

## L.S Lowry – A Visionary Artist

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Michael Howard's book on L S Lowry takes a fresh look at the Artist, & asserts his significance in British 20th Century Art. This major monograph, lavishly illustrated with paintings, drawings & comparative illustrations is £40.00.

Lowry was born in 1<sup>st</sup> November 1887 and died 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1976.

There is something about his work which makes it memorable in our national consciousness. He has become very much part of what we are.

He was an interesting man in his own right.

Sir Maurice Collis, diplomat, and who mixed with celebrity of all types, wrote in his diary:

*"Of all the men I ever met, by far the strangest was Mr. Lowry".*

Lowry was a very private man – for him to gain the place he has in our national consciousness is an amazing achievement.

He did not paint what he saw – but what he felt and what he remembered.

Laurence Stephen Lowry was an only child – his mother was a music teacher who played with the Halle on several occasions.

He was born at 8 Barrett Street (now a community centre on Shrewsbury Street, Old Trafford, previously a district of Stretford).

His family called him "Laurie". It was a difficult birth, and his mother Elizabeth, who had been hoping for a girl, was uncomfortable even looking at him at first.

Later she expressed her envy of her sister Mary, who had "three splendid daughters" instead of one "clumsy boy". Lowry's father Robert, a clerk for the Jacob Earnshaw and Son Property Company, was a withdrawn and introverted man who Lowry once described as "a cold fish who realised he had a life to live and did his best to get through it."

After Lowry's birth his mother's health was too poor for her to continue teaching. She is reported to have been gifted and respected, with aspirations of becoming a concert pianist. She was an irritable, nervous woman who had been brought up to expect high standards by her stern father. Like him she was controlling and intolerant of failure. She used illness as a means of securing the attention and obedience of her mild and affectionate husband and she dominated her son in the same way. Lowry often maintained in interviews conducted later in his life that he had an unhappy childhood, growing up in a repressive family atmosphere. Although his mother demonstrated no appreciation of her son's gifts as an artist, a number of books Lowry received as Christmas presents from his parents are inscribed to "Our dearest Laurie." At school he made few friends and showed no academic aptitude. His father was affectionate towards him but was, by all accounts, a quiet man who was at his most comfortable fading into the background as an unobtrusive presence.

Lowry began to draw at the age of 8 and at 15 he began private painting classes. He wanted to be seen as a serious artist so much that it was only after his death it was revealed he was in full-time non-artistic employment from 1904 until he retired in 1952. He exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy in London and in 1962 he became a Royal Academician. He was a shy and reserved man and refused several honours including a Knighthood.

Michael Howard said that Lowry never went to school and that his mother home schooled him. She was amazed to be pregnant and even more to have a son rather than a daughter. Laurence Stephen was surrounded by a large number of female relations – totally enveloped in a feminine atmosphere. He played with dolls and not soldiers. He was greatly cherished and loved.

Wikipedia does speak of a school career – which was uneventful and friendless.

When Lowry grew up, his love for his mother meant that he never married – he was locked into parental life. He applied to the Manchester School of Art three times and was rejected but he became a part time student. He became a rent collector, like his father. He walked the city and felt restless in the modern world. Lowry retired from the Pall Mall Property Company in 1952 on his 65th birthday. During his career he had risen to become chief cashier but he never stopped collecting rents.

The firm had supported his development as an artist and he was allowed time off for exhibitions in addition to his normal holiday allowance. It seems, however, that he was not proud of his job; his secrecy about his employment by the Pall Mall Property Company is widely seen as a desire to present himself as a serious artist but the secrecy extended beyond the art world into his social circle.

Lowry asked himself “What is the purpose of art?”

He was a typical northerner. He knew the reality of people’s lives – like Van Gogh. He worked all his life wandering the streets of Manchester and Bolton right until almost the end when he ended up as Chief Cashier - reading the Financial Times daily and dealing with stocks and shares. He was no simple man.

His paintings “hang together”, are balanced and have depth – they draw you into the scene painted in front of you. He is a musical artist, building a rhythm within his paintings – leading you in, in a choreographed way, into the heart of the painting.

Some how or other, Lowry lost his Christian faith somewhere along the way and he was looking for fulfilment and enlightenment for ever thereafter.

Lowry’s light is unique – it is a particular interpretation of the climatic conditions in the north. The sun is excluded, it makes its way through the cloud and is reflected on the white cobbles.

His paintings are built on horizontals and diagonals. He painted in layers of paint and chiselled away the paint in areas to show depth or specific features such as washing.

He trained at Manchester School of Art – going night after night.

He was more like Constable in that he had to work at things. He was not a natural great artist – not the most talented artist in the world. However he took the limited talent that he had and stretched it to the ultimate.

He had the ability to conjure up the psychic presence of space. He used black chalk and white chalk and a lot of spit! He drew, rubbed and re-drew.

He only really used 3 colours – dirty yellow, dirty red and dirty blue! They were the strings on his fiddle. By using a limited palette, plus black and white, he achieved harmony. He was a simple man using simple techniques – to create incredible results.

