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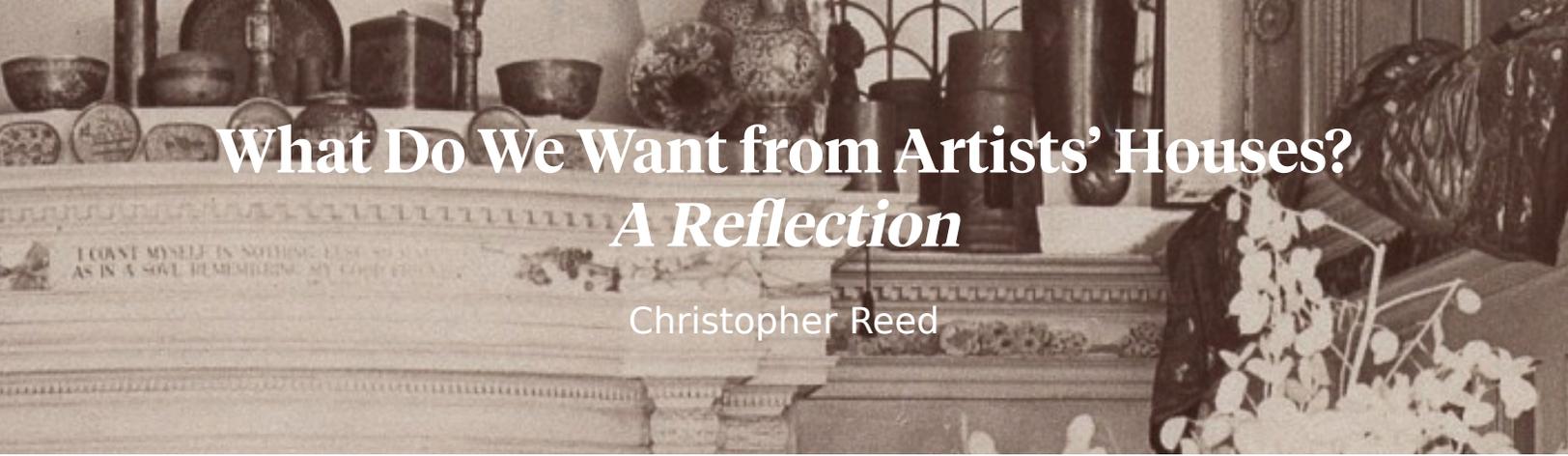
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What Do We Want from Artists' Houses?  
*A Reflection*, Christopher Reed



# 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.

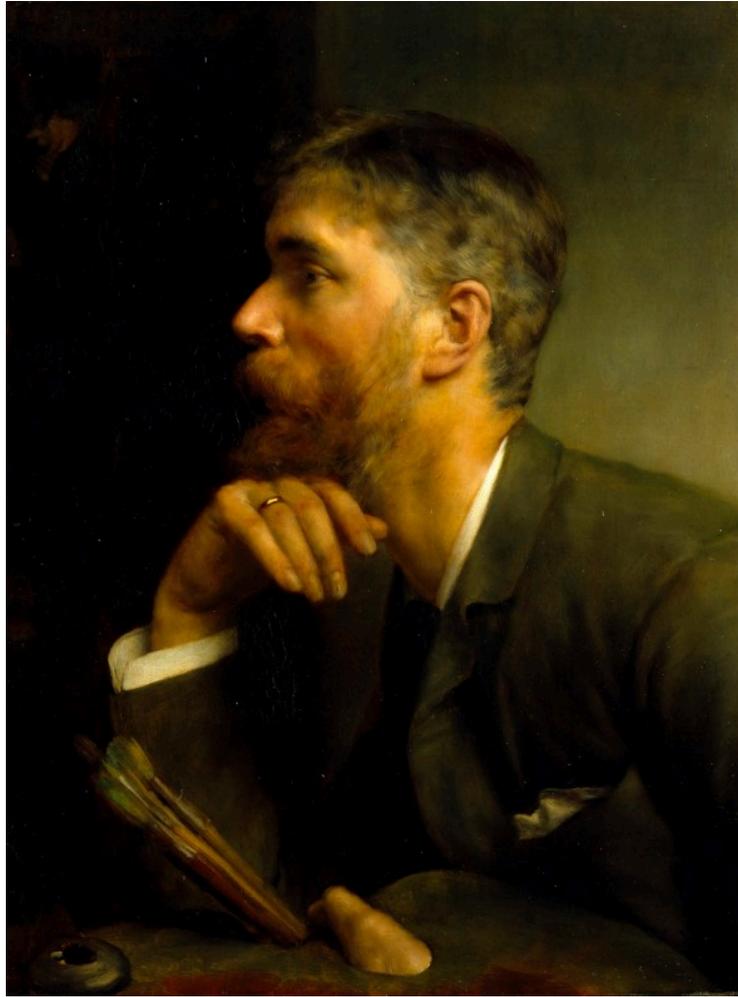
Here I invoke another instance of Bloomsbury's antagonism, this one in the form of an article by Roger Fry, who, with Bell and Grant over the winter of 1912–1913, organized the Omega Workshops to apply Bloomsbury's ideas of modernist aesthetics to domestic interiors. Fry's text appeared in *The Nation* 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,

