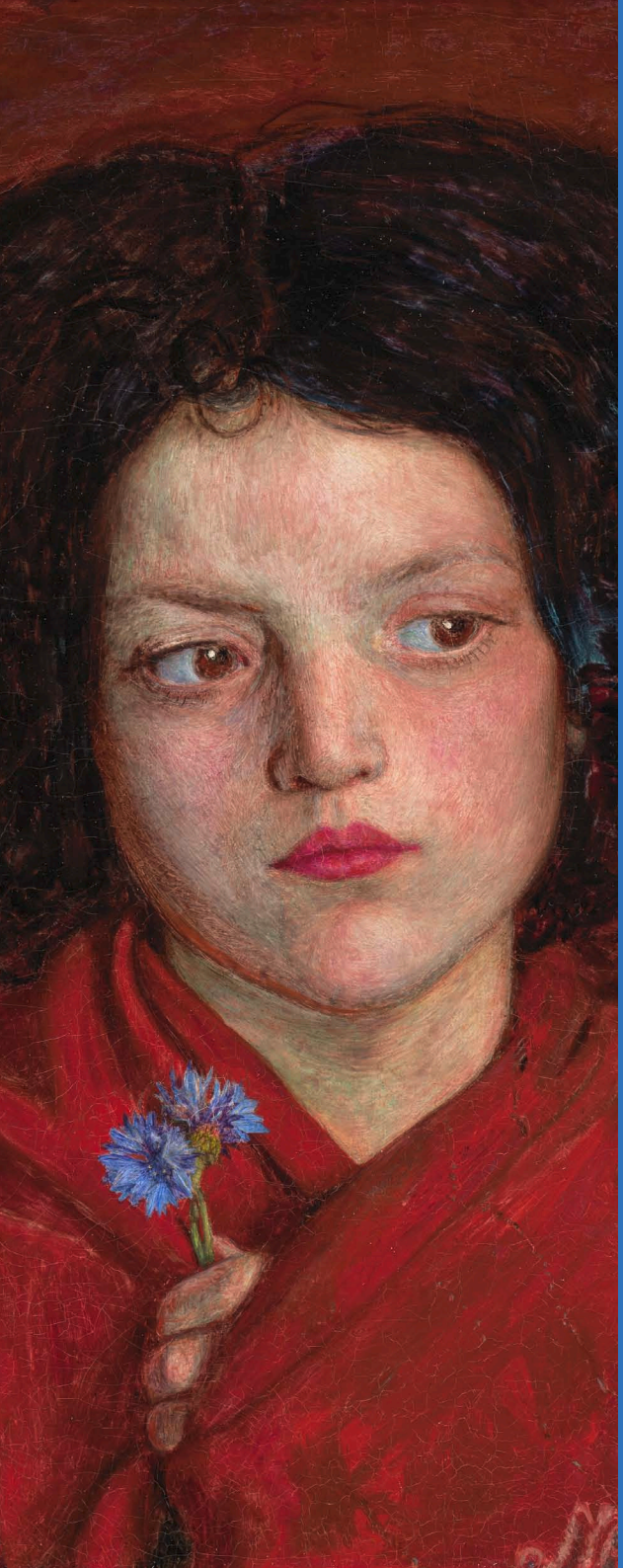


# Ford Madox Brown

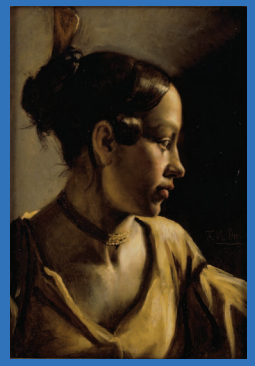
## Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer

**24 September–**
**29 January**
**Manchester**
**Art Gallery**

**Exhibition**
**Guide**

*Self-portrait*, c.1844/5, oil on board
© Peter and Renate Nahum, London

*Emma Hill (Study for the Last of England)*,
1852, black chalk and wash
© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery



*Head of a girl*, c 1840,
oil on canvas © Tate, London 2010

*Manfred on the Jungfrau*, 1841/1861,
oil on canvas © Manchester City Galleries

# Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer

Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893) was one of the great originals of British art. He is best known for his Pre-Raphaelite masterpieces *The Last of England* and *Work*, vivid modern-life subjects combining intense realism with originality of vision. Their social and political engagement is unique in Victorian art.

