

Collecting collectors: The Liverpool Art Club and its exhibitions 1872–1895

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The history of clubs and societies has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years. Fuelled in part by contemporary political debate in the United States and Britain over the issue of privatisation, particularly in the field of social welfare, growing interest in the history of voluntary associations has started to transform the subject into a serious academic topic. As a result, we now know that in Britain all sorts of clubs and societies—political, social, and cultural—were well-established and active all over the country by the end of the eighteenth century.¹ In particular, nineteenth-century Britain witnessed an explosion of private voluntary associations to the extent that it was sometimes referred to as ‘clubland’.² Understandably, clubs and societies were basically an urban phenomenon, where like-minded people could get together on a regular basis to discuss topics of mutual interests and entertain themselves. Liverpool was no exception. Starting with the Ugly Face Club in 1743, a number of associations were established, especially since 1780 when Liverpool’s economy rapidly began to expand. By the mid-nineteenth century numerous voluntary associations including such cultural institutions as the Liverpool Literary and Philosophical Society, the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, and the Liverpool Architectural and Archaeological Society were actively operating.³

¹ Peter Clark, *British clubs and societies 1580–1800: The origin of an associational world*, (Oxford, 2000).

² Simon Gunn, *The public culture of the Victorian middle class: Ritual and authority and the English industrial city 1840–1914* (Manchester, 2000), p. 84.

³ Arline Wilson, ‘The cultural identity of Liverpool, 1790–1850: The early learned societies’, *THSLC*, 147 (1998), pp. 55–80.

Simultaneously, art historians have recently begun to pay attention to the role art exhibitions have played in forming and transforming the artistic taste of individuals and of the general public. Marginalised traditionally as a backdrop for the progressive narration of great artists and their masterpieces, the subject of the art exhibition has slowly come to occupy a long-overdue niche in mainstream art history.⁴ Art exhibitions were by no means new to nineteenth-century Liverpoolians. On the contrary, having been the first provincial town in England outside London to stage an art exhibition in 1774, Liverpool retained a quite thriving exhibition culture throughout the nineteenth century.⁵ Thus, the establishment in the early 1870s of the Liverpool Art Club (hereafter LAC), an association of art-lovers and collectors formed to enhance their mutual interests in the visual arts and to hold regular exhibitions of fine and industrial arts, can hardly have been a ground-breaking event within the broader context of urban cultural life in Liverpool.

Nevertheless, the LAC was unique in combining the two functions of being a private club and at the same time fulfilling the role of a semi-public exhibiting society, led by collectors, not by artists who necessarily had a vested interest in showing off their works wherever possible. Above all, it was a highly unusual venture in a provincial town outside London, signifying the profusion of cultural capital, if private, in and around Liverpool in the second half of the nineteenth century. Fortunately, most of the LAC's printed annual reports and exhibition catalogues survive, but they have never been utilised by historians of Liverpool culture. Based largely on these primary and some other sources, the purpose of this paper is to examine in some detail the activities, functions, and organisation of the LAC with a view to throwing fresh light on this forgotten but significant institution in the cultural history of Liverpool.

⁴ Francis Haskell, *The ephemeral museum: Old master paintings and the rise of the art exhibition*, (New Haven, 2000).

⁵ Edward Morris & Emma Roberts, *The Liverpool Academy and other exhibitions of contemporary art in Liverpool 1774–1867: A history and index of artists and works exhibited* (Liverpool, 1998).

I

Although how exactly the LAC came to existence is difficult to ascertain due to the lack of relevant documentation,⁶ it was officially founded in November 1872 under the presidency of the mayor Edmund Samuelson.⁷ The formation of the LAC seems to have been inspired or influenced by the establishment in 1866 of the Burlington Fine Arts Club in London, an association of collectors and connoisseurs. The Burlington's initial objective was to meet informally at each member's house to enjoy and discuss their collections. Soon, however, a house was rented in Savile Row, just behind the Royal Academy, with a view to holding regular, if relatively small, exhibitions. Although its membership included some titled aristocrats and many London artists, it was overwhelmingly made up of a new generation of rich middle-class collectors.⁸ The Burlington in turn owed its origin to the Fine Arts Club, a body of collectors chiefly of decorative arts, founded in 1857 in London to share common interests and to exchange new information and ideas.⁹ Reporting the LAC's first exhibition held in December 1872, *The Times* spoke of 'the Liverpool Art Club, a new institution, founded on a similar basis to that of the Burlington Fine Arts Club'.¹⁰ Obviously, the LAC had certain features in common with the Burlington Club: they regularly held exhibitions; they secured permanent rooms for meetings and exhibitions; they printed catalogues of the exhibitions. Furthermore, an arrangement was made in 1876 between the LAC and the Burlington Club whereby members of each club were allowed to have access to the exhibitions of the other club.¹¹

The central objective of the LAC was to form 'one general centre of communication and re-union' among 'Art collectors and Art

⁶ Bound volumes of LAC annual reports for 1874–93, although imperfect, survive at the Liverpool Record Office, William Brown Street (Liv. RO), H706.3REP. The British Library also holds an imperfect run. My discussion of the LAC derives from this primary source unless otherwise stated.

⁷ *Art Journal*, 35 (1873), p. 26.

⁸ Haskell, *The ephemeral museum*, pp. 93–97.

⁹ Ann Eatwell, 'The Collector's or Fine Arts Club 1857–1874: The first society for collectors of the decorative arts', *Omnium Gatherum*, 18 (1994), pp. 25–30.

¹⁰ *The Times*, 26 Dec. 1872, p. 3.