Lowry liked his paint thick and opaque. “The most beautiful colours in the world are those with no name” said a French artistic expert.

Famously he had two suits – one to spill food down and one to spill paint down! He was 6 foot 2 and a gangling awkward man.

He showed his paint in two French salons in the 1920s and 1930s – he was known in France as “the refined and delicate English painter”.

A bit like Whistler, it was tone that carried his work. He slowly built up his work – he would famously take 10 years on a painting! He would typically get into his painting room at 11.00 p.m. and work until 3.00 a.m. – after a full day’s work and then looking after his sick parents in the evening.

Manchester was the world’s first industrial city containing the great palaces of the merchants – aping the great Medici palaces. There was another side; the underbelly of civilisation with everyone going there to wonder or think - Karl Marx etc

Lowry was born in Manchester into a changing world. The street on which he was born has a row of terraced houses with a church at the end of the road. He took the reality of his experience and transformed it into his paintings.

He dealt with time, memory and experience – the stuff of life.

The Lowry Centre in Salford – a post-modern building costing millions of pounds.

Lowry spent the last twenty years of his life producing high quality pornographic images. He left these drawings to be discovered as a time bomb after his death.

The French Impressionist artist, Pierre Adolphe Valette, was his Art School teacher and he was the fundamental influence on Lowry’s painting.

Lowry was a devotee of the cinema, the theatre and the ballet. In 1912 the play “Hindle Wakes” was first performed and was very controversial at the time for it was part of a growing reaction against the legacy of Victorian morality. Lowry went to see it again and again and again. Fanny was like Lowry’s mother – a strong woman.

When Lowry’s father’s business failed, they moved from the street where they lived to Pendlebury in Salford – in 1909. He was to live there for nearly 40 years. From being someone who visited the slums, they were now virtually living in them! Mrs Lowry took to her bed and never got up again – unless it was to go on holiday to Rhyll! Despite the inexorable link between Lowry and working class life, he did not grow up in poverty, however.

Michael Howard believes that Lowry was almost certainly autistic to some extent – he found a world that he did not understand.

He was not a naïve painter.

1922 he painted his first well known painting – based on Brueghel. He included himself in the paintings very often. He knew his art history and often based his work on that of well-known artists.

He took the gritty reality and made it into poetic art. His paintings were in some ways childlike – giving a sense of the strangeness of urban architecture.

In 1926, his father asked him to paint St Simon's Church because it was going to be demolished. Lowry went to draw it on the back of an envelope – quickly yet evocatively – and used this as a basis for his later masterpiece.

Lowry was an artist who takes you on a journey – which has to have a resolution.

By the late 1920s, he was really quite accomplished but was getting no critical recognition. His mother hated his paintings – feeling his art was a complete waste of time. His influential and well known friends encouraged him to continue.

Lowry could not paint horses – and when he did, they often only had two legs! However his creations were fabulous creatures.

Lowry's people were bowed but not broken – they were a crowd and yet separate individuals. Like a piece of theatre, or a musical score, his pictures have rhythm and symmetry – and as you do so you realise that “the most beautiful colours have no name”. All of this is chiselled away – so that when the light shines on it, it bounces back.

Lowry's favourite writer was a 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher who declared that we all wear masks. Lowry hid behind the uniform of flat cap etc. Lowry always claimed loneliness and dissatisfaction, but one wonders to what degree he really craved anything different. As he said himself, 'Had I not been lonely, none of my work would have happened.' He deprived himself of many of life's simple pleasures - living in isolation - and the price he effectively paid to be a great artist was his happiness.

Lowry's art wasn't beautiful like that of Renoir – why is he so popular? Because he tells a story – he leaves behind the emblems of one individual's life. He does not show the living waters of Constable or the Armageddon of Turner but he transforms an ordinary landscape producing something we should look at over time.



“Lowry was an extraordinary, mysterious and evocative artist who rewards close scrutiny.”

**During his life Lowry painted and drew some 2000-3000 pieces.**

# L.S. LOWRY: A Chronology

**1887** Born Laurence Stephen Lowry on 1 November at Barrett Street, Manchester, the only child of Robert and Elizabeth

**1889** The family moved to 4 Ellesmere Street, Longsight.

**1898-1903** The family moved to 14 Pine Grove in Victoria Park. After leaving school Lowry failed to secure a place as a full-time student at Manchester Municipal Collage of Art. He took private tuition from the artist Reginald Barber.

**1904-1907** Worked as a clerk for Thomas Aldred and Son (Chartered Accountants).

**1905-1915** Attended evening classes at the Municipal Collage of Art where he met tutor Adolphe Valette (1876-1942)

**1907** Worked as a claims clerk for the General Accident, Fire and Life Assurance Corporation until made redundant in 1910. Continued his art studies under the artist William Fitz.

**1909** The family moved to 117 Station Road Pendlebury for business reasons. It is the first indication of financial difficulties.

