

. AGNEWS .

EST. 1817

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**Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, O.M., R.A. (1836
- 1912)**

The Three Graces

Inscribed by Anna Alma-Tadema (the artist's daughter)

“L. Alma-Tadema aat” (upper centre)
Oil on canvas in five parts (mounted on panel, the largest diamond shaped, with four roundels), in a decorative frame designed by the artist
Central canvas: 25 3/4 by 26 in. (65.4 x 66 cm.)
Framed: 34 1/2 by 34 1/2 in. (87.6 x 87.6 cm.)



Top left: *The Three Graces of the State: Law, Order and Authority*

Top right: *The Three Graces of the Home: Mother, Wife and Child*

Bottom left: *The Three Graces of Religion: Faith, Hope and Charity*

Bottom right: *The Three Graces of Art: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture*

PROVENANCE

Anna Alma Tadema, London (acquired as a gift from the artist, her father, until 1925)

Thomas Lethbridge

Roy Miles, London

Sale: Sotheby's, London, June 20, 1989, lot 35.

Private Collector (acquired at the above sale)

Thence by descent until sold Sotheby's, New York, May 29, 2017, lot 1.

EXHIBITED

London, Royal Academy of Arts, *Exhibition of Works by the Late Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema R.A. O.M., Winter Memorial Exhibition*, 1913, no. 141 (lent by Anna Alma Tadema)

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, *Annual Exhibition, Memorial Section*, 1913, no. 1027

Roy Miles Gallery, *Paintings for Collectors*, November-December 1981, no. 4

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LITERATURE

Hampton & Sons, *Catalogue of the well-known and interesting collection of antique furniture and objects d'art formed by the late Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, O.M., R.A., London, 1913, p. 18

Vern Grosvenor Swanson, *Alma-Tadema: The painter of the Victorian vision of the Ancient world*, London, 1977, p. 139, Opus CCLI (with location unknown)

Vern Grosvenor Swanson, *The Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema*, London, 1990, p. 187-8, no. 199, illustrated p. 368

The Three Graces connects Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema to an endless lineage of artworks that draw inspiration from Zeus' daughters, and Aphrodite's handmaidens, Agalia, Euphrosyne and Thalia, allegories for beauty, mirth and abundance. In Greek mythology, they bestowed what is pleasurable in nature and society: growth and fertility, beauty in the arts, and harmony and peace. Eschewing any obvious narrative thrust or indulging in the elaborate reconstructions of the antique world for which he is most celebrated, in the present work Alma Tadema generously gives the entire composition to the faces of these three figures, the flowers in their hair, and their intertwined hands. One of the earliest and most iconic representations of the theme is a Greek work from the 2nd Century BC, early Roman copies of which are in The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Musée du Louvre, in which the trio is posed in a frieze-like ring, linked by outstretched arms with hands clasped or resting on shoulders. This arrangement became the canonic formula seen in every medium and on every manner of object, from sarcophaguses to *objets de toilette* to paintings for millennia. Innumerable art historical examples are worth citing, including Botticelli's *Primavera* (1482, Uffizi Gallery, Florence), Raphael's *The Three Graces* (1504, Musée Condé, Chantilly), Rubens' *The Three Graces* (1639, Museo del Prado, Madrid) and Canova's sculpture *The Three Graces* (1814-1817, Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Galleries of Scotland), and all of these works would have been fresh in Alma Tadema's mind when painting his own variation. In late 1875, the artist embarked on a half year tour of Europe, renting a studio in Rome where he would begin the present work, his own version of *The Three Graces*. Although this was his second time in Italy, it was the first time that he subjected himself to the inspiration of the Old Masters, later reflecting in 1901:

I do not greatly favor the idea that art students should travel in order to study the works of the great masters. Should they not rather wait until they have acquired sufficient knowledge and appreciation of their inward selves to profit by works of these masters? I confess, without shame, that on my first visit to Italy I did not see the Rafaels [sic] and the Angelos. I saved them

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for my second visit in 1876 and I am certain that I viewed those old masters with a fuller appreciation than would have been possible had I made their acquaintance on the previous occasion (as quoted in Swanson, p. 49).

It was on this trip that Alma Tadema would acquire portfolios of photographs and gather and prepare the sketches which would later inform some of his greatest compositions. The four roundels appear to be such oil sketches, preparatory works that might evolve into larger compositions. While no resulting works are known to exist, they act as tangents to the three figures in the center diamond-shaped panel, and are explicitly connected through his allegorical titles: the *Three Graces of the State* (in the Senate house), of *the Home* (in the atrium), of *Religion* (in the catacombs) and of *Art* (on the scaffolding of a building). The models for the painting were, presumably, Alice Search, the Alma-Tadema family nanny to the left, the artist's eldest daughter and poet Laurence in the center, and at right is his youngest daughter and artist Anna, who kept the painting in her collection until 1925. With its unique presentation in this elaborate artist-designed frame, *The Three Graces* is a jewel within Alma Tadema's oeuvre.

Just as Alma Tadema had found inspiration in Classical sources, so did many of his contemporaries. The allegorical figures and narratives that they mined allowed them to use the body as a place on which to inscribe meaning; in some instances the charge is erotic and in others political. Particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, perhaps as a response to extraordinary change, unrest and technological advancements, attitudes change. The imagery of antiquity espoused by John William Godward, Jean-Léon Gérôme or the mythological narratives of Evelyn de Morgan, Albert Aublet or Paul-François Quinsac compete with scenes drawn from contemporary literature and the allure of the *demi-mondaine*, like Henri Gervex's *Nana*, or from contemporary urban life itself.