¹¹ LAC annual report, 1876, p. 8.

lovers'. Such a centre was 'even more required in the case of Art, as many of the highest and most subtle lessons it has to teach cannot be learned from books, but only from a careful examination and comparison of specimens and a personal interchange of views and idea among its students'. Through exhibitions of 'specimens of all forms of Art' the LAC intended to bring 'the Art-loving public into closer and more direct connection, not only with local but also with Metropolitan and other Artists'. By assisting 'the promotion of Loan Collections and the delivery of Lectures on Art', the organisation aimed to 'promote a general interest in Art' among its members.¹²

Expanding from 106 in 1873 to 268 by the end of 1874, the original membership included virtually every major figure living in and around Liverpool who was a collector or patron of any note. Among them were the ship-owner and banker George Holt, whose collection can still be seen at Sudley House; the chemical manufacturer A. G. Kurtz, a collector of works by J. E. Millais, Frederic Leighton, J. M. W. Turner, and David Cox as well as works by contemporary French artists; the copper manufacturer John Bibby, who possessed as many as nine paintings by D. G. Rossetti as well as a number of works by Turner, Cox, Edwin Landseer, and Peter De Wint; the chemical manufacturer and newspaper owner Holbrook Gaskell, a notable collector of works by John Constable, Turner, Millais, and Lawrence Alma-Tadema; and the banker George Rae, a distinguished patron of Pre-Raphaelite painters as well as of local Liverpool artists.

The only notable name absent on the list of early founding members is that of Frederick Leyland, a prominent patron of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Movement painters. His absence may be explained either by his uneasy relationship with John Bibby, a founding member of the LAC, whose family shipping firm had been taken over by him, or his snobbish contempt for the provincial origin of the LAC: he moved to London in 1876.¹³ In addition, to add lustre to its profile, the LAC secured from the start as its honorary members such national luminaries as the influential art critic John Ruskin and the celebrated Pre-Raphaelite painter

¹² Objects of the LAC, annual report, 1874, p. 11. The objects were printed in every annual report.

¹³ For detailed information on these men and their collections, see Dianne Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class* (Cambridge, 1996), appendix.

William Holman Hunt. A number of Pre-Raphaelite painters had already established a close connection with Liverpool through the highly controversial Liverpool Academy exhibitions in the 1850s.¹⁴

The aspiration of the LAC to eschew the image of being one of those featureless provincial gentlemen's clubs was recognised from the outset in the most eminent national newspaper at the time for *The Times* covered the LAC's first exhibition in great length and detail. Entitled 'Oriental Exhibition', it was held in December 1872 at the clubhouse in 4 Sandon-Terrace, Upper Duke Street, Liverpool. With a comprehensive catalogue compiled by the architect George Ashdown Audsley, a member of the LAC, 1,101 objects, mainly from Persia, China, and Japan, were exhibited under eight sections—Enamel, Persian Ware, Satsuma Faience, Kaga Ware, Lacquer Work, Porcelain, Ivory Carvings, and Metal Work. *The Times* assured its readership that 'the exhibition is one which all who are interested in such matters should strive to see' because many of the items on display 'are not to be equalled elsewhere in this country'. Although there were twenty-seven contributors to the exhibition, mostly members of the LAC, a number of the exhibits, Japanese items in particular, came from the collection of the key member James Lord Bowes, to whose Japanese collection there was, according to *The Times*, 'probably no rival in the world'.¹⁵

It seems clear, judging from the number of contributors and the tone of *The Times* report, that there was an enthusiastic group of collectors around Liverpool of Oriental objects, particularly Japanese. For example, apart from Bowes, the author of the exhibition catalogue Audsley himself was an expert on Japanese art, lecturing and writing several books on the subject.¹⁶ However, the huge popularity of Japanese art at this period was not confined to

¹⁴ Unfortunately, Ruskin did not mention the LAC in his writings: John Ruskin, *Works of John Ruskin on CD-ROM* (Cambridge, 1996). See the work of Mary Bennett, 'The Pre-Raphaelites and the Liverpool Prize', *Apollo*, 76 (1962), pp. 748–53; 'A check list of Pre-Raphaelite pictures exhibited at Liverpool and some of their northern collectors', *Burlington Magazine*, 105 (1963), pp. 486–95; 'William Windus and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in Liverpool', *Liverpool Bulletin*, 7 (1958–9), pp. 19–31.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 26 Dec. 1872, p. 3. For Bowes's collection, see Christina Baird, 'Japan and Liverpool: James Lord Bowes and his legacy', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 12 (2000), pp. 127–37.

¹⁶ Simon Jervis, *The Penguin dictionary of design and designers* (London, 1984), pp. 38–39.

Liverpool. Rather, it was a widespread European phenomenon called 'Japonisme', a taste for things Japanese. For the development of Japonisme in Britain, the 1862 International Exhibition held in London was a landmark, providing the largest display of Japanese art objects ever seen at that time in Europe. Since then a surprising number of Victorian connoisseurs and artists had collected Japanese art of one sort or another.¹⁷

Once set in the right track, holding exhibitions became the centrepiece of the LAC's activities until its dissolution in 1895. Several exhibitions were staged every year (see the appendix). Each exhibition was usually organised on a voluntary basis by a small group of the members who took a special interest in the subject to be exhibited. Catalogues, compiled by one of the organisers, were printed to accompany most of the exhibitions. They were freely sent to the members of the LAC until 1880 when it was decided that they should be paid for. The quality varied from catalogue to catalogue. Some are rather scholarly expositions of the subject on display while others simply provide elementary information on the titles and the names of artists and lenders. Catalogues were not printed for some miscellaneous exhibitions. No matter what the quality of the contents of the catalogues, the surviving catalogues are instrumental in identifying local collectors and patrons as addresses are often printed alongside the names of the lenders, and also in extrapolating the nature of their collections.¹⁸

A glance at the list of the exhibitions (see the appendix) will make clear that there was no systematic, long-term exhibition programme set out by the LAC. Although each exhibition was devoted to a particular subject, medium, genre, artist, or school in line with the LAC's general exhibition policy, choice of subject for each exhibition was largely determined by availability and suggestions from the exhibitors. Thus, while there were exhibitions of fine art like oil, watercolour, and print, exhibitions of decorative or applied art were equally visible, including goldsmith's work, embroidery, fans, and porcelain. Some shows were relatively large-scale, involving loans from all over the country. For example, in preparation for the 1875

¹⁷ Tomoko Sato & Toshio Watanabe, eds, *Japan and Britain: An aesthetic dialogue 1850–1930*, (London, 1991).

