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SIEMIRADZKI'S ROME

When Henryk Siemiradzki, in 1870, won a gold medal and a much coveted six-year travel award from the St. Petersburg Academy, he initially went to Munich, then, in 1872, to Rome. Instead of six years, he was to remain in the Eternal City for the next thirty years, except for the short time he spent in St. Petersburg, Moscow and on other professional and personal trips. Siemiradzki came to Rome only months after its elevation to Italy's capital in the wake of the full unification of Italy in 1871. The thirty-year period immediately following this event was a fascinating era in the city's history, when Rome was at once rapidly modernizing and reasserting its Classical roots. In the following essay, I will show how a rush of construction uncovered and recontextualized ancient Roman sites; how new archaeological practices coupled with new modes of history writing altered attitudes toward Roman Antiquity; and how these related changes informed the work of Siemiradzki and some of his contemporaries. This essay is, therefore, at once about the city in which the artist lived from 1872-1902 and about the artist's paintings of ancient Rome, specifically the most famous ones, *Nero's Torches* (1876) and *Christian Dirce* (1897).

THE ATTRACTION OF ROME

Siemiradzki's choice of Rome as a place to study and further his career was not unusual. Northern-European artists had flocked to the city since the late 16th and early 17th centuries, first, to study the monuments of ancient times, then to learn from the masters of the Renaissance, particularly Michelangelo and Raphael.¹ In 1666, the French government had institutionalized a period of study in Rome for its best art and architecture students by founding an academy in the city.² By the 18th century, Rome had become, in the word of Christopher Johns, "the intellectual entrepôt, the cultural clearing house, and the academy of Europe."³ It was a tourist destination for the rich and powerful, especially coming from the British Isles and a favorite gathering place for intellectuals. For artists it became a veritable mecca and it would remain so until the early 20th century.

The 18th century saw a growing fascination with the Rome of classical antiquity, which affected all who came to the eternal city. This interest was fostered, among others, by the opening of the Museo Capitolino in 1734, the discovery of Pompeii in 1748, the publication of Giovanni-Battista Piranesi's *Le Antiquità romane* in 1756, the publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* in 1764, the opening of the Museo Pio-Clementino in 1771; and, last but not least, the publication of Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the first volume of which appeared in 1776 and the last and sixth in 1789. Events, museums, and publications like these reawakened the interest in classical, especially Roman, antiquity, and led to the birth of the Neoclassical style, first seen in full force in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (Musée du Louvre, Paris), shown to popular acclaim in the artist's studio in Rome in the summer of 1785. The depiction of scenes from Roman history as examples of virtue – *exempla virtutis* – would become one of the hallmarks of this style.

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- 1] The literature on this topic is vast. Among the most recent sources is *Viva Roma! Artists and the Trip to Rome*, eds. Vincent POMARÈDE, François BLANCHETIÈRE, Musée de la Boverie Liège, Musée du Louvre, Paris 2018. In following notes, I will mention some other publications that are particularly pertinent to my essay.
 - 2] See, among others, Philippe MOREL, *Villa Medici. Académie de France à Rome*, Franco Maria Ricci, Milan 1998.
 - 3] Christopher M.S. JOHNS, *The Entrepôt of Europe*, in: *Art in Rome in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Edgar Peters BOWRON, Joseph J. RISHEL, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 2000, p. 37.

