

‘BY THE GAINS OF INDUSTRY WE PROMOTE ART’

**BUILDING THE BIRMINGHAM MUNICIPAL
MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY**

ANDREW REEKES



Building the Birmingham Municipal Museum and Art Gallery

In 1891 Marius Vachon, the French Minister of Culture, reported back to his government that, *'Today the Birmingham Museum is the finest museum that exists in the provinces and the one that through the whole of England (British Museum excepted) receives the greatest number of visitors. This stems from municipal pride. The museum's aim is to give the public, artists and artisans models of art of the purest taste, the most beautiful forms and highest execution.'*

This glowing testimony, from a Parisian well versed in civic culture, provides evidence of the Museum's exalted reputation by the end of the nineteenth century, when Birmingham was reputed to be 'the most artistic town in England.'

The Municipal Ideal in Birmingham

What Vachon commented on was a new Italianate palace set in the administrative heart of the city which, with its classical simplicity, its portico and campanile, drew inspiration from the Florentine and Venetian republics that Birmingham's leading citizens sought to emulate. Its scale, its central position, the quality of its exhibits, all constituted a more contemporary statement too, visibly reminding Northern rivals of the prosperity, good taste and good sense of Birmingham's cultural leaders.

The Museum was adjacent to the School of Art, the leading municipal art school in Britain, and opposite the most famous cultural institution in the country, the Birmingham and Midland Institute; together they formed an enviable artistic and intellectual focus for the city. More than this, it was also seamlessly joined to Birmingham's Council House, that symbol of municipal authority and pretension. It shared its space with its host and benefactor, the Municipal Gas



Yeoville Thomason's Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (pre-1910).

committee, whose £92,000 investment funded the gallery's construction; to underscore this relationship, an improving text – *By the gains of Industry we promote Art* – was inscribed at the entrance to the Art Gallery.

More than any other provincial city in Britain Birmingham was wedded to this idea of strong municipal government. Although it was not the first large Victorian town to promote a municipal art gallery (Salford and Warrington founded theirs in the late 1840s) Birmingham's cramped one room municipal gallery at the top of the

new Reference Library (opening in 1867) established the principle of council involvement in art before most big industrial cities. And Birmingham would thereafter lead the way in this regard. It was a Birmingham councillor, Jesse Collings, who first fought and won the battle to permit Sunday museum opening in 1872, arguing that pictures and artefacts would prove a worthwhile counter-attraction for the working class to pub-going; and that

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Birmingham School of Art (in the background) early 20th century.

for many workers Sundays were the only days when they were free from toil to visit galleries. It was he who also persuaded the National Gallery to allow regular loans of prize works to provincial galleries, so that citizens beyond London could experience acknowledged masterpieces. He ensured Birmingham's Museum benefitted first from the concession.

Unlike other great cities, notably Manchester and Liverpool, Birmingham was committed from the start to free admission. If art administrators were serious about taking Art to the workers, then charging for admission would be inherently contradictory; yet in nearly all other galleries charges were made.