Brown had a formative influence on the younger Pre-Raphaelites. Before the foundation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, he created a new style inspired by the 'primitive simplicity' of the age before Raphael. The members of the Brotherhood took up his ideas and he in turn learned from them. Working in parallel, they adopted the minute detail and vivid colour that became hallmarks of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Brown's art was anti-academic, rejecting easy solutions, prettiness, and conventional Victorian formulae. His landscapes revealed unexpected beauty in ordinary places, and anticipated the open-air effects of the Impressionists. He depicted children without sentimentality and poor people without condescension. He challenged traditional ideas of artistic harmony, balance and decorum: Brown's use of clashing colours, confrontational poses, agitated movement, forceful expression and humour was ahead of its time.

This is the first comprehensive exhibition of his work for over forty years. It demonstrates a consistent determination to see things anew: to breathe fresh air, natural light and realism into the traditional forms in which he had been trained. It also includes stained glass and furniture designed for William Morris; and features works Brown painted here in Manchester, where he lived for several years while painting the twelve murals of Manchester's history in the Town Hall. The murals, his last great undertaking, show that even in old age his wit and inventiveness were undiminished.

# The Artist and his Family

Brown's background was unusual for a British artist. He was born in 1821 in Calais. His parents were English but lived in Northern France. They sent him to study at the art academies of Belgium. After a period in Paris, he settled in London.

Brown was married twice. His first wife, his cousin Elisabeth, died only five years after their marriage. His second wife Emma was illiterate when they met and he arranged for her to have lessons in social and domestic skills. They married in secret several years after the birth of their first child. Brown could not sell his paintings easily. He became depressed and reclusive and she developed a drink problem. The family never had enough money and during the 1850s they lived a hand-to-mouth existence.

Two of Brown's children died in infancy, and another, Oliver, died aged nineteen. Two daughters, Lucy and Catherine, survived. Both of them became artists, although their careers were interrupted by marriage. At the beginning of his career Brown used professional models for his paintings, but he also used his family and his friends.

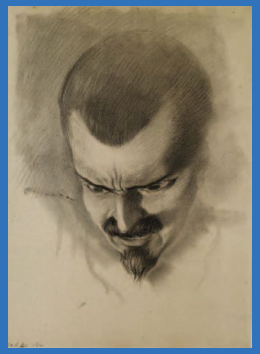
Brown later became romantically involved with two younger women: Marie Spartali, one of his pupils, and then the freethinking poet and feminist Mathilde Blind. These relationships may have been purely platonic, but in any case Brown's marriage to Emma survived. She was his favourite model and her beauty continued to inspire him until her death in 1890.

# The Early Period

Brown studied art at the Fine Art Academies of Bruges and Ghent, and finally at the Antwerp Academy, one of the leading art schools in Europe. The training there, modelled on the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, was much stricter and more thorough than anything available in Britain. It gave students skills in anatomy, composition and technique, enabling them to produce grand history paintings with elaborately grouped figures on elevated themes from history, literature or mythology. They were regarded as the ultimate test of the painter's art.

Brown then spent a period in Paris where he began to question his academic education. His few surviving paintings of this period are dark and dramatic, influenced by French Romantic artists such as Delacroix and Delaroche. But Brown's work was quirkier and deliberately less polished than theirs, with exaggerated facial expressions and a satirical edge, stemming from his admiration for Hogarth. His rough but powerful drawing style, seen in the King Lear series, rejected the suave drawing technique taught in the academies. Like the French Romantics, Brown favoured subjects from Byron and

*The Seraph's Watch (A Reminiscence of the Early Masters)*, 1847, oil on panel
© Private collection Geneva



*Head of Azo (Study for 'Parisina')*, 1842, black chalk and ink wash
© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

*The First Translation of the Bible into English* 1847–8, 1859–61, oil on canvas
© Bradford Museums and Galleries (Cliffe Castle Museum)

*'The pretty baa-lambs'*, 1851–59, oil on panel
© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Shakespeare. In France this was a short-lived fashion, but Brown retained a lifelong passion for English history and literature.

