It is always an illuminating experience to have the opportunity to see in one collection the major output of a significant artist, and the exhibition showing the work of Ford Madox Brown (1821 – 1893) at Manchester Art Gallery provides such an encounter. It is a reminder of the important links that cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham have with Pre-Raphaelite art in their permanent collections; and it is a fortunate legacy of Victorian entrepreneurs, that they helped to fund the museums, art galleries and other cultural institutions of the industrial cities and towns, seeking out the works of the Pre-Raphaelites in particular so enthusiastically. Ford Madox Brown was born in Calais in 1821. He was educated in Belgium, then lived in Paris and settled in London. Manchester became his home later in life when he was commissioned by Manchester Corporation to paint murals of the history of Manchester for Waterhouse’s Town Hall. He lived first in Crumpsall and then in the Victoria Park area of Manchester between 1881 and 1887.

Brown’s life is chequered. He was one of the most gifted of Victorian artists, with a strict training in Europe as an artist. He did not join the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. He taught Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He was known by a wide circle of prominent Victorians either personally or through his art. In his personal life, however, he knew great loss and suffering: his first wife, Elisabeth, died in 1846 just five years after their marriage. He married his second wife Emma Hill in secret in 1853: she had been his model and he made it one of his tasks to help her to learn to read. The marriage was a surprise to his circle and both suffered because of prejudice against the marriage: money was hard to obtain. Two of their children died in infancy. Yet, with all these sorrows in life, Brown still managed to become one of the most significant of Victorian artists.
This exhibition consists of paintings, cartoons and versions of his murals from 1841 to the late 1880s; and there are examples of some of his own stained glass and furniture designs, mostly when he worked with William Morris in the company they formed (Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.) along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and others from 1861 onwards. Together the collection provides a valuable insight into some of the key inspirations, concerns, settings and figures that preoccupied Brown as a painter, draftsman and designer throughout his working life. The works are displayed more or less in chronological order, although there is some overlap and return to earlier dates in later sections. The exhibition is arranged in a way that allows one to revisit a work already seen, browse and reflect. It is a valuable experience, too, because the Gallery has a significant permanent collection of other important Pre-Raphaelite artists, and it holds Brown’s famous painting entitled Work on display in the exhibition too. The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester complements this with its own important Pre-Raphaelite watercolours. Comparisons with Millais, Rossetti and Burne-Jones in the Pre-Raphaelite section provide an intriguing insight into the distinctive techniques and subjects of each of these artists along with important comparisons with holdings of Turner.
Conventional rectangular frames, Brown often created arching frames around subjects. He (the Manchester version painted 1854-5) and Brown believed this painting to be one of the most important when the wider socio-political context of his age and art is considered. His teacher at Walton-On-The- Naze experience. Anxiety, melancholy and tragedy fill much of his work indicating a preoccupation with the problematic nature of human existence. He was to praise Chaucer the poet (a painting is devoted to Chaucer) for his 'delicate sense of naturalistic beauty...the deep-tone passionate mysticism' which he also found in Dante. From his student days, his encounters in Italy, his own observations, Brown had developed a vast, cosmopolitan understanding of narrative in art. He was, after all, born into a Europe where revolution had become a close living reality since 1789. revolution leading to the secession of Belgium from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Brown's affinities with European art extended into the arching, round and oval frames so often found in Italian altar pieces of the Renaissance to suggest indefinable borders and spatial extensions beyond the frame whilst enfolding the scenes within the pictures. Even in the Scapegoat cast into the desert to die. Brown was to use the rainbow in the much more tranquil painting of The Last of England.

An English Fireside of 1854 – 51 with his own designed external frame of gilt grapes and leaves surrounding the Madonna and Child with the Young John the Baptist was seen as the sentimentalising of a sacred image. One can see in all of this both a 'domestication' of the tradition of religious depictions of the mother and child in the posed studies, re-enacting within a Victorian home environment images of security, domesticity and comfort, whilst, in stark contrast, the girl holding the baby in The Pretty Baa-Lambs suggests Hogarth's archways within the painting, framing the girl to provide glimpses of a landscape beyond,

The Seeds and Fruit of English Poetry, begun in 1853; the background passengers of The Execution of Mary Stuart, just after (c.1532). Vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines produced by columns, trees, figures, horizons, sometimes threatening frame, the strong geometric, architectural lines that run horizontally, suggesting Hogarth's archways within the painting, framing the girl to provide glimpses of a landscape beyond,

