

The Art of philanthropy? The formation and development of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool

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Abstract

The development of nineteenth-century municipal art galleries was often closely associated with the activities of private philanthropy. The history of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, illustrates the problematic nature of philanthropy and the ways in which it could be used to advance personal status and political goals. However it also demonstrates that philanthropy was a skilled art; philanthropy that appeared to be self-seeking could be counter-productive and produce an adverse public reaction. Study of art gallery philanthropy can therefore be useful in exploring both the interdependence of public and private bodies in public cultural provision and the limitations of philanthropy as a strategy for urban governance.

Introduction

The period 1870-1914 saw the rapid spread of municipal art galleries across the English regions. By the First World War every city and almost every major town had a local art gallery supported and maintained by local taxation (Foster, 1998). However the formation and early development of these galleries often owed much to the activities of private philanthropists and sponsors (Lorente, 1998, Taylor, 1999; Fyfe, 2000). Perhaps the most notable instance of private philanthropy in provincial art gallery formation is the case of Liverpool where local brewer, Andrew Barclay Walker, not only provided the full funds for construction of the gallery, but also supported its later extension and development. Other galleries in the north-west did receive significant amounts of private support, but this was often in the form of bequests. Edmund Robert Harris's funding of the Preston gallery took this form, as did the funding for the Whitworth gallery (Morris, 2001). Walker was relatively unusual in sponsoring gallery construction during his own lifetime, creating a living memorial for himself in his own city of residence and business. As this article will make clear, however, Walker's philanthropy was not unproblematic. Walker's business interests in the brewing trade made him a controversial political figure in a city riven by sectarian and religious differences. Many saw Walker's philanthropy as a crude attempt to establish his own cultural status in the town and to curry favour with metropolitan artistic elites. Others accused him of attempting to buy a knighthood through showy displays of philanthropy. Nonconformist churchmen even attacked the gallery itself, viewing it as the fruits of drunkenness, crime and immorality.

The early history of the Walker allows an opportunity to examine the very notion of philanthropy in the context of the cultural development of the mid-Victorian city. Philanthropy was clearly not a value-neutral benevolent activity or a straightforward act in the exercise of power. It was a negotiated activity that not only operated in the context of complex expectations of the donor and receiver but also acted against the background of costs and expectations shared by wider civil society.¹ In Liverpool, as in many urban centres, philanthropy was a competitive activity. In the early days of public services leading politicians from the major parties even attempted to outbid each other's generosity. One man's offer to build a museum could prompt another to offer a public reading room. In general, however, the operation of philanthropic spirit was much more subtle than that, making it difficult to unravel the patterns of expectations and values associated with supposed public-spirited activity.

Early historians of philanthropy tended to emphasize the selfless, other-regarding aspects of the activity. For Kirkman Gray (1905: vi-ix), voluntarism was the key element of philanthropy; it was an activity done through benevolence without any sense of compulsion, duty or right and without any reciprocal expectation of service. Yet, arguably, philanthropy has always been closely associated with the promotion of personal ambition and the desire to provide reciprocal reactions from its recipients. Cicero was careful to advise his son Marcus about the problems of philanthropy, warning that while philanthropic contributions were a tool to win public favour, too much philanthropy could be damaging in both financial and political terms (Cicero, trans 1967: 54; Payton, 1989: 29-35, esp. 32-3). Indeed the growing popularity of the term in the mid-nineteenth century may have been as a result of the growing awareness of the importance of public giving in the political processes of the classical world. Those familiar with Isocrates, Xenophon, Plutarch and Polybius would have been aware of the term in its Greek form and its position in ancient political thought and historiography (Curti, 1958: 420-37; esp. 420-1). It was closely associated with Aristotelian notions of political prudence and, in essence, the promotion of enlightened self-interest (Payton, 1989: 33). Thus the exercise of the power of philanthropy may not necessarily be connected with a pressing public need, or even the needs of a specific group. It can instead be an act of existential display focused on the promotion of specific values, or simply the reputation of the individual associated with it. Indeed the fact that so much philanthropy does not appear to respond to specific normative demands has stimulated, in recent years, a significant re-evaluation of the historiography of public giving (Jones, 1996: 51-63). Until recent times there has been a tendency to assume that the decline of philanthropy was closely and inexorably associated with the rise of the state. Philanthropists and voluntary organizations identified social needs but it was the failure of 'voluntarism' to adequately meet these needs that led to the gradual growth of statutory collective provision (Lubenow, 1971; Greenleaf, 1983). However, as Gorsky has noted, recent literature has attempted to 'deteleologise' this approach and question the role of philanthropic activity in processes of social and cultural modernisation (Gorsky, 1999: 1-12). These revisionist accounts also, of course, have significant implications for the development of the local state and, for our purposes, the development of art institutions. It is important not to read the rise of the municipal art gallery as simply the product of the 'failure' of private provision. In the case of the Walker art gallery, a private subscriber provided that which the local state had failed to supply. However, without the long-term support of the local state, the private subscriber may have declined all involvement. Philanthropy needs, therefore, to be understood in the context of a network of multiple agencies attempting to meet the needs, or the perceived expectations, of a given community.

With the challenge to the old teleologies of voluntarism, came a greater reluctance to accept structuralist explanations for the changing nature of philanthropy associated with E.P. Thompson and Harold Perkin (Thompson, 1991; Perkin, 1969). However issues of class and status remain important in understanding the operation of philanthropic effort. Mauss's work (Mauss, trans 1990) on gifting and the gift economy have illustrated how gifts can be expressions of power and superiority, rendering the receiver indebted and subordinate. Much of the power inherent in gifting lies in the inability to refuse the gift without being placed in a morally or politically embarrassing position. However, Mauss emphasizes how important this process is in the formation of human bonds and social alliances (Mauss, 1990: 65-68, 73-83). This theme has been taken up by a number of modern urban historians. Morris (1983), for example, sees the creation of voluntary societies, often with a philanthropic purpose, as crucial in processes of class formation and emerging group identities in the early industrial city. Indeed there has been an increasing tendency to emphasize the capacity of philanthropic effort as a unifying, conciliatory force, embracing those from different cultural backgrounds in the exercise of shared values and identity. Harrison's work on charity emphasizes how the values of the workers and the elite could be remarkably similar reflecting a process of mutual recognition and negotiation (Harrison, 1966). More recently, of course, Gunn (2000), Vernon (1993) and Joyce (2003) have identified the importance of the displays of public virtue and philanthropy in the broader governance of the modern city. Such activities are viewed not only as important at the individual level but, as both Aristotle and Cicero may have observed, essential in understanding the generation of new patterns of civic political legitimacy (Morris

and Trainor, 2000).