In 1844 he entered the competition for murals in the new Houses of Parliament, and moved to London, attracted by the possibilities of work. He was not successful in gaining a commission.

## The Change of Direction

In 1845–6 Brown and his first wife Elisabeth travelled across Europe to spend the winter in Rome for the sake of her health. They travelled via Basel, Milan and Florence and spent seven months in Rome. The journey, which was marked by personal sadness, as Elisabeth died on the way back to England, had a radical effect on Brown's art.

His style changed dramatically: it became lighter in colour and more naturalistic, and he experimented with natural lighting, to bring 'air and sunshine' to his historical subjects. Key influences were Italian Renaissance art, the Flemish paintings seen during his student days in Belgium and the work of the Nazarene painters encountered in Rome. In his portraits he followed the uncompromising realism of Holbein; and he painted a number of mother and baby subjects inspired by Italian and Flemish paintings of the Madonna and Child. Despite the foreign influence on his style, he used it to depict English subjects reflecting his patriotic views.

Brown's new manner, 'Pre-Raphaelite' before the style had a name, influenced the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded a few years later. His art struck a chord with the young Rossetti. They became lifelong friends, and Rossetti introduced Brown to Holman Hunt and Millais. In 1848, Rossetti, Hunt and Millais founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although Brown never became a member, he was a formative influence on the Pre-Raphaelite style and became one of its most important exponents.

## The Draughtsman

Brown's art education in Belgium was based on drawing. Students were trained to study the ideal proportions of the human figure by drawing from plaster casts of classical statues. Only then were they allowed to draw from live models. They were also taught to prepare for a painting thoroughly by studying every detail, drawing each figure nude and clothed, combining figures into groups and making studies of everything including hands, feet, draperies and accessories. Throughout his career, Brown continued to make preparatory drawings for his figure subjects but not for his landscapes, which were painted directly onto the canvas.

The drawings in this section were not intended to be finished works of art but they can still be admired for their various qualities of clarity, delicacy and energy.

## The Landscape Painter

Brown's earliest landscapes, in the backgrounds of his historical compositions, were copied from small studies done out of doors, but the finished paintings were done in the studio. The other Pre-Raphaelites, inspired by Ruskin's idea of 'truth to nature', painted their larger landscapes out of doors, but added the figures later in the studio. The turning point was *The pretty baa-lambs*. Here for the first time Brown sat in the open air and painted figures and landscape together to get a more unified and convincing appearance; he recorded the dazzling effect of hot sunlight with unprecedented fidelity.

Then, in the 1850s while living in Hampstead and Finchley, he painted a group of small landscapes of great originality, exploring different times of day, different seasons and different types of scenery. He tried to paint exactly what he saw, eliminating landscape conventions such as framing trees and aerial perspective. He also experimented with oval and circular shapes to get away from the usual rectangular 'window' format. Just as original was the larger *An English Autumn Afternoon*, a truly modern landscape painting: Pre-Raphaelite accuracy was applied to an ordinary, workaday scene with figures in modern dress, referring to contemporary ideas about landscape and leisure.

Although Brown was not trained in landscape painting, and wrote in his diary how he struggled to capture the ever-changing light and colours of nature, his landscapes are among his greatest achievements.

## The Painter of Modern Life

Brown was one of the first artists to paint serious contemporary subjects exploring social and political questions. Brown was not active in politics but had strong views. He was bitterly critical of the aristocracy and the class system, and was an admirer of Thomas Carlyle, who attacked Victorian materialism

*The Last of England*, 1852–55, oil on panel
© Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Detail of Thomas Carlyle and Revd. Frederick Maurice in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

Detail of a navvy in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

Detail of the chickweed seller in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

Detail of the rich ladies in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

and hypocrisy. His social conscience took practical form in his help for the poor: he taught at the Working Men's College in London, and founded a Labour Bureau to help the Manchester unemployed. He was also fiercely patriotic, and joined the volunteer Artists' Rifles Corps during the French invasion scare in the late 1850s.

