

# Art Treasures in Manchester: 150 years on—Part one

Robert Stevens  
23 January 2008

*Showing through January 27, 2008, at Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, England.*

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”—John Keats, 1818

*The following is the first of a two-part review.*

The exhibition *Art Treasures in Manchester: 150 years on*, currently displaying at the Manchester Art Gallery, is a retrospective of a major and historic art exhibition held in the city in 1857.

It brings together 160 works of art from the original display, including paintings by artists ranging from Michelangelo to Anthony Van Dyke, Nicolas Poussin, J.M.W. Turner, William Hogarth, to a number of works from Manchester’s large collection of Pre-Raphaelite artists such as John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt and Ford Maddox Brown. The exhibition also includes watercolours, sculptures, ceramics, majolica ceramics, photographs and furniture.

These are only a tiny fraction of the number displayed in the original *Art Treasures of the United Kingdom*. The original exhibition was a vast and unprecedented undertaking. Some 16,000 works of art were exhibited in a huge purpose-built glass and wrought-iron structure modelled on the recently built Crystal Palace exhibition centre in London. The Crystal Palace had then just housed another large-scale project, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations of 1851—dedicated to industry and science.

The 1857 exhibition in Victorian Manchester was one of several major events open to the public in the 1850s. These included the Dublin International Exhibition of 1853 and the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1855. “Polytechnic Exhibitions” of art, science and manufacturing had been held in the city of Leeds in West Yorkshire as far back as 1839.

*Art Treasures of the United Kingdom*, held in the Trafford Park area of Manchester, was the first such event to be solely dedicated to the arts. It was and remains the largest temporary exhibition of works of art ever assembled in Britain.

Over a period of five months, it was attended by more than 1.3 million people from all over the world. These included Queen Victoria, Emperor Louis Napoleon, the Duke of Wellington, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Palmerston, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Ruskin, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Gaskell and Florence Nightingale. But most were workers who travelled from all over Britain to see, in many cases for the first time in their lives, major works of art on public display. In one day alone, more than 30,000 people attended the exhibition.

The current exhibition is divided into three main areas. The first is a look back at what Manchester was like in 1857 and what the emergence of the city represented historically. By 1853, Manchester had been granted city status and over the previous decades had become the premier industrial city in the world. This growth was bound up with the development of the cotton industry in the town and the surrounding areas in south Lancashire.

More than any other city, it was associated with the emergence of the industrial working class, brought into being by the introduction of the new

factory system.

Manchester had been a small market town since the Middle Ages, but began to grow exponentially from the late 1700s. The first steam-powered mill was built in the town in 1781 by the inventor and industrialist Richard Arkwright. The population of Manchester and adjacent Salford increased from 95,000 in 1800 to 310,000 in 1841. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the name “Cottonopolis” was coined to describe Manchester.

It can be difficult to imagine such a transformation and its impact. One of the paintings on display here is William Wylds’s *Manchester from the Cliff, Higher Broughton* (1830). The work shows a landscape of rural fields in the foreground, where a picnic is under way. In the scene, children play, adults relax, some are asleep, while cows amble and graze. Meanwhile, in the background, all that can be seen is a myriad of enormous factories with vast towers and chimneys belching out smoke. The smoke almost takes on the appearance of a second sky appearing to darken the town.

Commenting on his visit to Manchester in 1835, the French politician, historian and social commentator Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) described it as follows: “A sort of black smoke covers the city... Under this half-daylight 500,000 human beings are ceaselessly at work... From this foul drain, the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilise the world.”

A section of this part of the exhibition cites the work of the co-founder of scientific socialism, Friedrich Engels, who was also among those attending the original *Art Treasures* exhibition.

Engels first arrived in the city in 1842 from what was then Prussia in order to work in the office of the cotton firm Ermen and Engels, in which his father was a partner. The Engels family was one of many merchant families who came to the city from throughout Europe and settled.

In 1844, Engels published his groundbreaking study, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. This book was largely based on his observations of the extremely harsh and often brutalised conditions facing factory workers and the unemployed in the town.