It is, of course, important not to ignore selfless and disinterested aspects in understanding public philanthropy. McCord's work (1972) on the relief of poverty in the early nineteenth century argues that straightforward liberality could sometimes provide an adequate explanation for philanthropic effort. Although those who 'fail' to notice the supposedly political aspects of philanthropy can all too easily be charged with naivety, at least some elements of disinterested benevolence could clearly be present in any public gift. Indeed many sociologists are now keen to rescue 'genuine' altruism from reductionist cynics who have long claimed it must inevitably collapse into self-referential feelings of personal satisfaction (Piliavin and Charng, 1990). Similarly, empirical research on late twentieth-century patterns of philanthropic giving has identified a complex pattern of motivations, including, in many cases, a strong sense of altruistic obligation partly derived from the possession of surplus capital (Ostrower, 1995). Although such motivations can rarely, if ever, fully explain philanthropic effort, the notion of 'the obligation of capital' was clearly important in Victorian industrial society, even if it was a heresthetic tool emeshed in the conscious and unconscious modes of urban governance. As A. B. Walker was to discover, successful philanthropy had to be perceived as a disinterested act aimed at the public good. If suspicions arose that it was undertaken for private or partisan advantage, the act of philanthropy lost its political purchase. The power of philanthropy lay in its ability to create for the donor a universally accepted narrative that presented him as a benevolent, selfless servant of the polis, dedicated to the good of all men. The narrative was one that would be transmitted not only in the announcement of the benefaction and the public ceremonies associated with its realisation, but in the permanent monument that it created – such as the Walker gallery.² Inevitably, charges of partisanship and selfishness challenged this narrative, threatening its rearticulation and encouraging the circulation of contradictory interpretations. It was Walker's failure to be aware of this threat that ultimately challenged his public image. An art gallery that should have become a monument to his benevolence became a prison for his vanities.

The origins of the Walker Gallery: the political context

In many town and cities public corporations funded art galleries because of the perceived failure of private philanthropy to provide these important cultural tropes. Similarly in some places, such as Manchester, the corporation took over existing private institutions that were failing (Bud, 1974; MacDonald, 1985). In Liverpool, however, almost the reverse was true. Liverpool Corporation had, for many years before Walker announced his project, assembled plans for the construction of a publicly-funded art gallery but had consistently failed to take them beyond the planning stage. The famous Pre-Raphaelite dispute of the 1850s and 1860s effectively destroyed the Liverpool Academy, ended the Academy's annual exhibition and fundamentally threatened Liverpool's position as a major regional art centre (Morris, 1998; Bennett, 1972). In 1860, at the height of the dispute, the Corporation took the first steps towards the development of its own gallery but financial constraints and the economic problems associated with the American civil war saw the plans quietly shelved. It was not until five years later that a serious proposal emerged for the erection of a specific building for art gallery purposes. Sadly, however, the committee lost a portion of its anticipated rate support, rendering the plans unsustainable. Sir William Brown's provision of a civic museum for the city in 1867 only served to postpone the development of an art gallery further. Brown's museum provided a suitable home for the art treasures of Joseph Mayer, which had recently been donated to the city, but the running costs of the museum fell on the city rate, ensuring that fewer resources were available for the development of a separate art gallery.³

The development of Brown's museum did, however, provide a suitable location for the revival of Liverpool's annual modern exhibition. By this time the Academy's exhibition had effectively collapsed. Small exhibitions were held in 1864 and 1867 at Griffith's private gallery and in 1865 at Old Post Office Place, but these failed to attract major metropolitan artists and were subsequently discontinued for financial reasons (Morris, 1998: 14-5). The Corporation was persuaded to promote a new exhibition, at Brown's museum, by Philip Henry Rathbone and Edward Samuelson. Both were prominent municipal leaders and prominent figures in

Liverpool's business and social circles. Rathbone was son of the Liverpool merchant and banker William Rathbone and had risen to the Presidency of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce (Marriner, 1861). Samuelson was a leading tobacco broker and the son of Henry Samuelson, a shipping merchant of Liverpool and Hull. Significantly the two men represented rival factions of Liverpool's deeply divided political community; Rathbone was a Liberal, Samuelson a Conservative (Orchard, 1893). The revived exhibition at Brown's was a considerable success and, by excluding artists from the management of the exhibition, the Corporation was able to avoid the worst of the controversy that had afflicted its predecessor.

