

# Off The Wall by Anthony McCarthy

An article discussing one of L.S Lowry's well known paintings 'A Man Lying On a Wall' 1957.

'It was a hot sunny day and I was sitting on a bus when we suddenly passed the man on the wall, just as you see him in my painting.' (1)

Lowry's words were often carefully chosen and sometimes deliberately deceptive to downplay the many facets of his life and character, as here he casually refers to the inspiration for one of his most iconic and popular images, 'Man Lying On a Wall', 1957. (fig 1)

In terms of Lowry's prolific and varied output this painting is not particularly interesting for its technique, which in its lighter brushwork and realisation isn't quite as laboured as his earlier very sculptural and detailed canvases from the 1930's and 1940's, on which he would sometimes take months or years to refine his unique vision through the accumulated layers of paint.

Symbolically however this work is highly intriguing. In fact when this painting is placed in the context of Lowry's later artistic career there is a strong argument to re appraise the deceptively trivial 'Man Lying on a Wall' as an important, even pivotal work which reflects Lowry's deep understanding of art history, his keen insight into human nature, an expression of a changing era and a signpost of a career in thematical flux, but how?

The origins of 'Man Lying on a Wall' began, as with so many of Lowry's works, as he took a bus ride. It was in Haslingden that the artist saw this very situation and remarked to a friend that this would be him when he retired, taking it easy. The painting is dated five years after Lowry's actual retirement aged sixty five, when he was released from forty two years service as rent collector and chief cashier at the Pall Mall property company of Brown Street, Manchester. Evidently, this new found freedom initially instigated some of Lowry's most inspired and iconic works such as 'Going To The Match' and the immense composite, 'Industrial Landscape', both dated 1953.

Through the years Lowry often made a point of recording the odd on his travels as Shelley Rohde comments, 'he had a great knack of spotting the incongruous or the eccentric in a situation and translating it to the canvas' (2) Yet ironically this view of the everyday was also a factor in the public's reluctance to buy pre fame Lowry paintings. Andras Kalman, a long term friend and art dealer noted, 'if you offered them a Lowry they would say: "I can get on a number eight bus and see that bloody sight for tuppence"'. (3)

The artist would use these observations and personalise them often appearing in his paintings through what have been termed 'displaced self portraits', 'He said that the people in his pictures were symbols of his mood , "they are myself." (4) This Alfred Hitchcock cameo is sometimes personified as a black suited red scarfed man, similar to the figure looking out of , 'Blitzed site', 1942 (fig2). This recurring character is often outside the lined border that is a prevalent feature in the construct of Lowry's paintings and used as a device to contain the theatricality within the scene. In 'man lying on a wall' however, Lowry the former man of business lies centrally, prostrate on the wall dividing the painting in half and remains the only person who knows what is actually behind the edifice. Is it the artists own past? Or a glimpse of the future? Is Lowry on the verge of something? Or has he given up in some way?

The trappings of business, the umbrella and Lowry's own initialled briefcase are resting in front of the wall and there is an unusual stillness in the painting. Incidentally the briefcase, one of Lowry's favourite props, is prominent in other Lowry works at this time, notably in 'Private view', 1958 (fig3), an incarnation of the midday studio theme. Perhaps there is a reason for its debut at this time? Is the briefcase a reference to Lowry leaving his business life behind or does it now represent the fact that he is an independent, financially secure artist confidently selling his wares?

The bowler hat, uniformal business attire in the artist's youth and often a focus of comic intent in his paintings rests on his stomach as one leg seems to be hanging over the far side of the wall. What happens next? Does the man fall? The artists humour is clearly evident in the work as he smokes a cigarette, a practice Lowry gave up in his youth. Yet the cigarette cleverly mirrors the chimneys behind him. Lowry loved Vaudeville and Chaplin, as Mervyn levy states: 'The artist has often spoken to me of his affection for the art of Charlie Chaplin, and there seems little doubt that his own humour has been influenced at points by the film comic. His paintings of the man lying on the wall and father going home display more than a brush of Chaplinesque influence' (5)

The key to Lowry's art is his accessibility; people of all ages relate to the universality of his subjects his themes and through his characters, an extension of the artist's personality, they relate to him. As in Chaplin's performances Lowry's images are innocuous and unpretentious: ' He hated anything that smacked of pretension, or pomposity.' (6) A fact that distanced Lowry from the art establishment right throughout his life.

