

Sir Lawrence ALMA-TADEMA (Dronrijp 1836 - Wiesbaden 1912)

Two Studies of an Egyptian Headress

Pencil on buff paper.

Inscribed (by the artist's daughter Anna) with the artist's initials LAT at the bottom centre right.

133 x 180 mm. (5 1/4 x 7 1/8 in.)

The present sheet is part of a group of early drawings by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, all taken from a sketchbook, which have been dated to the late 1850s. These two studies of men's headdresses may well have been drawn from a book of Egyptology. Alma-Tadema owned an extensive collection of books and photographs devoted to ancient and classical archaeology and architecture, and several of his earliest Egyptian subjects contain accurate depictions of objects and settings which reflect his close study of reference books of the period. As the artist's contemporary biographer Percy Cross Standing noted of Alma-Tadema's early paintings of Egyptian subjects in particular, 'So careful at all times about detail, he took extraordinary care in the preparation of his preliminary sketches for these pictures.'

Egyptian subject pictures account for a small but significant part of Alma-Tadema's oeuvre. Although he was not to actually visit Egypt until 1902, he began painting Ancient Egyptian subjects in the late 1850s, and continued throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Stimulated by his friendship with the German writer and Egyptologist Georg Ebers, his interest in Egypt was also inspired by his study, on a visit to London in 1862, of the collection of Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum.

The first owner of these drawings was the art critic and biographer Edmund Gosse, a cousin of the artist's second wife, Laura Epps.

Provenance:

The studio of the artist
The artist's brother-in-law, Sir Edmund William Gosse, London
By descent in the Gosse family until the 1920s or 1930s
Acquired by a private collector
Thence by descent.

Artist description:

Born in the Dutch province of Friesland, Laurens (later Anglicized to Lawrence) Alma-Tadema showed considerable talent as a draughtsman from a very early age. He enrolled in the Antwerp Academy in 1852, but left in 1857 to work as a studio assistant to the Dutch painter Louis (Lodewijk) de Taeye in Antwerp. He was encouraged by his master to study the early history of France and Belgium, and in particular the history of the Merovingians and the Franks, which the young painter began to use as source material for his own work. After three years with de Taeye, Alma-Tadema was invited to join the studio of Baron Henrik Leys, then one of the leading painters in Belgium, whom he assisted on a number of significant commissions, notably a cycle of frescoes for the Town Hall in Antwerp. The young Alma-Tadema made his first trip to London in 1862, and two years later exhibited an Egyptian subject picture at the Salon in Paris, winning a gold medal. At around the same time he met the influential art dealer Ernest Gambart, who engaged the painter on a contract to supply twenty-four paintings, and, beginning in 1864, began to exhibit his work each year in London. The success of these exhibitions led Gambart to engage the artist on a commission for a further forty-eight paintings. By this time Alma-Tadema was painting almost entirely Greek and Roman subjects, which account for the bulk of his output as a mature artist, and which established his international reputation. In 1865 he left Antwerp to settle in Brussels, where he worked with increasing success and recognition for the next five years.

Already well-known and admired in England, Alma-Tadema moved to London in 1870, where his career continued to flourish and his paintings were exhibited at Gambart's gallery with much success. Naturalized in 1873 and elected an Associate of the Royal Academy three years later, he also began exhibiting at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877. In 1879 Alma-Tadema became a full Royal Academician, and three years later was honoured with a large retrospective exhibition - numbering 185 paintings dated between 1840 and 1882, with many works lent by private collectors - at the Grosvenor Gallery. After this 1882 exhibition, however, his output lessened, so that he painted around six or seven pictures a year, including a small number of portraits; this was about half of his previous yearly production. The last decade of his career, however, also found him producing a large number of highly-finished drawings and watercolours. By this time a leading figure in the Victorian art world and one of the most famous artists in Europe, Alma-Tadema was the recipient of numerous honours and prizes, culminating in a knighthood in 1899 and the Order of Merit in 1905. Throughout most of his career, Alma-Tadema numbered all of his paintings sequentially with an 'Opus number' in Roman numerals, the last work being Opus CCCCVIII (or 408). Following his death in 1912 and burial in St. Paul's Cathedral, a comprehensive memorial exhibition of his work was mounted at the Royal Academy in 1913.

Unusually for a Victorian artist, Alma-Tadema used figure drawings only rarely in preparing his paintings, preferring to paint directly from the live model. As the artist himself wrote in 1883, in a letter to his friend Georg Ebers, 'in order to master oil painting I gave up everything else in 1859 and have but seldom touched a pen or pencil or water-colour.' Indeed, drawings by the artist remain relatively scarce today, certainly by comparison with the drawn output of many of his artistic contemporaries. As one modern scholar has noted, 'Drawings by Alma-Tadema are rare, and tend not to be preparatory works, but records of a head or pose done for pleasure in fine pencil, after perfecting them on the canvas or panel...However, a small number of rough studies for figures and compositions survives...'