



L.S. Lowry, *Mill Scene with Figures* (1944)

L. S. LOWRY AND THE HERITAGE MOVEMENT

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Lowry remains one of the more controversial figures in twentieth-century British painting. Many members of the art establishment still treat his paintings with suspicion. His first moderately successful exhibition did not take place until 1939, when he was already 52 years old. Only in the final year of his eligibility, at the age of 74, was he elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy. On another occasion, Rohde reports that when Lowry complimented the President of the Royal Academy on his paintings, the President sniffed back 'I wish I could say the same about yours but I dislike them intensely'.¹ The cognoscenti of high art seemed to have deep reservations about his subject matter, his technique, and his vision.

The response of the British public, once they had 'discovered' Lowry, was quite different. The first of a number of documentary films about Lowry and his work was presented on national television in 1957. A postage stamp reproduction of one of his industrial scenes was issued in 1967.² By the late 1970s his work had become

extraordinarily popular. When a retrospective of his work was mounted at the Royal Academy in London in 1976, the exhibition set attendance records for a showing of the work of an individual twentieth-century artist.³ Two years later, a popular song about Lowry and his work climbed to lofty positions in local and national charts of the record industry. A 'Lowry's Bar' was opened in Central Manchester (an ironic use of his name, since he was a lifelong teetotaler and rarely included public houses in his paintings). In the 1980s, reproductions of his work appeared on items such as buttons, shopping bags, bumper stickers and mugs. Weekend tours of 'Lowry Country' were being organised, visiting museums and vestiges of Lowry's world. In 1987, the centenary of his birth, a major exhibition of his work was mounted in Salford, and then presented in other British towns and cities. And in that same year, 1987, a major analysis of Lowry's legacy was presented in the pages of *this Review*.⁴

This essay builds on that analysis by exploring just one facet of the representation and meaning of Lowry's urban-



L.S. Lowry, *The Market Place* (1927)

industrial landscapes. It confronts and attempts to explain the seemingly paradoxical relationship between the growing popularity of Lowry's work in the second half of the twentieth century and the virtual simultaneous disappearance of the urban-industrial scenes that were the central theme of much of his work. In short, our argument is that as postmodern culture gathered momentum about the time of Lowry's death in 1976, its consumers found in his works an accessible and fairly comprehensive record of the North's fast-disappearing industrial heritage.

Lowry recorded a slowly fading phase of imperial power in which the factories retained some of their local importance, and were still the centre of gravity for a multitude of workers. In the larger context, however, they were increasingly an industrial anachronism. Capital had found new avenues of accumulation as the cotton industry slowly crumbled, and its workforce aged; there was no investment in new technology or new human capital, and little in modernising the infrastructure.

Lowry was a heritage conservationist, one of the first in the land.⁵ His art began to record the workings of the cotton economy that produced the Manchester region long before heritage conservation became fashionable. There are parallels, here, between Kestelman's cultural interpretation of some of Montreal's great historical buildings⁶ and the cultural symbolism of Lowry's monumental factories: these, too, were metaphors of economic and social power, in this

case of Lancashire's entrepreneurial class. By the time Lowry died in 1976, the destruction of the urban-industrial system he had depicted was well advanced. In 1980, the local historian, B.G.H. Malet remarked that Lowry 'captured and chronicled a Salford which has completely vanished'.⁷ The near-total disappearance of this and most other components of what had been an archetypal landscape makes Lowry's record of the scene especially valuable. Indeed, the term 'Lowryscape' has recently been coined to convey the sense that Lowry's depictions represent a settled place in the North of England 'with an agreed iconography'.⁸

The erasing of the old landscape of Manchester and Salford was remarkably rapid. It had begun as a result of municipal housing policies before the Second World War. Wartime destruction by bombing attacks hastened the process. In the 1950s and 1960s extensive urban renewal programmes in the age of high modernism had a massive impact, specifically because modernism consciously eschewed all interest in local history: entire districts were razed and then drastically redesigned and rebuilt with the explicit goal of erasing the old landscapes. The changing economic base of the region and de-population within it contributed to the transformation of the landscape. It is probably no exaggeration to suggest that Salford has changed more drastically than any other city in Britain.⁹ Fortunately, if ironically, this most transformed of urban regions is also the one England's most prolific regional artist laboured to record.¹⁰