In his article on the life of Engels, written in the autumn of 1895, Vladimir Lenin wrote of the historic significance of this work: “Even before Engels, many people had described the sufferings of the proletariat and had pointed to the necessity of helping it. Engels was the *first* to say that the proletariat is *not only* a suffering class; that it is, in fact, the disgraceful economic condition of the proletariat that drives it irresistibly forward and compels it to fight for its ultimate emancipation. And the fighting proletariat *will help itself*. The political movement of the working class will inevitably lead the workers to realise that their only salvation lies in socialism”.

Also on display in this part of the exhibition are photographs of the terrible housing conditions where thousands of people were crammed into the tiniest of cellar hovels. Many of the poorest lived in dwellings in an area known as Little Ireland off Oxford Road to the south of the city centre. Up to 4,000 Irish immigrants lived in just 200 cottages in this

slum.

Engels wrote, “The race that lives in these ruinous cottages, behind broken windows, mended with oilskin, sprung doors, and rotten doorposts, or in dark, wet cellars, in measureless filth and stench, in this atmosphere penned in as if with a purpose, this race must really have reached the lowest stage of humanity.”

Many of these slums were beside the River Irwell that runs through the city. A panel within the exhibition shows a photograph of the river along with the comments of a Scottish observer who noted in 1845, “The River Irwell is considerable less a river than a flood of liquid manure, in which all life dies....”

Due to the widespread pollution emanating from factory chimneys, the presence of the fatal waterborne diseases such as cholera and dysentery, the inhumane conditions of overcrowdedness and the poorest of diets, the life expectancy in the city in 1841 was just 26.6 years of age.

Alongside these images, and in stark contrast to the descriptions of abject poverty and despair, other photos and drawings show some of the palatial, grand warehouses that were built in the city. Many were based on the architectural designs of the Italian “Pallazo” and constructed to both store and sell the textile products. By the 1820s, Manchester had become a global commercial centre of industry and trade—as much involved in selling the cotton products as in producing them. In 1806, there were just over 1,000 such warehouses. By 1815, this had almost doubled to 1,819.

At the centre of this commerce was the Manchester Royal Exchange. One of the panels shows its evolution. It was originally built in 1729 and enlarged twice in 1806-1809 and 1847-1849. It was both a trading hall and a meeting point for the cotton traders and merchants in the city, resplendent with a library and newspaper room. As many as 11,000 traders would congregate there, and the Exchange was recognised as “the largest trading room in the world.” By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Royal Exchange controlled more than 80 percent of the world trade in finished cloth.

Another of the works shows a painting of the Royal Manchester Institute, built in 1824 and completed in 1835. The Institute was founded by wealthy merchants and was dedicated to the promotion of art and culture. This building now houses the Manchester Art Gallery in which the current exhibition is showing.

#### **The chronological display of art and new studies of art history**

*Art Treasures of the United Kingdom* was the first large-scale exhibition in Europe to display works of art chronologically. Only after 1857 did galleries and exhibitions in Britain and throughout Europe begin to systematically exhibit this way. Previously, art exhibitions had in the main displayed works according to various themes, or a particular school of art was given prominence over another.

Following its predecessor, the retrospective also lays out the works according to their chronological date. In the present exhibition, there has also been an attempt to reconstruct the iron arches that soared above the heads of those in attendance in 1857. However, this is not really successful in recalling the enormous scale of the original display.

The genesis of the earlier exhibition can be traced back to the then recently published work of Gustav Waagen, the director of the Royal Gallery in Berlin. In 1854, Waagen published *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*, the first part of a work detailing the contents of the main privately owned art collections in Britain. The work had been 20 years in the making. In 1857, he published a supplement focusing mainly on the “Old Masters” in these collections. These works helped to raise awareness both in the artistic community and among the wider public as to the vast number of paintings and other works of art hitherto concealed from public view.

Waagen had previously inaugurated the hanging of paintings according to their historical chronology at the Berlin Gallery and gave advice and assistance to the committee in Manchester regarding the planning of their

own exhibition.

However, the person primarily responsible for this innovative display in 1857 was the art historian and critic George Scharf. He was son of George Scharf, a Bavarian miniature painter who settled in England in 1816 and died in 1860. Scharf had travelled widely throughout Europe and was very well versed in the contents of many of the finest private and public art collections. While on his travels, Scharf would often draw a miniature sketch of each painting he had viewed. Some of these fascinating sketchbooks are on display in the current exhibition.

