

Art Treasures in Manchester: 150 years on—Part two

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

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

This is the conclusion of two-part review. The first part was posted January 23.

The “Manchester Madonna”

Among the most important and striking works on display at the current exhibition is a painting by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) named *The Virgin and Child with Saint John and Angels*. When the painting was originally displayed in 1857, it had only very recently been attributed to the great Renaissance artist.

The painting is unfinished and is dated around 1497. In the image, a young Christ is seen indicating a passage in the book held by the Virgin Mary while a pair of angels look on. Another two angels are studying a scroll. Art scholars have interpreted that this scroll and book were perhaps given to them by John the Baptist and may carry prophecies of Christ’s future sacrifice.

The latter two angels are unfinished figures but provide a startling example of how the artist built up and layered his work. These include an outline showing the intended shape of the figures and areas of intricate drapery that the artist had begun to sketch in lines.

The painting was the first authenticated work by Michelangelo ever displayed in public in Britain. As such, following the exhibition, it became popularly known as the *The Manchester Madonna*—a name by which it is still referred to today. The painting is now owned by the National Gallery in London, where it is on permanent display.

Another significant painting included in the new exhibition is *Fishermen Upon a Lee-Shore in Squally Weather* (1802) by the English artist Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). The visually arresting oil painting captures a fishing boat carrying a group of exhausted fishermen who are being tossed around in a raging sea near the coast. One of the figures appears almost completely lifeless and about to fall into the sea as he tilts towards the edge of the vessel. This was one of a series of such scenes painted by Turner throughout his life.

His first oil painting, *Fishermen at Sea*, produced in 1796, contrasted the turbulent waters of the Solent and the calmer waters of the English Channel beyond the Needles (large rocks in the sea off the Isle of Wight). Above the seascape, the moon can be seen breaking through the dark clouds, illuminating the boat.

According to eyewitness accounts, the most popular work at the 1857 exhibition, and one that is displayed this year, was a depiction of the young poet Thomas Chatterton by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Henry Wallis. *The Death of Chatterton* (1856) depicts the impoverished late-nineteenth-century poet, who has just poisoned himself at the age of

17 by taking arsenic. In the painting, he lies dead on his bed in a dingy attic room. The colour has already drained from his face. A rose on the windowsill begins to wilt while a candle releases its last, faint wisps of smoke.

His brightly coloured clothes clash violently with the dark gloom of his final resting place. Beside the dead youth is an open chest containing torn-up paper. The shreds of paper are also scattered on the floor, near his hand. This is all that remains of his literature.

According to reviews of the 1857 exhibition, such was the clamour to see *The Death of Chatterton* that it had to be protected at all times by two policemen. One viewer of the painting was so overcome by its rich detail and exuberant colours that she approached it, stating she wished only to straighten out Chatterton’s ruffled bedclothes.

A letter published in the *Manchester Guardian* as the exhibition was closing said that the painting “tended to overawe and exalt the mind.”

One may venture to suggest that perhaps a reason for its popularity among viewers in 1857 was that the death of the young was at the time a commonplace phenomenon among a largely impoverished working class population.

Some criticisms of the 1857 exhibition

As well as those works of art heralded by reviewers of the day and viewers alike, criticism was levelled at some of the exhibits and at other aspects of the Art Treasures. According to a study by Victoria Whitfield that accompanies the present exhibition, criticism was also made of the “poor representation of some periods and schools, such as the early Italian works. Scharf himself was to express disappointment at, among other things, the paucity of works of real ‘transcendent power’ by Raphael” (*Art Treasures in Manchester: 150 Years On, “The Greatest Show on Earth,”* p. 27).

Whitfield notes, “Most commentators judged that the greatest enjoyment came from the modern and watercolour galleries. George Scharf, who had just been appointed as director of the new national collection of portraits, agreed that the galleries of living artists gave the ‘most unalloyed enjoyment’ ” (*ibid*, p. 26).

Friedrich Engels wrote to Karl Marx on May 20, 1857, stating his own forthright views regarding what he saw at the Art Treasures exhibition.

“Everyone here is now a friend of art and chatters about the paintings in the exhibition. The affair will be *plus ou moins* a failure, financially at any rate. There are, by the way, some very fine pictures on show, however, most of those by the good and the best painters are only second-rate pieces. Among the finest exhibits is a splendid portrait of Ariosto by Titian. The modern German and French school is very bad and practically unrepresented. Three-quarters of the exhibition is English rubbish. The Spanish and Flemish painters are

represented best of all, and after them the Italians. You must come over somehow this summer with your wife to have a look at the thing, *s'il y a moyen*."