¹⁸ Bound volumes of LAC exhibition catalogues, 1872–94 are available at Liv. RO, H706.3 CAT. My discussion of the LAC exhibitions relies on this source unless otherwise stated.

David Cox memorial exhibition calls for loans were announced in *The Times*, to solicit the co-operation of 'all those who possess examples in oil, water-colour, sepia, or black and white' to make 'the exhibition reflect the highest genius of David Cox'.¹⁹ In 1883 a request for information on the illustrator Hablot Browne's works for his memorial exhibition was advertised in *The Times*, and the exhibition was duly reported in the same press.²⁰

Some exhibitions were entirely drawn from collections of single individuals: the 1874 etching exhibition came solely from the collection of James Anderson Rose, who was not a member of the LAC, nor even a resident in Liverpool but in London; the 1884 exhibition of the works of the German painter Hans Thoma derived from the collection of F. C. A. Minoprio, a member of the LAC. In these cases it was the voluntary offer of the proprietors that made the exhibitions possible. However, the majority of the LAC's exhibitions were widely culled from the local collections of the members. And it is quite striking to find the sheer amount of notable local collections, particularly in fine arts. For instance, in the 1874 water-colour exhibition all but four of the 252 items drew from the collections of local collectors including Ralph Brocklebank, Holbrook Gaskell, Robert Holt, A. G. Kurtz, Charles Langton, Joseph Mayer, John Miller, John Pilkington, Edward Quaile, and P. H. Rathbone. The painters represented were no less impressive, including J. M. W. Turner, Francis Wheatley, Benjamin West, Richard Westall, John Varley, George Stubbs, Thomas Stothard, Paul Sandby, William Clarkson Stanfield, Thomas Rowlandson, William Mulready, John Linnell, Angelica Kauffman, Thomas Hearne, Francis Hayman, Thomas Girtin, A. V. C. Fielding, Peter de Wint, David Cox, John Sell Cotman, A. W. Callcott, E. F. Burney, and William Blake.

The 1881 British oil painting exhibition is more astonishing. Among the total 340 exhibits by eighty-eight lenders, 309 paintings by seventy-nine contributors came from local collections in or around Liverpool. The local lenders included landed aristocrats such as the Duke of Westminster at Eaton Hall in Chester who lent five pictures and the Earl of Derby at Knowsley who made a loan of four paintings, but most of them were middle-class citizens.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 30 Sept. 1875, p. 10.

²⁰ *The Times*, 16 Jan. 1883, p. 10; 10 Feb. 1883, p. 11.

Among them significant contributions were made by John Bibby, Ralph Brocklebank, Philip Eberle, Holbrook Gaskell, Enoch Harvey, Gray Hill, George Holt, Thomas Hope, David Jardine, Charles Langton, Charles Minoprio, Edward Quaile, Robert Rankin, Benson Rathbone, Peter Stuart, and Albert Wood. Many of the painters whose works were on display were those deemed to be among the best and most popular of British artists. Among those represented were A. W. Callcott, William Collins, John Constable, Thomas Sidney Cooper, David Cox, John Crome, William Etty, A. V. C. Fielding, Thomas Gainsborough, John Linnell, George Morland, Joshua Reynolds, Clarkson Stanfield, Thomas Stothard, George Stubbs, J. M. W. Turner, David Wilkie, Richard Wilson, and Joseph Wright of Derby.

Undoubtedly this 1881 British oil painting show was the most ambitious exhibition the LAC had ever undertaken. Lasting from 10 October to 10 December, it was opened by the Mayor of Liverpool at which occasion some 600 people attended. Organised by a sub-committee of the LAC made up of John Finnie, F. Prange, R. D. Radcliffe, and Benson Rathbone, the show was visited during its opening by 2,200 paying visitors, besides the members of the LAC and their families who were entitled to free admission. 1,350 copies of the catalogue were printed and all were sold.²¹

Many of the exhibitions were open to the paying public at a charge of a shilling and members of the LAC and their families were admitted free to all the exhibitions. The opening duration varied from exhibition to exhibition but usually lasted for several weeks. The precise attendance numbers are unavailable for most of the exhibitions, but where available, they seem quite low key when it comes to the paying visitor numbers—just a few hundreds in most cases. There were, of course, exceptions: apart from the 1881 British oil painting exhibition, the 1879 Wedgwood exhibition attracted about 2,000 paying visitors. For some exhibitions mostly associated with industrial art, free season tickets were issued to encourage the participation of those who were concerned with relevant industrial fields. Thus, while the 1882 exhibitions of lace and bookbinding attracted only 393 paying visitors altogether, 600 free season tickets were distributed to students of the local art schools and employees of ‘firms connected with the lace trade and bookbinding’.²²

²¹ LAC annual report, 1881, p. 9.

²² LAC annual report, 1882, p. 8.

