

INTRODUCTION

Recovering Victorian Ideas

About Art, Beauty, and Society

In 1885, James McNeill Whistler gave a brilliant and caustic speech attacking the then-pervasive habit of understanding art as a means to an end: “the people have acquired the habit of looking, as who should say, not *at* a picture, but *through* it, at some human fact, that shall, or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental, or moral state.”¹ Indeed, late-nineteenth-century civic reformers used this idea of art as the experience of its subject matter to support art galleries as part of a profound reimagining of their industrial cities. Alongside libraries, schools, town halls, sanitation works, drainage systems, food inspection, and the panoply of state-sponsored reactions to industrialization, municipal art museums and galleries of contemporary art became a fixture of city life. Inspired by social critics such as John Ruskin, who connected aesthetics and ethics, middle-class civic leaders worked to rectify the moral and physical ugliness of industrial capitalism through access to art. As Whistler complained, “Beauty is confounded with Virtue, and, before a work of Art, it is asked, ‘What good shall it do?’”²

A generation later, this understanding of a purposive social role for art persisted, predicated on looking “through” paintings: for example, in 1911, Professor Michael Sadler gave a lecture to the Royal Manchester Institution, which in 1883 had given its building and collection to the city to become the Manchester City Art Gallery. Sadler was an important art collector and professor of education at the University of Manchester; in various posts from Oxford to Calcutta, he developed an internationally influential, sociological approach to education.³ In this talk, “Pictures in a Great City,” he explored the relationships between urban space, nature, art, and beauty, with particular reference to the city art museum in Manchester. Sadler understood the art collection in terms of its urban location: “Those who live in Manchester have their sense sharpened for the beauty and refreshment of unspoiled landscape. We are hungry for it. Through separation from it, we understand what it means to us. And the pictures in the gallery reveal its delights and prepare us for a deeper delight in it.”⁴ For Sadler, the city was defined by separation from the beauty of nature, and while some could—

and did—go to the countryside themselves, others had access to such beauty only through art. Indeed, exposure to art could “prepare” viewers to understand nature more profoundly.

Whistler and Sadler, cosmopolitan modern artist and imperial educator, separated by a generation, present in a nutshell the argument of the Victorian museum movement: art is not important for itself, but for the experience it provides, made possible by viewing paintings as windows; further, this encounter is directly related to the daily deprivations of the modern industrial city and something called “nature,” its imagined opposite. *Transformative Beauty* tells the story of this idea and how citizens turned it into city art museums—bricks and mortar, pictures on walls, and visitors to galleries—in Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. In doing so, this book explores the complex relationship between a period’s governing aesthetics and its public use of art. In tracing the reformers’ attempts to beautify their cities, we come up against fundamental questions about culture, money, and power: who should pay for art? what is it for? how can society generate the wealth that pays for it without also causing suffering and poverty? are art museums equally open to all, regardless of education level?

In his 1885 speech, Whistler blamed many of the errors of his time period’s ideas about art on an unnamed critic, offering a searing portrait of his old rival Ruskin: “Sage of the Universities—learned in many matters, and of much experience in all, save his subject. Exhorting—denouncing—directing. Filled with wrath and earnestness. Bringing powers of persuasion, and polish of language, to prove nothing. Torn with much teaching—having naught to impart. Impressive—important—shallow. Defiant—distressed—desperate. . . . Gentle priest of the Philistines.”⁵ Like Whistler (although not sharing his disdain), I have observed Ruskin’s importance to the people who helped make art public in the city museums of Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester. Certainly, multiple voices connected art and morality in the late nineteenth century, deriving ideas from such figures as A. W. N. Pugin, Thomas Carlyle, William Morris, Matthew Arnold, Prince Albert, George Eliot, and Ruskin himself, to name just a few.⁶ What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which reformers who wanted to make art public engaged with Ruskin’s work, and often with Ruskin personally, even when he himself disagreed with their attempts to put his ideas into practice. Indeed, during the 1870s, largely through his publication *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin emphasized that the entire system of Liberalism, free markets, and industrial capitalism, divided as it was into separate and unequal social classes, worked against his understand-

ing of God and morality.⁷ He tried to make his well-intentioned followers, correspondents, and students see the suffering around them and exhorted them to action: “Children should have enough to eat, and their skins should be washed clean. It is not *I* who say that. Every mother’s heart under the sun says that, if she has one.”⁸ To put his ideas into practice, Ruskin began or participated in several projects, such as teaching at the Working Men’s College in London, building roads with his Oxford undergraduates, and establishing the Guild of St. George. All of these combined art, education, and manual labor in varying degrees, enacting his particular criticisms of industrial society and his understanding of the close relationships among meaningful work, beauty, and morality.⁹