There is something in the human psyche that longs to take time back for oneself from the ever present construct of the nine to five. As Bialystock said to Bloom in 'The Producers', "Well Leo, what say we promenade through the park" (7) as the accountant is coerced to quit his day job and follow a dream of untold riches. Everyone can relate to the Man Lying on a Wall.

What can this painting reveal thematically? And what insight can it give us into Lowry's artistic career at the time? There are tantalising clues contained in the work itself which show a change in the realisation of Lowry's subjects, but to put this into context we need to look back to the beginning of the artist's career.

Consider the imposing 'St.Simons Church', 1928 (fig4). This work was the first painting purchased by Salford council in 1936 for the amount of £20.

In many ways this scene is THE archetypal Lowry. The painting is highly descriptive, the towering church demands attention through its smoke sodden, forbidding, grim presence. The working factories are a constant reminder of the hardships of day to day living as the dwarfed population precariously live out their cycle of life amongst, for this artistic period, the accurate topography. As we look at a mid career work Lowry's psychological masterpiece, 'The Cripples', 1949 (fig5) there is a very different sense of mood and view of the industrial era. This painting focuses on a crowded character driven theme of misfits as Lowry himself calmly walks a dog through its chaotic centre. There are no looming buildings here as, if anything, the industrial vision is fading into the top section of the work and remains almost as a sectional painting in its own right. The continuing theme of the church and factories found in Man Lying on a Wall are represented as a whisper, toy like and translucent they are firmly ensconced and partially veiled behind the wall as the figure of Lowry now lies above the factories. In the painting 'Gentleman Looking at Something, 1960 (fig6) the subject now stands alone in a sea of white, his world is an abyss, he could be anywhere.

This simplification also applies to architectural forms, as we look at 'The Spire', 1960 (fig7). Lowry now focuses on one section of the building alone and yet it can be said to hold much more meaning and ambiguity in this abstract form, merely through the fact that the artist looks at the building in this focused way.

The progression Lowry has made between each of these works is considerable as the industrial vision has gradually and skilfully been refined to a much more personal approach to the artwork. As Lowry stated: 'Without

knowing what it was, I had an instinctive feeling that the time had come to drop the industrials, now I feel more strongly than ever that the figures just stand on their own two feet.' (8)

This thematical progression was finally confirmed in 1961 as Lowry had a highly successful one man show at his long term London based dealers Reid and Leferve, the same establishment that sold *Man lying on a wall* to Salford council in 1959. In this show many paintings of the industrial type sold for a thousand pounds each, yet Lowry now spurned the demands of both his dealers and the public for more of these works as the dominant subject matter was now single figure paintings : 'In London all they want now are pictures with lots of little figures on them, well there are no little figures on them so they'll have to do without .Its very sad ,people write ,you know, and say," I'd like a mill scene," and I write back to say, "I can't do it, and it wouldn't be any good if I did do it." (9) Certainly in the late fifties and early sixties many areas that Lowry was accustomed to seeing were slowly being demolished, a substantial change of which the artist must have been aware, as Judith Sandling comments:

'Lowry was aware of the change, but nobody could foretell how swift and radical this economic, social and environmental upheaval would be. Thus most of the terraced streets and cotton mills immortalised in his paintings were swept away in an orgy of demolition' (10)

The nostalgia for Lowry's industrial vision surely had a part to play for his increased popularity and his instincts and integrity persuaded him to move on.

Could it be then that the man lying on a wall is Lowry lying in state, is this to represent the death of his past, an industrial vision that no longer surrounded him? No longer interested him? Or is the artist bathing in his own success?

At the time of painting *Man Lying on a Wall*, Lowry was Seventy years old, in terms of his celebrity and financially he was becoming a rich man. In this same year John Reads documentary, 'Lowry' was aired on the BBC, two years earlier he 'deflated pomposity' by turning down an offer of an OBE by the then Prime minister Harold Macmillan and his paintings were displayed in the homes of Royalty and prominent foreign collections .He could sell out any show and seemingly could now ask any price he wished for his works, surely he was now a man aware of his vast achievements?

Lowry also had an awareness of a different kind, a well versed self directed

education in Art history and it is this that gives the man lying on a wall an infusion of genuine intrigue.