II

One salient feature that should be noted in the LAC exhibitions is that some of them are exclusively devoted to contemporary continental European art, including the 1875 exhibition of Dutch, Flemish and Belgian art, the 1884 modern foreign paintings exhibition, and the 1886 exhibition of Belgian oil paintings. To be precise, the 1875 exhibition of Dutch, Flemish, and Belgian art was not solely reserved for contemporary art but included Dutch and Flemish Old Masters and Delft pottery as well as paintings by modern Belgian artists. But the 1884 loan exhibition was solely devoted to contemporary oil paintings by foreign artists. 182 pictures including a number of paintings by the French painter Auguste Bonheur were exhibited, and among the thirty-seven collectors who lent the pictures the names of John Davies, F. W. Medley, and Peter Stuart prevailed in the catalogue with the loans of nineteen, twenty-nine, and twenty-one paintings respectively.²³ The 1886 exhibition of oil paintings by modern Belgian artists was a result of the LAC's international call for an art exhibition in Liverpool, occasioned by the absence of art section in the 1886 Liverpool International Exhibition:²⁴

Belgium having shown a marked interest in the undertaking, the Committee [of the LAC] applied to the *Cercle Artistique* of Antwerp . . . the Government [of Belgium], most liberally, is defraying the cost of transport, and the King, with his well-known love of and care for Art, has graciously consented to be Patron of the Exhibition.²⁵

Given this special favour granted by the Belgian government and the king, the LAC made an exception in allowing the Belgian artists to offer their paintings on display for sale. The prices ranged from as low as £12 up to the highest of £280, and among the exhibitors were the symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff, who was later to be closely

²³ The catalogue for this exhibition is not available at the Liv. RO but is attached at the end of the bound volume of the LAC annual reports at the British Library.

²⁴ The Liverpool organisers of the International Exhibition shrewdly bought several of their buildings from the organisers of the 1885 Exposition Universelles in Antwerp, reconstructing them on Merseyside. See Paul Greenhalgh, 'The art and industry of mammon: International exhibitions 1851-1901', in John MacKenzie, ed., *The Victorian vision: Inventing new Britain* (London, 2001), p. 274.

²⁵ LAC, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Oil Paintings, by Belgian Artists*, p. 1.

associated with Edward Burne-Jones and actively introduced contemporary British art to Belgium.²⁶

The fact that the LAC held some, if not many, exhibitions of modern European art invites a serious reconsideration of received views on, and calls for a revisionist account of, British patronage of art in the nineteenth century. So far the dominant historiography of British patronage of art, particularly by the middle-classes, in the nineteenth century tends to focus on their conspicuous support for contemporary British painters, creating and consolidating the impression that they patronised and collected only British art.²⁷ To a large extent there is still a sense of truism in saying that the history of patronage of art in Britain in the nineteenth century was the history of championing contemporary British art. And yet, it has begun to emerge that the assertion is inaccurate and the overall situation was more complex than previously thought.

Far from alien, contemporary continental European art was already familiar by the 1860s to many middle-class collectors and patrons in Liverpool and Manchester. Continental artists exhibited their paintings more frequently at the Royal Manchester Institution than at the Royal Academy in London. At the 1860 Royal Manchester Institution exhibition, for example, one room was exclusively reserved for 179 contemporary French paintings including works by Ingres, Delacroix, and Rosa Bonheur and other rooms contained 156 modern German and 46 Belgian paintings. Similarly, in the 1850s and 60s a number of artists from France, Germany, Belgium, and Holland sent their works to the exhibitions of the Liverpool Academy, Society of Fine Arts, and Institution of Fine Arts in Liverpool. Undoubtedly, there was a substantial, if not necessarily large, group of middle-class collectors and patrons who cared for contemporary European as well as British art in North-West England.²⁸ Examples would include Arnold Baruchson, Salis Schwabe, Sam Mendel, A. G. Kurtz, James Reiss, Edmund Potter, John Pender, John Heugh, Samuel Ashton, Henry McConnel,

²⁶ Mary Anne Stevens, 'Symbolism: A French monopoly', in Andrew Wilton & Robert Upstone, eds, *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* (London, 1997), p. 58.

²⁷ For instance, Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class*; C. P. Darcy, *The encouragement of the fine arts in Lancashire 1760-1860*, (Manchester, 1976).

²⁸ Edward Morris, 'Provincial internationalism: Contemporary foreign art in nineteenth-century Liverpool and Manchester', *THSLC*, 147 (1998), pp. 81-113.

Samuel Barlow, C. J. Galloway, John Naylor, George Holt, Peter Stuart, and Grant Morris.

From this perspective, the continental art exhibitions staged at the LAC could have been hardly innovative, nor did they seem very popular at least to its local audience. Nonetheless, some exhibitions, regardless of their popularity, were considered to be pioneering. For example, the 1874 exhibition, offered by James Rose in London, of the loan of his collection of etchings which included twenty-two Rembrandts and fifty-six Whistlers, was claimed to be the first exhibition ever devoted to etching alone.²⁹ Another exhibition held in 1881 of English caricatures, organised by a member of the LAC, Dr John Newton, was again assumed 'to be the first of its kind in England'.³⁰ Lasting for seven weeks, all the exhibition catalogues were sold out and copies were still sought even nearly a year later.³¹ Furthermore, the LAC went as far as to beget the formation in the late 1880s of the short-lived National Association for the Advancement of Art, based on the model of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.³²

From time to time, competitions were offered for entries to certain exhibitions. It started in 1877 when an embroidery competition for two prizes, offered by the then President of the LAC, P. H. Rathbone, was announced. Numerous specimens were received and they were forwarded to London for the judgement of Misses Garrett, assisted by the Royal Academician Edward Poynter. As a result, the first prize was awarded to Miss Burchardt from Liverpool, and the second to Miss Glaister from Southwell. When the specimens were on view at the clubhouse just for a week in December, nearly 400 people came to see the show. This success led the LAC to offer annual competitions (though not held annually as a matter of fact) for various 'forms of Amateur Art' and the Art Club Medal was designed to be awarded on such occasions.³³

²⁹ LAC annual report, 1874, pp. 6–7. Rose's collection was also exhibited in Southampton in the same year. Emma Chambers, *An indolent and blundering art? The etching revival and the redefinition of etching in England 1838–1892* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 169.

³⁰ LAC annual report, 1881, p. 9.

³¹ No copy of the catalogue seems to survive.

³² *Scottish Art Review*, I (1888–89), p. 67.

³³ LAC annual report, 1880, p. 10.