The success of the new exhibition, however, only served to highlight the need for a purpose build gallery that could do justice to the work of the country's leading artists. In the summer of 1873 Jame Picton, a key figure in Liverpool's civic life, brought forward new proposals for a publicly-funded gallery. Although the cost of the gallery was relatively modest – an estimated £18000 exclusive of fixtures and fittings – the proposals provoked considerable opposition from the city's small shopkeepers and the lower middle class. In some respects the proposal was badly timed. The proposal costs, although not great compared to comparative projects in other cities, seemed considerable at a time when the Corporation was seen to be reluctant to fund more pressing commercial needs – such as reform of the city's fish market (*Daily Courier*, 6 Aug 1873). Moreover, there was increasing recognition of the injustices inherent in the system of local taxation which appeared to fall disproportionately on the lower middle class. Merchant princes, and indeed many councillors, lived outside the boundaries of the city, escaping the city's high domestic rates and only paying business rates to Liverpool Corporation (*Liverpool Mercury*, 6 Aug 1873).⁴ Critics argued that the building would be 'almost exclusively used by the upper classes' (*Daily Courier*, 6 Aug 1873) and should therefore be provided by the wealthy men who would frequent it (*Daily Courier*, 7 Aug 1873). Worse still, the construction of an art gallery would only serve to cripple the development of the lending libraries which had been shown to be especially popular in working class districts (*Daily Courier*, 7 Aug 1873). Picton also experienced significant opposition from within the council. Alderman Weightman of the Finance Committee criticized the vagueness of the plans, the failure to provide working drawings for the scheme and the apparent reliance on uncertain exhibition profits to provide revenue funding for the day to day operation of the proposed gallery. However ultimately it was probably Picton's attempt to take £300 from the lending library budget for art gallery development that persuaded his fellow councillors to reject the plans (*Liverpool Leader*, 9 Aug 1873).

Protestors against the plans for a municipally-funded gallery accused Picton of attempting to use public funds to satisfy the recreational needs of a civic cultural elite. The *Liberal Review* noted that it would be well if Picton and his followers 'would ride their hobby only at the expense of their funds' (*Liverpool Review*, 9 Aug 1873). Similarly the *Liverpool Leader* called upon Picton and Samuelson to organize an effort to secure a gallery by private gift if they really regarded it as important for the cultural wellbeing of the city (*Liverpool Leader*, 16 Aug 1873). Statements like this in the press clearly put Picton and his followers under some pressure and demonstrate the societal expectations that came with civic leadership. Willingness to offer a philanthropic gift was an important factor in marking out a civic leader's selflessness and commitment to public duty – particularly when that civic leader was calling upon his electorate to make continuing sacrifices in the shape of ever rising rates. This became abundantly clear during a protest meeting against rising civic expenditure in late August 1873. Picton, under pressure from Conservatives attempting to exploit his associations with high public expenditure, withdrew his plans for a municipal art gallery. However he then, in a clear move to outflank his opponents, offered to fund an art gallery for the town providing that his main Conservative opponent, Councillor Richard Minton, would provide a lending library (*Liverpool Courier*, 29 Aug 1873).

Picton's offer to finance the construction of a gallery seems to have been a rather rash one, prompted by the emotion of the moment and the desire to diffuse personal criticism. Minton's Conservatives, however, were determined to see Picton's hand and engaged in what can only be said to be an exercise in competitive philanthropy. The following day, Minton announced, through his agent, that he would provide a new lending library for the town providing that Picton made good his pledge to construct an art gallery (*Liverpool Mercury*, 30

Aug 1873). Picton was clearly somewhat taken aback by events and, unwilling to meet the entire cost of a new gallery, sought to relieve himself of the commitment:

I never offered to build an art gallery at my own expense, but I did say whatever Mr Minton might be prepared to give in aid of his pet project of an additional lending library, I would give double the sum towards the erection of an art gallery. However, let that pass. I do not wish to make the progress of art dependent on Mr. Minton's generosity connected with the extension of lending libraries (*Liverpool Mercury*, 1 Sept 1873).

Picton's offer to provide finance for an art gallery was clearly not the product of disinterested commitment to the public good. His very public dispute with Minton turned the affair into a somewhat sordid political and philanthropic competition. Any gift given in these circumstances would be tarnished by its partisan associations. As the press observed, it was at best an 'undignified controversy', a worst a 'broad farce' (*Liverpool Mercury*, 1 Sept 1873, *Daily Courier*, 1 Sept 1873). Picton, clearly desperate both to salvage his own reputation and the art gallery scheme, offered to put down £1000 to fund the gallery, if another 19 benefactors would follow suite (*Liverpool Mercury*, 1 Sept 1873). Unfortunately the response was disappointing. The only patrons prepared to match Picton's offer were the manufacturing chemist George Kurtz, brewer John Parrinton, merchant James Houghton and collector Thomas Harding (*Liverpool Mercury*, 4 September 1873; *Daily Post*, 5 September 1873).

The failure of the scheme is somewhat puzzling given the success of the revived Liverpool autumn exhibition. The exhibitions of 1871 and 1872 had both generated considerable surpluses for the organizers which were in turn utilised to develop the municipal collection. In 1871 £495 was spent on three pictures for the corporation collection and a year later £600 was spent on major acquisitions, including F.W. Topham's celebrated *The Fall of Rienzi* (LCP 1874-5, 627).⁵ Yet this level of support was not manifest in the plans for a public gallery. This may partly be because some resented Picton's associations with the project and his apparent withdrawal of the offer to finance the gallery himself. However it was clear that many were also sceptical about the long-term viability of the gallery, even if £20000 could be found to finance the initial construction. In the absence of a major patron there was a danger that it would simply fall to the local ratepayer to fit out and complete the gallery. Commentators took the view that a gallery to reflect Liverpool's importance would cost over £100,000 and it would be impossible to achieve anything of significance with the sums projected by Picton. The *Liberal Review* proffered that a gallery 'filled with daubs, the refuse from rich merchants' dining rooms, would be a far greater disgrace that having none at all' (*Liberal Review*, 6 Sep 1873). The *Review*, for its part, offered an old hat last worn in 1861, two Chinese tea boxes, a copy of *Punch* and a half pint china cup labelled 'A Present from Staffordshire' (*Liberal Review*, 6 September 1873). For Picton, however, the failure of the scheme presented little occasion for amusement. In a last desperate attempt to rescue the project Samuelson, in his capacity as mayor, called a town's meeting to rally support. Despite attempts to gain support for the scheme by reviving the spirit of the collector William Roscoe (1753-1831) and reminding citizens of the supposed cultural connections between the mercantile city of Liverpool and Renaissance Florence and Rome, just 25 attended the meeting. A public subscription list was opened, but with little practical effect (*Daily Post*, 30 Sept 1873; *Liverpool Leader*, 4 Oct 1873).

