LARGE PRINT GUIDE

LOWRY AND THE PRE RAPHAELITES

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Lowry and the Pre-Raphaelites

This exhibition explores LS Lowry’s passion for the Pre-Raphaelites. It brings together works by Lowry’s two favourite artists, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown, alongside Edward Burne-Jones and others, to tell the story of how Lowry fell in love with Pre-Raphaelite art. It includes works formerly owned by LS Lowry and displayed in his home, ‘The Elms’ in Mottram-in-Longdendale, alongside some of his favourite pictures in public and private collections around the country.

Manchester 1911

LS Lowry grew up in a city with one of the best public collections of Pre-Raphaelite art in the country. Works he considered to be among the greatest paintings by his favourite artists – such as *The Bower Meadow* 1872 and *Wilhelmus Conquistador (The Body of Harold)* 1861 – were in the collection at Manchester City Art Gallery. Across the road in the Town Hall were Ford Madox Brown’s murals depicting the rise and progress of Manchester, completed when Lowry was a small boy.

In 1911 the Art Gallery hosted a ‘Loan Exhibition of Works by Ford Madox Brown and the Pre-Raphaelites’. Lowry’s copy of the catalogue survives and the exhibition had a considerable impact on him as a young man. 320 works were displayed, borrowed from public and private collections across the country. Well known paintings sat alongside rarely seen designs for stained glass, book illustrations and portraits, providing an unrivalled range of work.

The exhibition was formally opened by the artist Arthur Hughes (part of the Pre-Raphaelite circle himself), and the *Evening News* soon claimed that ‘One hears of [the exhibition] in towns fifty miles and more away from Manchester…Many visits will not suffice to exhaust its wealth.’ A month later they estimated ‘about a hundred thousand’ visitors had been through the doors. Most of the works on display in this room were exhibited in 1911.

LS Lowry’s Collection

In 1952 Lowry retired from the Pall Mall Property Company where he had been employed since 1910. He had always bought pictures but his purchases had focused on one or two artist friends whose work he admired, including Sheila Fell, or were intended to support young artists. With his pension supplemented by income from the sale of work and limited edition prints, he could afford to be more ambitious in his collecting. In 1953, over 40 years after seeing his first major exhibition of their work, he began buying Pre-Raphaelite art. Writing to a friend he reported, ‘I have bought a Rossetti drawing, a head (pencil) not one of his best but a good one. I have always wanted one.’

Through the 1950s and 60s he purchased works by Burne-Jones, Charles Fairfax Murray, Elizabeth Siddal, Ford Madox Brown and, above all, Rossetti, reflecting his fascination for ‘paintings of [Rossetti’s] ladies. Nothing else. Not his subject pictures… Rossetti is the only one I ever wanted to possess.’ In 1964 he purchased his only oil painting by the artist – *Proserpine* 1877 – at 5000 guineas his most expensive acquisition. Its sale at this price marked a significant moment in the rise in popularity of Pre-Raphaelite art.

After his death in 1976 Lowry’s collection was largely dispersed. The works displayed here are among those which feature most prominently in photographs of the interior of his home, ‘The Elms’, where they hung in his living room or in the privacy of his bedroom.

The Stone Gallery

The Stone Gallery opened in 1958, determined to bring the best in modern British and contemporary art to Newcastle. In 1962 Lowry first wandered into their premises in St Mary’s Place, eighteen months after meeting Ronald (Micky) and Phyllis (Tilly) Marshall, who ran the gallery with their son Simon. Lowry was to become a frequent visitor on his regular working holidays to nearby Sunderland. When the gallery was forced to close in 1964 he was one of a small group of clients who banded together, briefly becoming shareholders, to help it reopen. He was also instrumental in refocusing the gallery to specialise in Victorian art, and the Pre-Raphaelites in particular. By 1971, when Lowry had his 84th birthday celebrations in the gallery, it was considered one of the country’s leading specialists in the Pre-Raphaelites.

A small group of Stone Gallery clients formed an informal Rossetti Society. To be a member you simply had to own a work by Rossetti purchased from the gallery. Lowry was felt to be the natural President, Tilly Marshall was the Librarian and Micky Marshall, for no apparent reason according to his wife, was Chaplain. The members would dine out together at a nearby restaurant: ‘How we laughed and laughed again, during those Rossetti Society dinners,’ Tilly Marshall remembered, ‘It is impossible to relay the sheer stupidity and fun we all enjoyed.’ After Lowry’s death the Society quietly disbanded.