III

All the LAC's exhibitions were held in its clubrooms. The original clubhouse was in 4 Sandon Terrace, Upper Duke Street, where the first exhibition in 1872 of Oriental art was mounted. Yet in early 1874 the LAC took a lease of 1 Sugnall Street. In 1875 there must have been some renovation to make room for an art gallery at the venue as *The Times* announced that '[t]he Committee of the Liverpool Art Club have decided to open their *new gallery* with such an exhibition of the works of the late David Cox as will illustrate his method of working'.³⁴ However, the lease was due to expire in 1881 and the Committee of the LAC decided to purchase a clubhouse instead of taking another lease. To raise the necessary purchase fund, the issue to the members of 400 shares of £10 each was proposed, but failing to secure the necessary number of positive replies, the scheme was abandoned. Instead, the Liverpool Art Club Building Company, Limited, consisting of fifty-four members of the LAC who had subscribed to produce the capital sum of £5,000, was formed. Consequently the company bought the freehold house of 98 Upper Parliament Street for £3,900 in 1880, and it was agreed that the LAC take the lease of the house at a rent of £300 per annum from the company. Upon purchase, the house was altered to accommodate a new gallery built by Messrs. Haigh & Co. under the supervision of the architects George and William Audsley, who were members of the LAC. The new clubhouse opened in August 1881 with the gallery 60 ft long by 30 ft wide. In fact, the 1881 British oil painting exhibition was occasioned to celebrate the opening of the new clubhouse.³⁵

However, it would be misguided to portray the LAC as an exhibiting society aimed mainly to promote the sale of works of art through exhibitions. As the statement for the 1886 Belgian oil painting exhibition suggests, under normal situations sale was strictly prohibited at the LAC's exhibitions, and indeed there was no exhibition for contemporary living British artists except for the last years of the LAC's existence when it became increasingly difficult to stage a loan exhibition due both to the lack of funds and the dwindling enthusiasm of the members. Rather, the LAC was

³⁴ *The Times*, 30 Sept. 1875, p. 10, my italics.

³⁵ *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1881, p. 9.

essentially a gentlemen's club for those who loved art, or who pretended to be art-lovers. Like all other private clubs, it had its own rules governing membership and management. It also provided regular dinners, conversazioni, and provision of clubhouse with all the relevant facilities like billiard-room, library, and smoking-room, characteristic of countless other Victorian urban clubs and societies.

The election of members was vested in the Committee of the LAC and was conducted by ballot. The entrance fee was set at three guineas, payable on election, and the annual subscription was two guineas. The Annual General Meeting of the members was held in January. The general and pecuniary management and direction of the LAC was entrusted to the Committee of twenty-four members. They included a president, one or two vice-presidents, a treasurer, and one or two honorary secretaries, all of whom were to be appointed by the Committee. At each Annual General Meeting one-third of the Committee members were to retire by rotation, and new Committee members were elected by the majority vote of the ordinary members present. But any retiring Committee members were allowed to stand for re-election.

Most of the prominent patrons and collectors named earlier served on the Committee for one term or two. However, thanks to the rotation rule, nobody was able and indeed willing to sit on the Committee for a long time but one man, Philip Henry Rathbone,³⁶ arguably the most important and influential figure in Liverpool's municipal art patronage scene in the late nineteenth century. An underwriter by profession, he entered in 1867 the city council as a Liberal during the period of Conservative domination. Subsequently, sitting on the Council's Library, Museum and Arts Committee, he gained the power to virtually dominate municipal affairs concerned with the Walker Art Gallery (founded in 1873, and completed in 1877) and its annual Autumn Exhibition series.³⁷ Sitting also on the Committee of the LAC virtually for the entire period of its existence (using the loophole clause of re-election), Rathbone was a key player, along with his nephew Benson Rathbone, in the success of the LAC. In fact, the LAC was backed by the powerful Rathbone clan, a family of non-conformist merchants and

³⁶ Dianne Macleod, *Art and the Victorian middle class: Money and the making of cultural identity* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 465.

³⁷ Edward Morris, 'P. H. Rathbone', in Jane Turner, ed., *The dictionary of art* (34 vols, London, 1996), vol. 26, p. 12.

shipowners, who were prominent in Liverpool's public life throughout the nineteenth century.³⁸ As many as seven members of the clan joined the LAC from early on including William Rathbone, MP, who was a key ally of Gladstone's Liberal party.

The members came necessarily, taking account of the nature of the club, from the middle-classes and above. There were a few aristocratic members such as the Earl of Derby and the Earl of Sefton but their involvement with the LAC's activities was minimal. The membership grew gradually by the end of the 1870s: it was 106 in 1874, 268 in 1875, 343 in 1876, 367 in 1877, and 372 in 1878, reaching its all-time high of 387 in 1879. This was despite increasing the entrance fee from three to five guineas, and the annual subscription from two to three guineas. Yet, coupled with the general economic recession affecting the entire country in the 1880s, the increases in the fee and subscription backfired. The membership took a downturn: it shrank to 368 in 1880, 362 in 1881, 332 in 1882, 306 in 1883, 251 in 1884, and 236 in 1885. To combat the plummeting membership, a new category of membership was introduced in 1886. Called 'Professional Members', painters, sculptors, musicians, teachers, writers, and actors were allowed to join without paying the entrance fee of five guineas. Furthermore a reduction of the annual subscription from three to two guineas for the Professional Members was announced in 1889. As a consequence, the number of Professional Members gradually grew: 10 in 1886, 26 in 1888, 35 in 1891, and 47 in 1893. Nevertheless, the backbone of the club membership, that is, the number of the entrance-fee paying Ordinary Members, continued to decline. In 1894, one year before the LAC was disbanded, the overall membership records show 142 Ordinary, 40 Professional, 18 Lady, 5 Non-Resident, and 8 Honorary, totaling 213 members in all.