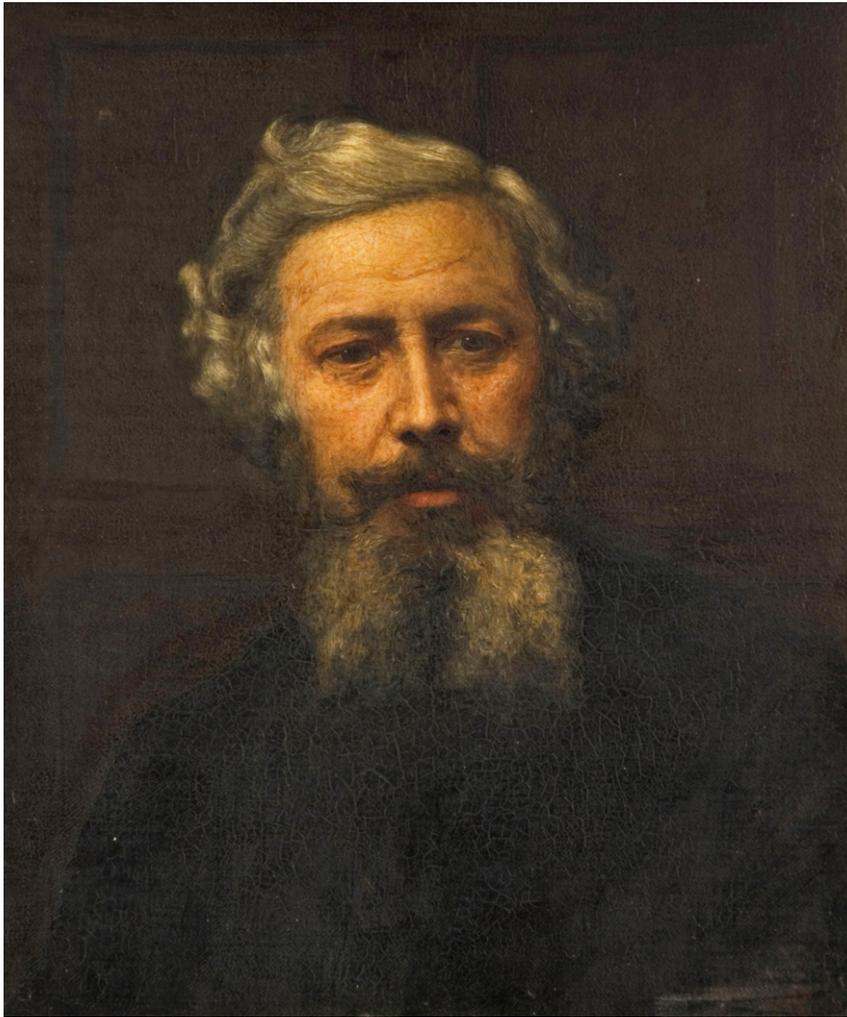
In no other city was the link so overt between museum/art gallery with a municipal Art school which trained up the artists and designers who would – it was hoped – produce work of sufficient quality to merit a place in the exhibitions. By extension, in no other city was the link so strong between the indigenous industries of the host city and the museum and gallery displaying artefacts. Birmingham's prosperity grew out of its manufacturing workshops and the city's leaders shaped

the content of those galleries to reflect that fundamental truth. Not only that – in contrast to most Northern galleries - Birmingham's leaders ensured that there was generous funding available for the purchase of high quality pieces from 1871 onwards, when they established the Public Picture Gallery Fund. This antedated the actual building of the great Museum and Art Gallery (1883-5) which so impressed Vachon, and so it constituted a ringing declaration of intent.

The Civic Gospel, Art and the Birmingham Museum

None of this is surprising given that Birmingham was the home of the civic gospel, a mission cause propagated by the great Nonconformist preacher George Dawson. Dawson's talks at his Church of the Saviour from the late 1840s through to his death in 1876 profoundly influenced many of Birmingham's leading businessmen. Besides convincing them that it was their duty to roll up their sleeves and act to improve their town, he also directed them to those areas where they could make a difference. Like so many thoughtful Victorians he

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George Dawson, 1872, British School.

despaired of the squalor, rootlessness and soul-lessness of sprawling industrial cities and he transmitted this to his many disciples in Birmingham. Men like Joseph Chamberlain took up the cudgels to fight for sanitation reform, for slum clearance and for a well-planned city environment. He and others of Dawson's congregation campaigned for free, compulsory elementary education. And Dawson, Sam: Timmins, William Harris and friends successfully won the Town Council over to establishing a Free Reference Library, suburban lending libraries, and a Shakespeare Memorial Library in the mid 1860s in the belief that the distillation of knowledge and wisdom found in books could transform and civilise the reader. Yet there was a further fundamentally important aspect to Dawson's thinking which relates directly to the Museum and Art gallery.