He was nominated as the art secretary to the Art Treasures Exhibition and was responsible for the hanging of the paintings in the “Old Masters” galleries.

A 2001 study of the exhibition by Suzanne Fagence Cooper pointed out the importance of the work by Scharf in determining how the artwork in 1857 would be displayed. She comments, “It was Scharf’s idea to allow visitors to compare works from southern and northern Europe, so Italian and German paintings of the same period were hung on facing walls of the gallery to demonstrate the contemporaneous existence of opposite schools.”

Cooper relates, “This innovative approach challenged the conventional art historical hierarchy by giving equal weight to Italian, Spanish, Netherlandish, and German painters. Visitors were able to compare for the first time, for example, Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* (Pl. VIII) and the *Adoration of the Magi* attributed to Jan Gossaert (Pl. VII), both then in private collections.”

[<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-111453726.html>]

The organisation of the 1857 event was a remarkable feat in itself. Part of the current exhibition is centred on how it was achieved. The original idea for the Art Treasures exhibition came from John Connellan Deane (1816-1887), who had commissioned the 1853 Exhibition in Dublin. The chairman of the executive committee for the Manchester exhibition was Sir Thomas Fairbairn (1823-1891). He had previously been the commissioner of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851. Fairbairn became wealthy through his father’s shipbuilding company.

It took a period of just 15 months from the initial idea to stage the exhibition, to its opening on May 5, 1857. The executive committee called for financial donations, mainly from wealthy industrialists, to fund the exhibition, and within three weeks they had raised the £74,000 required to go ahead.

As part of its task, the committee wrote 17,000 letters. Many of these were written to request loans from private collections, including that of Queen Victoria and her consort Prince Albert. The latter was an enthusiastic supporter of holding the exhibition in Manchester, as opposed to London. The vast majority of the works on display in 1857 came from private collections. It is documented that at least one request to assist was rebuffed. A private collector thought to be the Duke of Devonshire responded to a request for a loan by retorting angrily: “What in the world do you want with Art in Manchester? Why can’t you stick to your cotton spinning?”

Today, many of the 1857 exhibits are owned by public galleries and the owner of the work, both in 1857 and 2007, is included on the information captions in the present exhibition.

As part of the 1857 project, some 500 workers were employed in the building of the structure and a railway line was built to take visitors to the gates. Water and sanitation pipes were laid to serve the exhibition. A massive restaurant was also built to serve first- and second-class visitors with meals, drinks and refreshments.

A total of almost 1,000 individuals and institutions loaned art works to the exhibition. These included 1,123 paintings by “Ancient Masters,” including 39 by Rubens, 33 by Raphael and 30 by Titian as well as a newly attributed work by Michelangelo. A further 28 paintings were attributed to Rembrandt.

In addition to this, almost 700 “modern” paintings were obtained for the exhibition. The organisers defined “modern” as works by artists born after 1700. Artists deemed as modern included J.W.M. Turner, who had 24 works on display, Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds, William Etty and John Constable. The modern section also included a number of works by artists from the Pre-Raphaelite school, including William Holman Hunt and Arthur Hughes.

Nearly 1,000 watercolours were on display, including works by Turner. The collection also boasted 160 sculptures, 1,500 engravings, 500 miniatures, 260 drawings, 597 photographs and 63 architectural drawings.

In addition to this were collections of Sèvres porcelain, Wedgwood, pre-Columbian artefacts, Renaissance glass, ivories, ceramic collections, Hellenistic jewellery and medieval armour. The committee also spent £13,000 to loan the entire “Soulages collection” of 749 decorative objects.

It took two months just to unpack and display all the exhibits.

Due to the vast number of works on display, many of the paintings were hung very close together, almost stacked one on top of the other. This resulted in some ending up quite near to the glass ceiling. If viewers wanted to see paintings higher up, they generally had to stand on elevated platforms or hire a pair of binoculars.

By modern standards, the display of the works was somewhat chaotic. Paintings were displayed without labels. The artist, to the extent that the painting had been attributed to an artist at the time, was thus not cited alongside their work. Those in attendance were able to buy a cheap guide to the exhibition costing one penny and entitled “Peep at the Pictures.” The guide pointed out only the most important works and where they could be found. Other guides were available for a shilling. These guides were the very least that the viewer required in a building that was 700 feet long and 200 feet wide!

*To be continued*



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**