As the introduction in 1886 of the special category of Professional Members and the subsequent increase of their number in the following years suggest, the Liverpool artists succeeded in 'infiltrating' the middle-class collectors' club and exploited the opportunity to advance their own interests—for example, the 1890 landscape exhibition by Liverpool painters, the 1893 book illustration exhibition, and the 1894 exhibition of drawings and

³⁸ Lucie Nottingham, *Rathbone Brothers: From merchant to banker 1742–1992* (Liverpool, 1992).

sculpture by Liverpool artists. However, it is difficult to confirm whether the invasion of the Liverpool artists and the resulting dilution of the LAC's strictly non-commercial outlook contributed to the demise of the club in 1895 or whether it helped to prolong the club's feeble existence foreshadowed already in the mid 1880s.

During its existence the LAC was a vital forum for socialising. And perhaps this social clubby aspect was more important to many ordinary members than organising exhibitions. The clubhouse was open every day from 9 am to midnight (on Sundays it was closed at 11 pm), and amenities like a library, billiard room, and smoking room were provided besides the art gallery. Weekly House Dinner was served every Monday at a charge of 2s 6d. In addition, social evenings with music, recitations, or dramatic performances were an integral part of the club life. Musical soirees in which classical music mainly by German composers was performed were a regular entertainment at the club. A drawing class was formed in 1874 under the direction of John Finnie, a member of the LAC and the head of the local art school himself, and sketching excursions were occasionally organised, which explains in part why there were a number of exhibitions of amateur works.³⁹

Conversazioni at which members of the club or invited speakers read papers on particular subjects were as crucial as any other activities. They were often held to coincide with the relevant exhibitions but many of them were given independently. For example, papers were read in 1874 'On early Forms of English and French Gothic Architecture', 'On the Progress of the Autotype', and 'On the Paintings of the Old Masters'. In 1876 six talks were given and among the papers delivered were 'On the Sistine Madonna' by F. G. Prange, 'Liverpool Past and Present as a Home for Artists' by P. H. Rathbone, 'Powers of Art and Acquirements of Artists' by G. H. Garraway. In 1877 seven conversazioni were given, attended by more than two thousand people, and among the papers read were 'Architecture of Liverpool' by J. A. Picton, 'Greek Coins' by H. V. Tebbs, and 'Mayer Collection' by C. T. Gatty. Speakers in 1883 included Seymour Haden, President of the Society of Painter-Etchers, London, who read a paper on 'The Relative Merits of

³⁹ History of amateur art has recently become a subject of serious research. Ann Bermingham, *Learning to draw: Studies in the cultural history of a polite and useful art* (New Haven & London, 2000); Kim Sloan, *'A noble art': Amateur artists and drawing masters c. 1600–1800* (London, 2000).

Etching and Engraving as Fine Arts'; Enoch Harvey on Turner's *Liber Studiorum* with about forty examples.

In 1886–88 a series of lectures by Martin Conway, holder of the newly-established Roscoe Professorship in Art at the University College, Liverpool, predecessor of the University of Liverpool, were delivered on topics touching on such Old Masters as Durer, Mantegna, Rembrandt, and Van Eyck, all illustrated by reproductions of their works on display at the gallery. In 1888 Louis Fagan of the British Museum gave a course of lectures on the principal objects of interest in the British Museum. In 1890 permission was given to R. A. M. Stevenson, who succeeded Conway as the Roscoe Professor, to deliver in the gallery of the LAC a course of eight lectures dealing with the theory of painting and composition on the condition that members of the LAC should be admitted free. In 1892, T. C. Horsfall of Macclesfield was invited to present a paper on 'Education by Means of Pictures' and P. H. Rathbone delivered a paper on 'Technical Instruction in Decorative Art'.

Most of these social events were very popular. In fact, overcrowding caused by some members bringing with them all kinds of strangers to these occasions was a perennial source of complaints. As a result, the Committee of the LAC was obliged to impose a restriction on the number of guests members could invite. Also, apart from the weekly House Dinner for regular small gatherings of members, individual dinners were occasionally arranged to entertain special guests as 'one object for which the Club was founded was as a means of introducing strangers distinguished in art to those of the town who had already learned to know and appreciate their works'.⁴⁰ Subsequently, artists of national distinction were received to the LAC's special dinners: William Holman Hunt and E. M. Ward were entertained in 1874; in October 1876 the club invited the delegation of the Social Science Congress including Edward Poynter and Frederick Leighton; in 1877 when the Walker Art Gallery was opened, the sculptor from Warrington, John Warrington Wood, who was active in Rome and patronised mostly by English supporters from the North West, was entertained along with Lord Sandon, Andrew Barclay Walker, donor of the Walker Art Gallery, and the painters W. P. Frith, E. M. Ward, H. P. Roberts, and Luke Fildes; in 1878 Bragge, Herkomer, and Legros were received; on 15

⁴⁰ LAC, annual report, 1874, pp. 7–8.

December 1879 a lavish dinner attended by nearly 100 members was given to Frederick Leighton to celebrate his election as President of the Royal Academy. Besides the special dinners, a dinner was given annually to the Hanging Committee of the annual Autumn Exhibition at the Walker Art Gallery, consisting of several city councilors and a few artists associated with the Royal Academy in London.