**1910** Lowry was employed as a rent collector and clerk for the Pall Mall Company Ltd

**1915-1925** Attended Salford School of Art under Bernard D Taylor.

**1919** The Annual Manchester City Gallery featured pictures by Lowry (2 or 3 dependent on which source you read).

**1921** In October Lowry exhibited pictures in Manchester. A review in the Manchester Guardian singled him out from his co-exhibitors as someone who might make a real contribution to art.

**1930 "An Accident"**, opposite, was the first of Lowry's paintings bought for a public collection, by Manchester City Art Gallery.



**1932** Robert Lowry died suddenly of pneumonia and his considerable debts were revealed. Lowry's work was exhibited at the Royal Academy in London.

**1934** Elected a member of the Manchester Academy and the Royal Society of British Artists.



**1936 "A Street Scene, St Simons Church"** (1928) became the first Lowry purchased by Salford City Art Gallery.

**1939** Lowry had his one-man show at the Alex Reid and Lefevre Gallery, London. Later that year his mother died.

**1943** The War Arts Advisory Committee appointed Lowry as an official War artist.



**1945** Lowry received an honorary MA from the University of Manchester. He had a second one-man show at Alex Reid and Lefevre Gallery and pictures sold well, making this his first major success.

**1948** Lowry left Pendlebury and settled at The Elms in Mottram-in-Longendale

**1952** Retired from the Pall Mall Property Company.



**1953**

The Football Association launched the Football and the Fine Arts competition.

**“Going to the Match”**  
opposite won fifth prize.

**1955** Elected Associate of Royal Academy.

**1957** an unrelated 13-year-old schoolgirl called Carol Ann Lowry wrote to Lowry at her mother's urging to ask his advice on becoming an artist. He visited her home in Heywood, Lancashire some months later, and befriended the family. His friendship with Carol Ann Lowry was to last the rest of his life.

**1962** Became a Royal Academician.

**1963** The Hallé Orchestra celebrated Lowry's 77th birthday with a concert in his honour.

**1965** Received the freedom of City of Salford.

**1975** Received honorary Doctorates of Literature from both the University of Salford and University of Liverpool.

**1976** Admitted to hospital following a stroke, Lowry dies of pneumonia on the 23 February. In September the Royal Academy mounts a major retrospective of his work, which attracts more than 300,000 visitors.

In his later years Lowry often joked with friends about retiring from the art world, citing his lack of interest in the changing landscape as a reason.

Instead, he began to focus upon groups of figures and odd imaginary characters.

Unknown to his wide circle of friends and the general public, Lowry was also producing a series of erotic works which would not be seen until after his death.

The paintings themselves depict the mysterious "Ann" figure, who appears in a number of portraits and sketches produced throughout the artist's lifetime, enduring sexually-charged and humiliating tortures.

When these works were finally exhibited at the Art Council's Centenary exhibition at the Barbican in 1988, art critic Richard Dormant wrote in the Daily Telegraph that these works "reveal a sexual anxiety which is never so much as hinted at in the work of the previous 60 years."

Lowry died of pneumonia at the Woods Hospital in Glossop, Derbyshire on 23 February 1976 aged 88. He was buried in Chorlton's Southern Cemetery in Manchester, next to his parents. He left his estate, valued at £298,459, together with a considerable number of artworks by himself and others to Carol Ann Lowry, who, in 2001, obtained trademark protection of the artist's signature.

Lowry left a cultural legacy, with his works often selling for millions of pounds and even inspiring other works of art.

The Lowry in Salford Quays was opened in 2000 and cost £106M; as well as being named after L. S. Lowry, the 2,000 square metres (22,000 sq ft) gallery houses 55 paintings and 278 drawings by the artist – the world's largest collection of his work – with up to 100 on display.

In January 2005, a statue of Lowry was unveiled in Mottram in Longdendale, Cheshire. Lowry lived 100 yards away from where the statue stands in a linked detached property, "The Elms", in Stalybridge Road from 1948 up until his death in 1976. Unfortunately this has become a target for local vandals with the statue being vandalised several times since being unveiled.

In 2006 the Lowry Centre in Salford hosted a contemporary dance performance inspired by the works of Lowry.

#### **Awards:**

Lowry was awarded the honorary degree of Master of Arts by the University of Manchester in 1945, and that of Doctor of Letters in 1961, and given the freedom of the city of Salford in 1965.

In 1975 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the Universities of Salford and Liverpool. In 1964, the art world celebrated his 77th birthday with an exhibition of his work and that of 25 contemporary artists who had submitted tributes to Monk's Hall Museum, Eccles. The Hallé Orchestra also performed a concert in his honour and Prime Minister Harold Wilson used Lowry's painting "**The Pond**" as his official Christmas card.



The Pond



Coming Out of School

Lowry's painting "**Coming Out of School**" was the stamp of highest denomination in a series issued by the Post Office depicting great British artists in 1968.

Lowry twice declined appointment to the Order of the British Empire: as an Officer (OBE) in 1955, and as a Commander (CBE) in 1961. He turned down a knighthood in 1968, and appointment to the Order of the Companions of Honour (CH) in 1972 and 1976. He holds the record for the most honours declined!