ALMA-TADEMA AND VICTORIAN PAINTING IN THE PÉREZ SIMÓN COLLECTION

NOTABLE ARTISTS AND WORKS

Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912)

Following his move to England in 1870, the success enjoyed in England by Alma-Tadema, an artist of Dutch origins, was largely due to the fact that his particular fascination with Greco-Roman history coincided with the growing interest there in classical civilization. While still living in Brussels, the artist had previously focused on scenes of everyday life in Flanders in the late Middle Ages (such as Leaving Church in the fifteenth Century, ca.1864). However, his first trip to Italy in 1863, his friendship with the Egyptologist Georg Ebers and his meeting in Paris with Jean-Léon Gérôme led Alma-Tadema to abandon these local Belgian themes and to expand his range of subjects. After moving to London with the help of the Belgian art dealer Ernest Gambart, he soon acquired a considerable reputation, participating in various exhibitions with works that recreated life in the Greco-Roman world.

During the first part of his career Alma-Tadema principally executed small-format works depicting the everyday life of Romans (Returning Home from the Market, 1865) or Greeks (Greek Wine, 1873), as well as various historical scenes of human dramas (Agrippina visiting the Ashes of Germanicus, 1866). The artist prepared his works through the detailed study of a wide range of sources, including his own photographs or purchased ones, his library and the drawings he made in situ, allowing him to depict historical settings with a wealth of detail and an effect of authentic reconstruction. He even commissioned a classical style couch for inclusion in his compositions, a piece of furniture that survives and which is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Alma-Tadema’s reputation was at its height in the 1880s and the popularity of his work brought him clients ready to purchase larger format works, encouraging him to regularly produce compositions of impressive size such as The Roses of Heliogabalus (1888), which was first exhibited at the Royal Academy before entering the private collection of the engineer and collector John Aird, the main contractor of the Aswan Low Dam in Egypt. In this case, as with several of his large canvases, Alma-Tadema chose a historical theme that emphasises the darker side of the Roman Empire with its palace intrigues and murders. The life of the young Emperor Heliogabalus (203-222 AD, reigned 218-222 AD) is a perfect example of the decadence that fascinated the artist’s contemporaries. The power of Alma-Tadema’s masterpiece lies in its juxtaposition of the apparent beauty of the scene and the cruelty of the subject depicted; between the painting’s decorative appeal and the tragedy of the death taking place in the foreground. It is also a magnificent example of the artist’s masterly ability to depict the different textures and colours of the materials, flesh tones and marble.

Towards the end of the 19th century and in order to adapt his work to the evolution of artistic taste in Britain, Alma-Tadema moved away from precise archaeological reconstruction in order to depict timeless, sentimental scenes that are closer to genre than history painting, albeit still set in a classical context that reveals the artist’s talents as an interior decorator.
Edward Coley Burne-Jones (1833-1898)

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood had only recently broken up when Burne-Jones’s career began to flourish in the early 1860s. Maintaining that movement’s poetic emphasis, and thanks to his remarkable sense of line and colour, the artist created a dream-like and sensual universe. At the same time Burne-Jones produced designs for stained glass for the firm established by William Morris, a fellow student from his Oxford days. Burne-Jones held his first exhibition in 1877 at the Grosvenor Gallery, which brought him enormous success and recognition. The following decade was marked by a series of important undertakings and professional success in England (including his first retrospective exhibition in London in 1893), in Europe, where he was appreciated in Symbolist circles, and in the United States. Although elected an associate member of the Royal Academy in 1885, Burne-Jones did not frequent it regularly. He produced a number of portraits but his popularity largely derives from his activities as a decorative artist.

Dating from the outset of his career is Fatima (1862), one of the works by the artist included in this exhibition. This period is characterised by an habitual use of watercolour, which he found easier to work with than oil, and an interest in the femme fatale that would remain evident throughout his oeuvre. In his depiction of Fatima, Blue Beard’s last wife, Burne-Jones did not choose the dramatic moment when she discovers the corpses of his previous wives, but rather shows her about to open the door, thus focusing the viewer’s attention entirely on her action.

Frederic Leighton (1830-1896)

After an international artistic education in Germany, Italy and France, the English artist Frederic Leighton spent some years defining his particular path between the classical tradition and the Aesthetic Movement. His work, in which the great themes of classical painting prevail, is characterised by a restrained treatment of emotions and an ongoing quest for formal beauty. After early struggles in London, Leighton became an associate member of the Royal Academy in 1864, an academician in 1868 and a highly active president of that institution from 1878 until his death.

Greek Girls picking up Pebbles by the Sea (1871) is a key work of the Aesthetic Movement: purely decorative, it produces an immediate effect on the viewer’s senses through the harmony of its composition. In contrast to earlier works by the artist, it makes no reference to any real event in antiquity and is rather a study of the abstract qualities of colour and form, the latter organised through rhythmical balance and counter-balance.

Leighton’s particular enthusiasm for classical culture, characteristic of the Academy of which he was president, is evident in the noble beauty of Antigone (undated) as she learns of her tragic fate. However, his work also reveals a marked interest in naturalism, to be seen in the delightful nude of the model Dorothy Dene in Crenia, the Nymph of the Dargle (1880).
Albert Joseph Moore (1841-1893)

Although Moore remains a relatively unknown artist today, he played an important role in the development of the Aesthetic Movement. Born into a family of artists in North Yorkshire, he studied at the Royal Academy in London and went to Paris and Italy on several occasions. After his initial interest in the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic and having worked for William Morris’s firm, he radically changed his conception of painting. In the mid-1860s and together with his friend James Whistler, Moore became a pioneering figure in the quest for “art for art’s sake”, a type of painting devoid of a specific theme and prioritising formal beauty. Following a detailed study of Greco-Roman sculptures in the British Museum, Moore began to produce purely decorative works inspired by the aesthetic of antiquity and influenced by music.

*The Quartet. A Painter’s Tribute to the Art of Music* (1868) is one of the icons of the Aesthetic Movement. It could depict a classical scene but the presence of modern and hence anachronistic musical instruments indicates that it is not a historical reconstruction. Based on perpendicular lines, the composition frames the two groups of male and female figures who are judiciously arranged to create an asymmetrical rhythm. The choice of delicate colours, principally whites and ochres, emphasises the quest for visual harmony which is further emphasised by the use of Greek proportional canons for the figures.

Edward John Poynter (1836-1919)

Born in Paris to a family of artists and the son of an architect, Poynter received a cosmopolitan education there, as well as in Italy and at the Royal Academy. On his return to London he participated in various decorative projects including the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) and the main vestibule of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster. In the 1860s Poynter was one of the leading artists of his generation and contributed to the evolution of the Aesthetic Movement.

*Andromeda* (1869) is one of the most beautiful nudes in European painting of the second half of the 19th century. The reference to classical mythology, albeit confined to the figure of the young woman resigned to her fate, and the small scale of the work led it to be accepted by the Academy at a time when the nude was still a lesser genre in British painting. Here Poynter achieves a remarkable synthesis between the classical canons, the influence of Ingres’ nudes in the position of the body, that of Titian in the colours, and a genuine British naturalism, particularly evident in Andromeda’s hair.

From 1875 onwards Poynter’s teaching and administrative duties, together with his continuing adherence to classicism, notably reduced the quantity and quality of his output. He was made an associate member of the Academy in 1869 and a full academician in 1876, then president of the institution until his death in 1919.
John Melhuish Strudwick (1849-1937)

While Strudwick is almost unknown today, between 1875 and 1900 he enjoyed considerable success and had faithful clients, particularly among Liverpool shipbuilders such as William Imrie, owner of the White Star Line. Strudwick worked for some years in Burne-Jones's studio until the success of *Song without Words* at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1875 allowed him to establish his own studio. His style is characterised by its markedly decorative character, a taste for detail inherited from the Pre-Raphaelites, colours inspired by the Florentine Renaissance and a female type derived both from Burne-Jones and from his study of the work of Botticelli. While *Elaine* (ca. 1891), which depicts a heroine of Arthurian legend as reinterpreted by Tennyson, can be located within a post Pre-Raphaelite context, other works such as *Passing Days* (1878) and *The Ramparts of God's House* (ca. 1889) are closer to European Symbolism. Through his enthusiasm for collecting works by Strudwick, Juan Antonio Pérez Simón has played a key role in the present day rediscovery of this notably complex artist.

William Waterhouse (1849-1917)

Born at the time of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, William Waterhouse was the last of the great classical painters of the Victorian and Edwardian ages. Waterhouse trained at the Royal Academy Schools and made various trips to Rome, the city in which he was born. After an initial period marked by the influence of Alma-Tadema and focusing on reconstructions of scenes of daily life in antiquity, in the early 1880s he radically changed his subject matter, adding literary references to his interpretations of the classical world and primarily focusing on the depiction of female beauty, particularly in the form of heroines and enchantresses. Fascinated by magic and the occult sciences, Waterhouse was responsible for some of the iconic images of the femme fatale in Victorian painting. He became an academician in 1895 and enjoyed continuous success in England until 1912, while also participating in numerous international exhibitions in both Europe and the United States.

*The Crystal Ball* (1902) combines all the elements that contributed to Waterhouse’s fame in the last decade of the 19th century: a lone woman of idealised beauty, located in an interior that gives on to a landscape and focusing on a specific activity, in this case reading a crystal ball. She conforms to the “Waterhouse type”: slender, with hair that emphasises her beautiful oval face with its prominent chin, almond-shaped eyes and small mouth.