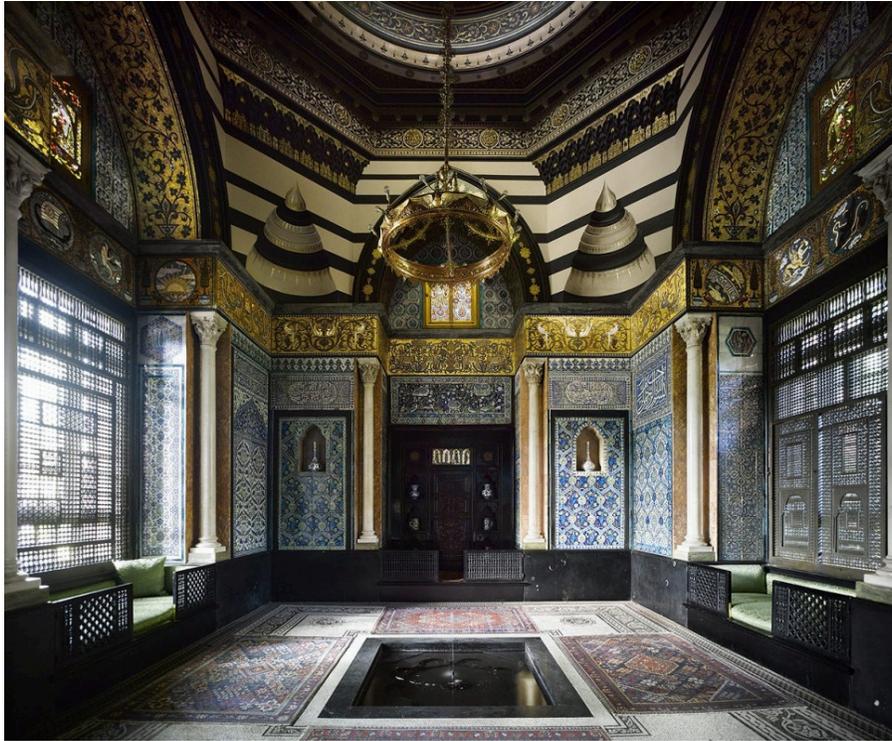
When I came here a few years ago, I felt a real longing to document this place in the same manner that I document my own home because it is very much how I live: books everywhere, things that seem very humble, very sacred ... Art wasn't just a precious thing, art was part of everyday living.<sup>24</sup>

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).