In the 19th century the artistic expatriate community became increasingly diverse. In 1809, four rebellious students from the Vienna Academy moved to Rome and occupied the monastery of San Isidoro, which had been closed by the French. They were soon joined by other German-speaking artists to form the so-called Nazarene movement, which, turning away from classicism, found inspiration in early Renaissance art.⁴ The Germans were followed by the Danes, who had a thriving colony in Rome in the 1830s,⁵ as well as by a group of Russian artists, who lived around the Isidoro Monastery and on the Via Felice.⁶ The latter included the Briullov brothers, Alexandr and Karl. Karl Briullov, who spent a considerable part of his life in Rome, was the teacher of Dmitry Besperchy, Siemiradzki's first art teacher in Kharkov. It is possible that this connection planted the seed for Siemiradzki's subsequent love affair with Rome. Perhaps the largest number of artists from a single nation to come to Rome during the second half of the 19th century were Americans.⁷ The lives of the first generation of American expat artists in Rome was famously evoked in Nathaniel Hawthorne's bestselling novel *A Marble Faun*, published in 1860; that of the second generation in Elihu Vedder's memoirs, *The Digressions of V.: Written for His Own Fun and that of His Friends* (1910), which gives a detailed account of the life of the American expat community in Rome at the end of the 19th century. Both sources suggest that there was relatively little close contact between artists of different nationalities, except between the Americans and the British.

Since the 17th century, foreign artists had tended to live around the Spanish Steps, in an area of Rome that stretched from the Piazza del Popolo via the Piazza di Spagna to the Piazza Barberini. The Villa

4] Among the most recent English-language books on the Nazarenes is Cordula GREWE, *The Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA 2015. See also Klaus GALLWITZ, *Die Nazarener in Rom: Ein Deutscher Künstlerbund der Romantik*, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome 1981; German edn., Prestel Verlag, Munich 1981.

5] Laila SKJØTHAUG, *Bertel Thorvaldsen and the Danish Artists in Rome*, in: V. POMARÈDE, F. BLANCHETIÈRE, op. cit., pp. 95-99. Accessible online: <https://arkivet.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/articles/bertel-thorvaldsen-and-the-danish-artists-in-rome>.

6] See Ludmila MARKINA, *German and Russian Artists: Rendezvous in Rome*, "Tretyakov Gallery Quarterly Magazine", Special Issue 2011, pp. 38-49. Accessible online: <https://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/si-italy-russia-crossroads-cultures/german-and-russian-artists-rendezvous-rome>.

7] On this subject, see William L. VANCE, Mary K. MCGUIGAN, John F. MCGUIGAN, and Paul S. D'AMBROSIO, *America's Rome: Artists in the Eternal City, 1800-1900*, Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown N.Y. 2009.

Medici and the Monastery of San Isidoro were to the North. The Via Margutta, where artists had lived since the 17th century was towards the West. Near the Spanish Steps, on 86 Via Condotti, was the Caffè Greco, which from about 1760 had been a hangout for foreign artists in Rome.

ROME IN THE TIME OF SIEMIRADZKI

When Siemiradzki arrived in Rome in 1872, he initially rented an atelier near the Spanish Steps, on Via Margutta 5, following the example of other expat artists. In 1883, however, he moved to the Via Gaeta (no. 1), which then was still on the outskirts of the city, and from where he had beautiful views of Rome and the Alban Hills. In 1872, the year in which Siemiradzki arrived in Rome, the city was on the cusp of a major political, cultural, and physical transformation. It had become the capital of Italy in July of 1871, when the government of a newly unified Italy had moved to Rome from Florence. During the next thirty years or so, the city would be transformed into a modern capital by the construction of the Termini railroad station; the erection of government buildings and new residential quarters; the creation of several major arteries, including the Via Nazionale, the Via Cavour, the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele II, and the Via Veneto; and, to top it all off, the erection of the National Monument to Victor Emmanuel II or the Altare della Patria – the Altar of the Fatherland. Designed by Giuseppe Sacconi, it was begun in 1885, dedicated in 1911, and completed in 1925.

Throughout most of the thirty years during which Siemiradzki lived in Rome, from 1872 to 1902, many parts of the city – particularly in the area where he lived, were construction zones, as old buildings and even entire streets, dating as far back as the Middle Ages, were torn down to make place for new government buildings as well as apartment buildings to house the growing population of the city. Siemiradzki certainly felt the impact of these changes. The new Termini station, which was near his house, had been constructed between 1868 and 1874, so it had already been completed when he moved to the Via Gaeta. But over the next decades the area around the station was gradually modernized with the building of the Via Cavour and the urbanization of the neighboring Monti district.