Art historically many connections, both conscious and unconscious can be made by both the artist and the critic to other artists. The task is in ascertaining would the artist in question have seen the artworks that to us now seem to have influenced the artists own. In this regard connections made through Lowry's work are incredibly fascinating with many very pertinent references to the unlikeliest of artists. These influences could have been made through Lowry's extensive visits to exhibitions around the country and through his vast knowledge of European art and self directed education:

'Lowry was an avid reader of classic literature and fond of quoting from Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld, not authors to have made much of an impression on backward readers.' (11)

Art historically valid connections have previously been made linking Lowry's work to Van Gogh, Brueghel, and Avercamp and certainly the Pre Raphaelites were a major passion for the artist:

Lowry himself, said he had no idea why he liked Rossetti ("the only man I have ever wanted to possess") but that it had something to do with the potential poetry of the work' (12)

From the early fifties Lowry collected many original works connected with the Pre Raphaelites and throughout his life many other artists of note such as Daumier and Freud. Occasionally Lowry traded one of his own paintings for one of the Pre Raphaelites via his dealers if they, on his request, acquired a work for him at auction. Eventually his personal collection numbered 'about a dozen' of Rossettis own work. Perhaps this need to collect Rossetti stemmed from Lowry's mothers love of Rossettis poetry, which the dotting son read to her through her illness. Perhaps this impressive collection was pursued to vindicate his own artistic success to the ever present memory of his mother. Certainly Lowry took refuge in these paintings after Elizabeth's death:

'In that week, on a bleak winters day when the wind lashed the sparrows off Princess street, Harold Timperley found his friend hunched on a seat before the Pre Raphaelites of Manchester city gallery, his eyes half blinded with unshed tears.' (13)

When we analyse Rossettis, 'Arthur's Tomb' 1855 (fig8) conceptually this could have been a possible influence for Lowry's own Man Lying on a Wall

(1957) as King Arthur's figure is immortalised in stone, his likeness raised above his tomb. Walled structures are a very prominent theme of the Pre Raphaelites, often used as a thematical barrier within their paintings. The idea of impending mortality is certainly paraded throughout Lowry's canvases, the ghostly figures that arrive at his home unannounced in the dead of night, the ever present fever van, a subject used even in Lowry's much later paintings and the ominous dark coffin like tankers that float into harbour blotting out the thick whitened sky, only some examples of the spectral and final.

In other considerations, through the masses of hair, it is not too outlandish to see traits of John Everett Millais', 'The Bridesmaid', 1851 (fig9) in Lowry's own 'Girl seen from the front', 1964 (fig10). In very close inspection when we observe Lowry's cameo walking through the centre of 'The Cripples', with comparable walking stick, tethered dog and hollow, etched out eyes, this is not an artistic concept so far removed from Millais' own pen and ink drawing of 'The Blind Man', 1853 (fig11) as a sightless Victorian gentleman steps out in similar fashion.

Returning to Man Lying On a Wall, the most direct influence I can source for its conception lies with the somewhat unlikely comparison of the Belgian artist Rene Magritte, (1898-1967). A man who achieved great universal popularity through his widespread images in the 1950's and 1960's.

Lowry held a fascination with the Surrealists and made many references to them throughout his life claiming that they all seemed so 'normal' like businessmen, like him:

'Lowry was intrigued by Surrealism, and in particular by the work of Magritte and Delvaux whose pictures he could have seen in London during the thirties. Magritte for example, had been represented by fourteen works at the international Surrealist exhibition of 1936, held at the New Burlington galleries.' (14)

There is an unlikely kinship in both the artists themes as many of Magritte's paintings also explore the nature of mankind and his relationship with the urban environment. As in Man Lying On a Wall, Magritte's themes evoke mystery as the bourgeois little man in a bowler hat often manifests as a witty symbol of anonymity and disassociation as shown in his work, 'The Great Century', 1954 (fig12) Magritte's very own man behind a wall.