In the title of The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found repeatedly in Brown's paintings along with his very familiar with Italian art. For a time he was taught by Gustav Wappers at Antwerp. Brown's strong in European art long before Romanticism as a movement at the end of the eighteenth century. In the title of The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found repeatedly in Brown's paintings along with his very familiar with Italian art. For a time he was taught by Gustav Wappers at Antwerp. Brown's strong in European art long before Romanticism as a movement at the end of the eighteenth century. In the title of The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found repeatedly in Brown's paintings along with his very familiar with Italian art. For a time he was taught by Gustav Wappers at Antwerp. Brown's strong in European art long before Romanticism as a movement at the end of the eighteenth century. In the title of The Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ is to be found repeatedly in Brown's paintings along with his very familiar with Italian art. For a time he was taught by Gustav Wappers at Antwerp. Brown's strong in European art long before Romanticism as a movement at the end of the eighteenth century.
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Even Brown’s portraits of individuals are not ‘studio’ work: he captures the lively thoughtfulness of feature and personality in *The Irish Girl* (1860) with her sidelong look to the right beyond, outside the frame, and again in the impish, direct and nonchalant challenge of the look in *Mauvais Sujet* (*The Writing Lesson*) of 1862. Love unrequited and the isolation of rejection is captured in *Byron’s Dream* (1874). When his portraiture is translated into studies for a full scale canvas as in the chalk study of an apostle kneeling with outstretched arms in agitation (‘Drapery Study’ for *The Ascension*. 1844), it is at once evident to see how skilfully he portrays intensity and depth of mood and situation. Famously *The Last of England* (1852–5) encapsulates the loneliness, sadness and tragedy of a couple about to sail in the great exodus to Australia which began in the middle of the nineteenth century. The haunted and despairing worry on the faces of the man and woman are differently realised in shade for the man and light for the woman (who is clutching an almost hidden child inside her outer garment). The woman (Emma was the model) is framed, and shrouded, by the dark umbrella. There is great tenderness and concern in the execution of posture, expression and their clasping hands: his are large and strong, her gloved hand, small, delicate. The cliffs of England recede as they set out on their perilous journey. It is a powerful picture of departure and loss and it emphasises how skilfully Brown used drapery to suggest movement, situation, crisis and anxiety: *The Last of England*, an enigmatic title, with two figures huddled together for comfort and strength in the face of an unknowable future.

It is therefore an essential part of this exhibition that all these portraits, landscapes, literary and mythical subjects are exhibited together with the perhaps most famous of Brown’s paintings, *Work* (1852–1865). This large painting is a combination of detailed structure and social commentary which brings his strengths of figure study, drapery, gesture, colour and movement into a comprehensive architectural statement of his age – the ‘condition of England’ (a phrase coined by Thomas Carlyle, depicted on the far right wearing a hat and observing the scene). The painting ranks alongside Blake’s “Holy Thursday” in *Songs of Experience* (1794), Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1834), Disraeli’s *Sibyl or the Two Nations* (1845), Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), Ruskin’s attacks on the materialism of the nineteenth century in *Unto This Last* (1860), and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s comments to Robert Bridges regarding the conditions of the working classes and injustices which he saw when he worked in the North-West of England as a curate (1871) and, later in Dublin witnessing the turmoil of Anglo-Irish politics alongside his own torments, in his powerful “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves”. Brown’s painting has its cultural affinities with the graphic images of Hogarth’s London (*Gin Lane*, 1751), the tradition of English caricaturists and the long established medieval and Renaissance portrayals of crowd scenes and Chaucer’s own satire in his *Canterbury Tales*.