Where other Victorians would simply be inspired by the writings of the social critic and art historian John Ruskin, Dawson would go further, to become his most important and articulate mediator, explaining and developing the ideas of this complex but undoubtedly great sage of the era for his Birmingham auditors. So, Dawson taught his followers that Art in its pursuit of Beauty, was vital to mitigate the effects of industrial urban

degradation. Artists, he believed, had an important role in bringing the beauty of nature, and images of Divine perfection, to citizens afflicted by the filth and amorality of city life. It was the duty of the municipality to ensure all had the opportunity to apprehend beautiful art and artefacts. He said:

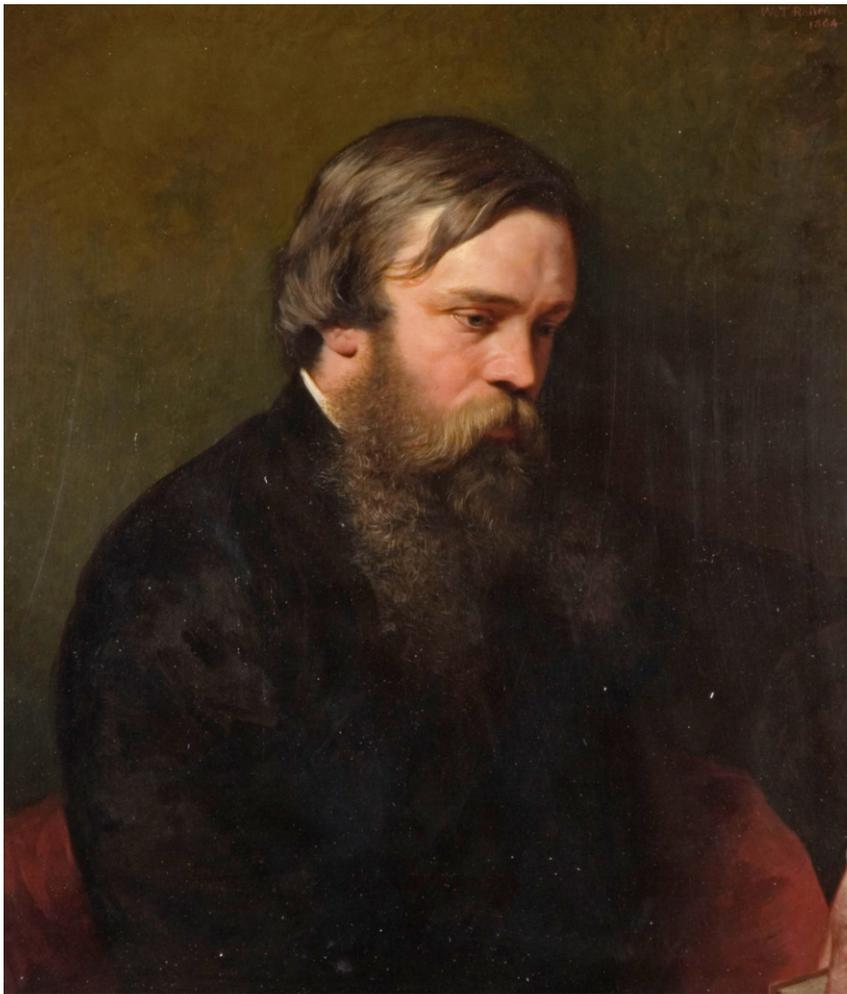
The city which is a city must have its parks as well as its prisons, its art gallery as well as its asylum, its books and libraries as well as its wash houses, its schools as well as its sewers. One of the highest offices of civilisation is to determine how to give masterpieces of art to the whole people.

A whole generation of civic gossellers, converted to the cause by Dawson, came to dedicate themselves to the principle of taking beauty, through art and architecture, to the masses. Art would provide a refuge from the diurnal grind of life in squalid slums. Followers like Jesse Collings and J T Bunce concluded that the Council had a very public duty to create a comfortable environment where citizens, whose own homes lacked such stimuli, could access books and pictures and experience their transformative effects. So, the Museum and Art Gallery – when it eventually came – was envisaged as a domestic space, warm and welcoming, in contrast to the homes of many of the working classes.