Alongside these efforts, however, most of the many men and women inspired by Ruskin worked during this same period to do what they could to bring art, beauty, and nature to their own cities and towns and to address social problems without wholesale revolution or radical economic restructuring to an imagined preindustrial ideal. As we will see in Chapter 1, reformers in all three cities explored in this book engaged with Ruskin personally on some level, and all received similar exhortations to take on more radical social change. Even though Ruskin criticized their projects, however, his followers were deeply committed to translating his writings into action; indeed, Ruskin inspired a worldwide audience, as for example described in Gandhi’s autobiography, the Mahatma being one of the few people who converted Ruskin’s ideas into radical social experimentation.¹⁰ Part of the larger, international Arts and Crafts movement, such reformers founded Ruskin Societies that presented lectures, produced pamphlets, and organized meetings; created paintings that attempted to achieve “truth to nature”; gave sermons to inspire individual and civic reform; began new communal housing and work ventures to alleviate poverty; designed buildings, furniture, and everyday objects with a new craft aesthetic and philosophy; and founded museums and wrote exhibition catalogues to redeem industrial capitalism using methods inspired by Ruskin’s art and social criticism.¹¹ Collectively, these enthusiasts created a vision of art and meaningful labor as experiences necessary for counteracting the debilitating and dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism in general, and the ugliness of modern cities in particular. Thus, as Whistler perceived, the art museums in these industrial cities were not intended to teach viewers about art itself, either in terms of established modes of connoisseurship or as showcases for the history of art—in contrast, for example, to the National Gallery at the time, or to nearly all art museums today.

However, as *Transformative Beauty* also shows, these goals of bringing a wider public to beauty and morality through art were complicated by multiple actors striving to use art in different ways: art could represent philanthropy or civic pride, and museums could be important venues for the display of middle-class (including lower-middle-class) cultural aspirations. Close research into the histories of these art museums shows them as sites of vibrant cultural debate—over the role of government (should taxes support public art?), over the meaning and role of art (is it a necessity or a luxury?), and over what kinds of art, what kinds of audience, and what kinds of interpretation should go into public institutions. Debates led to extreme positions on both sides, as those in favor of art as part of the betterment of society claimed powers for it akin to religious awakening, and those against public art mocked these claims in favor of traditional religion, self-help, or different kinds of public intervention. These institutions, therefore, although largely created from middle-class initiative, did not form a unified cultural imposition. Rather, public art remained a fraught and hotly contested issue, as interested parties sparred over the museums' founding, financial support, institutional structure, collecting policies, educational programs, and opening hours.

Likewise, the art itself brought all of the tensions and debates of late Victorian culture into the sanctuary of the museums. Nineteenth-century British art, eclipsed for several generations by the criticism and aesthetics of modernism, has recently reemerged as worthy of sustained scholarly investigation and interpretation.¹² Far from being simplistic escapism into rural idylls or nostalgic historicism, the paintings in these museums, and the criticism they generated, raised fundamental concerns of the Victorian age, including the relationship between the material and the spiritual, the meaning of labor and wealth, the mystery of faith and the gnawing cancer of doubt, and the historical significance of the Industrial Revolution and the British empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, modernists such as Whistler had thrown out the basic premise that painting was primarily a medium through which to engage with subject matter. Despite this sea change in aesthetic standards, however, the idea that art can be a force for moral regeneration, and the institutions this idea inspired, have continued to shape our own conceptions of beauty, the urban experience, and the public role of art.

I find two distinct foundational assumptions behind the new libraries, parks, and museums supported and run by local governments. The first was the cult of domesticity, or ideology of “separate spheres,” that celebrated the home as a benign, healing sanctuary from industrial capitalism. This topic has of course

