

Cultural Daily

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The Industrial Allure of Lowry's Urban Landscapes

Estelle Lovatt · Wednesday, August 7th, 2013

Industrial Landscape 1955 Tate © The Estate of L.S. Lowry

If you are an American coming over to London for your summer vacation this year, then I must recommend one exhibition to you: *Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life* at Tate Britain.

I was having a discussion recently about the painter L.S. Lowry and his impact on the art world. The discussion revolved around how Lowry is often a victim of the art world's middle-class snobbery when assessed as a painter.

Be it panoramic or intimate vignettes of the North of England, Lowry's matchstick men may look fairly idiotic; nonetheless they are instantly recognizable. Hard-edged, grotesque and comedic, Lowry's painted people might look formulaic because they were drawn from his memory. Although simple-looking, you'll recognize human variety in every one of his people. In fact, many faces in his paintings are former tenants. In his lifetime, Lowry made over 1,000 paintings and 8,000 drawings. If you asked him, "What are you doing when you're not painting?" he might have replied, "thinking about painting." Lowry often described himself as "a simple man," but, in fact, he was a complex and contradictory character considering the murky realism of his environment and British history in general.



Ancoats Hospital Outpatients' Hall 1952, Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester

It took the attention of American art critic Jessica Stephens to wake the world up to Lowry's work. In her writing in 'The Studio' in 1928, she describes how "beauty may be of many kinds...The work of Mr. L.S. Lowry has qualities which make it difficult to forget."

For those not familiar with Lowry's artwork, he was a modest man in both character and artistic temperament, known for his landscapes which spoke to the enormity of England's industrialization. His pictures tell the story of life before the National Health Service (similar to Obamacare): pre small-scale Capitalism; pre strike meetings. In other words, British history in oil paint. Or, as Jessica Stephens wrote: "It is the nearest rendering of the life of Lancashire one knows."

There are lots of assumptions surrounding Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887 – 1976). Here's the truth for you; he was born to lower middle class parents (a real estate agent and hopeful concert pianist) in Stretford, Manchester, Northern England. A move to the industrial hamlet of Pendlebury led to an obsessive subject matter for the young painter. He captured the twisted forms the human body took when it was bent over machines for 12 hours a day, six days a week. Always scurrying along, the subjects of his paintings have very little time and money; too busy running around representing the rituals of public life from football matches (otherwise known as soccer to

Americans) to protest marches, evictions and fist-fights. The experiences of the 20th-century working-class life in England were all captured by Lowry.



Coming Out of School / Courtesy Tate © The Estate of L.S. Lowry

A rent collector by day and virgin by night, Lowry lived with his mother and was formally trained in drawing and painting under the French Impressionist painter Valette. The Parisian galleries and French art critics recognized and helped further his endeavors in the history of British art. He exhibited at the Lefevre gallery in Mayfair, London, and was a visiting tutor at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art, recognised at the time as one of the best art schools in England.

What was unusual about Lowry was that he was not the typical moneyed student graduating from the Courtauld Institute of Art, nor was he an artist that fit into the traditional Eton-Oxford English mold. Nor did he study art history at St Andrews University in Scotland – where Kate Middleton and Prince William, now the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, first met and studied art history. Why? Simply because Lowry's subject as a painter was British industry – not the British Empire.

Although Lowry has never been a darling of the art world, his work does find its fans. The minute details in his densely-packed paintings give the eye much to feed on. More importantly, his landscapes of Northern England's textile mills and factory chimneys make Lowry an artist of 'place'. This 'localism' – topographies of slums in Manchester – speaks to those who inhabit these areas. Whereas traditionally labor is concealed within factory walls, Lowry brings it to the public's attention: showing men at work or on the streets. Describing the slum subjects in his paintings, Lowry said: "I saw the industrial scene and I was affected by it. I tried to paint it all the time. I tried to paint the industrial scene as best I could. It wasn't easy." His ambition was to reveal the industrial scenes shaping England at the time. No one else had done it seriously and Lowry had an edge over the rest: he was wise about street life.



The Fever Van 1935 © The Estate of LS Lowry / Image courtesy of National Museums Liverpool

First melodramatic and pessimistic, his mood changes drastically after World War II. If you're surprised at how small the paintings are, just wait for the last room in this exhibition, which houses the Industrial Landscapes. Here, for the first time ever, are five grand-scale panoramic paintings of Lowry's world shown together. His world is a pictorial record of a time before Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher changed the face of British industry. However, when the industrial scene changed, so did the nature of Lowry's subject matter. He couldn't paint what wasn't there. So Lowry left for the mining districts of South Wales, where he painted the trees looking like they oozed smoke. Faced with these panoramas the size of large-scale history paintings, the viewer finally understands the scale and scope of Lowry's ambition.

Lowry certainly left more than a cultural legacy. What makes this the perfect exhibition at the moment, is our social awareness of our unemployment and current dismal financial times. Lest we forget, today, Lowry's artwork often sells for millions of dollars. Enjoy.

Lowry and the Painting of Modern Life runs from 25 June – 20 October 2013 at [Tate Britain](#).

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