

‘Our Most Beautiful Contrivances’: Exhibiting Empire in Nineteenth Century Liverpool

By the turn of the nineteenth century Britain, like many of its European neighbours, had taken an interest in advancing technological knowledge through the exhibiting of mass-produced goods, first on a national, and by 1851, an international scale. Underpinning these ventures was a desire to drive sales and to apply to manufactured goods an aesthetic sensibility in which the fine arts were united with the tools of industry. Whilst many regard Birmingham’s 1849 ‘Exhibition of Industrial Arts and Manufacturers’ as being Britain’s first national exhibition of industry, recent evidence has emerged which challenges this long-held perception. Research conducted by Dr Isabel Robinson of LJMU’s History Department has brought to light compelling evidence which locates the seeds of this cultural movement to regional initiatives within the heartland of the Industrial North. Significantly, her research has shown that during the mid-nineteenth century, the city of Liverpool was instrumental in cultivating what has come to be known as the ‘World Fair Movement.’

Dr Robinson’s broader research focusses on the extent to which LJMU’s earliest schools were complicit in enslavement, empire, and the distribution of racial science. Composed of at least thirteen antecedent colleges, the university we know today actually began life in 1825 as the Liverpool Mechanics’ School of Arts. Founded ‘for the instruction of the working classes in the principles of the arts they practice, and in the various branches of science and useful knowledge connected therewith’ (Liverpool Mechanics’ Institution, 1860, p.19), LMSA provided practical, low-cost education to the working population of Liverpool at a time when educational provision was often reserved for elites. In this mission, it was just one of many charitable, voluntary, and subscription-based organisations which emerged in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth

century. Otherwise known as mechanics' institutes - and a relative of the mutual improvement society - these educational endeavours subscribed to the reformist, Utilitarian ethos of key social thinkers of the age. Counted amongst them were the likes of Jeremy Bentham, Samuel Smiles, Robert Owen, and Lord Henry Brougham. Together, their writings worked to encourage the belief that values such as efficiency, individual accountability, mutual self-help and, perhaps most important of all, the provision of elementary education, were the cornerstones of a modern, progressive society. 'Useful knowledge', readily deployed through the mastery of the 'three Rs' (reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic), were inherent to this new wave of educational reform, and worked to considerably advance Britain's industrial and commercial infrastructure, both domestically and in its pursuit of overseas territory.

Such writings, too, were essential to the formation of Liverpool Mechanics' School of Arts, creating an identity for the institution at a time when Liverpool was universally recognised as being 'the second city of empire'. The practical expression of this was rooted in the curriculum itself, and in an educational establishment whose immediate function was to unite craftsmanship with commercialisation in equal parts. Whilst today we tend to view the principles of artistic design as being fundamentally anti-mechanical, in reality, during the nineteenth century the terminology, just like the practices, were far from distinct. Draughtmanship, technical drawing, engineering, and industrial design all shared a similar investment in the 'laws of beauty' 'reconciling', according to historian Barbara Whitney Keyser, 'ancient wisdom with modern achievements' ... to forge a newly 'aestheticized science' of the post-Romantic era (Keyser, 1998, p.128). On this view, categories of artistic expression typically deemed as 'high' or creatively superior were just as valuable as the output of the master craftsman and the local artisan, with the tools and machinery of industry operating with a rhythmic beauty analogous to the application of the finest brushstrokes of paint on canvas. This was a doctrine keenly upheld by the school's longest serving President, Thomas Stuart Traill. By Traill's own admission, 'perpetual motion' was just one example of ... 'exhibiting instances of beautiful ... mechanical ingenuity' and something to be fundamentally applauded and encouraged as a pedagogical tool in the working man's armour.

By 1832, Traill had left Liverpool Mechanics' School of Arts for his native Scotland. Yet, his legacy would endure. Now named Liverpool Mechanics' Institution, this predecessor college to Liverpool School of Art and Design moved beyond the delivery of technical education for the working adult, adding to its repertoire a distinctive programme of cultural events. In addition to soirées, vocal performances, and an extended series of guest lectures, in 1840 the institution hosted for the first time a large-scale exhibition. Three more would follow: in 1842, 1844, and 1861. Their genesis would be pivotal to the creation of Liverpool's civic and cultural identity, displaced only by the provision of free-to-access galleries on what is now William Brown Street. At their height, the exhibitions attracted more than 100,000 visitors, courting the attention of some of the city's wealthiest benefactors and inculcating a culture of 'learning by looking' for all sectors of society (Nichols, Wade and Williams, 2016, p.32). Paintings, sculptures, and engravings by artists of historical and local significance were prominently displayed alongside anthropological and ethnographical specimens, tools, machinery, and the apparatus of modern industry. And with each successive exhibition, the scope, scale, and content of the displays grew ever more elaborate. Menageries, live demonstrations of equipment, a 'Glaciarium' (an artificially frozen 'lake') and, by 1861, paintings loaned by both Queen Victoria and the National Museum of South Kensington (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) would all feature as star attractions.