received a great deal of attention in recent years, particularly from historians of gender and the family. Writers have emphasized that the cult of domesticity arose in reaction to the physical and moral conditions of industrial labor.¹³ New forms of public space such as museums, libraries, and parks took on the qualities associated with the domestic sphere: separate from industrial capitalism and offering refuge, beauty, and morality.¹⁴ For instance, longtime Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery curator Whitworth Wallis explained that his museum hoped to create a space outside of everyday experience: “Ruskin says that the word museum means ‘Belonging to the muses,’ and that all museums ought to be places of noble instruction, where, free from the distractions of the outside world, one can devote a portion of secluded and reverent life to the attainment of divine wisdom, which the Greeks supposed to be the gift of Apollo or of the sun, but which the Christian knows to be the gift of Christ.”¹⁵ Like a civic version of the ideal Victorian home—a place of moral refuge and repose, outside the hurly-burly of the marketplace—city art museums would provide a domesticated public space for beauty. Art museums could thus bring middle-class ideals to the center of industrial cities, part of the wider response to industrial capitalist society and its perceived ugliness. The cover image of this book, an illustrated map of Birmingham by H. W. Brewer from 1886, highlights this idea, showing the new cultural center architecturally distinguished from the smokestacks that stretch to the horizon.

A second idea behind the museum movement, as the Sadler lecture showed, was that the beauty of nature (and nature through art) was a necessary counterpart to cities, particularly industrial cities. This idea developed out of three related aspects of Victorian society and culture: first, the rapidity of urbanization, and the lucid memory, preserved in literature and art, of village life and country traditions; second, the resulting, often nostalgic, articulation of clear dichotomies in society and culture between the country and the city, even if these differences ignored continuities of exploitation; and third, the understanding that art acted as a window that could provide an experience of beauty within the ugliness of the city.¹⁶ As we will see, advocates linked the set of ideas associated with “home” and those connected to “nature,” both signifying opposition to industrial, commercial cities, in order to bolster their arguments for public art museums.

The prominence of art museums in late-nineteenth-century (and contemporary) cities has made them, as Jesús Pedro Lorente phrased it and titled his 1998 book, “cathedrals of urban modernity.” However, much of the historiography has understood Victorian museums as hodge-podge collections of contemporary British

art, the result of more or less clumsy middle-class attempts at “social control” combined with civic or personal boosterism.¹⁷ In contrast, detailed archival research shows the complex beliefs behind these new urban institutions, which embodied the possibilities for local government action and city leaders’ attempts to contain the chaotic forces of industrialization. In other words, when we examine the Victorian ideas and aesthetics behind the museums, we uncover as a major impulse both a serious dissatisfaction with industrial society and a reasonable hope for mitigating its worst effects. Viewed in this light, the art collections and educational policies of these museums make sense because they were amassed and organized not in terms of art history or art education, but to provide art as experience. Whether understood as pursuing fine craft and self-expression or as presenting through art the beauty of nature and God’s creation, these art museums came out of romantic and natural theological conceptions about the universal language of, and need for, beauty, most particularly in the context of industrial cities. In supporting such institutions, reformers echoed the dominant cultural trope about the possibilities for the home as refuge. When museums developed as city-run institutions, they enshrined a new type of public, urban space, a domesticated ideal supported by an increasingly powerful government that thereby took on new responsibilities for its citizens. Their educational, opening, and collection policies were certainly ad hoc and often contradictory, but they were usually premised on these fundamental assumptions and were not simply accidental.

Ultimately, in the successes and failures of these Victorian museums, their histories reveal a tragic fact of the modern age: thriving cultural institutions such as city art museums arose out of the same wealth that caused or profited from, at least in part, the very inequalities they were meant to alleviate. We still cannot solve this basic conundrum. On the one hand, industrial capitalism and its attendant forms of imperialism and globalization create vibrant cities, people, and cultural institutions, such as public museums. On the other, the same forces give rise to tremendous suffering, poverty, and conflict, ills that no art collection, regardless of size or quality, can hope to abolish. In his fantasy *News from Nowhere*, William Morris imagined a utopia of joyful labor where all workers were artisans and all artisans were artists, thus actually ending “art” in the European tradition: “Many of the things which used to be produced—slave-wares for the poor and mere wealth-wasting wares for the rich—ceased to be made. That remedy was, in short, the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who

produces.”¹⁸ Morris lectured to Birmingham reformers and helped choose acquisitions for Manchester’s city art museum; like Ruskin, however, his mighty imagination sought some larger, more beautiful, more complete—and perhaps, therefore, impossible—solution to the iniquities of the machine age.