L.S. Lowry, *The Lake* (1937)

The evidence seems to suggest that there is a direct relationship between the more or less simultaneous disappearance of the urban-industrial scene and the growing popularity of Lowry's depiction of it. The connection between the two events is not a simple one, yet both are, we suggest, manifestations of the cultural transition from modernism to postmodernism. A feature of Britain since the 1970s has been a growing preoccupation with the past, which in turn is one of many changes originating in the country's political decline, cultural shifts, and economic restructuring. Reflecting this pervasive interest in the past is enthusiastic attention to artifacts and representations of the past, and the emergence of what has been called the 'heritage industry' that exploits its economic potential.¹¹ Indeed, Harvey recently noted that in Britain a new museum was opening every three weeks.¹²

The proliferation and popularity of former industrial sites, such as the Wigan Pier Heritage Centre and Styal Mill,¹³ as well as the preservation of industrial history and the rise of industrial archeology all illustrate the shift. The rapid growth in the number of museums reflects not just a new interest in them but also the development of a new kind of museum, designed to invoke, re-create and display industrial heritage:

*The urge is to recall not military greatness or the emergence of the nation state, but Victorian Britain, or even more poignantly, the 1920s and 1930s. Now, nostalgia is for the industrial past.*¹⁴

By 1988, Trinder's guide to Britain's industrial heritage listed 112 industrial museums.¹⁵ The literature on industrial archaeology, both popular and academic, multiplied rapidly. In Cottonopolis, and in other parts of Britain, as the industrial landscape was disappearing, interest in its features and in relics of the scene was growing: Castlefield, a district adjacent to Central Manchester containing a variety of industrial buildings and artifacts, was converted into an industrial heritage museum; and by the late 1980s, the City of Salford Art Gallery, which housed the largest collection of Lowry's paintings and drawings, had been re-named the Lowry Heritage Centre. Thus, Lowry's record of the scene became more and more significant, its popular appeal deriving from the fact that it constituted an accessible and revealing window through which the urban-industrial scene of the past could be viewed.

The ideologies driving the consumption of Lowry's work are easier to identify. Jameson views postmodernism as the 'cultural logic of late-capitalism' with commodity production diversifying into any marketable form of culture.¹⁶ The heritage industry has been generally accepted as a component of this postmodern commodification of history and culture. Harvey views heritage activities as a form of middle-class populism, which one might expect to mesh with Lowry's own values.¹⁷ To paraphrase Baudrillard, heritage centres have become the hypermarkets of history.¹⁸ Hewison goes so far as to suggest that the manufacture of heritage, rather than the manufacture of goods, has become a principal British industry.¹⁹

Lyotard, Jameson, Harvey, Featherstone and other commentators on the postmodern project are generally in agreement that the beginnings of the era can be dated to around 1972, precisely the period when Lowry was advancing from widespread recognition as an artist to celebrity status.²⁰ As Bourdieu emphasises, postmodernism saw the rapid expansion of the economy of symbolic goods, and particularly of the consumption of those with cultural and historical associations.²¹ The expanding group of middle-class consumers of cultural goods found in Lowry not only an accessible artist, but one whose images resonated with their own roots in the earlier age of urban industry.

The arrival of postmodernism was accomplished by new patterns of cultural consumption based on middle-class tastes. This implies a process different from that which Hewison proposes, in which there is a prioritised list of conservation interests:

With the country house secure, anxiety has transferred to a different sector of national memory – and national concern: our industrial past, and the simple objects of everyday life that evoke a time that has become remote, though it is well within living memory; only just the other side of the looking glass.²²

Postmodernists argue that the new consumer has a qualitatively different list of priorities that reflect their own specific interest. For many, the industrial past is part of their 'self', whereas the stately homes clearly belong to the other.²³ With one exception, none of the published studies that attempt to put Lowry's work in its historical and geographical context make this point, the exception being Philip Dodd, who, having identified his own origins as the son of a Yorkshire miner, writes that 'the Lowryscape North has to be preserved in order that "We" can speak on its behalf . . . "the North", too, has been changing in our absence; . . . its fact firmly towards the future, whilst "We" gaze at the past'.²⁴