Models and Muses

‘Our pictures seem to come out badly in the Reviews this year’, wrote one of Ford Madox Brown’s patrons, ‘owing to nothing but the ugly female faces in the bulk of the Pre-Raphaelite work. Rossetti has much to answer for this…’

The models most closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites - referred to by the artists as ‘stunners’ - were not conventional Victorian beauties. Rossetti and Burne-Jones in particular created their own distinctive icons. In Rossetti’s earlier work Elizabeth Siddal (later his wife) is the woman he records repeatedly. After Siddal’s death, Jane Morris became a constant presence, while Burne-Jones’ mistress Maria Zambaco dominated his work for many years. Often depicted ‘off duty’ in relaxed, intimate sketches these Pre-Raphaelite women also took on the roles of Shakespearean heroines or ancient goddesses. A complex mix of collaborator, friend, blank canvas, lover and often fellow artist, they have helped define Pre-Raphaelite style.

Lowry’s collection, dominated by female portraits, reflects his preference for this aspect of Rossetti’s work but also his own fascination with capturing the essence of a subject through repetition. ‘Ann’, whose existence was never questioned by Lowry’s friends but who has never been identified, can be seen as Lowry’s stylised, ideal muse - his own response to the Rossetti femme fatale.

Pre-Raphaelite Women

The women depicted in this exhibition include some who sat as models only occasionally, alongside others who played key roles in the personal lives of the artists. As models, wives and lovers, they have become iconic images of Pre-Raphaelite art. As individuals, most of them worked for a living and several were artists themselves. If, in early accounts of the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti’s own work was sometimes overshadowed by sensational readings of his personal life, the models own contributions were often similarly ignored.

In an Artist’s Studio - Christina Rossetti

One face looks out from all his canvases,

One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:

We found her hidden just behind those screens,

That mirror gave back all her loveliness.

A queen in opal or in ruby dress,

A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,

A saint, an angel – every canvas means

The same one meaning, neither more or less.

He feeds upon her face by day and night,

And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,

Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:

Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;

Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;

Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Maria Zambaco (1843–1914)

Maria Zambaco was born in Athens, and came to England after her father, a wealthy cotton merchant, died. Her mother was a member of the Ionides family who were important art patrons in London. Described as ‘rude and unapproachable but of great talent and really wonderful beauty’ it was her mother who introduced her to Burne-Jones. She became Burne-Jones’ mistress, an affair which almost ended his marriage. His wife, Georgiana remarked that he was generally affected by two qualities – ‘beauty and misfortune’. Their relationship, which included a failed suicide attempt, finally ended in 1872. Already working as an artist she turned to sculpture in the early 1880s, exhibiting work at the Royal Academy, and in the following decade became a good friend of the sculptor Auguste Rodin.

Ellen Smith (dates unknown)

Ellen Smith was a laundry-maid spotted by Rossetti near his house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. Her features were softer and more conventional than some of his other models and she was a popular sitter for several artists in the 1860s. Rossetti’s assistant, Henry Treffry Dunn, recorded that she ‘sat for several of [Rossetti’s] sweetest pictures until the poor girl got her face sadly cut about and disfigured by a brute of a soldier and then of course she was of no more use as a model.’ Smith later married and set up a laundry business.

Marie Stillman (1843-1927)

Marie Spartali was part of the wealthy Anglo-Greek community in London. She and her sister were first introduced to the Pre-Raphaelite circle of artists at a garden party where the painter Thomas Armstrong recalled ‘every one of us burned with a desire to paint them’, and Algernon Swinburne, the poet, thought her ‘so beautiful I feel as if I could sit down and cry.’ Marie became Ford Madox Brown’s pupil in 1864 and began exhibiting work three years later. Rossetti considered her head ‘about the most difficult I ever drew. It depends not nearly so much on real form as on a subtle charm of life which one cannot recreate.’ In 1871 she married the widowed American journalist WJ Stillman.

Annie Miller (1835-1925)

Ford Madox Brown described Annie Miller as ‘siren-like’. Brought up in a slum area of Chelsea she was the model for William Holman Hunt’s influential painting *The Awakening Conscience* 1854, which depicts a ‘fallen woman’ realising the error of her ways. Hunt undertook to pay for Miller’s education with the intention of marrying her when he returned from his travels in the Middle East but the relationship she forged with Rossetti in his absence eventually broke them apart. Many years afterwards Hunt saw her, ‘a buxom matron with a carriage full of children’ and they parted on amicable terms.