THE GRECIAN URN VERSUS RUSKIN’S WINDOW: BEAUTY AND TRUTH

How did art become a tool for ameliorating industrial cities? To understand this, we have to go back to an earlier generation’s concept of art. In 1819, both the future Queen Victoria and future art critic John Ruskin were born—both would live until 1901 and, in their own ways, define the age. That same year, John Keats wrote his five “great odes,” including probably the most famous, “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” This ode, using ideas derived from Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy and most influential British eighteenth-century painter and art theorist, contained what became a near-ubiquitous statement of the equation of beauty and truth. This poetic proclamation would echo throughout the nineteenth century and become the standard by which and against which artists, art critics, and the art-buying public would try to judge artworks and their social role.

Keats considers the urn as an example of perfect artistic expression, its figures preserving unblemished the ideal forms of youth, love, and beauty:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!¹⁹

Most famously, the poem imagines that the urn’s ultimate statement to humanity is Reynolds’s equation of beauty and truth:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty;”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.²⁰

Reynolds had equated beauty and truth in his “Discourse VII” (1776), which made an argument (similar to that previously advanced by John Locke and Locke’s pupil the Earl of Shaftesbury) for the “uniformity of sentiments among

mankind,” which results in “the reality of a standard in taste, as well as in corporeal beauty.” He concluded that beauty and truth are “formed on the uniform, eternal, and immutable laws of nature, and . . . of necessity can be but one.”²¹ Keats’s poem, then, participated in an understanding of art as essentially about the uncovering of universal truths through the search for ideal beauty, both being based on unchanging natural law. While the artist alone could reveal the essential harmonies of nature, all of humankind could recognize them. However, fine art still seemed to demand some education or culture; could one exhibit a classical nude, however beautiful, to all classes?²²

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a complex combination of artistic movements, art criticism, and the rise of new art buyers challenged this established understanding of art and paved the way for the idea of art as an experience that would counteract the ills of urban, industrial capitalism. This revolution would find beauty in the particular rather than the general, and in the eager use of nature by early Renaissance artists, rather than in the perfection of Raphael that had been conventionalized in the academies. In the works by what became the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and in the writings of Ruskin—their most famous defender—beauty could be achieved only by absolute truth to nature, a fidelity that ignored received conventions of color, composition, or style; instead, these artists sought to portray universally recognizable truths through a meticulous realism and attention to (symbolic) detail. The Pre-Raphaelites reviled “Sir Sloshua,” targeting the abstract idealizing and muted palette of Reynolds’s portraits, and they avoided the generalities and long gaze of the romantic landscape artist. Instead, they developed an intense focus on foreground detail, used vivid color from painting outdoors, adopted explicitly moralizing and narrative subjects, and emphasized medieval rather than classical models of beauty. This revolution in the relationship between beauty and truth, and a concomitant change in the purpose and understanding of art—as a mimetic representation of imperfect nature, rather than the expression of beautiful, ideal forms—made art appear to many viewers and collectors both moral and appropriate for all classes, and hence part of a new approach to addressing social and economic disparity.

In defending and explaining this new approach to art, Ruskin combined the romantic idea of the artist as revealing the “invisible world” with an evangelical language that no doubt comforted his many middle-class readers.²³ Yet Ruskin’s oeuvre was enormous, contradictory, and dense, and his ideas changed throughout his lifetime. His middle-class upbringing combined strict evangelical doctrine,

family trips in Europe, and art collecting, and from an early age he began developing a new mode of visual interpretation that would justify visual pleasure in terms of religious experience and, eventually, social relations.²⁴ His five-volume work *Modern Painters* (1843–1860) brought a new urgency to art criticism, as he combined the campaigning zeal of A. W. N. Pugin and Thomas Carlyle with his own religiously inflected aesthetics.²⁵ From the first book of *Modern Painters*, what we might call Ruskin's new "visual evangelism" emphasized the continuity of beauty and morality; he argued that the joy derived from beauty was based not on sensuality, but on the perception of the divine.²⁶

Ruskin put forward an influential interpretation of paintings in the chapter "Of the Use of Pictures" in the third volume of *Modern Painters* (1856). Here, he tried to explain his ideas about beauty and "truth to nature," which some readers had apparently found somewhat confusing. If, he wrote,

it were offered to me to have, instead of [works of art], so many windows, out of which I should see, first, the real chain of the Alps from the Superga; then the real block of gneiss, and Aiguilles Rouges; then the real towers of Fribourg, and pine forest; the real Isola Bella; and, finally, the true Mary and Elizabeth; and beneath them, the actual old monk at work in his cell,—I would very unhesitatingly change my five pictures for the five windows; and so, I apprehend, would most people, not, it seems to me, unwisely.²⁷