There are relevant comparisons with Magritte's paintings throughout a range of other subject matter, as Michael Howard states:

'In the Belgian artists work, the image of the sea can be seen almost exactly as it would appear in so many of Lowry's compositions. This is especially noticeable in *La Baigneuse du Clair au Sombre* (1935) and *L'invention Collective* (1935), which depicts a fish with the lower limbs of a woman stranded on the empty seashore. Lowry cut a photograph of this painting from an exhibition catalogue and kept it with a small number of other Surrealist images.' (15)

Certainly when we compare, '*L'invention Collective*' 1935 (fig13) with Lowry's own seascapes such as, '*The sea*', 1963 (fig14) the treatment of the subject by the two artists is clearly comparable through their mutual stylisation of the theme. Lowry's own seascapes were believed to have been first initiated soon after Magritte's, in 1942 during a holiday in Anglesey. The mesmerising works share a unique sense of movement and are an exploration into emptiness as they unveil scenes of immense vastness open to interpretation by the viewer. The seascapes became a great passion for Lowry through the following decades; perhaps this was to do with the fact that one of the few subjects that could never change for him, given its nature, is the sea itself. Lowry often spoke of the sea in Surrealist terms which only emphasises this connection:

'He confided that he was often tempted to plonk a mill chimney in the middle of an empty seascape. "But they would have accused me of being a Surrealist wouldn't they?" And he added chuckling, "Salvador Lowry", relishing the coupling of the two names.' (16)

Both drawings, '*Two dogs a shark and a man*', 1971 and, '*A Game of marbles*', 1970 (fig15) illustrate Lowry's interest in Surrealism and explore the same fascination as Magritte's with human/shark like figures, the former work a more refined version of Magritte's own, '*The presence of spirit*', 1960. (fig16)

In terms of portraiture compare the two head studies, '*Far away looks*', 1927 (fig17) and Lowry's own, '*Two Heads*', 1965 (fig18) Although Lowry's treatment is typical with his trademark brushwork conveying its scratched opacity and the faces quite Nordic in style and the Belgian masters own work also typically smooth and luscious in its realisation, both paintings explore the theme of two heads, potentially male and female, in one body. In my own opinion the comparison is astonishing.

We can ascertain with some confidence that Lowry did visit exhibitions that contained Magritte's work and that he retained evidence of the admiration for this artist in his own possessions. The comparisons between Magritte's artistic exploration of the sea, portraiture and Surrealist hybrid figures are emulated, often to a very accurate extent by Lowry, all of which gives weight to a direct connection between the Man Lying On a Wall and Magritte's, 'The Rights of Man', 1947 (fig19). If we remove the Lowryesque lamppost and Magritte's symbolism at the foot of his work, we are left with a synonymous backdrop, like a stage set of Lowry's own painting waiting for the obligatory man to enter the scene stage left and climb into position. The wall and the paving slabs are the same muted colours, only the angle of the view has changed, Lowry's being typically face on for this period.

Often when people are asked why they like Man Lying on a Wall a sense of mystery prevails, people like it, but they often don't know why? Public opinion regarding the painting is simultaneously described as playful, contradictory surreal and unbelievable. In many regards they are unwittingly describing the artist himself and his own life story. A man who for a large proportion of his life was a secret rent collector, a gregarious recluse, the educated northern yokel, a would be surrealist and depressive humourist who understood but never ceased to question human nature. A man who in 1957 had now achieved fame and artistic success but was unsure of its longevity in a rapidly changing world. An artist looking back on his subjects and career while also peering forward to an unsure artistic future. In many respects Lowry had to be and was always The Man Lying On a Wall.

## Bibliography

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## List of illustrations

- 1) L.S.Lowry 'Man lying on a wall' 1957
- 2) L.S.Lowry 'Blitzed Site' 1942
- 3) L.S.Lowry 'Private View' 1958
- 4) L.S.Lowry 'St.Simons church' 1928
- 5) L.S.Lowry 'The Cripples' 1949
- 6) L.S.Lowry 'Gentleman Looking at Something'1960
- 7) L.S.Lowry 'The Spire' 1960
- 8) Gabriel Dante Rossetti 'Arthurs Tomb' 1855
- 9) John Everett Millais 'The Bridesmaid' 1851
- 10) L.S.Lowry ' Girl seen from the front' 1964
- 11) John Everett Millais 'The Blind Man' 1853
- 12) Rene Magritte 'The Great Century' 1954
- 13) Rene Magritte 'L'Invention Collective' 1935
- 14) L.S.Lowry 'The Sea' 1963
- 15) L.S.Lowry 'A Game of Marbles' 1970
- 16) Rene Magritte 'The Presence of Spirit' 1960
- 17) Rene Magritte 'Far Away Looks' 1927
- 18) L.S.Lowry 'Two Heads' 1965
- 19) Rene Magritte 'The Rights of Man' 1947