On different occasions, Lowry offered different accounts of why he had chosen to focus upon the urban-industrial scene. But, in an interview he gave at the age of 88, a year before he died, Lowry responded sharply to one question by insisting that his preoccupation originated because 'I wanted to put the industrial scene on the map, sir! That's my story, and I'm sticking to it'.²⁵ There is obviously no way of knowing whether or not, or to what extent this was his original intention. In any event, Lowry's own characterisation of his pictures on another occasion reveals that he certainly knew that they were of historical value: 'They're documents, and I've done them as well as I can.'²⁶

NOTES

- 1 S Rohde, *A Private View of L.S. Lowry* (rev. ed., 1987), p.89.
- 2 M Leber and J. Sandling (eds.), *L.S. Lowry* (Oxford, 1987), p.107.
- 3 M. Vaizey, 'Will It All Last . . . ?' in M. Leber and J. Sandling (eds.), *L.S. Lowry* (Oxford, 1987), p.84.
- 4 M. Leber, 'The Remarkable Legacy of L.S. Lowry', *Manchester Region History Review*, 1:2 (1987), pp.13–22.
- 5 J. Berger anticipated this point when he wrote that Lowry 'chose to paint the historic': *About Looking* (New York, 1980), p.95.
- 6 P. Kestelman 'Monumental Buildings: Perspectives by Two Montreal Painters' in G. Norcliffe and P. Simpson-Housley (eds.) *A Few Acres of Snow: Literary and Artistic Images of Canada* (Toronto, 1992), pp.180–8.
- 7 B.G.H. Malet, 'Salford – The Surviving City' in H. P. White (ed.), *The Continuing Conurbation: Change and Development in Greater Manchester* (Farnborough, Hants., 1980), p.23. For example, when protracted efforts to acquire and preserve a Manchester specimen of back-to-back housing finally met with some success late in 1990, the specific small block that was saved for posterity was apparently by then only one of two surviving examples (and the one that was saved will have to be torn down and then re-built in a new location in order to preserve it): see *The Times*, 24 December, 1990.
8. P. Dodd, 'Lowryscapes: Recent Writings about "The North"', *Critical Quarterly*, 32 (1990), p.17. A series of historical studies of the heart area of this urban-industrial landscape is presented in the vol. 7 (1993) issue of this *Review*, in a special issue entitled 'Ancoats: The First Industrial Suburb'.
9. Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester, 1971), pp.9–10; M. Leber, 'The Remarkable Legacy of L. S. Lowry', p.20.
- 10 Leber has drawn attention to the important distinction between Lowry's paintings, which by and large are composite views, and his drawings and sketches, which are remarkable for their topographical value.
- 11 R. Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (1987).
- 12 D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, 1989), p.62.
- 13 Styal, which was voted Museum of the Year in 1987, includes a restored and working cotton mill.
- 14 Hewison, *Heritage Industry*, p.88.
- 15 Barrie Trinder, *Industrial Heritage of Britain* (Basingstoke, Hants., 1988).
- 16 F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), pp.53–92.
- 17 Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*, p.62.
- 18 J. Baudrillard, 'The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion and Deterrence', *October*, 20 (1982) pp.3–13.
- 19 Hewison, *Heritage Industry*, p.9.
- 20 J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester, 1984); F. Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), pp.53–92; Harvey, *Condition of Postmodernity*; M. Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991).
- 21 P. Bourdieu, 'The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods', *Media, Culture and Society*, 2 (1980), pp.261–93.
- 22 Hewison, *Heritage Industry*, p.83.
- 23 P. Rodaway, 'Self, Geography, Postmodernism' in C. Philo (ed.), *New Words, New Worlds: Reconceptualising Social and Cultural Geography* (Lampeter, Wales, I.B.G. Study Group in Social and Cultural Geography, 1991).
- 24 P. Dodd 'Lowryscape: Recent Writings about "The North,"' p.27.
- 25 J. Heilpern, 'Portrait of the Artist, Mr. Lowry', *Observer Review*, 9 November 1975, p.21.
- 26 F. Whalley, 'Masterpieces in His Spare Time', *Manchester Evening News*, 18 August 1976.