

Contemporary Art Society

Nothing Beautiful Unless Useful

This display draws works from public collections in the North West of England and focuses on the relationship between industrialisation, art and social reform between 1880 and 1940.

It brings together three organisations, Manchester Art Museum (1886–1953), Leeds Arts Club (1903–1923) and Mass Observation (1937–1949). Each were nourished by the thinking of leading intellectuals, philanthropists and practitioners of the time including **John Ruskin** and **George Bernard Shaw**.

Victorian philanthropist **Thomas Horsfall** established Manchester Art Museum in Ancoats, a deprived area of inner city Manchester, with the intention to improve the lives of the working classes through access to and appreciation of art and beauty. Founded by writers **Alfred Orage** and **Holbrook Jackson**, Leeds Arts Club rapidly became a forum for modernist thinking and artistic experimentation by its members including **Emily Ford**, **Eric Gill** and **Jacob Kramer**. During its existence it fused art with philosophy, radical politics, suffragism and spiritualism to encourage reform in everyday life.

Social research organisation Mass Observation was started by anthropologist **Tom Harrisson**, poet **Charles Madge** and filmmaker **Humphrey Jennings**. While it eventually grew to be a nationwide sociological experiment, it was initially based in Bolton where it recorded the everyday lives of inhabitants, particularly the voices of the under-represented, and invited artists like **Graham Bell**, **William Coldstream** and **Humphrey Spender** to contribute to the project.

The display also includes a smaller case-study that uses cotton, its manufacture and social history as a metaphor for other forms of industrial production during the period in the North West.


This is the first in a year-long series of displays exploring the theme of art and philanthropy. It is conceived in collaboration with the Contemporary Art Society by Arts Council-funded Curatorial Fellow Anna Colin, supported by the Harris Museum and Gallery, Preston.

For over 100 years, the Contemporary Art Society has encouraged an appreciation and understanding of contemporary art by donating works to museums and public galleries across the UK. These displays open up works from its museum and galleries membership.

The display will tour to Victoria Gallery, Liverpool between 7 March and 31 May 2014. A publication will be produced in March 2014 documenting the series of displays.

The Whitechapel Gallery's programme of collection displays is supported by:


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