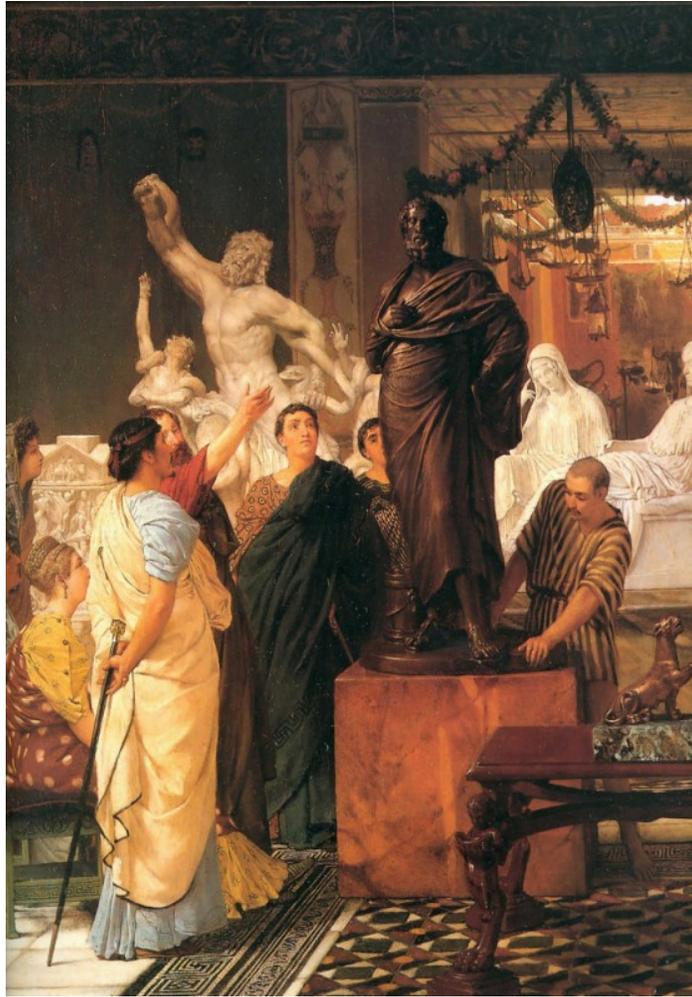
No wonder, then, that Sickert's modernist values prompted him to oppose the preservation of Leighton House:

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

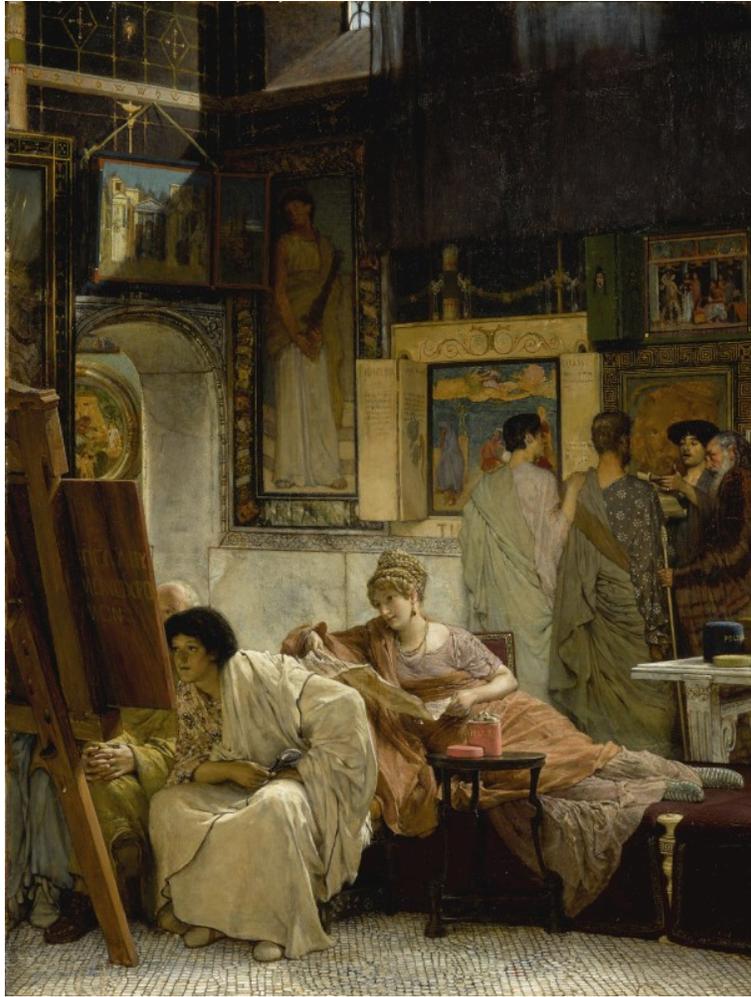
falling “into the indeterminate.” If “the archaeological” is no better than its sources, the “indeterminate” is a rehearsal of contemporary convention so superficial that it “outmodes worse than any crinoline.” <sup>29</sup>

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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