The older generation of expatriate artists and writers who had arrived in Rome some twenty or thirty years before Siemiradzki looked back with nostalgia to the time before Rome's elevation to Italy's capital city. Their sentiments are best expressed by the two children of the American sculptor Thomas Crawford, who had grown up in Rome, as their father lived in the city from 1835 to his death in 1857. Crawford's son, the novelist Francis Marion, recalled the charms of the Villa Negroni, their childhood home, which was destroyed in the late 1860s to make way for the Termini station.⁸ His daughter Mary Crawford Fraser, also a writer, lamented "the reckless destruction of beautiful buildings and venerated landmarks." For this, she blamed not only the new government but also "the Romans themselves, wealthy nobles who should have known better, [but] had gone mad with the insane greed of speculation."⁹

It is important to note that the parts of Rome that were sacrificed to modernization for the most part dated from the Middle Ages and after. The new government was keen to preserve and even highlight the ancient city. They did so by sponsoring archaeological excavations and providing better access to and more space around major classical monuments that served as reminders of the accomplishments of the city's ancient emperors – the ideological ancestors of Italy's modern leadership. As art historian Lindsay Harris, has argued, in late 19th-century Rome, "archaeology and modernization, while strange bed-fellows, shaped the development of [...] [the city] as capital of Italy."¹⁰

This active excavation and re-staging of ancient monuments is vividly characterized – and criticized – in a memoir entitled *Roman Holidays and Others*, published by William Dean Howells, an important and influential American writer of the late 19th and early 20th century. *Roman Holidays and Others*, published in 1908, was based on a prolonged visit to Italy, made when the author was seventy. It was Howells's second stay in the country as some forty years earlier, from 1860-1865, he had served as the American consul to Venice, from where he had frequently traveled to Rome. In *Roman Holidays*, Howells compares the new Italian capital of the early 20th century with

8] Francis Marion CRAWFORD, *Ave Roma Immortalis: Studies from the Chronicles of Rome*, vol. 1, Macmillan, New York 1898, pp. 148-149.

9] Mrs. Hugh FRASER, *A Diplomatist's Wife, in Many Lands*, vol. 2, Dodd, Mead, and Co., New York 1910, p. 198.

10] Lindsay HARRIS et al., *Imagining a Nation's Capital: Rome and the John Henry Parker Photography Collection, 1864–1879*, "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide", vol. 14, 1 (spring 2014), n.p. Accessible online only: <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring15>.

the pre-risorgimento papal Rome of the 1860s. In earlier days, Howells tells us, the Roman Forum was called the Campo Vaccino or the Cow Field, as “wide-horned cattle was chewing the cud among the broken monuments.”¹¹ By 1908, the cattle were gone and the broken monuments cleaned and stabilized. Moreover, archaeologists, according to Howells, had “resurrected the ancient Forum, by lowering the surface of the Cow Field fifteen or twenty feet; by scraping clean the buried pavements; by identifying the storied points; by multiplying the fragments of basal or columnar marbles and revealing the plans of temples and palaces and courts and tracing the Sacred Way on which the magnificence of the past went to dusty death.”¹² To Howells, the result was an embarrassment of archaeological riches. Indeed, he bemoaned the loss of the old Cow Field, which to him had had “all the elements of emotion and meditation.”¹³ The newly excavated Forum, by contrast, presented a kaleidoscopic clutter of archaeological detail (fig. 6).

Howells found the Colosseum less changed than the Forum, though it too had lost its former charms since “a minion of the wicked Italian government had [...] scraped its flowers and weeds away and cleaned it up so that it was perfectly spoiled.”¹⁴ Moreover, the amphitheater was invaded by “hordes of [...] tourists,”¹⁵ most of them attracted to the monument for the memories it evoked of “terrible stunts in which men fought one another for the delight of other men in every manner of murder,” as well as of “wild beasts [that] tore the limbs of those glad to perish for their faith.”¹⁶

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS ROME

William Dean Howells not only poignantly describes the transformation of Rome during the early decades of the city’ conversion from a papal city into a modern capital, but also articulates the development of a new attitude towards the ancient Roman monuments and, by

11] William D. HOWELLS, *Roman Holidays and Others*, Harper and Brothers, New York/London 1908, p. 93. Accessible online: <https://archive.org/details/romanholidaysoth00howeia>.