Brown's earliest modern life subject was *Waiting*, a modest domestic scene, begun in 1851. The following year he had the first ideas for three paintings dealing with broader contemporary ideas. These were eventually realised as *An English Autumn Afternoon*, *The Last of England,* and *Work*. In these three paintings Brown re-invented history and landscape painting for the nineteenth century. Instead of elevated generalities they presented an accumulation of everyday details; and instead of myths or heroic deeds, the paintings embodied some of the great issues of the age: the transformation of landscape and leisure in *An English Autumn Afternoon*; emigration in *The Last of England*; and class and social inequality in *Work*. Their vivid realism was the result of his painstaking observation of detail, his exploration of natural light, and his penetrating eye, which rejected artifice and convention.

## The Characters in Work

Brown based the characters in the painting on contemporary types, whom viewers would have recognised from their dress and attitude. He described them in an accompanying pamphlet, often expanding on what is shown in the painting by inventing histories for them and speculating on their thoughts. He used his friends and family as models for some, but painted others from ordinary people that he met in the streets and persuaded to model for him.

### The 'Brainworkers'

The two men standing on the right of the painting are the key to the ideas that inspired the painting. They are portraits of real people: the writer Thomas Carlyle (the taller of the two) and the clergyman Revd. Frederick Maurice.

Carlyle's book *Past and Present* put forward the idea that work was the basis of a just society, and a means of individual salvation. The painting embodies these ideas, and they are expressed in the quotations from the Bible written on the frame.

Maurice was a preacher, social reformer and educationalist. He was one of the founders of the Christian Socialist party, and of the Working Men's College, a pioneer of working class education. Brown taught art there for a time and included a poster for the College on the wall on the left of the painting.

Brown described Carlyle and Maurice as 'brainworkers' – in modern terms they are the intellectuals, who, he wrote, 'seeming to be idle, work and are the cause of well-ordained work and happiness in others.'

### The Navvies

The navvies are the workmen digging up the road. Brown placed them in the centre of the painting to underline the central contribution their physical work makes to society. Each navvy is engaged in a different task – digging, sieving earth, carrying bricks, pausing for a drink, mixing cement – and each is different in age, character and physique. Brown wrote that the young navvy on the left 'occupies the place of the hero' of the group.

### The Poor Children

In the foreground, centrally placed, is a group of poor children: 'just such a group of ragged dirty brats as anywhere get in the way and make a noise.' The elder girl wears second-hand clothes that are too big for her. The baby wears black mourning ribbons to indicate that its mother has died. Brown wrote that the father drank, and neglected his children.

### The Chickweed Seller

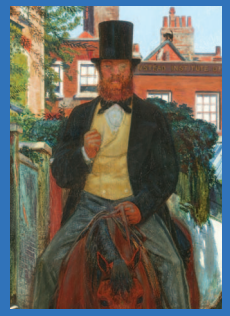
The man carrying a basket of plants is selling chickweed or groundsel, wild plants used as food for pet birds. He peers through his broken hat, decorated with ears of corn, a traditional symbol of madness. Street traders like this were often homeless vagrants or beggars. Brown described him as 'a ragged wretch who has never been taught to work.'

### The Rich Ladies

The ladies exemplify the rich who do not need to work. The older lady is engaged in charitable work. She holds a bundle of tracts (leaflets) advocating temperance (giving up alcohol). She has given one to the navvy in the trench but he is ignoring it: Brown's text wryly suggests she might 'be benefited by receiving tracts containing navvies' ideas!' In front of her is a fashionably dressed lady 'whose only business in life as yet is to dress and look beautiful for our benefit.' Behind them is a delivery-man carrying on his head the green tray of a pastrycook, a symbol of affluence.