Walker's opportunism and the limits of philanthropy

The failure of Picton and Samuelson to assemble an effective philanthropic plan for the construction of an art gallery, provided a significant opportunity for the politically and socially ambitious Andrew Barclay Walker. By 1870 Walker had established himself as head of the city's most extensive chain of public houses. Walker's business reputation was, however, somewhat chequered and he had been accused of conspiring with Conservative interests on the council to grant a free trade in licenses. He then used his market power to drive out independent competition and buy up licences from free houses at nominal cost. When free trade in licenses was abandoned several years later he retained the licenses, further consolidating his grip on the city's drink traffic (Orchard 1893: 687-9). In 1867 he entered the

town council and in 1872 was elected by the ruling Conservative group as an alderman, despite apparently showing little interest in municipal work and having a reputation for missing committee meetings (Orchard, 1893: 690). Remarkably, just a year later, he was elected mayor. Many commentators clearly saw a close association between the Conservative's decision to elect him as mayor and his offer to construct a £20000 art gallery for the town. As early as the 6 September it was suggested in the press that offers to support the art gallery scheme were closely associated with the political manoeuvring inherent in mayoral elections (*Liberal Review*, 6 Sept 1873). The Liberals, however, were in a difficult position. Many, having argued that the gallery should not be paid for by the rates, could hardly oppose Walker's apparently generous offer, especially as their own leader, JA Picton had withdrawn his apparent offer to fund a gallery himself (*Liberal Review*, 15 Nov 1873). Philip Rathbone made an explicit reference to Conservatives buying the office of mayor, although significantly, not through the agency public philanthropy but through subscriptions to the Conservative association (*Daily Post*, 4 Dec 1873). Press commentators were even more circumspect. *The Daily Post*, while noting that 'there has hitherto been no precedent for nominating a Mayor who has made no mark whatever in municipal matters' noted that Walker would always be remembered with honour as the man who provided the town with an art gallery (*Daily Post*, 4 Dec 1873).

Perhaps aware of the controversy surrounding his mayoralty, Walker rarely spoke publicly about his gift to the town. In an attempt to unify public opinion on the question it was Walker's rival, Picton, who moved the resolution in council naming the new gallery the Walker Art Gallery (*Liverpool Leader*, 6 Dec 1873). The council also planned major public events to celebrate the various stages in the gallery's construction. Even metropolitan newspapers such as the *Illustrated London News* provided detailed coverage of the plans for the gallery and laying of the foundation stone by the Duke of Edinburgh (*Illustrated London News*, 10 Oct 1874). Cornelius Sherlock's plans for a grand neoclassical building with over 1000 lineal feet of hanging space on the upper floors and sculpture galleries below gave the public a taste of what to expect (*Liverpool Mercury*, 2 April 1874). However Walker was never allowed to forget the political nature of the gift and its associations with his mayoral ambition. Those in the radical wing of the Liberal party objected to the donation of public land with a rental value of £1200 per annum in support of Walker's supposed philanthropy and the continuing commitment of the rates in revenue support of the building. As the economy began to slump into the 'great depression' of the mid-1870s their criticism became increasingly powerful. As the *Liberal Review* noted 'A magnificent home for pictures, and none but miserable hovels for poor frail human beings, is, indeed, a deep satire upon our boasted civilisation of the nineteenth century' (*Liberal Review*, 26 Sept 1874).

The most effective way to respond to this criticism was, in the view of the Corporation, to organize exhibitions and activities that would validate their work in the eyes of the wider art community. Above all they needed to avoid the accusation that the gallery could only be home to the refuse of mercantile living rooms. The Corporation was fortunate that it had received a number of donated pictures in the period when the possibility of a municipal art gallery was first mooted. Between 1852 and 1870 it had obtained sixteen significant works, including R. Ansdell's *The Hunted Slaves*, donated by G. Winter Moss and Benjamin West's *Death of Nelson*, provided by Bristown H Hughes. Following the announcement of the commencement of the Walker gallery, several more pictures were added through donation, perhaps most notably E.J. Poynter's *Faithful unto Death*, given by Charles Langton in 1874. The success of the autumn exhibition was also generating large surpluses that could be invested in new works. In 1874 £1200 was set aside for the purchase of new works, including £350 for David Roberts's *London – the Lord Mayor's Show* (LCP, 1874-5, 627). However it was always recognized that the success of the new gallery would be dependent on contributions from outside. These would not only improve the quality of the exhibition and fill wall space but also help legitimize the Walker as a gallery for all Liverpool's people – and not merely an exercise in political sophistry or 'The Mayor's White Elephant' (*Liberal Review*, 26 Sept 1874). A large representative committee was formed of Liberal and conservatives, municipal leaders, businessmen, collectors and MPs to oversee an appeal for paintings.⁶

The highpoint of the opening day of the gallery would be a grand procession through the town. The procession would not only include the city's officials, the corporation and the police, but also encompass trade unions, voluntary societies and religious groups, in a show of civic unity. The demonstrations would be a celebration of the culture of the Liverpool and the generosity of its leading philanthropist. Yet in practice the political divisions of the city stirred beneath the surface. Working class organizations and trade societies were initially excluded from the formal procession for fears that 'political organizations' would attempt to use the day's events to publicise their particular cause. Ultimately the trade societies were allowed to take part but on the strict understanding that no party badges or emblems of any kind would be displayed (*Liverpool Mercury*, 22 Aug 1877, *Daily Post*, 24 Aug 1877). The organizers were even careful to provide directions on the types of national flag that could be carried. Royal standards and union flags with orange borders were strictly prohibited, as were any other emblems associated with the Orange order.⁷