12] Ibid.

13] Ibid.

14] Ibid., p. 89.

15] Ibid.

16] Ibid.

extension, towards Roman Antiquity, generally, that had important implications for late 19th-century art. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the ancient Romans were known and admired primarily for their literature. Relatively few people had a chance to travel to Rome but all those who had a secondary education were steeped in the writings of Livy, Pliny, Suetonius, and Tacitus, whose works provided inspiration to literature, theatre, as well as art. Ancient Roman literature was especially admired for the examples of virtuous behavior it provided and, in art, they became the preferred subjects of history painters. The artists who painted these *exempla virtutis* derived from classical literature made some effort at historical correctness; they studied classical monuments for posture, setting, and costume, but the focus was less on historical accuracy than on the selection of details that would dignify the moral lesson that was taught.

During the Romantic period, attitudes towards Rome changed. In the wake of Gibbon's *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the focus of the historical interest in Rome shifted from the Republican period to the Empire. Darwin and Hegel notwithstanding, there was, in the 19th century, a strong interest in cyclical models of history, in which the word "empire" came to signify the beginning of the end. The Russian historian Nikolai Danilevsky was an important representative of this circular view of history, sometimes referred to as "eternal return" or "eternal recurrence", which seemed particularly pertinent in the 19th century, when many believed in the imminence of what Oswald Spengler, in the early 20th century, would call *Der Untergang des Abendlands* or the Downfall of the Occident—commonly seen as a recurrence of the fall of the Roman Empire.¹⁷

The American painter Thomas Cole's *The Course of Empire* (New York, New York Historical Society), a series of five paintings executed in 1833-1836, illustrates this 19th-century belief in a cyclical or biological model of civilizations, which are born, mature, get old, and die. Cole's *Course of Empire* was inspired by a visit to Italy, during which the ancient ruins caused him to meditate on the transient nature of civilization. In a letter to his parents, written from Italy, Cole ruminates about his visit to the Colosseum:

"To walk beneath its crumbling walls, to climb its shattered steps, to wander through its long arched passages, to tread in the footsteps

17] Oswald SPENGLER, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte*, vol. I Wilhelm Braumüller, Wien und Leipzig 1918, vol. II, Beck, Munich 1920.

of Rome's ancient kings, to muse upon its broken height, is to lapse into sad, though not unpleasing meditations".¹⁸

Cole's biographer Louis Legrand Noble, specifically mentions that Cole conceived *The Course of Empire* while contemplating the ruins of Rome,¹⁹ but though he made numerous sketches among them, Cole made no attempt to approximate Rome in his final paintings. It is clear to any viewer that *The Course of Empire* is imaginary, the product of a general meditation on the rise and fall of greatness. Take his *Consummation of Empire*, the fourth painting in the series (fig. 7). The painting represents a vast urban landscape that is, broadly speaking, classical but upon close inspection presents a strange conglomerate of buildings and sculptures from different places and times: Here is Phidias's *Athena* from the Parthenon, there the Column of Trajan, beyond the Caryatids of the Erechtheion, etc. Such fantasies were admired at the time because everyone understood them for what they were, imaginative pastiches of ancient monuments that evoked memories of past greatness, of transient glory.