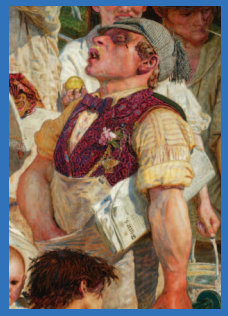
### The MP and his daughter

The man and the woman on horseback are a wealthy Member of Parliament and his

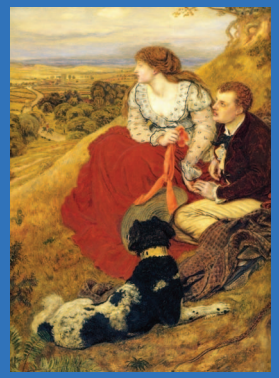


Detail of the MP in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

Detail of an Irish man in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries



Detail of the beer seller in *Work*, 1852–63, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries



*Byron's Dream* 1874, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

*The English Boy* 1860, oil on canvas
© Manchester City Galleries

daughter, soberly but expensively dressed. They are at the top of the composition, appropriate for the ruling class. But Brown had little faith in politics and put the two figures in shade, whereas the poor children and the navvies, to whom he was more sympathetic, are in full sunlight.

### The Beer Seller

The man in the fancy waistcoat carrying *The Times* is a beer-seller. He holds a green bottle-carrier. Brown painted him with his mouth open because he is calling out his wares. 'That black eye was got probably doing the police of his master's establishment in an encounter with some huge ruffian whom he has conquered in fight.' wrote Brown.

### The Irish

Because of the potato famine in Ireland in the 1840s, many Irish people emigrated to London to find work. Brown identified the navvy mixing up cement and the man leaning on the tree as Irish, and in front of him is a 'young shoeless Irishman with his wife' feeding their baby. Sleeping on the bank are migrant labourers, possibly also Irish, in search of work. At the extreme right edge is a policeman pushing an orange-seller. Most of the orange-sellers in London at this time were Irish girls.

## The Storyteller

Narrative painting gave Brown the opportunity to combine his love of literature with the skills of the history painter. But Brown developed his storytelling technique beyond what he had been taught in Belgium. His narrative paintings are characterised by extremes of gesture and expression: his friend Charles Rowley wrote that 'Some of Ford Madox Brown's really powerful designs have passages so queer, so exaggerated and wanting in control, that even his best friends "cannot abide them." This vigorous originality is part of the price one has to pay for his abounding and lasting power.'

Brown was an avid reader and many of the stories he illustrated came from his favourite writers. Besides Shakespeare and Byron, Carlyle's *Lectures on Heroes* was particularly important for him. Brown's own heroes were radical and unconventional figures who stood outside society: Cordelia, Lear, Manfred, the Prisoner of Chillon. Brown depicted Carlyle himself as such a hero in *Work*. One of Carlyle's heroes, Oliver Cromwell, was also the subject of a painting by Brown.

Brown painted Bible stories, some of them related to commissions for stained glass or book illustration. As a young man he seems to have been a conventional member of the Church of England but by the time of his death he had become an agnostic. He seems to have admired the Bible not as a source of religious doctrine but because of the lessons it had for modern society.

## The Portrait Painter

Brown did not paint many commissioned portraits: most of his portraits are of friends or family, and many of their faces also appeared as characters in his story paintings. For his independent portraits he did not use the standard formulae of the professional Victorian portraitist. He varied his approach in response to each sitter, but all his portraits are intimate and direct, without flattery. Several of his portraits combine an individual likeness with a more generalised meaning.

Brown's portraits of children are particularly vivid. With his unerring ability to see through convention, he was able to depict children as real people, without the sentimentality or sweetness characteristic of Victorian child portraiture.

## The Designer

Brown was one of the original partners of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, the design firm founded by William Morris in 1861. Brown designed over one hundred cartoons for stained glass windows which were made by the firm, mainly for churches but with a few domestic commissions. His windows, like his paintings, possess originality, vigorous design and strong expression. He also designed textiles and wallpapers which can no longer be identified, and a few pieces of furniture in an austere and simple style. Brown, jointly with Rossetti, also designed frames for their pictures. Both artists considered frames not as decorative additions but as integral to their paintings. Many of the works in this exhibition are in their original frames designed by Brown.

Brown was an early advocate of the equality of the fine and the decorative arts, an attitude fundamental to the philosophy of William Morris and later of the Arts and Crafts Movement, whose leading figures were great admirers of his work.

