

# Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



**Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (Dronryp 1836 - Wiesbaden 1912)**

**Antium seen from outside the city walls: Design for Sir Henry Irving's production of William Shakespeare's 'Coriolanus'**

Circa: c.1879

Watercolour and pencil

c.1879

Signed lower left: L Alma Tadema

38.5 x 51.5 cm

This sheet is part of a commission which Alma-Tadema received in 1879 from Sir Henry

Irving (1838-1905), to design a production of William Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.<sup>1</sup>

Although the play is set in Rome during the fifth century BC and its heroes fought the Volscians, Alma-Tadema opted for archaeological researched set designs after Etruscan architecture and objects, to highlight the difference between a more provincial Antium and the cultural epicentre of Rome. Alma-Tadema, faithful to his meticulous concern for archaeological realism, was inspired by the discoveries of the painted tombs of Tarquinia,

Volterra, de Vulci and Cerveteri from the 1820s onwards.

He was equally inspired by his travels, as well as the abundant details given on the various sites in the celebrated novel by George Dennis, *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*, published in 1848, which had become the main reference for any erudite traveller

exploring the sites of Ancient Etruria. Alma-Tadema's stage set for *Coriolanus* is the result of having carefully studied all the archaeological resources he could draw from (see Colombe Couëlle, *Alma-Tadema ou les couleurs de l'Antiquité*, Travaux & Documents, 2007).

According to Bram Stoker, then director at the Lyceum theatre, and known as the author of *Dracula*, 'the idea was new of getting specialists in various periods to apply their personal skill as well as their archaeological knowledge to stage effect... Irving wanted things to be correct, well, knowing ... that which is accurate is most likely to convince' (*Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving*, 1906, volume II, pp. 65–66).

Tadema had achieved a 'magnificent series of studies for the piece' in July 1880, but it would take another twenty-one years before the play would be performed at the Lyceum, as Irving wanted to make the most of the youth of his lead actress Ellen Terry (1847-1928), prioritising roles for her in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing* before returning to the Roman Tragedies. *Coriolanus* finally opened on 15 April 1901 with Irving himself in the lead role of Coriolanus, and Ellen Terry as Volumnia.

This watercolour was created by Alma-Tadema for Act III, but finally was not used in its entirety, rather elements were incorporated into various scenes. Although the public did not admire the performances by Irving and Terry, Tadema's vision of 'Rome and Antium of the time of the Kings' (c.500BC) was greatly admired (Prettejohn and Trippi, p. 180).

The design on this watercolour was described in 1913 as 'Antium seen from outside the city walls. In the entrance gateway we recognise the Etruscan gateway of Perugia flanked by two enormous towers. The battlements and the walls are based on those which have been found in the older part of Pompeii, there being an outer wall about 30ft. high and an inner wall beyond some 16ft. higher. Above the town walls is another wall enclosing the citadel, the semi-circular openings which are similar to

those which existed in the walls of Servius Tullius at Rome. In the distance is the principal temple, of the Tuscan order, with six columns in-antis based on the tomb of Norchia. In front of the temple is the great altar, of which we see only the smoke rising from the sacrifice, and in front of that lofty pedestal bearing the doublewinged Phoenician goddess Astarte'.

Among the other rare survivors of Tadema's designs for Coriolanus is a beautiful sheet, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig.4, E.2182-1924, 1901, 374 x 494 mm), and the Interior of the Caius Martius' House at the Manchester City Art Galleries.

### **Provenance**

Acquired from the artist by Sir Henry Irving (1838-1905);

His posthumous sale, Christie's, London, 16 December 1905, lot 23, where acquired by

Gooden & Fox, London;

Christie's New York, 15 February 1985, lot 363;

Mainichi Auction, Tokyo, 7 December 2019, lot 921

French Art Market to 2024

Acquired from the above.

### **Exhibitions**

Scenic Artists' Exhibition, London, 1905 (on loan from Henry Irving); Royal Academy,

London, Works by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, R.A., O.M., 1913, n°133.

### **Literature:**

R.P. Spiers, 'The Architecture of "Coriolanus" at the Lyceum Theatre', Architectural

Review, X, 1901, pp. 20-21, ill. p.21;

R.P. Spiers, 'Archaeological Research in the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema',

Architectural Review, XXXIII, 1913, p. 48, ill. plate XIII ;

R. Barrow, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, London, 2001, ill. p. 166.