Fast forward, it is illustrative to compare Thomas Cole's painting *Consummation of Empire* with Siemiradzki's *Christian Dirce* (fig. VI) painted some sixty years later. Both paintings are about empire and decadence, but whereas Cole's painting is a generic timeless fantasy couched in classical terms, Siemiradzki's painting is specific in as far as time, place, and even characters, are concerned, and it is based on careful historical and archaeological research. His painting depicts a scene of Christian martyrdom under Nero, detailed by the French historian Ernest Renan in his *L'Antéchrist*, the fourth volume of his eight-volume *L'Histoire des origines du christianisme*, published between 1863 and 1883. Renan describes how under Nero some of the tortures inflicted upon Christians were reenactments of classical myths, such as the Greek myth of the Naiad nymph Dirce, who was punished by being tied to the horns of a wild bull – a scene famously depicted in the *Farnese Bull*, now in the Museum in Naples.²⁰ Siemiradzki's painting is set in Nero's circus, where, according to Tacitus

18] Louis Legrand NOBLE, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole*, Sheldon, Blakeman, and Co., New York, 1856, p. 159. Accessible online: https://books.google.com/books?id=xYcfAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=thomas+cole&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKewijvMSk0ZfeAhUsWN8KHb_xBcAQ6AEIMzAC#v=onepage&q=Rome&f=false.

19] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

20] [Ernest RENAN], *Renan's Antichrist*, translated with an introduction by William G. HUTCHINSON, Walter Scott, London 1900, pp. 84-85.

many Christian martyrs found their death. The painting, like other paintings of Roman history painted by Siemiradzki, stands out for its wealth, if not the excess, of apparently carefully researched details. The figure of Nero, walking in the circus to inspect the naked dead women close-up, is an allusion to both classical sources like Tacitus, who mentions that Nero mingled with the people in the circus, and to Renan, who claims that Nero was shortsighted. Nero himself is clearly modeled after classical sculptures. Details of architecture, furniture, and clothing are copied from illustrations in scholarly books on life in ancient Rome that were popular in the second half of the 19th century, for example *Das Leben der Griechen und Römer nach antiken Bildwerken dargestellt* (Life of the Greeks and the Romans, rendered after classical sculptures) of 1862, by Ernst Karl Guhl and Wilhelm Koner, which appeared in numerous editions and translations since it was first published in 1862.²¹

The amount of detail in *Christian Dirce*, as well as other well-known paintings by Siemiradzki's depicting scenes of Roman history, like *Nero's Torches* (fig. II) equals that found in Thomas Cole's *Consummation of Empire*. Both paintings illustrate, what Gibbon saw as some of the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire: "immoderate greatness," "vain emulation of luxury," and corruption of imperial government. But whereas Cole's painting is a generic pastiche of details loosely modeled on Classical antiquity that evoke the "immoderate greatness" of a distant Mediterranean past, Siemiradzki's *Christian Dirce* is a careful archaeological construction of a specific episode in Roman history that illustrates an example of the vanity, corruption, and cruelty that Gibbon cites as the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire. His painting illustrates a new attitude towards ancient history that neither uses it as a source of *exempla virtutis* nor as a subject of a generic philosophical meditation on the course of history, but rather as a compelling narrative that brings home the lesson of history through its capacity to move and excite the viewer.

21] Some of these sources are discussed in: Jerzy MIZIOLEK, *Nel segno di Quo Vadis*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 2017, pp. 116-132.

SIEMIRADZKI, ALMA-TADEMA, AND LENDING COLOR TO ARCHAEOLOGY

Siemiradzki's attempts to reconstruct the historical past based on careful archaeological and historical research was not unique. Indeed, he was part of a small international group of European painters, working at the end of the 19th century, who were all equally fascinated with Classical Antiquity, especially the Roman Empire, and who depicted it with the same attention to detail. Perhaps best-known among them was the Dutch-British painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema. In the last decades of the 19th century, both Alma-Tadema and Siemiradzki were among the most respected contemporary artists of their time. Internationally exhibited and widely collected, their works sold for exorbitant prices. Their reputation was short-lived, however. By the second decade of the 20th century, they came to be rejected for what was then thought of as an excess of detail that was denigrated as a ploy to make these paintings popular with a materialistic middle-class public that delighted in sensation and "stuff." The British critic Roger Fry put it best when he wrote, in reference to Alma-Tadema, "His [Tadema's] art [...] demands nothing from the spectator beyond the almost unavoidable knowledge that there was such a thing as the Roman Empire, whose people were very rich, very luxurious, and, in retrospect at least, agreeably wicked. That being agreed upon, Sir Lawrence proceeded to satisfy all the futile inquiries that indolent curiosity might make about the domestic belongings and daily trifles of those people."²²