Ruskin thus encouraged his readers to see a key source of art's greatness as its subject, even to the point of preferring the subject over the painting, and to understand the painting not in terms of representation or surface, but in terms of its engagement with subject matter. Throughout his writings, he led his readers to judge art by asking themselves whether paintings represented nature faithfully, not by convention or preconceived ideas of beauty. Indeed, at its best, for Ruskin, art could unite the divine in God's creation, the creative process, and the viewer. He argued that it was the role of the artist to act as an "eye-witness" whose sight testified to the glory of nature as God's creation: "Nothing must come between Nature and the artist's sight; nothing between God and the artist's soul."²⁸ Thus art, because of these properties, became a key index of social justice; Ruskin's famous essay "The Nature of Gothic" measured beauty not only in terms of aesthetics, but also in terms of morality, judged again through connections to the real world, that is, to conditions of production.²⁹

Using these ideas, reformers worked to bring art and the beauty of nature to the public, primarily through museums but also through country walks, settle-

ment programs, local exhibitions and world fairs, publications, and design reform. For example, in 1895 Manchester reformer T. C. Horsfall argued that the city art museum there could provide “the inhabitants of the poorer parts of the town knowledge of the beauty and wonderfulness of the world and of the nobler works of Man.”³⁰ By the end of the century, when Horsfall was writing (here, advocating the Sunday opening of the Manchester City Art Gallery), this had become an established trope.³¹ Indeed, art had been incorporated as part of the governing structure of most British towns in the form of city museums, often using a version of this argument that the visual arts were universally accessible and could offer a restorative experience of beauty.

The movement to bring art to the people thus came out of a nineteenth-century British aesthetic ideology distinct from both what preceded and what followed. Born of romanticism, natural theology, the reification of “nature,” and changes in artistic practice and art criticism, the new approach allowed, even encouraged, artists, critics, and audiences to participate in defining the social role of art and dominant modes of representation.³² In other words, nineteenth-century British art itself helped make it possible for reformers to think that it would be beneficial to make art accessible to the masses. Trying to understand the relationship between art, ideas, and the movement to make art public allows us to take seriously the profound dissatisfaction with their cities that spurred many museum advocates to action. This book is thus part of the larger scholarship that has recently tried to understand nineteenth-century art and art institutions not simply as instruments of social control, but as emerging out of complex negotiations among a disunited middle class that deployed art for multiple (and often contradictory) purposes.³³ As Dianne Sachko Macleod has convincingly argued in *Art and the Victorian Middle Class* (1996), the broad middle classes, active as new art patrons and civic leaders in late-nineteenth-century British towns, helped to create an eclectic art that reflected their values. But they did not agree on how the resulting works should be used.

A substantial body of scholarship has emphasized that middle-class patrons’ entry into the art market in the 1830s and 1840s had several significant consequences, creating what Robert Hewison has called a new “visual economy.”³⁴ The new class of collectors bought contemporary British art and shunned old masters—limited in number and hence out of the price range of most buyers—not least to differentiate themselves from aristocratic connoisseurs.³⁵ As artists lost their traditional sources of patronage, an exhibition system developed in London

and the great regional cities to connect artists to their new, anonymous public.³⁶ Capitalizing on increasing public interest, the press reported on art exhibitions, guided the new buyers in aesthetic decisions, and explained the merits of the rapidly multiplying numbers of artists.³⁷ The explosion of museum-building in the last half of the nineteenth century arose out of, and in turn fuelled, a new enthusiasm for contemporary British art; the most important regional art museums, such as those in Manchester and Liverpool, held annual exhibitions of new works for sale to raise revenue and often bought from these exhibitions (see Chapter 1). The Royal Academy, commercial galleries, and regional art museums, in concert with the national press, all participated in the diffusion and popularization of contemporary British art and the discussion of new ideas about art's social role.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, these interconnected developments had a profound impact on the use and prominence of art in British society. Many individual choices by single collectors gradually created a new art market and a new visual language. The new practice of professional art criticism was not only a sign of art entering mainstream culture, but also a continuing catalyst, as art critics helped to justify and popularize art in new ways. In this context, Ruskin's enormous influence becomes more understandable. In the relationship between Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites, art criticism, practice, and patronage combined to redefine categories of traditional aesthetics. Artists, art critics, and collectors continued to explore the relationship between beauty and truth, and museum advocates strove to create public spaces for both.