Exposure to Art would refine the sensibilities, would develop good taste and discrimination, and make of men and women better citizens. One disciple, the architect J H Chamberlain saw his many buildings in Birmingham – commissioned by the Town Council – having a clear didactic purpose:

They should enlarge human life, make it wider and brighter and better, and give to men and women even down to the very poorest, a greater pleasure in every hour they spent.

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John Henry Chamberlain, 1864, by William Thomas Roden.

This was public art in the form of Venetian gothic, a style of architecture associated with the moral seriousness of a deeply Christian age; through his Board schools, his designs for pumping stations, public baths, police stations and the Midland Institute and School of Art, he sought to educate, stimulate and inspire.

He joined others agitating for a purpose-built art gallery in the town. J T Bunce, editor of the *Birmingham Post*, was an early Dawson convert and was among the first to argue in the Press for a municipal art gallery – in the late 1850s – and he kept campaigning until the wealthy Tangye brothers in 1880 were moved to a major act of philanthropy by his editorial proposition that: *the town sustains a great loss in the absence of an adequate art collection*. Bunce was prominent on council library, Art Purchase and Art School committees, and like Dawson believed in the life-changing power of Art:

Art must permeate and suffuse the daily life and – with public buildings, ample and stately and rich in ornament – dignify the corporate life too so that all will promote a municipal life nobler, fuller, richer than any the world has seen.

Here in one short extract Bunce distills the civic gossellers' belief in the

importance of civic pride and the role of architecture and art in civilising citizens – it was a moral mission.

Pre-Raphaelites

This is quite apparent in the art which the new Gallery patronised. Because here too, Birmingham differed from its provincial rivals. The Birmingham Society of Artists, an association of practising artists, showed the work of Millais and Holman Hunt and other Pre-Raphaelites in their exhibitions in Temple Row in the 1850s even when these newcomers were shocking London critics; similarly, leading civic gossellers like William Kenrick enthusiastically purchased their work for private collections. Kenrick, aside from ensuring – as Chairman of the Gas committee – that profits from municipal gas be used to build the gallery in 1881, would also actively promote Millais and others when that Municipal Gallery opened. It helped that his friend Edward Burne Jones, one of the movement's leading lights, was a native of Birmingham and returned to the city to lecture at the School of Art, to design the cathedral's glowing stained glass and to paint *The Star of Bethlehem* ('a blaze of colour and looking like a carol') for the new Museum. The important point about the movement was that it exactly chimed with the Birmingham civic gossellers' intentions for Art. Ruskin, then Dawson, taught that art should be accessible and beautiful, should be a window on Nature, and should have a clear social and moral purpose.

In its medievalism (mythical and religious subject matter) Pre-Raphaelite art was a protest against the vulgar industrial world. In the serious subject matter for their paintings artists sought to improve and stimulate the viewer. The characteristic high colour and jewel-like detail was intended to be both that

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The Star of Bethlehem (1887-1891) by Sir Edward Burne-Jones.

window onto Nature and exemplary in its fine craftsmanship. So, the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery owned and exhibited important Pre-Raphaelite paintings by Millais (*The Blind Girl*), Holman Hunt (*The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*), Madox Brown (*The Last of England*) and by Burne Jones (*The Star of Bethlehem*). They were given by wealthy Birmingham businessmen like William Kenrick, Richard and George Tangye, and of course they reflected their taste; and perhaps too there was an element of conspicuous consumption in such patronage, a demonstration of the modern outlook and superior taste of the patron. But, whatever the motivation, by 1895 it comprised the most important collection of Pre-Raphaelite Art in England.