Those damning words were written in 1913, when Modernism was reaching its height, and they spelled the beginning of a seven decades-long period when the paintings of Alma-Tadema, Siemiradzki, and other artists of similar ilk were relegated to museum storage areas and lost all of their former value in the market. It was not until the end of the 20th century, with the advent of Postmodernism, that art historians slowly began to revisit their works. Scholars like Elizabeth Prettejohn have raised the question whether the abundance of carefully researched and lushly painted archaeological detail found in the paintings of Alma-Tadema may have been more than merely a strategy to make antiquity palatable to Victorian middle-class viewers. She has suggested that perhaps we must consider them in the light of a new turn in historiography that had begun as early as the Romantic

22] *A Roger Fry Reader*, ed. Christopher REED, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996, p. 148.

period,²³ when, under the influence of the historical novel, historians like Augustin Thierry and Prosper de Barante had introduced a form of narrative history writing that differed dramatically from the philosophically-grounded historiography then still in practice.²⁴ This new history was to be exact and serious but it was also, to use Thierry's words, "capable of touching popular sensibility" (*émouvoir la fibre populaire*).²⁵ To enliven history, Barante and Thierry inserted the data yielded by the archival record into an engaging narrative, thus lending color and relief to material that otherwise might seem dry and dusty. While the Romantic historians applied the new narrative method of history writing especially to the Middle Ages and subsequent periods in French history, at least one historian of the next generation, Ernest Renan, applied it to the late Roman Empire, especially in his eight-volume *Histoire des origines du christianisme*. To the previous generation's interest in narrativity, Renan added a scientific, positivist historical approach, which meant a critical philological reading of the historical sources and multidisciplinary attempts to verify those sources as much as possible. To write the first volume of his *Histoire, Vie de Jésus*, for example, Renan traveled to Italy and Ottoman Syria and Palestine, not only to be able to lend local color to his narrative, but also to verify various details of biblical and other historical sources. The other volumes of the *Histoire des origines du christianisme*, which are largely set in Rome, were similarly well-researched.

The new kind of scientific, positivist historiography represented by Renan, both undergirded and was prompted by a new approach to archaeology. In Italy, Giuseppe Fiorelli, best-known for his work in Pompeii, in the 1860 and early 1870s introduced an entirely new system for the excavation of the city. Instead of uncovering the streets first, in order to excavate the houses from the ground floor up, as had been done until that point, he imposed a system of uncovering the houses from the top down – a better way preserving everything that was discovered.²⁶ Of course, this uncovering of layer after layer was

23] Elizabeth PRETTEJOHN, *Recreating Rome in Victorian Painting: From History to Genre* in: *Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Michael LIVERSIDGE, Catharine EDWARDS, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol 1996, p. 64.

24] On the new narrative historiography of the Romantic era, see especially Lionel GOSSMAN, *Between History and Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/London 1990.

25] Augustin THIERRY, *Dix ans d'études historiques*, Garnier Frères, Paris 1834, p. 12.

26] Bruce G. TRIGGER, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/London 1989, p. 196. See also Giuseppe FIORELLI, *Descrizione di Pompei*, Tipografia Italiana, Napoli 1875.

even more useful in sites that had a long history, such as the Forum in Rome, where excavations undertaken between 1870 and 1885, by Italian as well as foreign archaeologists unearthed many layers of history and a wealth of archaeological detail.

