

## EXHIBITIONS REVIEW

Of a trio of recent pertinent exhibitions, the largest was *Empires Restored, Elysium Revisited: The Art of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, organized by Jennifer Gordon Lovett and William R. Johnson for the Stirling and Francine Clark Art Institute and subsequently for the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the Taft Museum in Cincinnati, and the Dixon Gallery and Gardens in Memphis. Given that the Walters owns several works by this artist, it was particularly appropriate that the exhibition travel to Baltimore. Unfortunately, many newspaper journalists reviewing the exhibition confirm how negative the connotations of Victorian art still are in some aspects of the public imagination. A *Washington Post* critic seemed unable to get beyond the ancient trappings and former Allen Funt provenance of various works, denigrating the artist as "that sentimental caesar of high Victorian kitsch" and the show as filled with "deeply silly works of art." These are not silly works of art, and they were especially well installed at the Walters. A handsomely stenciled period frieze, deep maroon colors, and sensitive juxtapositions of thematically related objects all created a welcome atmosphere for viewing Alma-Tadema's virtuoso technique, meticulous antiquarian detail, and fantasies of ancient daily life.

Many scenes recast Victorian parlors or domestic situations, raising a central question about how different ages reconstruct and adapt past history to their own attitudes and environs. The British viewing public must have enjoyed the overt and covert parallels of their own culture with Rome and Greece, a comparison that implicitly exalted the virtues of British Imperialism and, in works like *Reading from Home*, appealed to the alleged erudition of viewers. Alma-Tadema's well established great success with middle-class patrons also contributed to this phenomenon, for purchasers often paid very high prices in order to own one of his canvases and seemingly gloried in the act of buying his vision of the past and the vicarious interconnections it forged for owners with contemporary artists too. This "golden age" of the British Empire was reflected in the parallel world or twilight zone parlayed in Alma-Tadema's vignettes, where connoisseurship, courtship, and motherly love ruled along

with grander concepts. In Baltimore the range included daring scenes of sensuous excess, from the frenzied bacchanalian dancer in the *Forbes Magazine Harvest Festival* painting or the pagan slumber party captured in *The Women of Amphissa*.

At times the installation posed some interesting juxtapositions that either created dialogues between opposing themes such as reception vs. male intruders, male vs. female codes of behavior, or undercut the latent violence in scenes of heroism or death (e.g., the assassination of the emperor Caligula). The exhibition catalogue offers a useful overview of the artist's career and contributions and is an affordable alternative to the massive catalogue *raisonne* by Vern Swanson.

Another highlight of the 1992 season was *The English 'Nineties*, a selection from the superb private library of Mark Samuels Lasner exhibited at the Grolier Club in New York last winter. This eminent bibliophile has an outstanding collection of Pre-Raphaelite material as well as an amazing collection of books and is well-known among scholars for his generosity, sharing information, insights, and access to these objects. Each corner of the space illuminated an important author, movement, or publisher, and there were several "surprises" even for the *cognoscenti*. Of particular interest for feminist scholars was Grant Allen's typescript for *The Woman Who Did*, Mary Chavelita Dunne's (a.k.a. "George Egerton") annotated copy of her first book *Keynotes* (along with her handmade embroidered cloth cover with a Beardsley design from the title-page and wrapper), and presentation copies to such significant parties as *The Heavenly Twins* by Frances Elizabeth McFall ("Sarah Grand") and *Verses* by Christina Rossetti. Samuels Lasner's catalogue is part of a tradition of exquisite rare limited editions that will undoubtedly be coveted by future bibliophiles.

A less felicitous exploration of nineteenth-century subject matter appeared in the Katonah Gallery's foray into Morrisiana in *Designing Utopia: The Art of William Morris and his Circle*. While the exhibition itself with its large room and central area with Morris wallpaper and an artificial Morris fireplace was attractively presented, the accompanying catalogue had an