The Importance of Applied Art

In another sense Burne Jones, and his close friend from Oxford, William Morris, helped shape the future of art – and of the Museum – in Birmingham. After visits in 1880 they concluded:

We have been much struck with the need there is in such an important town for a Public Museum of Art. It is not too much to say that without one a School of Art is impossible. How can students work properly without a standard of art before their eyes, some visible authority to which reference is made. An Art Museum is as essential for a student of art as a library is to the student of letters. A building is the first requisite.

The timing was impeccable for their urgent plea coincided exactly with the Tangye brothers offer of £10,000 to fund a public art collection. But what was noteworthy was that Burne Jones and Morris were echoing a message articulated first in Birmingham at least 30 years before and repeated often since – about the fundamental importance of a museum and art gallery in educating local artists and designers. Both men were wedded to Ruskin's analysis that industrial production had killed off the individual skill and craftsmanship of the Victorian worker. Morris himself lived out a life-long commitment to simple, honest hand-crafted products, by way of a protest against the countervailing tide of ugly,

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The Industrial Gallery (pre-1910).

mass-produced goods (of which – paradoxically – Birmingham was the prime manufacturer). He would famously advise a Birmingham Town Hall audience in 1880, *'Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.'*

It was another founder member of Dawson's congregation, the designer William Aitken, who as early as 1849 interpreted the preacher's message about the urgent need for access to Beauty and Art to imply:

A permanent local museum which shall contain some works by the old masters in design as applied to manufacturers, with not a few of the best works of today.

He believed that exposure to fine examples of applied art could – by a kind of osmosis – transfigure a humble

craftsman by setting a standard for him to emulate. So, he helped Prince Albert organise the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 and later masterminded an ambitious large-scale exhibition of art and applied design in Aston Park in 1858; these exhibitions were intended to inspire working men to be better craftsmen and designers. He campaigned restlessly for a spacious municipal design museum until his death in 1875. Others agreed with him – in 1876 Joseph Chamberlain, a businessman who understood the importance of educating his workforce, gave £1000 to that constrained Museum for the acquisition of examples of industrial design which would 'improve the quality of its collection,' as he told Jesse Collings.

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Equally, Aitken spent years agitating for a proper design school; the confined design spaces in the Midland Institute were a poor substitute. His message about the importance of providing adequate facilities for the development of designers would later bear fruit through the efforts of R F Martineau, and the largest design school in Britain was opened in 1895, while Burne Jones and Morris's hopes of better art teaching resources would be realised by the foundation of the School of Art in 1885 to an iconic design of J H Chamberlain; by 1895 it was unrivalled in the country. But the new Museum and Art Gallery would turn out to be just as important in meeting the needs of practising artists and designers for – as Aitken, Joseph Chamberlain and Morris intended – it served as a collection of inspiring models from the past as well as the present.

Museum and Art Gallery Exhibits

Yeoville Thomason's new Italianate Museum and Art Gallery opened in 1885 and its spacious galleries reflected the promptings of the civic gospellers. This was to be a museum for all, to reach out to working people, and so admission was free, and catalogues were very cheap (just 1d), with entries which were historical or topographical rather than aesthetic, detailing the biography of a portrait's subject, closely describing a landscape. There were rooms and an elegant round gallery, replete with fine art, both good examples of old masters and – as earlier indicated – a very good collection of Pre-Raphaelite work. But – much more the case than in most other provincial galleries – there were also extensive and beautiful spaces for the products of design (most especially the gothic iron-work structure which comprised the Industrial Hall). They placed industrial art on an equal footing with fine art. These reflected the idea propounded by Aitken, and later by William Morris, that mere exposure to beautiful workmanship would rub off on the many skilled and semi-skilled artisans and artists who gazed on it.