VICTORIAN MUSEUMS IN CONTEXT

What economic and social aspects of late-nineteenth-century society spurred museum proponents to advocate art as a restorative experience? How was the museum movement part of the larger story of reactions to the new realities of economic depression, urbanization, democratization, imperialism, and mass production of the late nineteenth century? For many observers, it was obvious that there was something wrong with an economic system that created not only air blackened with soot and farmland grown into slums, but terrible suffering and poverty, a pervasive erosion of established social relations, and an empty materialism and consumerism. This increased markedly after the Great Depression of the early 1870s, as the economic slump spurred on an active press and increasingly proactive local governments to describe the depth of suffering and poverty

across Britain.³⁸ At the same time, British fears of competition from the United States and Germany (like American anxiety about China and India today) led to initiatives to improve industrial design, while fears of revolution and degeneration prompted action to ameliorate workers' living conditions and their opportunities for education and "improvement." By the end of the century, imperialist and nationalist ideologies suffused discussions of culture and society, as Victorians and Edwardians increasingly saw themselves in a larger international and even racial competition for survival. The city art museums in Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham began to develop in the last third of the nineteenth century, a period of intense social, cultural, and economic pressure. The museums opened in purpose-built, permanent structures within eight years of each other: the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool in 1877, the Manchester City Art Gallery in 1883, and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1885.

It is a particular aspect of this period that reformers looked to art as one of the key methods that were slowly and haphazardly devised to deal with the problems of the emergent modern, secular, industrial age. The municipal art museums embodied a new version of the Liberal ideal, in which individuals could—through self-education, hard work, and discipline—participate in ever-increasing numbers in the democratic process. They harnessed together private and public wealth. Built with donations of money and objects, administered by elected councilors, and maintained through public funds, the museums helped to strengthen and extend the idea of local government. Cities developed art galleries alongside a number of other, related beautification and educational projects, such as libraries, parks, and museums of natural history and anthropology (these last two were often combined, as during this period curators understood artifacts of many other cultures through racist categories). Often the same active citizens advocated for all of these improvements, and the resulting institutions were frequently combined administratively—for example, Liverpool's Free Libraries, Museum, and Arts Committee.³⁹ Yet it is notable that unlike free public libraries, the art museum projects in these cities were not successful in the immediate wake of the roaring sensation of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the boom years that followed. Instead, they came out of a distinctly more anxious period.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed a raft of technological marvels—the telephone, the cinema, the bicycle, the telegraph—that compounded, in the age of the railroad and steamboat, an ever-increasing pace and sense of displaced traditions.⁴⁰ Despite the economic depression of the 1870s,

which hit agricultural sectors especially hard, new opportunities proliferated, particularly for the broad middle and even working classes; in fact, falling prices helped urban workers, who increasingly participated in new leisure cultures, including sport, music halls, and workingmen's clubs.⁴¹ Urbanization continued to depopulate the countryside, mass production and a proliferating mass press offered an unprecedented consumption of goods and images, department stores and large corporations began their steady domination of the economy, and nations entered an intense competition for world markets and resources.⁴² Museums thus operated in an increasingly saturated visual culture and as one option among many for middle- and working-class leisure and consumption.⁴³

Out of all of these various social and economic transformations, the political economy of the last decades of the nineteenth century was marked by a constant search for elusive consensus and stability. Museums, and the art they contained, offered important venues for attempting such resolution, in the process prompting multiple debates and struggles between interested parties. Successive Conservative and Liberal governments managed to pass significant reform legislation that expanded the electorate, created a mandatory national system of primary education, and standardized the political process.⁴⁴ These moves toward the democratization of politics and culture changed the political landscape less through their direct effects—workers voted Conservative more often than not—than through the new political culture of partisan competition and the threat of new political groupings that might claim workers' allegiance as legitimate parties, as the socialist movement eventually generated the Labour Party. During the years before World War I, the women's suffrage movement, massive strikes and demonstrations, acts of violence against people and property, and urban poverty threatened the balance that maintained Britain's class- and gender-divided society. These developments also increased the pressure to bring the working and lower middle classes into a common culture with dominant middle-class values, a goal that gave further impetus to the movements to establish domesticated public spaces such as libraries, museums, and parks.

