

“A Joy for Ever”: the Manchester Art-Treasures Exhibition in Print

10th September - 14th November 2007



On 5 May 1857 the largest and most spectacular art exhibition ever mounted in Britain opened in Old Trafford, Manchester. The scale, ambition and, arguably, the art historical significance of the Art-Treasures Exhibition was unprecedented in Britain, and has not subsequently been equalled. When the exhibition closed on 17 October, over 1,300,000 visitors had passed through its turnstiles. In all, over 16,000 works of art were gathered together in the specially built Art-Treasures Palace, where the first line of Keats' poem *Endymion* exhorted visitors to cast aside their daily cares and devote themselves to the appreciation of art and beauty.

On display were 1,173 works of the Ancient Masters, 689 productions of the Modern Masters and 386 British portraits. In addition, there were 969 watercolours and drawings, 260 Old Master drawings, 1,475 engravings, 597 photographs and some 10,000 objects that comprised the 'Ornamental Art Museum'. The majority of exhibits were the property of private individuals and many were on public show for the first time.

To many commentators, Manchester was an incongruous setting for an exhibition of Art Treasures. The American writer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, reflected that 'It is singular that the great Art-Exhibition should have come to pass in the rudest great town in England.' The practical realisation of the exhibition in just fourteen months from its formal inception to the grand opening in the presence of Prince Albert, was a certainly an extraordinary feat of Victorian cultural entrepreneurship and organisation. Yet the spectacle lasted just five months: at the end of the exhibition, the exhibits were returned to their owners and the Art-Treasures Palace was dismantled. However, the numerous surviving accounts and images of the exhibition that were produced in 1857 enable us to reconstruct how it was organised, the reaction of the critics and the responses of its diverse visitors.



This small exhibition is devoted to the representation of the Art-Treasures Exhibition in words and images, and is divided into two parts. An introductory section is in the Rylands Gallery on the first floor, where material relating to the Art-Treasures Exhibition is shown with other highlights of the Library's collection. The second part, in the Historic Reading Room on the third floor, examines the origins and organisation of, as well as responses to, the 1857 Exhibition.

Exhibition Opening Times:

Monday	10am - 5pm
Tuesday	12 - 5pm
Wednesday - Saturday	10am - 5pm
Sunday	12 - 5pm