The main problem Walker and the civic authorities faced was, however, not from sectarianism but from temperance opinion that objected to Walker's role in the Liverpool drinks trade and the extravagant attempts of self-promotion inherent within his philanthropy. Almost as soon as the Corporation had announced plans for the art gallery's opening ceremony, the temperance campaigners announced their own plans for a counter demonstration (*Daily Albion*, 22 Aug 1877). Temperance activists were particularly annoyed at plans for a working class testimonial subscription to mark Walker's generosity. The local press reported allegations that large employers had been putting pressure on workers to give to the fund, despite the objections of many to Walker's business activities (*The Porcupine*, 18 Aug 1877). On the day of the opening ceremony temperance activists presented their own testimonial casket to Walker - handbills and posters representing the gallery as the reward of iniquity. The new gallery was depicted as a building built upon the foundation of Walker's alehouses. On its walls were chalked the statistics of drink related crime - '472 brothels known to police', '23, 556 drunkards' '2,318 licensed drunkeries' - with the legend 'All these will I give for a baronetcy?' The elegant neoclassical statues by Warrington Wood at the gallery's entrance were replaced by a common prostitute and a drunkard in rags, with the statue above the gallery's cornice replaced by the figure of the devil.⁸

Walker's attempts to establish a cultural and philanthropic reputation were shattered by 'respectable' criticism of his business activities. Rather than diverting attention from his drink trade activities, high profile patronage of the arts simply brought his associations with brewing industry into sharp focus. Moreover 'respectable opinion' became even more dubious about Walker's motivations when, shortly after the opening of the gallery, it was announced he was indeed to receive a knighthood.⁹ By the 1890s even those who sought to defend Walker's reputation from scurrilous attacks accepted that the baronetcy was 'deliberately bought', merely denying that there was anything improper in this practice (Orchard, 1893: 690). It is interesting however that even during the opening of the gallery, many in Liverpool's elite appear to have been suspicious of Walker's motives. Although Liverpool Corporation and the city's 'official society' paraded in support of the opening ceremony, many of the city's leading merchant families were absent from the festivities. Not surprisingly this absence was noted by the Liberal press who observed:

People from the first have viewed his present with suspicion...They appreciate generosity, of course, but they well question the motives of a gift which is proclaimed from the housetops with the blare of trumpets and the beat of drums (*Liberal Review*, 8 Sept 1877).

Modesty and a degree of circumspection were essential in the delivery of philanthropic gifts. Both Walker's friends and enemies ensured that his generosity was put on public display. It was inevitable, then, that the gallery was born into a public controversy.

Significantly, Walker seems to have played only a limited role in the operation of the gallery that was donated by him and named in his honour. Although Walker, as mayor, was involved in the organizing committee for the opening ceremony there is little evidence that he proffered strong views about its future development. Indeed, years later, some questioned whether he had any real interest in the cultural life of Liverpool at all. His early business

associations were with Warrington and, it seems, he initially planned to fund the cost of a large art gallery there. This was at a time when Warrington was home to a number of prominent artists such as Luke Fildes, George Sheffield and the man whose sculptures were to eventually decorate the Walker, Warrington Wood. He turned his attention to Liverpool only after a somewhat petty planning dispute with Warrington Town council persuaded him to withdraw his philanthropy from that town (*Daily Post*, 4 Feb 1933). Walker rarely intervened in policy matters concerning the Walker gallery, leaving operational matters to connoisseurs Rathbone and Samuelson.

Both Rathbone and Samuelson appear to have been aware of the criticism of the gallery and immediately tried to stimulate the widest possible interest in gallery activities. Although the annual autumn exhibition inevitably focused on attracting the cream of London artists, for reasons of both financial viability and prestige, there was strong support for local and regional artists. In order to avoid the conflicts of the past local artists were officially excluded from the hanging committee of the exhibition, but there were representatives from the Liverpool Academy, the Art school and the Royal Institution (*Daily Albion*, 6 Sept 1877). One of the first pictures bought following the revival of the exhibition in 1871 was a landscape of Snowdon produced by John Finnie, headmaster of the Liverpool school of art (*LCP* 1874-5, 627). Over the next few years local artists would continue to receive the patronage of the corporation. In 1877 the art committee spend 130 guineas on an important landscape by the leading Manchester artist HC Whaite (*LCP* 1877-8, 28). Whaite went on to be an influential President of the Manchester Academy of Fine Art and a founder of the Royal Cambrian Academy. The support the Walker gave to local artists in its formative years suggests a strong desire to foster links with the local artistic community and by supporting the efforts of local landscape painters the Walker was providing accessible art which even the most visually illiterate could enjoy.

The progress of the Gallery: The role of Rathbone

While many feared that the Walker would become a storehouse of merchant's refuse, in practice the gallery obtained a number of important paintings through voluntary donation in its first two decades of existence. Although some in Liverpool's merchant community were reluctant to support the gallery initially, once it was open the building undeniably became central to the cultural life of the city. With Walker himself taking little role in the operation of the gallery, prominent citizens could support the gallery's activities without necessarily being directly associated with Walker's attempts at self-publicity. Indeed by offering donations themselves other groups in Liverpool society could draw attention to their own disinterested benevolence in contrast to the partisan benevolence of Walker. It is notable that shortly after the walker's opening, Picton provided a donation of £1000 for the fitting up of the city's reading room (*LCP*, 1877-8, 79). One of Picton's supporters in the original art gallery scheme, A.G. Kurtz, followed with the donation of the valuable *Lady Macbeth* by T.F. Dicksee (*LCP*, 1877-8, 113). Less than two months later, there were a number of donations from the Arkle family, the most notable of which was probably *Ruins of a Temple and Amphitheatre* by David Roberts. It was also during this period that the Walker began to receive its first major bequests, including a number of items by Thomas Creswick, Birket Foster and T.S. Cooper, from the collection of Robert Ellison Harvey (*LCP*, 1877-8, 130-2).