Museum advocates achieved success in making public art a key issue of debate in a particular moment of great change in the constitution of local governments, which faced the same tensions between forces of traditional authority and increasing democracy.⁴⁵ Indeed, local governments themselves had been subject to significant reform, as over the course of the nineteenth century, older institutions of local administration had proved inadequate to deal with the problems of

modern industrial cities or the needs of mass populations.⁴⁶ Through a series of parliamentary acts from 1835 to 1894, feudal privileges and positions in local government haphazardly gave way to elected bodies of officials and central oversight boards, as, piece by piece, local government in Britain gained new powers, responsibilities, and administrative structures. The beginning of this new role for local government was the 1835 Municipal Corporations Act, part of the same broad transformation of the practice and administration of British governance initiated with the Reform Act of 1832 (which began the long process of widening the franchise and election reform) and the New Poor Law Act of 1834 (which created a new administration for poor relief, a system separate from and parallel to local governments). The 1835 act established town councils as the unit of local governance and granted the right to vote to all ratepayers (taxpayers) who had lived in the city for three years.

Parliament gradually added both permissive and mandatory legislation, creating a body of law that reflected the concern of the time to strike a balance between traditional elites and elected authorities, and between central and local administration. This process left many important aspects of governance in the hands of the town councils and allowed for a wide range of engagement and activity, as different cities created different styles of municipal government. Over the course of the century, local governments adapted and expanded to tackle many problems that became more acute as cities grew, such as sanitation, health, education, housing, care for the poor, transportation, lighting, policing, and recreation. In the case of public museums and libraries, Parliament passed the Museums Acts of 1845, 1850, and 1855, which allowed local governments to assess rates (property taxes) to maintain public libraries and museums.⁴⁷ Parliament tried to standardize the provision of basic services at the local level, and to create a simplified administrative structure, through legislation passed between the late 1860s and the middle of the 1890s. At the same time, regional cities struggled during this period to cope with their new responsibilities.

The continuing pace of urbanization in the wake of the economic crisis of the 1870s, new political movements, and the mass press combined not only to make poverty more visible than ever to citizens and civic leaders, but also to convince many contemporary observers of the unhealthy influence of the cities themselves.⁴⁸ The glaring distance between rich and poor had long been studied and publicized in the industrial cities, forming a core part of earlier reform efforts from the 1840s on. From the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Benjamin Disraeli

to the inquiries of Owen Chadwick and Frederick Engels, fiction, official studies, and exposés did much to create the image of the (especially northern) industrial city as one of masters and men, of great wealth and abject poverty. The awareness that London harbored comparable inequality thus came relatively late, but the capital's discovery of the horror of the slums of the East End spurred a national debate on the need for major social reform and the best means of accomplishing it.

New cultural amenities such as art museums, funded by local government and the donations of wealthy industrialists, represented a novel approach to government intervention in British society and a new vision of social reform—social change through aesthetic experience.⁴⁹ Because of the gradual move to state-run institutions, the story of the erection and funding of museums in nineteenth-century Britain is part of the larger story of the haphazard and often-faltering development of government intervention after the mid-century triumph of *laissez-faire*. Museums were not simply passive receivers or products of new ideas about culture and governmentality, but were active agents of this transformation. They were part of a concurrent movement that rebuilt urban centers with libraries, concert halls, and parks for new and expanded publics, a creative solution using ideals of domesticity and the morality of art to create domesticated public spaces dependent on, but positioned in deliberate contrast with, the wider capitalist economy.

TRANSFORMATIVE BEAUTY

In this book I argue that the art museums of Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham were part of a broad reaction to industrial, capitalist society. Research into the history and origins of Victorian museums gives us a glimpse of a culture deeply self-conscious about the very leisure time, wealth, and material abundance that allowed their production.⁵⁰ Civic art museums were one of many new institutions that proliferated during the second half of the nineteenth century because they helped Victorian society to negotiate and even reconcile the apparent extremes of evangelical religion and the new productivity of the industrial economy, and, in doing so, to imagine a new relationship with material culture. They were part of the great transformation by which the wide middle class deeply affected by evangelical Christianity came to think, as Deborah Cohen has recently put it, of “morality and materialism . . . as mutually reinforcing propositions.”⁵¹ Public museums emerged as material prosperity grew, taking particular objects out of the market—or into a very special part of the marketplace—for a variety of pur-

poses.⁵² By doing so, Victorians evinced a great belief in the didactic and morally transformative potential of objects, whether art or natural specimens, even as mass production was revolutionizing labor relations, consumption patterns, the domestic interior, the urban environment, and traditional practices of all kinds. Ultimately, museums both celebrated the new dogma of progress and hoped to mitigate the worst effects of urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism.⁵³