IV

Needless to say, not everybody was appreciative of the LAC's activities. In particular, the local *Liberal Review* was openly hostile, sarcastically branding the club 'the Artistic Dining Association':

It had another dinner at the sumptuous rooms in Sugnall-street. It was as usual a feast of a thoroughly artistic kind, and did much to popularise art- in other words, artistic dinning- in the good old town of Liverpool . . . the fact that the dinner was held and was a great success may be taken as evidence that the artistic dinners are yet on the right track and are likely to keep so. Art must be popularised. And in Liverpool how could this be done without diners?⁴¹

The basis of this hostility arose basically from the perception of the LAC's activities, symbolised by splendid dining, as an elitism bearing no relation to the actual life of the working masses, because 'the principal local patrons of art had been unable to attend to their own business, their presence having been required at the magnificent kitchen of the Artistic Dining Association, to superintend the arrangements of the culinary artistes who had been brought from London, Paris, Vienna, New York, and other distant cities'.⁴² Deliberately contrasting the 'dock labourers'strike' with the indifference of the 'art enthusiasts', the paper recommended halting banquets 'until trade improves' and went on to 'invite them [the art enthusiasts] to pause and calmly consider what they are about'.⁴³ At the core of the criticism lay the philistine, but by no means unjustifiable, conviction that art was a bourgeois game functioning as a demarcation line between those who had the means to engage in the play and those who had not, and that art in itself could not

⁴¹ *Liberal Review*, 8 Feb. 1879, p. 7.

⁴² *Liberal Review*, 26 Feb. 1881, p. 7.

⁴³ *Liberal Review*, 22 Feb. 1879, p. 10.

change the world until the working masses were able to escape from their hand-to-mouth lives. 'If they wished to elevate the masses, why did not they come to an artistic dinner . . . The Artistic Dinning Association has yet much to do before it convert the world', argued the *Liberal Review*.⁴⁴

This kind of criticism would have irritated, but mattered little to, the members of the LAC. First of all, they had never fully assumed a public role, nor had they ever explicitly announced that one of their aims was to enhance the general public's awareness of the significance of art. However, to regard the members as consisting of a homogenous group is to miss the diversity of each individual's different taste, disposition, and motivation to join the club. Although it is far beyond the scope of this essay to trace and analyse each member's collection in detail, what is clear from the survey of the surviving exhibition catalogues is that different people have different taste. On the one hand, there were a few collectors like Holbrook Gaskell who were omnivorous in their taste for art. They collected a variety of paintings ranging from continental Old Masters to modern British. On the other, there were collectors who were more focused and single-minded in their collecting directions. F. C. A. Minoprio is a good case in point. He was less drawn to mainstream and popular painters but more interested in supporting lesser-known artists such as James Baker Pyne, John Frederic Herring, William Havell, and above all Hans Thoma.

Minoprio's patronage of the German painter Hans Thoma is quite unusual and remarkable. Considered to be 'a cultured and intelligent critic of paintings',⁴⁵ Francis Charles Anthony Minoprio was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1838 to a merchant family, and was educated there. He came to Liverpool at the age of twenty and took up British citizenship in 1868. A commission merchant by profession, he seems to have kept a close contact with his native country, and it is surely his attachment to his native town and country that led him to patronise his fellow German Hans Thoma, who lived in Frankfurt from 1876 to 1899.⁴⁶ Thoma, later to be regarded as the most respected painter in Germany after Arnold Böcklin's death in 1901, was little known even in Germany until the

⁴⁴ *Liberal Review*, 26 Feb. 1881, p. 7.

⁴⁵ B. G. Orchard, *Liverpool's legion of honour* (Birkenhead, 1893), p. 503.

⁴⁶ Eberhard Ruhmer, 'Hans Thoma', in Turner, *The dictionary of art*, vol. 30, pp. 739-40.

late 1880s.⁴⁷ Curiously, Thoma's talents began to be noticed first in England: as early as 1872 the Manchester art dealer Thomas Tee bought five pictures from Thoma. However, Minoprio, along with his brother-in-law Von Sobbe, whom Thoma often referred to as 'my two Liverpool friends', was his most important patron, always buying several paintings from Thoma on his yearly visit to Frankfurt. As a result, more than sixty paintings by Thoma went into this 'English possession', culminating in the 1884 exhibition of Thoma's sixty-two paintings at the LAC.⁴⁸ Moreover, Minoprio staged the 1884 exhibition at his own expense, a most unusual gesture for which the Committee 'voted him their cordial thanks'.⁴⁹

V

The dissolution of the LAC in July 1895 was unavoidable in hindsight. As has been observed, the membership had been in continuous decline since 1880, due mainly to the proliferation of other social clubs that competed increasingly for Liverpoolian attention. The diversification of different cultural forms of consumption on offer and the changing perception of the role art played in private lives helped to distract people's attention more and more from the LAC and its activities. Thus, the annual reports in the early 1890s repeatedly indicated the low morale amongst the members in organising exhibitions and lending works of art. Interestingly, it is also in 1895 that the driving force behind the LAC, P. H. Rathbone, died, and most of the founding and cardinal members of the club had passed away by this time. The overall disappearance in the 1890s of the enthusiastic Victorian art lovers undoubtedly put the LAC's future in serious doubt and the void left was never satisfactorily filled.

Various reasons for the final demise of the LAC were suggestively reported: lack of funds, dissension in the Committee, and the

⁴⁷ William Vaughan, 'Spiritual landscapes', in Ingrid Ehrhardt & Simon Reynolds, eds, *Kingdom of the soul: Symbolist art in Germany 1870-1920* (Munich & London, 2000), p. 83.

⁴⁸ Hermann Busse, *Hans Thoma: sein leben in selbstzeugnissen briefen und berichten* (Berlin, 1942), pp. 85-128. I am very grateful to my wife Ute Schulten Chun for her help with the German text.