All this brings us back to William Dean Howells. We remember how on his second trip to Rome in 1908, he was horrified by his visit to the Roman Forum, which he remembered as a peaceful cow field and which now had become an archaeological site cluttered with a kaleidoscopic variety of archaeological detail. One would expect Howells not to be a lover of the works of artists like Henryk Siemiradzki or Lawrence Alma-Tadema but, interestingly, he owned a work by the latter. How can we reconcile Howells's abhorrence of archaeological detail with an admiration of the work of Alma-Tadema? In a review of the 1876 Centennial art exhibition in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he wrote, "the great modern painters, Landseer, Leighton, Millais, Alma-Tadema [...] have not merely painted well, but they have painted about something, their pictures tell stories, and suggest stories where they do not tell them."²⁷

Clearly, Howells saw the excessive detail in Alma-Tadema's pictures quite differently from the excessive archaeological detail in the Forum. While the Forum offered a seemingly random scattering of archaeological details, in Alma-Tadema's paintings the details were carefully selected and subordinated to the story, which was paramount. In fact, the detail to a large extent, told the story, or, as Howells said, it "suggested a story where it did not tell one." He saw the detail in Alma-Tadema's work not as detail for detail's sake, as he saw the thousands of excavated pieces in the forum, but as the indispensable elements in the painting's narrative, which gave it both color and credibility.

Sentiments similar to Howell's reaction to Alma-Tadema's works are found in critiques of Siemiradzki's paintings. Writing about *Nero's Torches* in *Le Messager de Vienne* of 1877, a critic by the name of Juliusz Mien, argues that the detail in Siemiradzki's painting is both thoughtful and revealing: "The more one contemplates the painting of M. Siemiradzki, the more one is surprised by the thoughts and revelations that are contained within it."²⁸ Mien goes on to analyze some of

27] William Dean HOWELLS, *A Sennight of the Centennial*, "The Atlantic Monthly." vol. 38, 1876, p. 94.

28] Juliusz MIEN, *Causerie artistique: "Les Torches vivantes de Néron", Tableau de M.H. Siemiradzki*, "Le Messager de Vienne," no. 7 (supplement), 1877, p. 2.

the specific elements in Siemiradzki's painting, such as the figure of "the gladiator, leaning against the fountain [...]. Standing away from the crowd, attentive to the preparations of the sacrifice, his head, against all custom, is uncovered. Is he Christian? Will he become one? One cannot tell, but one sees that the spectacle does not leave him indifferent."²⁹ Mien's words are interesting not only because, like Howells, he suggests that the details are important to the telling of the story but also because they encourage the viewers of Siemiradzki's painting, to themselves become historical researchers – whether archeologists or philologists – trying to make sense of the past by studying it in its minutest detail.

CONCLUSION

Siemiradzki's monumental paintings of Roman history, like those of his contemporary Lawrence Alma-Tadema, stand out by what, at first glance, seems an abundance, even an overwhelming presence of carefully researched and painstakingly executed details. This explains, at once, the popular fascination these paintings have exercised since they were first exhibited, and the contempt in which they were held by modernist critics who felt that the detail was little more than a way for a artists to dazzle the public by their virtuoso technique and to cater to a materialist public's love of "stuff".

In their own time, already, some thoughtful critics of the works of Siemiradzki and Alma-Tadema realized that there was more to their paintings than bravura and crowd pleasing (although one should not altogether ignore these aspects). Influenced by contemporary historiography and archaeology, these artists were aware of the complexity of the archaeological as well as the historical record; they realized that each object and each archival document had its own story to tell; and that history was not a single narrative thread but number of threads woven together into a colorful and complex tapestry. That complexity, in a painting, could be expressed in thoughtfully placed and carefully painted details. To receptive and intelligent observers, these details, upon close observation, would yield different narrative threads and would enable them to deepen their understanding of history.

29] Ibid.

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6. *Roman Forum and Capitol*, postcard, early 20th century.
Photo Collection of P. ten-Doesschate Chu.



7. Thomas Cole, *Consummation of Empire*, 1836, oil on canvas,
130.2 × 193 cm, Historical Society, New York. Photo in public domain.