When “the museum” is understood as a conceptual category, it is tempting to see it as a metaphor for modern society as a whole.⁵⁴ It is easy to see the museums around us (whether of art, history, natural history, or other, more idiosyncratic types of collections) as powerful symbols and generators of Western culture since the Enlightenment. After all, they—like the Enlightenment project in general—make objects of study visible, categorize them, and submit them to rational inquiry. In this light, scholars have understood both nineteenth-century European imperial kleptomania and historicism (artistic, architectural, or philosophical) as being “museal,” “the museum” becoming both product and producer of a larger cultural drive.⁵⁵ Yet museums did not always present their collections in a “rational” or disciplined way; these late-nineteenth-century city art museums had in fact a rationale very different from that of the scientific or “disciplined” study of art history. *Transformative Beauty* thus contributes to recent work that has shown Victorian museums to be far less universalizing or powerful than earlier, abstract studies might have suggested.⁵⁶ The museum movement in Britain and its empire was widespread, but—in contrast to continental cultural provision—was locally driven, without any central administration.⁵⁷ Similarly, this book agrees with other recent scholarship in finding that museums had no single cause, method, public, or constituency.⁵⁸

To reinterpret museums in this way, *Transformative Beauty*, like other recent works, considers museums in their specific contexts, with sensitivity to the complex relationships between culture, class, and agency. Its five chapters investigate the city art museums in Birmingham, Liverpool, and Manchester: their founding (Chapter 1), opening policies (Chapter 2), collecting practices (Chapter 3), art and educational materials (Chapter 4), and subsequent embrace of the value of art for art’s sake (Chapter 5). I focus on these cities because contemporaries most frequently mentioned these city art museums, comparing them with each other and with museums in London. This is not unexpected; after all, in addition to Dublin and Glasgow, these were the major British cities outside of the metropolis, and they might be expected to have the biggest and most impor-

tant cultural institutions. At the same time, these cities embodied the Industrial Revolution and all of the cataclysmic social, economic, political, and cultural transformations it wrought. There are no scholarly published histories of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, the Manchester City Art Gallery, or the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, so this project thus rectifies serious lacunae in both museum studies and British cultural history.⁵⁹ Although I present evidence that each urban context was unique, I also show a unified museum movement that operated through the art, ideas, and social networks of the late nineteenth century, a profound response to industrial society in general, and industrial cities in particular.

Chapter 1 follows the men who tried to put Ruskin's ideas into practice—even though he exhorted them to more radical reform—to bring art to these industrial cities: architects making illuminated, calligraphic Ruskin bibliographies; city councilors lecturing on beauty; preachers inspiring city councilors to think of themselves as municipal Medicis. Chapter 2 addresses the question of whether art could draw people out of the pub, and—since they were generally not going to church or chapel—whether the working classes needed a government-supported alternative to their own homes for rest and recreation. Chapter 3 looks at the contested development of the museums' art collections, showing that all three museums collected art with the understanding that they were providing essential experiences rather than representative historical or educational collections. Chapter 4 considers how the three museums continued the idea of art as providing a means of engaging with subject, story, and morality through public lectures and through published catalogues and guidebooks, and examines the relationship between these readings of art and the works themselves. Finally, Chapter 5 explores how new ideas in the early twentieth century gradually transformed the museums, as a new generation of directors and city councils reconceived of the collections as primarily existing to educate citizens about art rather than to provide an antidote to industrial ugliness. Modernist art and art criticism, with their rejection of beauty, truth, and morality as artistic measures, would ultimately revolutionize the public role of civic art museums.

Although modernism brought in its wake radical changes in art and ideas about its purpose, the idea of art as experience, and of beauty as social transformation, created lasting institutions and social policy. These institutions continue to reinvent themselves, often recalling earlier goals and methods. By the end of the twentieth century, modern art museums had again created a public space

for the exhibition of everyday objects that could radically challenge viewers' perceptions. In unexpected ways, installation and conceptual art have brought back the idea of art as subject and the idea that an encounter with everyday objects in a museum might transform our experience of the city outside. Indeed, these institutions continue to thrive; at the beginning of the twenty-first century, art museums still, more often than not, form the central foci of urban renewal schemes. While standards for beauty have changed, the Victorian idea of art (and beauty itself) as reforming, refreshing, and inspirational has continued to influence contemporary policy. The Victorian museums are thus not just testaments to a past visual culture, but keystones for the central place of art in the modern city and in industrial capitalist society itself.