Once the gallery opened, of course, its operational costs fell upon the Corporation and, ultimately, local taxation. From the start civic leaders were keen to depict the institution as one designed for the enjoyment and education of all classes. The Walker was the largest gallery in the region and thus one of the most costly to maintain. Only by emphasizing the relevance of the gallery to all classes could the corporation avoid complaints about the high level of public subsidies. B.H. Grindley of the art gallery committee attacked those who saw art as merely the hobby of the rich, arguing that culture and refinement was required at all levels of society. For Grindley much of the adult population had become 'so sensual in their nature, and so low and debased in their pleasures' that what they needed was 'not so much education, as cultivation' (Grindley, 1875: 5). Rathbone expressed similar sentiments in a lecture at the free library in 1875. In Rathbone's view the great strength of art was its ability to inspire and

represent the common people. This, for Rathbone, was the great genius inherent in classical Greek art. By placing art on public display in the Greek marketplace, the artist and the people were brought into dialogue. Public taste was educated and purified and the artistic products which emerged came to reflect the values and interests of the whole nation. Such was the collective power of this process that it could still awaken and inspire the consciousness of a people generations later. For Rathbone it was 'not Homer, Euripides, Plato, or Aristotle, that delivered Greece from the Turks, but Phidias and the Parthenon' (Rathbone 1875: 8). Clearly Rathbone recognized that some saw the Liverpool art gallery as a product of one man's self-serving vanity. However by demonstrating the capacity of art to purify the taste and express the consciousness of a people, Rathbone was able to rescue the future of the gallery from the political partisanship associated with its birth. Equally he was responding to the insecurities that many Liverpudlians felt about the future of their city. Art provided an enduring image to immortalize their wealth and importance. Those who failed to leave behind evidence of their artistic taste would soon be forgotten and with it their civilisation. Liverpool was faced with a choice. Would it build a memorial to its civility 'or be content to rot away as Carthage, Antioch, and Tyre have rotted away, leaving not a trace to show where a population of more than half a million souls once lived, loved, felt, and thought' (Rathbone, 1875: 45).

The key difficulty for Rathbone, in trying to establish an artistic reputation for the city, was the same as that faced by Roscoe almost three quarters of a century before. Liverpool had few associations with artistic and craft industries and had failed to foster a distinctive school of painting or sculpture. In the early nineteenth century Liverpool had successful pottery and earthenware enterprises but these were shortlived. The Herculaneum pot works, situated near the docks, was particularly well known, but even the import of skilled Staffordshire craftsmen failed to prevent its demise and with it the pottery industry in Liverpool (Mayer, 1871: 40-1, also Mayer, 1855). The break-up of the Liverpool Academy had done little to help encourage the development of a distinctive Liverpool school, however much the Academy had helped foster the work of metropolitan Pre-Raphaelites. Worse still, Liverpool artists faced the danger of losing their identity altogether as the Manchester school of Corot-inspired impressionists became more prominent across the region. Rathbone seems to have been aware of the Mancunian threat and was unusually critical of their technique. Although Rathbone had some sympathies with the impressionist movement, he had little time for the Manchester school even going as far as to offer public condemnation of their 'slipshod cant and pretentiousness' in a Liverpool exhibition review of 1883 (Rathbone, 1883). The unfortunate truth was, however, Liverpool artists of the 1870s had offered little in response to radicalism of their colleagues in Manchester. If Liverpool was to express its cultural identity through art, it was hard to see how it could do so through the agency of its own art and artists.

Liverpool's great strength lay in its history of organizing successful autumn exhibitions of modern art. Although these had folded for a time, the Corporation's decision to organize its own exhibition from 1871 demonstrated that there was still a significant market for pictures in Liverpool and that profitable modern exhibitions could still be organized. The opening of the Walker gave the annual exhibition a renewed impetus, not only by providing a purpose built gallery in order to display the 'works of the season' to best effect, but also by providing significantly more wall space than had ever been available at previous venues. At the first autumn exhibition at the Walker in 1877, over 200 more exhibits were placed on display than in the previous year (*Liverpool Mercury*, 6 Sept 1877). In some respects the timing of the relocation of the exhibition was a poor one, coming at a time when the effect of the 'Great Depression' were all too evident. Total picture sales fell from £10,989 6s in 1877 to just £7340 7s a year later.¹⁰ Yet, remarkably, Liverpool's exhibition soon revived and by 1881 the aggregate value of sales topped £12,000.¹¹

Part of this success was undoubtedly due to the work of P. H. Rathbone. Rathbone was not only a prominent business leader but was also closely involved in the London art world (Orchard, 1893: 579). His artistic contacts were considerably and it was his influence that brought figures such as Alphonse Legros and Herbert Herkomer to Liverpool for public lectures. Rathbone bought works by Legros and donated his *The Pilgrimage* to Liverpool's permanent collection. While Manchester struggled to attract major metropolitan artists to its annual exhibition, Liverpool continued to attract major Royal Academicians. Even in the

relatively unsuccessful exhibition of 1878, E. W. Cooke, E. Ermitage, Ford Madox Brown, P.H. Calderon, C.G. Lawson and Alma Tadema all sent works. In turn the financial success of the exhibitions generated significant surpluses that could be used to finance the development of the permanent collection. In a good year commission on sales alone could generate over £500 and even in a poor one at least £250. This allowed Liverpool Corporation to bid for the great works of the season and build up a permanent collection that, if not actually representing the consciousness of the people of the city, provided an unsurpassed cultural resource.