Design for '*The Romans building a Fort at Mancenion, A.D. 80*' (Study for Manchester Town Hall Mural), 1879–80/1890, oil on canvas © Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections

# The Manchester Period

In 1878 Brown was commissioned by the Corporation of Manchester to paint murals of the history of Manchester in the new Town Hall. At first he worked on the designs in London and came up to work in the Town Hall for short periods. The murals took far longer than expected to execute. Brown and the Manchester artist Frederic Shields had originally been asked to paint six each. Shields later withdrew and Brown painted all twelve. Between 1881 and 1887 he lived in Manchester, first at Crumpsall and then at Victoria Park. After 1887, he moved back to London and continued to work on the murals there. The last one was completed in 1893 only six months before he died.

While in Manchester, Brown took part in social and cultural life, and his reputation was sealed when his masterpiece *Work* was bought for the Art Gallery in 1885. He painted portraits of Manchester people, and depicted some of his Manchester friends as characters in the murals. During the harsh winter of 1886 he was one of the organisers of a Labour Bureau formed to try and relieve unemployment. He also provided decorations on a colossal scale for the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition held in 1887.

The murals were the culmination of Brown's career, and of his early ambitions to be a mural painter. At the end of his life, Manchester gave him the opportunity he had always wanted.

### The Town Hall Murals

As part of *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer*, you can visit Ford Madox Brown's murals in the Great Hall in Manchester Town Hall, from 10am–5pm on the following Sundays: 25 September, 16 October, 23 October, 30 October, 6 November, 20 November, 4 December, 11 December, 18 December, 8 January, 15 January, 22 January, 29 January.

**A fully illustrated catalogue is available in the Gallery Shop priced £19.95**



# Events

## Tours

**Exhibition tours every Saturday and Sunday throughout the exhibition**
**3–4pm, except 13 Nov 24, 25, 30, 31 Dec 8, 28/29 Jan**
Explore the highlights of the exhibition with a trained volunteer guide.
Free, after entry to the exhibition

**Wednesday 13 October, 12.30–1pm**
**Focus tour**
Ford Madox Brown's modern life masterpieces
With gallery curator Rebecca Milner
Free, after entry to the exhibition

**Wednesday 9 November, 12.30–1pm**
**Focus tour**
Ford Madox Brown's landscapes
With gallery curator Rebecca Milner
Free, after entry to the exhibition

**Sunday 13 November 3–4pm,**
**Sunday 8 January 3–4pm**
Exhibition tour in British Sign Language
Take a tour with Jennifer Little
Free, after entry to the exhibition

**Thurs 1 December 10.30–12 noon**
**Exhibition tour with Audio Description**
Take a tour of the exhibition with curator, Rebecca Milner and audio describer, Anne Hornsby.
Free, after entry to the exhibition
Free entry to exhibition for sighted guides of visually impaired visitors

**Wednesday 7 December, 12.30–1pm**
**Focus tour**
Ford Madox Brown's modern life masterpieces
With gallery curator Rebecca Milner
Free, after entry to the exhibition

**Wednesday 11 January, 12.30–1pm**
**Focus tour**
Ford Madox Brown's landscapes
With gallery curator Rebecca Milner
Free, after entry to the exhibition

## Talks

**Saturday 1 October, 2–3.30pm**
Ford Madox Brown and Manchester
Talk by Julian Treuherz, curator of *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer*
Friends, Best Friends and Patrons only
£10. Booking essential

**Saturday 19 November, 2–3.30pm**
Ford Madox Brown: Life, Love, Art
Talk by Angela Thirlwell, author of *Into the Frame: The Four Loves of Ford Madox Brown*
£10. Booking essential

**Saturday 26 November, 11am–5pm**
Inspired by the Pre-Raphaelites Art Masterclass Session led by artist and lecturer Paul Brotherton. Includes visit to art store with curator Rebecca Milner. Best Friends and Patrons only
£60, all materials and refreshments included.
Booking essential as numbers are limited.

