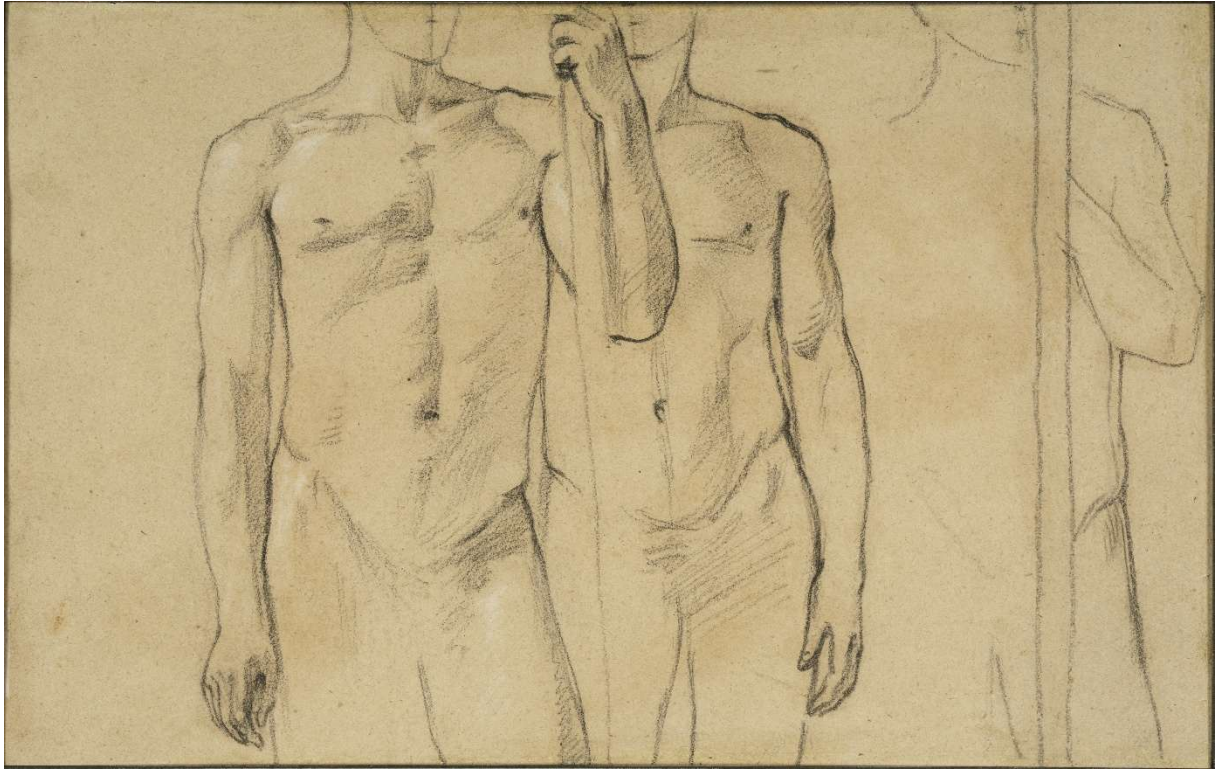




Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema

(Dronrijp 1836 – Wiesbaden 1912)

Three Studies of Drapery for The Contrary Oracle
(recto); *Study of Nude Men* (verso) (1857-1858)



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema - *Study of Nude Men*

Pencil and sanguine, with touches of white chalk on buff paper (recto) / Black chalk (verso)

Dimensions: 13 ³/₈ x 10 ⁷/₈ in (30 x 19 cm) - Framed: 15 ³/₄ x 10 ⁷/₈ in (40 x 27.5 cm)

Artist's initials (LAT) in the center of the recto on the right, and title "for the Contrary Oracle" at the bottom left, inscribed by his daughter Anna

Early 18th-century French cherry wood frame (St. Lucia wood?) with foliage and shell motif (in the centers of the sides)

Provenance: Artist's studio; His brother-in-law, Sir Edmund William Gosse, London; By descent in the Gosse family until 1920-1930; British private collection; by descent; Christie's London 09/12/15 lot 253; Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, London; British private collection

Literature: **Stephanie Moser** - *Painting Antiquity: Ancient Egypt in the art of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, Edward Poynter and Edwin Long, New York 2020 (reproduced on page 71)

Price on request

This magnificent double-sided study, with a solidly documented provenance, is linked to one of the first major compositions envisaged by the young Alma-Tadema while working in the Antwerp studio of the painter Louis de Taeye: *The Contrary Oracle*, a canvas of which only a few fragments remain. It demonstrates his great academic mastery, as well as his taste for scenes from antiquity, which would inspire most of his work.

1. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, the painter of "Victorians in togas¹," who inspired Ridley Scott for his film *"Gladiator."*

"If you want to know what the Greeks and Romans looked like... come and see me," used to say Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The Prince of Wales became his friend, William Henry Vanderbilt and Henry Clay Frick were his admirers – and *Gladiator* would not have been the same without him. Alma-Tadema received countless honors and awards. In particular, he was knighted by three different royal houses: the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom.

Lourens Alma Tadema was born in 1836 in the small village of Dronrijp in the north of the Netherlands. He anglicized his first name (to Lawrence) when he moved permanently to London at the age of thirty-five. He also added a hyphen between his middle name and his surname, perhaps as a way to appear at the top of art catalog indexes.

Fatherless at the age of four, the young Tadema was determined from an early age to pursue a career in art. His studies at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp provided him with a solid academic background. He then joined the studio of Louis De Taeye, a history painter who was also a professor of archaeology, before continuing his training in the studio of another Antwerp painter, Henri Leys.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema - *Leisure in Ancient Egypt Three Thousand Years Ago*, 1863. © Harris Museum and Art Gallery - Preston - Lancashire, United Kingdom

His painting *Leisure in Ancient Egypt Three Thousand Years Ago* (reproduced above) earned him a medal at the 1864 Paris Salon. He began a fruitful collaboration with London art dealer Ernest Gambart, who, in 1870, encouraged Alma-Tadema to move to the British capital.

Fascinated by the discovery of ancient civilization during his honeymoon in Rome and Pompeii, scenes set in antiquity became his favorite theme. At first, these were rather domestic scenes, but from the mid-1870s onwards, his painting became brighter and he produced larger scenes set in urban environments and populated by a large number of characters.

Like his contemporary Frederic, Lord Leighton, Alma-Tadema bridged the gap between the Neoclassical and Aesthetic movements. However, while Leighton's approach to the classical

¹ "Victorian in Togas" was the title of the monographic exhibition dedicated to him by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1973.

world remained rooted in mythology, Alma-Tadema preferred historical scenes, as illustrated by one of his most famous paintings, *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (reproduced below). One reason for the success of his art in late 19th-century Britain was the parallel that viewers drew between their own country's vast empire and the majesty of imperial Rome.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema – *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) – private collection

Alma-Tadema became a prominent figure in Victorian London, renowned for his musical receptions, where artists such as Anton Rubinstein and Camille Saint-Saëns performed. He was friends with the Prince and Princess of Wales (the future King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra). With Gambart's help, he made a name for himself in the United States, where his art was coveted by collectors of the stature of William Henry Vanderbilt, Henry Clay Frick, and Henry Gurdon Marquand.

Alma-Tadema died in 1912 at the age of 76 and was honored with a burial in the crypt of St. Paul's Cathedral. After his death, the president of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, Sir Edward Poynter, paid tribute to the artist for having "recreated the beauty of a bygone era... as if he had lived there." Poynter added that Alma-Tadema's work, "combining absolute technical perfection with imaginative qualities of his own, had perhaps never been surpassed."

With the advent of modernism in the early 20th century, his lush scenes of Roman life began to be considered outdated by much of the artistic world. But he became popular again... thanks to cinema, which drew inspiration from his work in films such as *Quo Vadis* (1913), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *Gladiator* (2000). Arthur Max, the production designer for *Gladiator*, said: "We wanted to make our subject as exciting as possible. Ridley Scott [the director] and I decided not to depict classical Rome as it is taught... We were more impressed by the romantic vision of Rome by painters such as Alma-Tadema... We tried to imitate the props, the pomp, the opulence, and the scale of his paintings."

2. *The Contrary Oracle*, an early work that is now damaged but widely documented

Unlike most Victorian artists, Alma-Tadema rarely used drawings to prepare his paintings, preferring to paint directly from live models. As the artist himself wrote in 1883, in a letter to his friend and biographer Georg Ebers, "in order to master oil painting, I gave up everything else in 1859 and since then I have hardly ever touched a pen, pencil, or watercolor." As a result, the artist's drawings are quite rare today, especially compared to what many of his contemporaries left behind.

The series of seven studies (including three double-sided ones) on drapery, male nudes, and Egyptian costumes to which our drawing belongs comes from an old sketchbook that has been dismantled. Sold at Christie's in 2015, they have been dated to around 1857-1858, a period during which Alma-Tadema, working in Antwerp in the studio of Professor Louis de Taeye (1822-1890), became friends with the German writer and Egyptologist Georg Moritz Ebers. Ebers had published several works on ancient Egypt and had a particular influence on the young artist, eventually becoming one of his first biographers.

Several inscriptions written by his daughter indicate that they were related to *The Contrary Oracle*, a painting inspired by ancient Egypt and painted in 1859. It was a large painting depicting a procession in an architectural setting, and a preparatory drawing on the back of one of the studies sold at Christie's gives us an idea of its overall composition.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema – *Preparatory study for The Unfavorable Oracle* – whereabouts unknown

The painter was most probably unsatisfied with his result, as he cut the painting into several fragments, only two of which have survived. One now features only three figures; this fragmentary painting is now in the Johannesburg Art Gallery in South Africa. The loincloth worn by the reclining young man is reminiscent of the one depicted on the recto of our study, although it was probably related to another figure in the lost composition.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema - *The Contrary Oracle* (fragment) - Johannesburg Art Gallery - South Africa

Another fragment of *The Contrary Oracle* was reworked by the artist twelve years later and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1871 under the title *The Grand Chamberlain to Sesostri the Great*. This painting, long considered lost, may be the one acquired in the 1920s by American cosmetics manufacturer and art collector Carl Weeks (1876-1962). It is still in his collection at Salisbury House and Gardens in Des Moines, Iowa. It matches the description given when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1871.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema - *The Grand Chamberlain to Sesostris the Great* - Salisbury House and Gardens -

Des Moines - Iowa

We believe that the male nude study on the verso of our sheet, which depicts the torso of a man leaning on a stick, is likely a preparatory study for this character.

3. Framing

We found that this highly refined drawing went particularly well with an early 18th-century French frame in cherry wood (wood from Saint Lucia), finely carved with foliage and shell motifs. The presentation also allows the drawing on the reverse of the sheet to be seen.



Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema - *Three Studies of Drapery for The Contrary Oracle (recto); Study of a Nude Men (verso)*

Main bibliographical reference:

Swanson, Vern G. The Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema. London, 1990.