Collecting and the public: A broadening appeal

During the 1880s it was Rathbone who led the development of the gallery and there is little evidence that Walker ever took a leading role in the development of gallery policy. He did finance a major extension of the gallery in 1882 but seems to have exercised little influence over the expansion of the permanent collection. Rathbone encouraged the corporation to collect all manner of British art and there was never a formal collecting policy. However, Liverpool's permanent collection did develop some important characteristics. In general, the art committee collected high art and subject pictures, often with a strong historical theme, and those that which reflected the city's association with the Pre-Raphaelites. This trend is typified by perhaps the most celebrated picture in the Walker collection, D.G. Rossetti's *Dante's Dream*. For many this was Rossetti's most ambitious imaginative work and its appearance at the Walker in November 1881 was occasioned by a formal civic reception (Caine, 1881). Formal historical pictures were also prominent, notably E.J. Poynter's *Faithful Unto Death*, depicting a Roman guard at Herculaneum and F.W. Topham's *The Fall of Rienzi*, illustrating the attempted escape of the tribune from a angry shouting people. However, according to Liverpool's art advisor E.R. Dibdin, many of the pictures chosen for purchase were done so with an eye to gaining public favour and stimulating interest in the new gallery. Pictures including children and animals were regarded as being particularly popular amongst the uncultivated and visually illiterate and it is interesting that many of the most celebrated works of high art in the gallery include these subjects. Frederick Goodall's *New Light in the Harem* had, of course, a baby as its central subject, but many other paintings, including Topham's *Fall of Rienzi* also featured infants in their midst. There were also a number of more obviously sentimental pieces such as J.R. Reid's *Rival Grandfathers*, Thomas Faed's *When the Children are Asleep* and Arthur Stocks's *Motherless*. The Walker authorities, although determined to collect high art, continually had one eye on public opinion. If Rathbone wanted Liverpool's art collection to represent the consciousness of the people rather than the vanity of one man it had to be made attractive to a wider audience. As Dibdin noted 'Children and animals, beloved of all but the utterly debased, are the surest baits for wide popular appreciation' (Dibdin, 1889: 50).

The other major bait for public attention was, of course, the landscape. Many municipal galleries focused on the collection of landscape, often buying works of questionable quality. In general Liverpool, under Rathbone's guidance avoided this pitfall. The corporation did buy some rather hackneyed Welsh landscape scenes, such as J. D. Watson's watercolours of scenery near Betwys-Coed, but in general the works acquired were of a superior quality. E.A. Waterlow's *A Summer Shower* was one of the collection's earliest acquisitions and one of the most popular. There were also important works by G.A. Fripp, Joseph Knight, J. Aumonier, Peter Ghent and many other leading British landscapists of the second half of the nineteenth century (Dibdin, 1889: 55). Nor was this popularist approach at the expense of foreign schools, with Rathbone pioneering interest in leading continental schools (Morris 1975-6: 59-67). It was in the area of portraiture that the Liverpool collection was, perhaps, the slowest to develop. However this aspect was gradually strengthened and could eventually claim representative samples of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Godfrey Kneller and Sir Thomas Lawrence. By the end of the century the Roscoe collection of Italian primitives had also found its way into the corporation art gallery. Although still owned by the Liverpool Royal Institution, the financial difficulties of the institution meant the collection had, in effect, been placed on permanent loan (*Liverpool Royal Institution Report 1905:14-5*).¹²

Rathbone's approach to collecting was not only driven by a desire to obtain high quality

works through his best metropolitan sources but also by a determination to popularise the gallery by choosing artists and subject matter that would be attractive to a wider audience. From the outset the gallery had attracted criticism both through its associations with Walker and the costs which fell on the public purse. Even in the late 1880s there was strong resentment at increasing expenditure on public museums and galleries. In 1887 the Liverpool Land and House Owners' Association successfully petitioned to prevent the art gallery committee applying to Parliament for an extra halfpenny rate (*LCP* 1886-7). Changes in the method of collecting rates on compound property had reduced the local tax yield and without the flexibility to increase the rate beyond the 1d statutory maximum, the committee was forced to cut its budget.¹³ Despite protests from Rathbone committee estimates were cut by £500 for 1890 and the corporation made it clear they would not allow the libraries and arts committee to increase its deficit (*LCP* 1889-90). Yet by this time Rathbone had already assembled a permanent collection which attracted considerable popular interest. The gallery could boast average daily visitor numbers of over 1,400 and over 60,000 people paid to visit the annual autumn exhibition.¹⁴

The Edwardian period saw a significant decline in the quality of works purchased by the committee. E.R. Dibdin took over P.H. Rathbone's role as chief negotiator of acquisitions and, although Dibdin had previously assisted Rathbone in new purchases, he did not continue Rathbone policy of purchasing small numbers of high quality works, preferring to acquire larger numbers of more modestly-priced items. In 1907 Dibdin submitted details of over 30 works from the current autumn exhibition that he hoped his committee might consider purchasing. This approach annoyed many in the Liverpool art world, not least R. Rathbone junior, who was now himself a member of the art gallery committee.¹⁵ A number of Liverpool artists issued a polemic against the corporation for allowing picture acquisitions to fall into the hands of 'the butcher, the baker, and candlestick maker' (Sharpe, 1909: 4). There was at least some truth in this charge. Although Liverpool had bought over 70 works between 1903-1909, few were thought to have lasting value. Manchester in contrast had been both more selective and imaginative. Their acquisitions in this period not only included works by Ford Madox Brown, Millais, Watts and Rossetti but also innovative and critically acclaimed works associated with the impressionists, notably works by Corot and D'Espagnat (Sharpe 1909: 9-10). Dibdin was not an entirely conservative force in Liverpool. Most notably he helped bring the work of French, Swedish and Danish artists to the Liverpool exhibition (*The Morning Post*, 5 Oct 1912). In 1914 he narrowly escaped internment after travelling to Germany shortly before the outbreak of war to bring the work of German artists before the Liverpool public (*The Scotsman*, 3 Oct 1914). However, after Rathbone's death public criticism of corporation purchases grew and few of Liverpool's Edwardian acquisitions stimulated the excitement of those of the previous generation.

The lure of philanthropy

The Walker gallery was born out of the failure of the municipality to persuade its public that art was anything more than a rich man's hobby. Ultimately the art gallery question provided a local brewer with the opportunity to improve both his public reputation and political standing. The lure of philanthropy drew many, like Walker, into close engagement with the sphere of culture. Some, such as Barrell, have said suggested that the nineteenth century saw a decline in artistic narratives of civic humanism, with patrons increasing consuming art in the domestic sphere and neglecting traditional public obligations (Barrell, 1986: esp. 1-13). Similarly sociologists have tended to emphasise the way in which the middle class broke with aristocratic traditions by rejecting the conspicuous display of cultural consumption, preferring to consume cultural goods in private (Savage et al., 1992: 35-57). However, the widespread and extremely public nature of giving to cultural institutions suggests that this view needs to be treated with caution. Walker's philanthropy can be viewed as a form of communitarian conspicuous consumption, informed by a civic humanism that placed high social value on the public giving of cultural goods. Nor is there any reason to suppose that Walker's support for public art galleries was unusual. The 'benevolence' of Francis Chantrey and Henry Tate at national level is well known and many industrial towns produced philanthropists prepared

to endow public art galleries or provide for public collections. Neighbouring Manchester had Whitworth, Preston had Harris and Oldham the empire of the Platts (Atkinson, 1996; Moore, 2003; Law, 1999).