An interpretation of this painting is well-documented in the catalogue to the exhibition. There are Dickensian touches in the sandwich board carriers: “BOBUS for Middlesex. VOTE for BOBUS”, their message proclaims as they retreat into the upper mid-left centre, ‘off-stage’, into a completely empty street. Bobus the sausage-maker, a character from Carlyle’s *Past and Present*, is satirised by Carlyle for the pretence of seeking ‘talent’ for promoting social cohesion whilst ignoring the potential within the poor of society. Is there a suggestion of ‘Bogus’ in the name? Certainly the reference to Middlesex is interesting. In the mid-nineteenth century Middlesex was generally regarded to be in a state of chaos. Brown fully explored his own lengthy account of this painting - reproduced in full in *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings* from Manchester City Art Galleries, Julian Treuherz, Manchester City Art Gallery, 1993 edition, pp.41-9.
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Brown was to paint *Geoffrey Chaucer Reading 'The Legend of Custance to Edward III and His Court* (1850 ff.). It is another of Brown's crowd scenes again with that suggestive medieval and Northern European tradition echoed in order to show, as he himself said, the overthrow of the Saxon and Norman influence as the English Chaucer rises above them. There is an affinity with Peter Breugel the Elder (1525-69) in Brown's crowd scenes with their energy and colour. One recalls the graphic portraits of peasants at leisure in the work of the Dutch painter Cornelius Dusart in the last half of the seventeenth century. From a distance Brown's work is almost classical, mythical, in its appearance and it is heavily framed by the dark greens of the overhanging trees and background dwellings. Not surprisingly, therefore, and valuably here as an extension of his socio-realist work, the drafts for, and context of, Brown's murals for Manchester Town Hall (1891 - 1887) are fully documented. He created a set of murals for Waterhouse's baronial neo-Gothic Great Hall to represent significant moments in the history of the city and the industrial and commercial present of his day. Here, in historical order in large rectangular format around the walls of the hall forming a continuing low frieze, one can see key aspirations and influences in Brown as an artist in one sweep – from mythical classical scenes of Roman Manchester (the workers have their own agenda and the Romans are utilising their slaves), the battle with the Danes (the local folk are not cowed), the Flemish weavers (a painting reminiscent of the Northern European schools), through to the opening of the Bridgewater Canal (almost medieval in setting and costume). The outsider is depicted: Wyclif the nonconformer as a forerunner of all the nonconformist traditions that worked with and for the ordinary people, often the victims, of industrial and financial centres. Wyclif himself, dramatically tried as a heretic, is symbolic in this role with Brown creating the fictional connection with Manchester (1885 – 1886). These murals crystallise a central concern of Brown in defining his own world and society in relation to history. They locate Manchester and, through that the Industrial Revolution, in history, with a long tradition of significant events that had shaped communities at different periods. They provide for Brown a context in which the later developments within the city, the growth of textiles, the concomitant industrial projects, the scientific inventions, major building programmes (the Bridgewater Canal) all have their meaning. The world in which Brown lived was part of a continuum of constant change with recurrent patterns of responses and behaviour throughout time. So in his art the classical, medieval, Renaissance and Victorian elements all feed into his subjects to give to the world of industry a context of understanding. As much as he saw the problems of his age, he was keen to bring his understanding of history and the history of artistic development into his statements to make sense of those problems.
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Significantly he emphasises, throughout many of these statements, those key figures seemingly on the margins, or seen as threats, in states of crises which they overcome. This element exists elsewhere in other subjects: Cromwell on his Farm (1873-4) is part of Brown's concern to interpret the significant figures of challenge, the god-fearing countryman (connecting with Carlyle's admiration for Cromwell). Even in the Lear sequence leading to the King Lear (Cordelia at the Bedside of Lear) of 1848 – 9 it is, as in Shakespeare, the dispossessed, the tragic king that is central; the forsaken lover and the beaten dog in his Stages of Cruelty (1856), the bedraggled baby and children, fatherless and without a mother in the foreground of Work. Not surprising that he wanted to depict Peterloo (1819); no surprise, perhaps, that the corporation did not agree to it but such a pity he did not have that opportunity. (Joseph Johnson, secretary to the Manchester Patriotic Union which called for the rally in 1819, imprisoned in Lincoln for one year for his part at Peterloo and now buried in the cemetery of Northenden parish church of St Wilfrid, would have approved of the venture.)

Every creation in this exhibition demonstrates an energy that expresses a range of human emotions from joy to despair, happiness to melancholy. He utilised religion, myth and history as well as the narratives and scenes of his own world. His truth to nature lies in the incredibly fine brushwork in depicting scenes that pick out a natural light and shade, joy and sadness. Holman Hunt wanted more of the 'realist' in Brown, rejecting the echoes of the past tradition to some degree. For Brown the past was part of the present, a continuum of people, events and responses interpreted through art that was being re-enacted in the personal and social triumphs and tragedies of his own age. There is evidence, in his drawings and studies, of the great care and detail with which he drafted his works, of the disciplined training in drawing and composition which he discovered as a student and which he brought to this enterprise. One of the most beautiful of his works, A Study of the Brent at Hendon (1854, 1855), is almost a miniature in an oval frame, with the deep browns, dark green flecked foliage, receding into the distant light just off-centre. The roots of the old tree, suggestive of the illustrative work of Arthur Rackham, tell of stories untold, histories locked away. Barely visible, as if floating in the upper left amidst the dark foliage is the figure of a woman, Emma; and the painting just has the touch of Impressionism in the fading delicacy of the foliage.

This is an important exhibition for anyone who is interested in the growth of Pre-Raphaelite art, the work of Brown in particular and the ways in which his art developed a genre which also addressed some of the central issues of his age: an illumination for those who see the connections between art and society; a great testimony to a very important artist. John Ruskin may have criticised Brown for the 'ordinary' subjects he came to paint but in important ways Brown was bringing art out of the Royal Academy into the world of Victorian England. He never painted 'pretty girls disguised as paupers', Ruskin's somewhat unjust sideswipe at Frederick Walker. For Brown art was closely linked to his social, moral and educational concerns. When Gerard Manley Hopkins was attempting to achieve in poetry a new vitality and the rhythms of spoken language, Brown was, through a disciplined expression of artistic form and structures, striving for a freshness in art based on discipline, independence of mind, precise detail and the rhythms of the lived world. This exhibition is a wonderful opportunity to revisit a great nineteenth century artist. (There is a full online text of the biography of Ford Madox Brown: a Record of His Life and Work (1896) by his grandson, also Ford Madox Brown – born Ford Madox Hueffer.)