The Titian portrait of Ariosto (c. 1512) cited by Engels is not included in the retrospective exhibition. According to later research, the painting was mistakenly thought to be of Ariosto (a poet of the High Renaissance) and is probably a self-portrait by Titian. It can be viewed here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Tizian_078.jpg

Another noteworthy aspect of the Art Treasures exhibition was that it featured, free of charge, twice-daily musical performances led by a German-born pianist and conductor, Charles Halle (1819-1895). Halle became a refugee as a consequence of the 1848 revolution in Paris; shortly after arriving in Manchester, he accepted the post of conductor of the already long-established Gentlemen's Concerts in the city.

The musical performances at the Art Treasures exhibition were included in order to provide those attending with entertainment and something of a respite from viewing the amassed art on display. As well as performing pieces by classical composers, the musicians also played popular music of the day such as waltzes by Johann Strauss and modern folk songs. A specially designed large organ was built as part of the exhibition to be used by the musicians.

Following their success at the exhibition, Halle was keen to maintain his newly augmented troupe of musicians, and within months the Halle Orchestra was officially formed. On January 30, 1858, he staged the first in a series of concerts at his own expense at the newly built Free Trade Hall in the city. The orchestra is today world-renowned and is the oldest professional orchestra in Britain. This year marks its 150th anniversary.

Art Treasures also featured a collection of 597 photographs, which was at the time a relatively new and developing artistic medium. A varied selection is on show in the current exhibition, including a stunning large-scale panorama photograph taken in the Alps by two French photographers, Louis-Auguste Bisson (1814-1876) and his brother Auguste-Rosalie Bisson (1826-1900). The brothers were pioneers in the development of early photographic technique. The glorious Alpine panorama was created from the combination of three negatives.

Another, entitled *Portraits of Insane Women*, shows a dozen or so women photographed by a doctor who wished to record his cases. Deemed insane, they may well have been the victims of poverty or had borne children at a young age and been forced to go into "mental asylums." Some of the expressions on the faces of the women, many of whom wear rags, capture a definite melancholy. Others reveal a bewilderment and apprehension in the face of the camera.

On the part of those who organised the exhibition, the notion was promoted that the exhibition would bring the cream of the private art collections in Britain "into view under one roof, for the edification of their fellow-men." The influential Victorian magazine *Art Union* stated that it hoped that the exhibition would serve to improve "the tastes, and consequently, the morals, of the community." It added that if the "lads of the loom" were exposed to wonderful works of art they might "stroll home, strong in a determination to achieve something."

Documentary evidence on display at the current exhibition shows that the exhibition was indeed attended by working class people in their tens and hundreds of thousands.

Many workers from other cities such as Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds, Bradford and London came on the regular train services to view the exhibition. They included 2,600 workers from the textile mill at Saltaire near Bradford. The workers were brought there in three

special trains from Leeds accompanied by their employer Titus Salt. Salt requested the workers wear their best clothes, and three brass bands accompanied them on the trip. A special dining tent was provided for them, adjoining the second-class refreshment room.

In her article Cooper states, "To attract the working classes, tickets to the exhibition were priced at sixpence on some days, the regular price being one shilling. Families could picnic on the lawn outside if they did not want to visit the first- and second-class refreshment rooms inside. Employers, Sunday schools, and temperance societies arranged tours, with transport and lunch provided.

"On September 12, for example, 450 workers from Winkworth, Proctor and Company in Macclesfield travelled to the exhibition. The pioneering travel agent Thomas Cook (1808-1892) also organised special trains from Newcastle, which left at midnight, arrived in Manchester in time for breakfast, and made the return trip in the evening. Fifteen hundred people took advantage of each of these 'Moonlight Trips.' The expanding railway network made it possible for visitors from the North and Midlands to travel to the exhibition easily and cheaply, and the galleries were connected to the station by a covered walkway."

An article in the *Art Treasures Examiner* noted that "young factory operatives" were seen to be "crowded about the most showy pictures with evident delight" (*Art Treasures in Manchester: 150 Years On*, "The Greatest Show on Earth," p. 31).

When those attending the original exhibition walked through the main entrance into the central hall, they could admire the many sculptures and continue to walk to the end of the hall. Above the arch at the end of the central hall, they were able to look up and see words written by the poet John Keats. Inscribed in paint, they read, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever."

Notwithstanding its limitations, the Art Treasures exhibition of 1857 was a milestone in the history of art in Europe. It is to the credit of Manchester Art Gallery that they have staged such a retrospective. It deserves a wide audience.

Concluded



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