An examination of the gifting process inherent in public donation illustrates both the way in which the local state was dependent on the private sector for the initiation of key cultural goods and the limitations of private sector philanthropy. Sociological research on the professions has emphasized how private individuals can have an important impact in conditioning state development, but how in doing so may have their own position brought into question (Johnson, 1982; Savage et al., 1992: esp. 39-45). A similar form of analysis can be applied to the cultural sector. The 'lumpy nature' of art gallery capital formation meant that municipalities often needed private donations to force their hands. Although the donation of a gallery implied ongoing financial commitment for a local authority, running costs were small compared to the initial capital provided by private donors. Thus the donation of an art gallery was a gift that was difficult to reject without embarrassment.¹⁶ However the early years of the Walker gallery demonstrated that a city was not always willing to accept philanthropic gifts, especially if they were from an individual associated with a morally dubious trade or a civic leader acting out of partisan motivation. In order for an individual to reap the rewards of philanthropy, generous deeds had to be made public, but if this was done a way that was too overt or extravagant, a hostile response was inevitable. The opening of the Walker gallery was met with overt resistance, not only from those with a Nonconformist conscience, but also those who saw a great public cause being perverted for private benefit. Thus the opening of few galleries can have been occasioned by the sort of ambivalent public response evident in the case of the Walker. Placards and billboards associating the gallery with prostitution, violence and drunkenness did little for A.B. Walker's reputation in Liverpool and little for the cause of art.

Rathbone realized from the outset that if the gallery was to be successful it had to be perceived as representing not the taste of one man but the artistic consciousness of a city. Although the parallels that Rathbone drew with the classical world were somewhat unrealistic, their democratic essence made him aware of the importance of making high art relevant to a mass and relatively uneducated public. Throughout his period on the art gallery committee the corporation were sensitive about the question of ratepayer expenditure on art. Even when tax yields dropped as a result of compounding reform, the corporation were unwilling to follow the example of other local authorities and seek parliamentary approval to raise rates beyond the statutory 1d maximum. The gallery could only meet these objections if it continued to attract a large annual attendance and organize a successful modern exhibition. Thus it was largely due to the work of Rathbone that the Walker prospered, developing a collection of Victorian art that was both high in quality and popular to the visitor. Ultimately Walker obtained the memorial that his philanthropy craved – a successful art institution housing one of the country's leading regional collections. Yet it was one of his political rivals, Rathbone, who secured Walker's reputation. Under Rathbone's careful management the gallery lost its associations with Walker's political vanities and became an important symbol of Liverpool's cultural identity.

Notes

¹ These expectations were, of course, rapidly changing in the second half of the nineteenth century. For background see J. Garrard, *Democratisation in Britain elites, civil society and reform since 1800* (Basingstoke 2002), P. Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge 1978).

² For a recent discussion of the popular creation and transmission of personal narratives see P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge 1991), esp. 27-55; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge 1994).

³ Details can be found in *Report on the History and Progress of the Libraries, Museum and Gallery of Arts* (Liverpool 1887), 5-7.

- ⁴ Rates were a form of local taxation levied on domestic and commercial property values.
- ⁵ *Statement of the Works of Art Purchased or Presented to the Corporation of Liverpool* (Liverpool 1875); in Liverpool Corporation Council Proceedings [hereafter LCP], 1874-5, 627.
- ⁶ For details on the opening see 'Opening of the Walker Art gallery', [leaflet, 37] in Documents and papers Connected with laying the Foundation Stone, The Opening Ceremony Etc, etc, of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (1877).
- ⁷ Instructions can be found in 'To the Orangemen of Liverpool' [leaflet, 72], in Documents and papers Connected with laying the Foundation Stone, The Opening Ceremony Etc, etc, of the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool [cuttings book] (1877), Liverpool Record Office [hereafter LRO].
- ⁸ A copy of this illustration 'A Casket to Commemorate the Opening of the Potter's Field' [leaflet, 150a], can be found in Documents (1877).
- ⁹ 'Walker Art gallery' [historical notes, 152] in Documents (1877).
- ¹⁰ Financial details can be found in *Twenty-sixth annual Report of the Committee of the Free Public Library, Museum and Walker Art Gallery of the Borough of Liverpool* (Liverpool 1879), 22-6.
- ¹¹ Financial details can be found in *Thirtieth annual Report of the Committee of the Free Public Library, Museum and Walker Art Gallery of the Borough of Liverpool* (Liverpool 1883), 29.
- ¹² *Report of the Liverpool Royal Institution, 22 February 1905*, 14-5 in Royal Institution Reports 1897-1906, LRO , H q027 2 ROY.
- ¹³ Budgetary details can be found in *Report on the History and Progress...* (Liverpool 1887), 7-9.
- ¹⁴ Attendance statistics are recorded in the annual reports. *Thirty-eighth Annual Report of the Committee of the Free Public Library, Museum and Walker art gallery of the City of Liverpool* (Liverpool 1891), 29-30.
- ¹⁵ *Liverpool Daily Post and Mercury*, undated cutting [but Dec 1907] in Newspaper Articles by ER Dibdin, LRO HF 700 DIB, 3.
- ¹⁶ Similar patterns can be seen with the American museum movement. See K. McCarthy, 'Creating the American Athens: Cities, Cultural Institutions, and the Arts, 1840-1939', *American Quarterly* (37), 426-39.

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