 91.
- 11 Violette and Obrist, “The Fundamental Gilbert and George”, 292.
- 12 Ratcliff, “Gilbert and George”, xxi.
- 13 On Britain in the 1970s, see Richard Coopey and Nicholas Woodward (eds.), *Britain in the 1970s: The Troubled Economy* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008).
- 14 Matthew Worley and Nigel Copsey, “White Youth: The Far Right, Punk and British Youth Culture, 1977–87”, *JOMEC Journal* 9 (2016): 29.
- 15 Worley and Copsey, “White Youth”, 31.

- 16 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1974", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 68-73.
- 17 Violette and Obrist, "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1981", 124.
- 18 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "Morning Coffee with Gilbert and George: Interview 1985", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 145.
- 19 Daniel Farson, *Gilbert and George: A Portrait* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 74.
- 20 Ratcliff, "Gilbert and George", x.
- 21 Ratcliff, "Gilbert and George", xi.
- 22 Violette and Obrist, "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1974", 71-72.
- 23 Murray Healy, *Gay Skins: Class, Masculinity, and Queer Appropriation* (London: Cassell, 1996), 42.
- 24 Timothy S. Brown, "Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and 'Nazi Rock' in England and Germany", *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004): 157-178.
- 25 Healy, *Gay Skins*, 58.
- 26 Healy, *Gay Skins*, 73.
- 27 Healy, *Gay Skins*, 110 and 115.
- 28 Violette and Obrist, "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1981", 131.
- 29 On homosexuality and fascism, see Andrew Hewitt, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism, and the Modernist Imaginary* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); on queer home-making in the 1970s, Matt Cook, *Queer Domesticities: Homosexuality and Home Life in Twentieth-Century London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 191-198.
- 30 Farson, *Gilbert and George*, 75.
- 31 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "Gilbert and George: Interview with Simon Dwyer, 1995", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 209; and Farson, *Gilbert and George*, 76.
- 32 Healy, *Gay Skins*, 4.
- 33 Matthew Worley, "Shot By Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of 'Consensus'", *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 3 (2012): 335; and, more generally, Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics, and British Youth Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 34 Quoted in Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music, and Film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 103.
- 35 Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 241.
- 36 Savage, *England's Dreaming*, 241.
- 37 Jarman makes connections between queerness and punk, suggesting that punk:

somehow got under my skin ... it opened up all sorts of wounds which go back of course to the schooling ... the actual venom poured out ... it was made more aggravating by being gay and having one's life bottled up.[fn]Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 249. Connections between punk and queerness are also made in Jim Ellis, *Derek Jarman's Angelic Conversations* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 52-53.

- 38 Derek Jarman, *Jubilee: Six Film Scripts* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 49.
- 39 Jarman, *Jubilee*, 68-69.
- 40 Jarman, *Jubilee*, 74-75.
- 41 Jarman said, "Afterwards, the film turned prophetic. Dr Dee's vision came true—the streets burned in Brixton and Toxteth, Adam [Ant] was on Top of the Pops and signed up with Margaret Thatcher to sing at the Falklands Ball. They all sign up in one way or another." see Peake, *Derek Jarman*, 251.
- 42 Violette and Obrist, "Morning Coffee with Gilbert and George: Interview 1985", 141.
- 43 Ratcliff, "Gilbert and George", xxvii.
- 44 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "Missionary Positions: From an Interview with Sarah Kent, 1987", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 166.
- 45 Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "The Fabrics of the Their World: From Interviews with Carter Ratcliff, 1986", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 158.

- 46 See Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978); and John Solomos, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones, and Paul Gilroy, "The Organic Crisis of British Capitalism and Race: The Experience of the Seventies", *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 1970s Britain* (London: Routledge in association with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1982), 9-46.
- 47 Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 225.
- 48 On attitudes towards homosexuality by British institutions in the post-war period, see Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- 49 See John A. Walker, *Left Shift: Radical Art in 1970s Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 196-197; Rosetta Brooks, "Gilbert and George: Shake Hands with the Devil", *Artforum* 22, no. 10 (Summer 1984): 56-60; and Wolf Jahn, *The Art of Gilbert and George, or, An Aesthetic of Existence*, trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 205-206.
- 50 See Ratcliff, "Gilbert and George", xxiii; and Robert Violette and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds.), "Interview by Martin Gayford, 1996", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 266.

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