

‘EXALTING AND ENLARGING THE MIND’

THE 1839 DERBY MECHANICS’ INSTITUTE EXHIBITION

Alice Insley

Open from May 13th 1839 until September the same year, the Derby Mechanics’ Institute Exhibition was a landmark event, as Derby’s first foray into the growing exhibition culture of the nineteenth century.



Derby's First Exhibition by Samuel Rayner, 1839.

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Today our knowledge of this exhibition primarily comes from a hand-coloured lithograph, produced by Samuel Rayner, entitled *Derby's First Exhibition*.

In 1839 Samuel Rayner was a successful artist residing at 17 Friar Gate and co-running the Cornmarket Gallery in Derby; his depiction of the exhibition highlights the vibrant cultural life of the town in the 1830s.

A Display of Diverse Objects

The exhibition spanned nine rooms, displaying a vast and varied collection of objects. These represented the fine arts, natural history, manufactures and ‘other curiosities’, including the ‘Legs of the Boa Constrictor’, running machines and science experiments. The lithograph represents the lecture hall of the Mechanics’ Institute, the main display space of the exhibition. This was filled with ‘a large and splendid collection of paintings, articles of statuary,

sculpture, natural history and models of various kinds’, a total of over 1000 exhibits.

Rayner has captured its diversity, including the prominently hung *Romeo and Juliet* by Joseph Wright of Derby on the back wall, a globe and telescope in the foreground, the cases of stuffed birds along the walls, and the clusters of classical statues in the room.

Although this seems like a mixed and disparate array of items to bring into relation with one another today, it demonstrates the

encyclopaedic understanding of knowledge in the nineteenth century. The lecture hall which displayed the objects became a theatre of knowledge for the viewer.

Such exhibitions were the precursor to the World Fairs of the nineteenth century. Whilst the Great Exhibition of 1851 was larger, more diverse and international, it shared many of the same characteristics as the earlier Mechanics' Institute exhibitions. Furthermore, Derby's display is not an isolated example as Mechanics' Institutions across the country held comparable exhibitions – the striking difference being that each sought to promote their own locality through exhibits.

The Culture of Improvement

This understanding of knowledge is also closely related to the middle-class discourse of working-class improvement during the early and mid-nineteenth century and upon which the Mechanics' Institute Movement was founded. This was made explicit by the exhibition committee who, in 1839, expressed the hope 'that the general result will contribute to the moral as well as to the intellectual improvement of the members of this institution'.

The exhibition was framed as a means by which the working-class population of Derby could be 'improved' as they viewed exhibits that elevated the mind. The displays emphasised the importance of progress, industry and human endeavour, thus raising the status of manufacturing and inspiring the visitor in their own work.

Described as a 'means of exalting and enlarging the mind' in a broadside produced by J. Chadfield on a Columbian Printing Press (which ran throughout the exhibition in room two), the exhibition offered a form of rational recreation, facilitating the exhibition visitor's education and entertainment. This was a preoccupation which continued to be at the heart of many exhibitions throughout the nineteenth century, as is apparent in the low admission prices and opening hours which sought to accommodate the working class.



Romeo and Juliet, The Tomb Scene by Joseph Wright, 1790.

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Learning and Civic Pride

As well as engaging with the nationwide exhibition culture and discourse of improvement, the exhibition was also a means of generating and asserting civic pride, showing Derby's independence and competition within the cultural landscape of the nineteenth century. Rayner's attention to the details of the lecture hall, representing the neo-Classical architectural features such as the frieze, is significant as it alludes to the Mechanics' Institute as a temple of learning.

Materially, this highlighted Derby's prosperity and support of educational and cultural institutions. It also physically located the exhibition at the heart of the town and connected it with Derby's material and cultural development.

Visited by over 96,000 people and raising £1355, the exhibition was extremely popular and quickly became a source of civic pride. Many of the exhibits related to Derby itself, highlighting its history of progress, advancement and notable figures. Joseph Wright's dominance within the lithograph is synonymous with this as he represented Derby's cultural history, its ability to foster the arts, and its encouragement and promotion of local artists.

The Exhibition was intended to instil civic pride, which was particularly pertinent given the social tensions of the 1830s – typified by the riots prompted by the failed reform bill in 1831. 1839 was, therefore, an opportunity to reaffirm and express social unity and cohesion within Derby, by highlighting its achievements and individuality.

Conclusion

Thus, the Derby Mechanics' Institute Exhibition was both an inward-looking expression and consolidation of local cultural identity and civic pride and an outward-looking engagement with the growing exhibition culture, asserting its competitive position within the new landscape of industrially important provincial towns and cities. ●

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Further Reading

Catalogue of Articles contained in the Exhibition of the Derby Mechanics' Institution, 1839 (W. and W. Pike, 1839).

Paul A. Elliot, *The Derby Philosophers: Science and Culture in British Urban Society* (Manchester University Press, 2009)

Toshio Kusamitsu, 'Great Exhibitions before 1851,' *History Workshop*, no.9 (Spring, 1980), pp. 70-89.