

Lending to the Manchester Art Exhibition in 1857

Part of the life of any curator, particularly in these days when blockbuster exhibitions are so essential to the success of almost any institution, is the lending of items from the collection. New College always responds as positively as it can to requests to borrow items in its ownership; not only are the objects seen in new surroundings and juxtaposed with different pieces, but we are able to share them with new and unexpected audiences. And the trips for the courier (usually the Chatters Fellow) associated with such loans are always in equal measure, trying and entertaining.

The concept of a blockbuster art exhibition is, of course, far from new, and when in 1857 Manchester staged the 'Art Treasures of Great Britain Exhibition', New College was among the lenders to the show. It was opened by Prince Albert and ran from 5 May to 17 October; at 16,000 objects, it remains the largest art exhibition ever held in the United Kingdom. From New College, the organisers requested the loan of the Founder's Crozier, an object that has been in the College since the death of William of Wykeham in 1404, and the gothic standing salt, *c.* 1475–94, the gift of Warden Walter Hyll. In 1857, neither object had been seen outside the College, which seems to have granted permission for the loans without demur, despite the fact that the request must have come with a very short lead time.



The crozier of William of Wykeham, the College's founder

The Manchester Exhibition was partly inspired by the Great Exhibition of 1851, the 'Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations'. This exhibition was the first of a modern type of show that aimed to show 'progress, prosperity, civilization and modernity' by bringing goods and artefacts from all over the world. These were arranged by geographical area and nation, and were 'characterized by a curious mixture of fleeting transience and legacy-creating endurance'. The 1851 exhibition was organised by Henry Cole and the Prince Consort, and ran from 1 May to 15 October 1851; it had 6,039,722 recorded visitors, and made a profit of a staggering £186,000, money that was used to found the Science and the Natural History Museums, the Victoria and

Albert Museum, and to establish the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, an educational trust which today supports advanced study and research in science, engineering, the built environment and design.

The Great Exhibition has exerted a fascination over subsequent generations, a fascination enhanced by the great glass building, the 'Crystal Palace', whose eventual destruction by fire in 1936 was a grievous loss of a monument to nineteenth-century initiative and ingenuity. One of those fascinated was David Mann (Modern History, 1956), whose collection of images of the show was gifted to the College by Anne Kriken Mann. When seen at a distance, the fabulous views by Pyne and others in his collection show a building on a large scale, with immense crowds and displays of objects from all over world; they convey the buzz and sense of wonder that those attending must have experienced. But it is easily romanticized. In reality, it was a commercial venture, with many of the objects on display being the latest in design and using the latest in modern production methods.



Leighton Brothers, 'Interior of the Art Treasures' Palace, Manchester, 1857'

The success of the Great Exhibition inspired other cities to follow suit; these included Dublin (1853), Paris (1855), Vienna (1873), Turin (1884), Antwerp (1885), Brussels (1888), Barcelona (1888), Liège (1905), and Milan (1906). Countries outside Europe were also in on the act; in 1880, Australia staged the Melbourne International Exhibition in the purpose-built Royal Exhibition Building, one of the few remaining such buildings in the world and now a UNESCO World Heritage site. One of the best known structural survivals fairs is the Eiffel tower, initially known as *tour de trois cents metres*, which began construction in 1887 and was completed in time for the Exposition Universelle in 1889. And in popular culture, references abound. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 (perhaps better known as the St Louis World's Fair) provides the setting for the musical film *Meet me in St Louis* starring Judy Garland, which has forever a place in movie-goers' hearts. It is Garland's final dialogue that sums up the place of the exhibitions in nineteenth-century society; looking out at the scene, she says in wonder, 'I can't believe it, here

where we live, right here in St Louis'. The fairs and their exhibits came to the people; anyone and everyone could visit them and be (mentally) transported anywhere in the world by the objects they found there.

The aim of the Manchester Exhibition stood in contrast to these commercial ventures. Gustav Waagen had published a three-volume work titled *Treasures of Art in Great Britain* in 1854, making play with the fact that these were all privately owned and not accessible to the public. A member of the Society of Arts, John Deane, had the idea of approaching all the owners—helpfully listed by Waagen in his volumes—and asking if they would lend their objects for display. His idea is first recorded in February 1856, and things moved fast; by May that year a General Committee and an Executive Committee had been established, and a General Commissioner had been appointed. The site chosen for the Exhibition building was at Old Trafford and was adjacent to what was then the Manchester Botanic Gardens. The site included railway access via the Old Trafford station, the railway company, through excursion fares, making a greater profit from the show than the exhibition committee.

Like Paxton's Crystal Palace, the main structure of the Exhibition was glass and iron; but it had an ornamental eastern end in brick, designed by a local architect, Edward Salomons. The architect for the whole project was Francis Fowke, and the main contractor was C. D. Young & Co. The vast interior was divided into spaces and galleries, which were then packed with art treasures divided into ten groups: Pictures by Ancient Masters, Pictures by Modern Masters, British Portraits and Miniatures, Water Colour Drawings, Sketches and Original Drawings (Ancient), Engravings, Illustrations of Photography, Works of Oriental Art, Varied Objects of Oriental Art, and Sculpture. The undivided open spaces suggest that, as was the case with many of these structures, the entire edifice was combustible in the extreme; the New York Crystal Palace which burned the following year during the 'American Institute Fair' was destroyed in twenty minutes, and it is appalling to contemplate the damage that would have been done to Britain's artistic inheritance had a similar disaster occurred in Manchester.



Leighton Brothers, 'Exterior of the Art Treasures' Palace, Manchester, 1857'

One of the show's legacies was the effect it had on public art collections and on taste in nineteenth-century Britain. While its attendance was less than, say, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition—the total for Manchester was 1.3 million visitors, that for the St Louis Fair, 19.7 million—it was staged at a time when the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery were developing their collections, and it helped to shape these institutions. The paintings in Manchester were 'arranged in chronological order and divided into geographical categories with Italian art on one wall and other nations opposite', constructing an enduring model of hanging that was both attractive and educative. The V&A also felt its influence, with its collection subsequently used to promote the notion of education through art, and late opening—possible now by gas light—so that the working classes could visit the collections.

Another result was the creation of the Hallé Orchestra. Charles Hallé was a German pianist and conductor, who after a successful career in London—he was the first pianist in England to play all the Beethoven sonatas in public—had moved to Manchester to direct the Gentleman's Concerts. Hallé was invited to give an organ recital every day and to assemble a small orchestra for the Exhibition's opening event, an ensemble that met with such success that he continued the band as the Hallé Orchestra, establishing it formally with its first concert on 30 January 1858. The orchestra became particularly known for its discipline, and is still one of the most dynamic orchestras in the United Kingdom.

Despite the scale of the 'returns', the crozier and the salt were safely delivered back to the College. The crozier has only been loaned once since, to the Royal Academy's 'Age of Chivalry: Art in Plantagenet England 1200–1400' exhibition in 1987–88, one of the great exhibitions of Medieval objects to be held in the Britain. Warden Hyll's salt, seen here in an illustration from the Exhibition's three-volume catalogue, has travelled more often: it appeared in 'Gothic: Art for England 1400–1547' at the V&A in 2003, and 'A Treasured Inheritance: 600 Years of Oxford College Silver' at the Ashmolean in 2004.



Warden Hyll's salt (back left)

The David Mann collection of Great Exhibition prints, the gift of Anne Kriken Mann, hangs in Lecture Room 4.

Those interested in the Manchester Exhibition will find a range of archives from the Manchester Record Office here:

<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/manchesterarchiveplus/albums/72157666091669333/with/8089732999/>>

Michael Burden
Chattels Fellow
New College, Oxford

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