Whitworth Wallis, the first curator, holding the post from 1885 to 1927, did more than anyone to shape the collection. He was firmly in that Dawson and Morris tradition which sought to help men and women make beautiful things by imitation of beautiful exemplars. He wrote in the introduction to the Museum's first Penny Guide that visitors must try to learn from the exhibits *to make, if only at first in a small way, our manufactures, candlesticks, coal-boxes, spoons or whatever, more and more beautiful.*

He would later elaborate on the purpose of the Museum in 1911:

It has ever been the object of the Committee to place before visitors such objects as have a direct bearing on the industries of the town cultivating thereby the power of observation and assisting the education of the eye in its perception of form and style.

His Museum and Art Gallery handbook of 1890 is a testament to his energies as well as to his discrimination. Equally important were his powers of persuasion for he was adept at negotiating loans and gifts for the Gallery. Armed with a generous fighting fund (£20,000 from the Art Gallery Purchase committee established by the Tangyes' gift) Wallis travelled to Egypt, Italy, France and Germany and attended sales, focusing on the decorative crafts and applied art, especially of the Italian Renaissance. As a result, the Italian Gallery was replete with cassone, examples of majolica ware, old Venetian glass and many casts of Roman statuary, while the Industrial Hall featured Japanese cloisonne and enamel work, Chinese bronzes, Persian armour, Indian metal work as well as American examples, all to stimulate and improve the minds of the many artisan metal workers in Birmingham. Wallis also built up an impressive collection of guns (for those engaged in the growing Birmingham arms industry) and of jewellery, to educate employees in the Jewellery Quarter. Wallis was engaged on a project both to improve the quality of Birmingham's craftsmanship (which would bring its own commercial benefit) and to cultivate visitors' visual discrimination.

The Museum's Impact

Far from being put off by this earnestness and serious educative intent the people of Birmingham responded enthusiastically. In the year after the Prince of Wales opened it, the Museum welcomed over one million visitors, a figure which made a deep impression on M. Vachon. Its Art collection provided models for the hundreds of students at the neighbouring Art School, and so helped shape the work of a new generation of Birmingham artists who would make a national name for themselves – Joseph Southall, Kate and Myra Bunce, for example.

The Museum's heyday, in terms of its popularity, was in the period up to the First World War. Many of the assumptions on which the Museum's collections had

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The Keepsake (1901) by Kate Elizabeth Bunce.

been based were called into question. The Modernist movement at the start of the twentieth century promoted the idea of instinct and self-expression in an artist's work. The gaudy expressionistic colouring of the Fauves, and the abstraction of Kandinsky or the cubist de-construction of Picasso and Braque, was all a far cry from the earnest narrative history of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers. More than this, the decline of manufacturing in Birmingham, from the middle of the twentieth century, undermined the argument that applied art exhibits were necessary to the training of the city's artisans. Finally, with the rise of cinema and other family entertainments, the Museum had to fight to maintain its position as a counter-attraction.

Nevertheless, the Museum and Art Gallery retain their importance, for Yeoville Thomason's building, and the high-quality collections of fine and applied art it curates, in themselves teach an important history lesson about the aspirations and values which motivated a generation of men who made Birmingham at the end of the nineteenth century the greatest, and the most artistic, provincial city in Britain.

About the author

Andrew Reekes is a historian and author whose other titles include: *Two Titans: Joseph Chamberlain and George Cadbury*; *The Birmingham Political Machine*; *More than Munich: Neville Chamberlain*; *Austen Chamberlain and the Burden of Expectation*; *George Dawson and his Circle*.

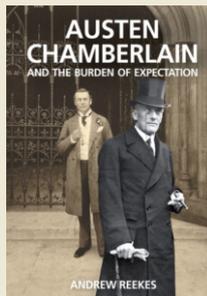
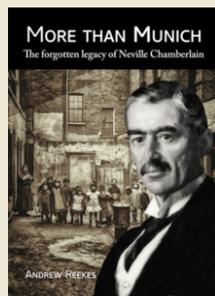
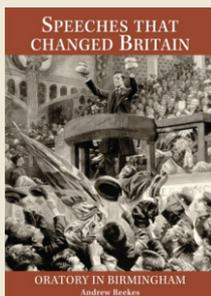
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