**Sunday 15 January, 2–3.45pm**
**Ford Madox Brown's Manchester Murals**
Talk by Julian Treuherz, curator of *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer*
£10. Booking essential

**Booking information**
You can book and pay for the exhibition talks by Angela Thirlwel (Sat 19 Nov) and Julian Treuherz (Sun 15 Jan) online www.manchestergalleries.org/fordmadoxbrown or in person at the shop.

**For Friends-only events**
Please call 0161 235 8814 or email friends@manchester.gov.uk

## The Pre-Raphaelite Experiment Until May 2012

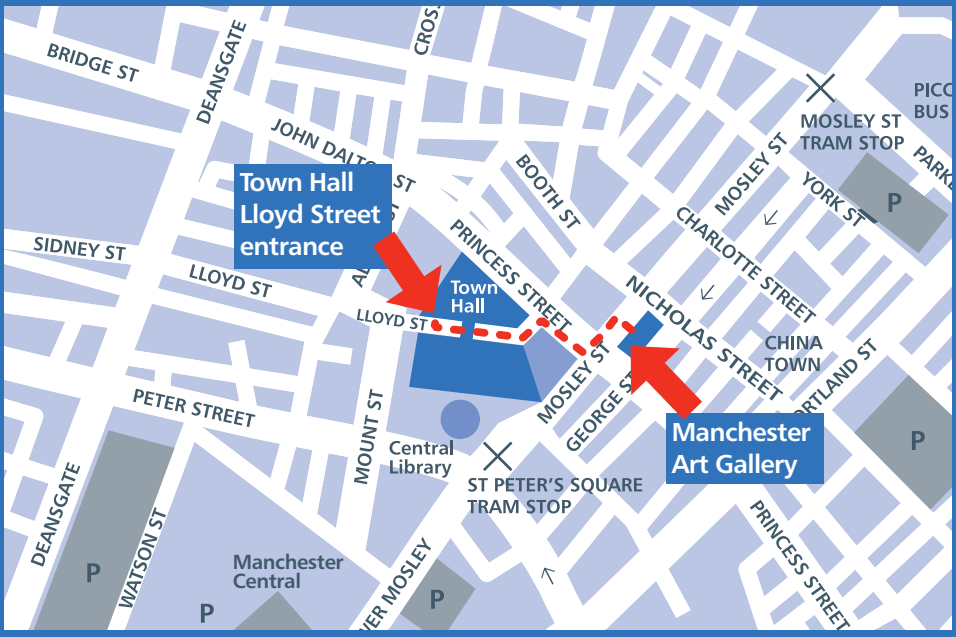
We have a special interest in Ford Madox Brown and his legacy because Manchester Art Gallery has an important collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. They were bought for the city by our Victorian predecessors and we've embarked on a project to find out what they mean to today's Mancunians.

Pop in to Gallery 6 on the first floor where there's space for you to tell us what you think of the Pre-Raphaelites in general. We've been working with local families, schools and community groups to contribute to this space.

heritage lottery fund
LOTTERY FUNDED

**Pre-Raphaelite bites**
**Every Friday Nov 2011–March 2012**
**12.30–1pm**
Lunchtime discussions around the Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Come and have your say.

## Directions to the Town Hall Murals




To get to the Town Hall murals:
Turn left out of Manchester Art Gallery, walk towards Café Nero on the corner. Cross the road at the pedestrian crossing and turn right. Ahead of you you will see the Town Hall and on the left there is a hoarding. Turn left down Lloyd Street. Enter the Town Hall entrance on the right and you will be directed by signage to the Great Hall on the first floor.

Opening times: 10am–5pm on the following Sundays: 25 September, 16 October, 23 October, 30 October, 6 November, 20 November, 4 December, 11 December, 18 December, 8 January, 15 January, 22 January, 29 January. More dates will be added, please check website below for further dates.

**Manchester Art Gallery**
**Mosley Street**
**Manchester M2 3JL**
**Tel: 0161 235 8888**
**Textphone: 0161 235 8893**
**www.manchestergalleries.org/fordmadoxbrown**

**Open Tuesday–Sunday 10am–5pm**
**Closed Mondays (except Bank Holidays), 24–26, 31 December, 1 January.**



*The Irish Girl*, 1860, Ford Madox Brown © Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund.