

Exhibition
Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life

Until 20 October
 Tate Britain
 Review by *Herbert Wright*

In LS Lowry's *Going to the Match* (1936), crowds bizarrely lean forward into the wind as they converge on a football stadium, keen for the action inside. Crowds converging on Tate Britain for Lowry and the *Painting of Modern Life* come to witness another match, which pitted the Lancashire painter against the status quo of the art establishment.

Its interest after the First World War was the avant-garde, rather than portrayals of drab Manchester or Salford. Nevertheless, Lowry's work was gradually recognised, and by the Thirties was exhibited in Paris, then London. When the band Status Quo

celebrated Lowry's work with its first hit in 1967, *Pictures of Matchstick Men*, it froze his dark, simple figures into the national psyche, but that tritely obscured the significance of Lowry. It was he who revealed the 'masses' of industrial society and its habitat. Tate Britain delivers its goal of restoring his significance. The score so far: Status Quo 1-Lowry 2.

It is not quite as simple as working class vs bourgeois art. Lowry himself was a rent collector who voted Tory, raising the question: was he merely documenting 'modern life', or speaking for the people he moved among? Certainly, class struggle is not expressed like Stalinist heroic-realist propaganda art. In Lowry's drawing of *Speculators* (1924), four awkwardly stiff men could just as well be clerks. There's no trace of satire — imagine how George Grosz would have portrayed such people in the contemporaneous Weimar Republic! On the other hand, *The Cripples* (1949) shows characters as bizarre as any Grosz caricature. It is hardly a

sympathetic view. Charlie Chaplin endearingly represented the individual worker in *Modern Times* (1924), but Lowry's people are largely anonymous (a powerful exception, not in the show, is the portrait *Unemployed* (1937)). Even in *Pit Disaster* (1919), there is a absence of emotion in the bereaved family depicted.

The ubiquitous 'matchstick man' is usually little more than a stiff, darkly-dressed constituent of the crowd. Yet Lowry is fascinated by streetlife, recording incidents like fights or prayer meetings or the visit of a hawker. He is detached from events though, merely an observer.

Lowry's view then, seems apolitical and depersonalised. The 'modern life' exhibited here is defined by the urban industrial landscape, which had emerged in the 19th century. In the show's first room, the Tate includes works by the likes of Maurice Utrillo, which seem irrelevant, and van Gogh, who recognised the emergence of industrial society. (The latter's 1880 drawing *Miners in the*

Snow, not in the show, shows nine uncannily Lowryesque figures against an industrial Belgian backdrop).

The show's big surprise to many will be some works by Adolphe Valette, Lowry's teacher. He would surely be recognised as one of France's greatest Impressionists but for his main works being about Manchester. Here, his *York Street* painting (1913) makes the boomtown's murky light glow like a Whistler nocturne, steam diffuse like a Turner, and the air itself as heavy as Monet's. His other masterpieces are hoarded in Manchester Art Gallery.

Lowry's city paintings could not be more different. 'I only deal with poverty and gloom,' he said, and the latter sets the visual tone. In dull, drab colours, looming mills and smoking chimneys appear in flat layers like

1 - *Industrial Landscape* (1955)

2 - *Adolphe Valette's oil painting York Street Leading to Charles Street, Manchester* (1913)

3 - *Going to the Match* (1936)

successive stage backdrops, paler with distance, marching across vistas below a sky which blends into a grey horizon. Working as an air-raid watchman in the Second World War, he would have seen Manchester from rooftops, but he painted with a floating viewpoint before then.

The cityscape is repetitive scenery, and the focus falls on people moving across their foregrounds, like studies in dynamic crowd behaviour. The far subtler shading and angles of drawings of streets and buildings on show demonstrate Lowry to be a master of massing and perspective but, by comparison, the paintings deal with space almost childishly.

Nevertheless, his formulaic cityscapes work because they are shorthand for the reality of Manchester when it was the workshop of the world. A deeper, atmospheric treatment like Valette's simply would not have captured the sheer endless grimness of the place. Lowry communicates that directly. He was particularly successful when he

painted industrial wastelands emptied of people, or indeed any life at all. The Tate quotes George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* describing 'flashes', stretches of dead, polluted water in the landscape. Lowry presents these in paintings such as *The Lake* (1937), a stunning nightmare view of an entire, vast 'flash' feature. Nowadays, we would recognise this as an eco-disaster, but back then, they were considered to be just part of an everyday industrial world, where nature had no place. It gives Lowry an unexpected dimension as a proto-environmentalist, offering a warning similar to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, but 25 years earlier.

There are other places he painted far from the ubiquitous crowds. *St Augustine's Church, Pendlebury* (1924) looms so bleakly that you could imagine Father MacKenzie sitting in it, writing the words of a sermon that no-one will hear. *The Empty House* (1934) is no Edward Hopper masterpiece, but captures a similar sense of stillness and isolation.



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He was commissioned after the war to paint for the Festival of Britain, and we get cityscapes much the same as before, but larger. No celebration of a brave new world emerging. *Ancoats Hospital* (1952) is not an endorsement of the NHS as a Utopian ideal, but a crowd of outpatients who seem thawed out from three decades earlier in an old waiting room where the only signs of modernity are the strip light casings above them. Lowry's gritty industrial world was beginning to slip away, and its replacement by the post-war landscape of high-rise social housing and motorway schemes was not something he addressed.

Lowry's style may have been naïve, but it revealed like no other artist the 20th-century working-class world. Some say it is relevant to places where industry booms today, such as the Pearl River Delta or Gujurat. Maybe so. How wonderful it would be if Lowry could be shown in such places, to inspire local artists to document their worlds, because they too will fade in time.



1, 3 THE STATE OF LS LOWRY 2 MANCHESTER CITY GALLERIES