Jane Morris (1839-1914)

The daughter of a stableman, Jane Burden married William Morris, founder of the design company Morris & Co, in 1859. She quickly took on an active part in the firm, creating fine embroideries and supervising the other needlewomen. By the 1870s she had formed an intense relationship with Rossetti which was an open secret among their friends. She appears repeatedly in Rossetti’s work at this time. When Rossetti suffered a breakdown, partly due to his increasing drug dependency, the relationship ended. The novelist Henry James recalled meeting her: ‘such a wife! …she haunts me still. …It’s hard to say whether she’s a grand synthesis of all Pre-Raphaelite pictures ever made – or they a ‘keen analysis’ of her… In either case she is a wonder.’

Fanny Cornforth (1835–1906)

According to Rossetti’s brother William, Fanny Cornforth had ‘no charm of breeding, education or intellect’. Born Sarah Cox, she met Rossetti in 1856 and became his model and sometimes mistress. Her abundant blonde hair makes her an easily recognisable figure in his work. Rossetti provided her with financial assistance throughout his life and she remained a friend.

Elizabeth Siddal (1829-62)

Lizzie Siddal was working in a dressmaking and millinery shop when she was noticed by the artist Walter Deverell. She sat for various members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, met Rossetti in 1850 and lived with him for several years before they were eventually married in 1860. Rossetti and the art critic John Ruskin helped to promote her career as an artist. Burne-Jones’ wife Georgiana remembered her ‘slender, elegant figure – tall for those days… I see her in the little upstairs bedroom…the mass of her beautiful deep-red hair as she took off her bonnet… Her eyes were of a kind of golden brown…and wonderfully luminous.’ Increasingly addicted to the narcotic laudanum, she committed suicide by taking an overdose in 1862, the year after her daughter was stillborn.

Alexa Wilding (1847-84)

Alice Wilding was first spotted by Rossetti walking down the Strand in London. At some point she changed her name to Alexa, perhaps hoping to pursue her ambition to be an actress. The artist Frederic Stephens believed there was no more ‘exquisite form of womanhood…than the beautiful Miss Wilding’ and her luxuriant auburn hair made her an attractive potential model for others. For some years Rossetti paid her a retainer to try and stop her sitting for his friends. He described her as ‘a really good natured creature – fit company for anyone and quite ladylike, only not gifted or amusing.’

The Manchester Murals

Ford Madox Brown secured the commission to paint the murals for the Great Hall in Alfred Waterhouse’s newly built Manchester Town Hall in 1878. Their theme charts the rise and progress of Manchester, although some of the events depicted happened outside the city.Manchester and its citizens were represented as free-thinking and independent. The first seven murals were painted insitu, directly on to the walls of the Great Hall. The final five were painted on canvas in Brown’s London studio, ready to be fixed into position.

Despite many arguments over the choice of subjects and with Brown forced to paint the last scene with his left hand, following a mild stroke, the murals came to be regarded as the perfect combination of architecture and art. In 1911, the teacher and philosopher WR Lethaby wrote, ‘An age that can produce…Madox Brown’s Manchester paintings, and the Forth Bridge, should be able to produce anything.’

The subjects depicted are:

*The Romans Building a Fort at Mancenion AD 80* (foundation of the city)

*The Baptism of Edwin AD 627* (introduction of Christianity)

*The Expulsion of the Danes from Manchester AD 910* (Danish invaders vanquished)

*The Establishment of the Flemish Weavers in Manchester AD 1363* (origins of the textile industry)

*The Trial of Wyclif AD 1377* (beginnings of non-conformism)

*The Proclamation Regarding Weights and Measures AD 1556* (foundation of commercial integrity)

*Crabtree Watching the Transit of Venus AD 1639* (scientific achievement)

*Chetham’s Life Dream CAD 1640* (education and philanthropy)

*Bradshaw’s Defence of Manchester AD 1642* (Manchester’s role in the Civil War)

*John Kay, Inventor of the Fly Shuttle AD 1753* (the industrial revolution)

*The Opening of the Bridgewater Canal AD 1761* (the industrial revolution, transport and invention)

*Dalton Collecting Marsh-Fire Gas* (modern science)