



Work catalogue all the echelons of Victorian society. Image courtesy of Manchester City Galleries

Work programme

Ford Madox Brown's masterpiece *Work* is among 140 of the artist's works on show in Manchester, where he found favour, says **Jo Nightingale**

The first exhibition dedicated to Victorian painter Ford Madox Brown for almost 50 years is underway in Manchester, the city where he completed some of his final work. Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer at Manchester Art Gallery presents 140 of the artist's works, some of which have not been seen since the 1840s, and argues that his innovative style and subject matter paved the way for a new realism in art.

"Brown was born in France and studied in Belgium so he was a natural outsider, a challenger of received wisdom," says curator Julian Treuherz, formerly director of Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery. "His work reflected social and political ideas of his period and he wanted to challenge the unadventurous nature of Victorian painting, and bring it closer to everyday experience."

It was a trip to Italy to improve his wife's health in 1845 that inspired Brown to revive the naturalistic approach of pre-Renaissance painters, in contrast with the decorous style of their successors, which was still favoured by the Royal Academy. His emphasis on mundane subjects and a more gritty, unflattering realism – complete with inharmonious colours, animated faces and confrontational poses – impressed the young artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who went on to found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Brown was also a talented draughtsman and designer, and

anticipated French Impressionism by several decades when he painted *The Pretty Baa-Lambs* entirely in the open air in the 1850s. To demonstrate his range the exhibition has been arranged into 11 themes, from depictions of contemporary life and his lesser-known landscapes to interior designs for William Morris.

Although largely unsuccessful commercially, Brown's efforts found favour in the industrial north, particularly Liverpool and Manchester. "Business people in the northern cities had a much more open mind about what art was and what was acceptable than in London," Treuherz says. "When Manchester Art Gallery opened in 1882 it was very keen on the Pre-Raphaelites, and purchased Brown's *Work*, which depicts a London scene, when the National Gallery would never have considered it."

Arguably the artist's most important painting, *Work* is exhibited with a selection of rarely seen preparatory studies from its ten-year gestation period. The resulting tableau, centred on navvies digging up a Hampstead road, catalogues each echelon in Victorian society, from heroic manual labourers to the idle rich, street urchins and the unemployed. But although the subject matter was radical for an artwork the painting reflects the contemporary emphasis on work's spiritual and moral value more than Marx's revolutionary theories. "Brown believed that the rich and poor were

equal but he wasn't a revolutionary and he didn't join any political movements," Treuherz says.

Instead Brown assuaged his social concerns by making personal interventions, teaching workers in London and helping establish a labour bureau when he moved to Manchester in the 1880s.

Commissioned to paint 12 murals in the new town hall (accessible on Sundays during the exhibition) he completed the 13-year project only shortly before his death, again foregrounding the heroic worker in his sometimes tenuous depictions of the city's history. In 1887 he contributed further momentous images of local workers to the Royal Manchester Jubilee Exhibition.

With his ground-breaking approach to both style and subject matter it seems surprising that an exhibition focusing on Brown has been so long coming, but the completion of cataloguing work by esteemed scholar Mary Bennett has been crucial for Treuherz. "We now know a lot more about him – including the existence of paintings which were thought to have been lost," he says. "This exhibition is very overdue, but not because Brown is any less important than the other Pre-Raphaelites."

Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer is at Manchester Art Gallery until 29 January 2012 (www.manchestergalleries.org/fordmadoxbrown)



ALSO SHOWING



MADAMA BUTTERFLY

15 Oct, Grand Opera House, York

Derek Black and Blackburn International bring this production of the internationally acclaimed Ukrainian opera to the UK for the first time. Starring Rosa Lee Thomas and Elena Dee, the award winning opera boasts exquisite sets and fabulous costumes. Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* tells the heart-breaking story of the beautiful young Japanese girl who falls in love with an American naval lieutenant. Highlights include the melodic *Humming Chorus*, the moving aria *One Fine Day* and the unforgettable *Love Duet*.



THE DEBT COLLECTORS

10&12 Oct, Capstone Theatre, Liverpool

Produced by the John Godber Company and Theatre Royal Wakefield, *The Debt Collectors* is the brand new play by John Godber, playwright of international hits *Bouncers* and *Teachers* amongst others. *The Debt Collectors* mixes money and love, as two out of work actors fall into the world of debt recovery. But all is not what it seems in this hilarious comedy of unpaid bills, offers of sex and boozy bailiffs.