⁴⁹ LAC annual report, 1884, p. 9.

influence of the University College that planned to open its own art club.⁵⁰ Obviously, financial problems plagued the LAC ever since the membership began to decline. In fact, a special fund to liquidate the LAC's debts was set up in 1888 with the donation list topped by George Holt's £100, followed by Benson and P. H. Rathbone's £50 respectively. Moreover, from 1889 the Committee was authorised to let the gallery for concerts, dramatic entertainment, etc to supplement its income. Apart from the inevitable expenditure items such as the rent and salaries for servants, staging exhibitions contributed significantly to tipping the financial balance in the red. And it is hardly surprising to discover that mounting exhibitions was an expensive business, as is today, with costs for transport, packing, and insurance. It was once even said that after the 1884 exhibition of oil paintings by foreign artists, 'the loss upon it was almost enough to discourage the Committee from venturing upon other Exhibitions'.⁵¹

To evaluate the significance and impact of the LAC depends ultimately on one's view of what art is for and about. The philistine *Liberal Review* would have taken a great delight in seeing the LAC collapse for it looked upon art as a plaything of the bourgeoisie. But another local press, the *Liverpool Review*, was rather sympathetic and positive. Reporting the LAC's demise, it asserted to its readership that:

The aims of the Art Club were laudable, and judging from the numerous industrial and fine art exhibitions conducted from time to time within its handsome and comfortable walls, not to mention the hospitable reception of British and foreign savants visiting the port, we have reason to believe that its influence upon those of its members who have filled responsible positions has shown itself in the vastly improved character of our new buildings and the materials used in their construction, in our thoroughfares and open spaces, and in other directions.⁵²

So the main line of argument here for the LAC is that through numerous exhibitions it helped to improve its members' artistic taste and the amelioration of their taste in turn played a pivotal role, through their social status and influence in the municipal life, in redressing the city's outlook. Needless to say, it is hardly possible to

⁵⁰ *Liverpool Review*, 13 July 1895, p. 5. The contents of the clubhouse were auctioned.

⁵¹ LAC annual report, 1884, p. 9.

⁵² *Liverpool Review*, 13 July 1895, p. 5.

quantify the impact the LAC's exhibitions had on the taste of the general public. Unlike the popular Autumn Exhibitions held since 1877 at the Walker Art Gallery, the LAC exhibitions were not devoted to modern art for sale but they were basically a thinly-disguised platform to display its members' tastes and wealth in a private setting. True, the LAC occasioned some pioneering exhibitions such as the 1884 Hans Thoma show. Nonetheless, most of them were less concerned with influencing the public's general taste than with demonstrating a few patrons' personal interests in an (unconscious) attempt to emulate the age-old aristocratic use of art patronage and collecting as a form of status symbol and cultural hegemony in an urban middle-class context.

B. G. Orchard, writing in the early 1890s when the LAC was still active, perhaps gave a more balanced assessment of the LAC when he stated that '[t]hese rooms have become the central meeting place where those with artistic tastes exchange ideas, and the result has already been a distinct advance in that direction among our *leisured people*'.⁵³ Of course, there is little doubt that the majority of the populace in Liverpool did not bother very much because the LAC, like countless other Victorian clubs, was essentially, 'the private in the public'.⁵⁴

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⁵³ Orchard, *Liverpool's legion of honour*, p. 57, my italic.

⁵⁴ Gunn, *The public culture of the Victorian middle class*, p. 84.

APPENDIX: LIST OF EXHIBITIONS AT THE
LIVERPOOL ART CLUB

Exhibitions marked with * indicate that catalogues for these exhibitions survive at the Liverpool Record Office. The numbers in brackets refer to the number of exhibits for the exhibition concerned.

- 1872 Oriental exhibition (1,101)*
- 1874 Goldsmiths' art (421)*
Etching exhibition (537)*
Water-colour drawings, by artists born during the eighteenth century, illustrating the progress of the art in Great Britain (252)*
- 1875 Embroidery, ancient and modern (123)*
Dutch, Flemish and Belgian art (236)*
Water-colour drawings, the property of Gilbert W. Moss (100)*
Loan exhibition of the works of the late David Cox (448)*
- 1876 Miscellaneous loan exhibition
Illuminated manuscripts (177)*
- 1877 Miscellaneous exhibition including medieval furniture, antique bronzes, etc.
Loan collection of fans (176)*
- 1878 Italian oak furniture exhibition
Specimens of art work in Chinese snuff bottles, and other articles forming part of the collection of William Bragge, esq, Birmingham*
Water-colour drawings, lent by W. S. Caine, esq. (71)*
Loan collection of wood engravings (303)*
- 1879 Loan collection of the works of Josiah Wedgwood (1491)*
Paintings on porcelain (174)*
- 1880 Cruickshank exhibition, lent by W. S. Caine
Water-colour drawings by artists born during 1801-1840, illustrating the progress of the art in Great Britain (348)*
Photographs of mosaics exhibition
- 1881 Coloured English caricature exhibition
Loan collection of oil paintings by British artists born before 1801 (340)*

- Amateur painting exhibition
- 1882 Paintings, drawings, sketches and designs by amateurs (403)*
 Loan collection of ancient lace (342)*
 Loan collection of ancient & modern book-bindings (313)*
 Collection of Chinese porcelain lent by George R. Davies, esq.
 (264)*
- 1883 Memorial exhibition of the works of the late Hablot
 K. Browne (409)*
 Water-colour drawings by amateurs (216)*
 Turner's *liber studiorum* exhibition
- 1884 Coin exhibition
 Modern oil paintings by foreign artists (182)*
 Loan collection of works by Hans Thoma (62)*
 Engravings, illustrative of 18th century art in England (213)*
 Eighteenth-century engravings exhibition
- 1885 Amateur art work (343)*
 Artisans' art work, including oil and water-colour paintings,
 drawings in black and white, wood carving, modelling, etc.
 (141)*
- 1886 Artisans' art exhibition
 Amateur embroidery and paintings on china exhibition
 Oil paintings by Belgian artists (119)*
- 1887 Works of art by the members of the Liverpool art workers'
 guild
- 1888 Paintings, drawings and sketches by amateurs (269)*
 Decorative art exhibition
- 1890 Landscapes by Liverpool painters*
- 1891 Pictures by Liverpool painters
 Miniatures and silverware exhibition
- 1892 Works by amateurs (234)*
- 1893 Original drawings in black and white and humorous designs
 by book illustrators (466)*
- 1894 Drawings, sketches, studies, and sculpture, chiefly by Liver-
 pool artists*
- 1895 English *ex libris**