Encyclopaedic in nature, today, such exhibitions are increasingly viewed as colonial endeavours; spaces in which the diffusion of knowledge about the 'new world' (both technologically and geographically) served as spectacle and wonder, whilst further promulgating societal divisions along racial, class, and gendered lines. In this environment of hybridity, the marvellous to the mundane seemingly paid little attention to disciplinary boundaries, allowing visitors to potentially see for the first time artefacts from non-Western cultures alongside the more quotidian paraphernalia of their daily lives. One particularly unsettling contemporary account describes how visitors could see

A first-rate oriental bazaar, with its open shops, displaying the riches of Europe and the East – with its turbaned and gaudily robed loungers, its veiled women and their slaves, hurrying to and fro to inspect and purchase, and its

imperturbable shopmen sitting in the midst of their beautiful wares, smoking their costly pipes ...
Liverpool Central Archive, n.d.

Arguably, in bringing together objects from all the world's continents, the expanding city served as a space in which 'Empire' could be sold back to Britain, teaching the public to become both better consumers and more strident exponents of a modernising, civilising prospect. In a clear nod to the performative, interactive environment such fairs invoked, the same article advises that there is 'a fancy dress ball' ... where 'you may, without any undue call on the imaginative powers, fancy that you are present at the levee of some universal monarch, from every part of whose vast dominions representatives have assembled' (Liverpool Central Archive, n.d.). Without doubt, these exhibitions, just like the broader World Fair Movement to which they belonged, simultaneously constituted a body of knowledge and a practical endeavour for the population of Liverpool, one whereby art, industry, and empire came into alignment in full public view.

Today, knowledge of Liverpool Mechanics' Institution's series of World Fairs has been all but forgotten. Exhibits were primarily loaned to these events, making archival materials which document their presence both rare and seldomly accessed. Likewise, those exhibits which can be identified are no longer in the possession of LJMU. Some are thought to have been acquired at later dates by National Museums Liverpool; others are known to have been lost or broken, whilst others still are beyond trace. However, as Dr Robinson has discovered, the catalogues produced for these exhibitions, together with a manuscript book of loans, exhibition committee minutes, and a large box of ephemera, have all survived. Housed in the collections of Liverpool Central Library, Dr Robinson estimates that at least one hundred years may have passed since these items were consulted for study in any great depth.

Thanks to a funding grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for the Study of Art History, Dr Robinson has been able to partner with Liverpool Central Archive to digitise for the first

time these overlooked materials. The first stage of the project will see the previously non-researched catalogues scanned to the highest technical specification, generating access to resources for both LJMU's academic community, and for the general public, who are interested in all aspects of the institution's history as it intersects with British imperialism in the nineteenth century. Once digitised, digital facsimile software [page turner] will enable users to interactively view each catalogue in 4K Ultra High Definition. Text searchable, the catalogues will also be indexed to maximise their research potential, and it is hoped that LJMU students will take full advantage of this when choosing future dissertation projects. The catalogues are invaluable for the insights they provide on so many aspects of Liverpool's history in the nineteenth century, including the history of material culture, provenance studies, art collecting practices, local and global politics, educational reform, design theory and practice, as well as technological innovation.

As Liverpool School of Art and Design celebrates its bicentenary year, Dr Robinson's project will also conclude with a small online exhibition (including the digitised catalogues), and a roundtable event, currently scheduled for November 2025. Both are intended to provide some much needed critical and contextual rigour to what is unquestionably a problematic aspect of LJMU's past. Whilst it is clear that these exhibitions help challenge the perception that industrial design initiatives were a metropolitan phenomenon alone, they are also demonstrative of Britain's increasingly pervasive imperial mindset. Thus, if we are to rethink the relationship between the creative, educational, and philanthropic ethos of mid-Victorian Britain, we must also examine the extent to which Liverpool Mechanics' Institution's exhibitions were a product of Britain's imperial identity.

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