



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

Dr Laurence Shafe www.shafe.uk

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61-20 L.S. LOWRY

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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L.S. Lowry
Self-Portrait
1925

Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford

Laurence Stephen Lowry (1887–1976) was an English artist born in Stretford, Lancashire. Working largely in isolation, he developed a distinctive style depicting the industrial landscapes of northern England, populated by his iconic 'matchstick' figures. Despite little formal recognition during much of his career, Lowry's work gained widespread acclaim in later life. He turned down numerous honours, including a knighthood. Today he is celebrated as one of Britain's most beloved and original twentieth-century painters.



L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
A Manufacturing Town
1922
Oil on board
43.2 × 53.3 cm
Salford Museum and Art Gallery,
Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *A Manufacturing Town*, 1922, Oil on board, 43.2 × 53.3 cm, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford

A Manufacturing Town is among the earliest of Lowry's surviving mature industrial compositions and demonstrates how quickly he assembled his definitive pictorial language. Painted when he was thirty-five, it already shows the compressed perspective—buildings pushed close to the picture surface—the pale sky, and the antlike figures that would define his work for the next fifty years. What distinguishes this early work is the rawness of the handling: the paint is thicker than in later oils, applied with a directness that reflects his ongoing training under Valette and Bernard Taylor at Salford School of Art. Lowry attended evening classes continuously until 1928, an unusually long apprenticeship for an artist who is often assumed to have been self-taught. Biographer Michael Howard has corrected this myth, showing that Lowry's mature style was the product of sustained formal instruction, not intuitive accident.

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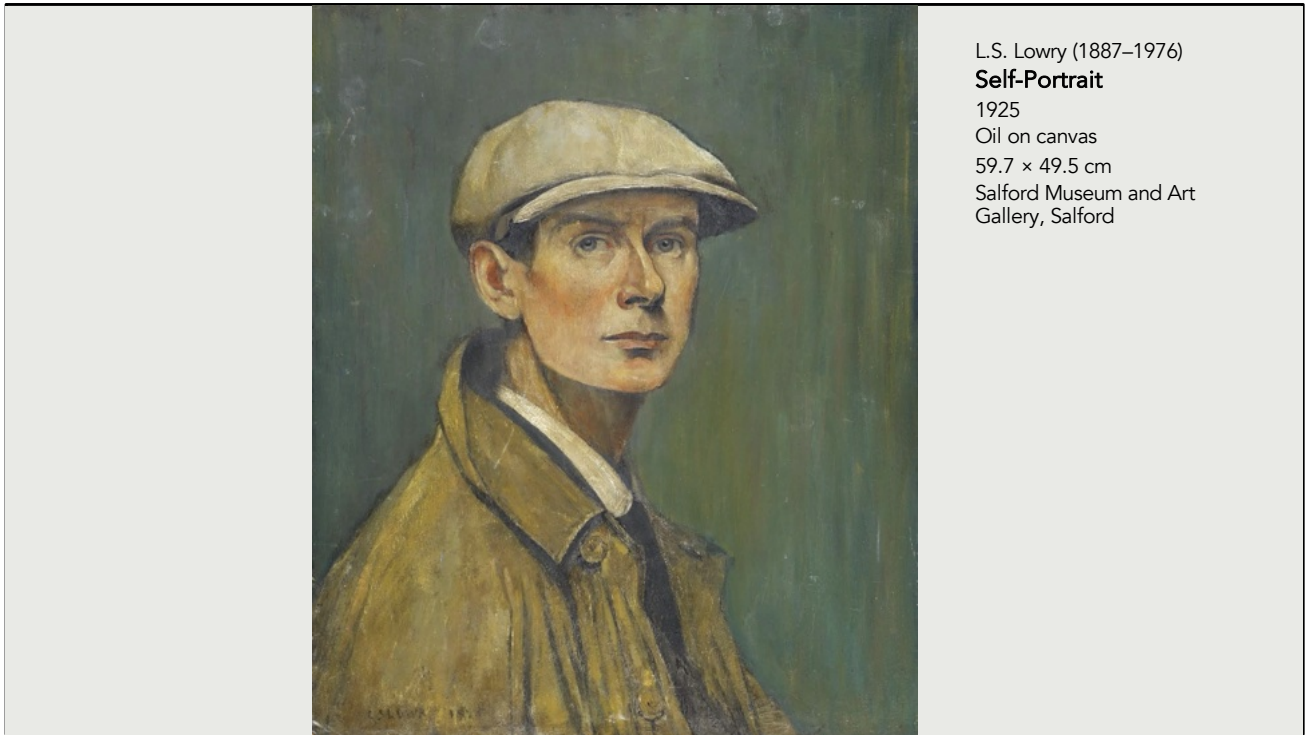
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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Self-Portrait
1925
Oil on canvas
59.7 × 49.5 cm
Salford Museum and Art
Gallery, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Self-Portrait*, 1925, Oil on canvas, 59.7 × 49.5 cm, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford

Lowry painted this self-portrait in 1925, the year after his mother suffered the stroke that would leave her bedridden for seven years until her death in 1939. The timing is not incidental. The face is direct, even confrontational, and the handling—firm, unhurried, with none of the sketch-like economy of the street scenes—suggests a young man taking stock of himself at a moment of private crisis. He was thirty-eight, still employed as a rent collector, still attending evening classes at the Manchester School of Art under Adolphe Valette, whose Impressionist-influenced urban fog paintings profoundly shaped his student work. Art historian Sandy Moffat has argued that the self-portrait reveals precisely the ambition Lowry spent his public life concealing: the slightly stiff formality signals a man who took his vocation as a painter entirely seriously, whatever the world around him thought.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
An Accident
1926
Oil on canvas
38.1 × 53.3 cm
Manchester Art Gallery,
Manchester

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *An Accident*, 1926, Oil on canvas, 38.1 × 53.3 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester

An Accident was painted four years before *Coming from the Mill* but represents the same northern industrial world from a suddenly dramatic angle: a crowd has gathered around an unseen event, their backs turned to the viewer, creating a ring of curiosity that excludes us entirely. Lowry showed this work to the Royal Academy in 1926, one of his first serious submissions. What is significant is not the notional subject—we never see what happened—but Lowry's understanding of crowd psychology: the figures lean forward as a collective body, individuality dissolving into communal attention. The scholar Michael Howard has described this compositional device, in which the viewer is locked out of the spectacle, as characteristic of Lowry's ambivalence toward both community and solitude. He belonged to these streets in the sense that he walked them daily, yet remained permanently outside the lives they contained.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Coming from the Mill
1930
Oil on canvas
42.2 × 52.1 cm
The Lowry, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Coming from the Mill*, 1930, Oil on canvas, 42.2 × 52.1 cm, The Lowry, Salford

Laurence Stephen Lowry painted *Coming from the Mill* at the age of forty-two, after more than a decade of sustained observation made possible by a peculiar daily ritual: walking to and from his job as a rent collector for the Pall Mall Property Company, he sketched the workers streaming out of the Salford mills at shift-end. He never romanticised them. Art historian T.J. Clark has noted that Lowry's crowds register the anonymity of industrial labour with more documentary precision than almost any contemporaneous British painting. The off-white, slightly yellowish sky—Lowry's signature ground, achieved by leaving the underlayer to discolour naturally over years—bleaches the scene of sentiment. The figures are schematic but anatomically coherent, their postures conveying fatigue. This work is one of the earliest finished oils to show the full Lowry formula: flat perspective, smoking chimneys, and the human mass moving as a single organism.

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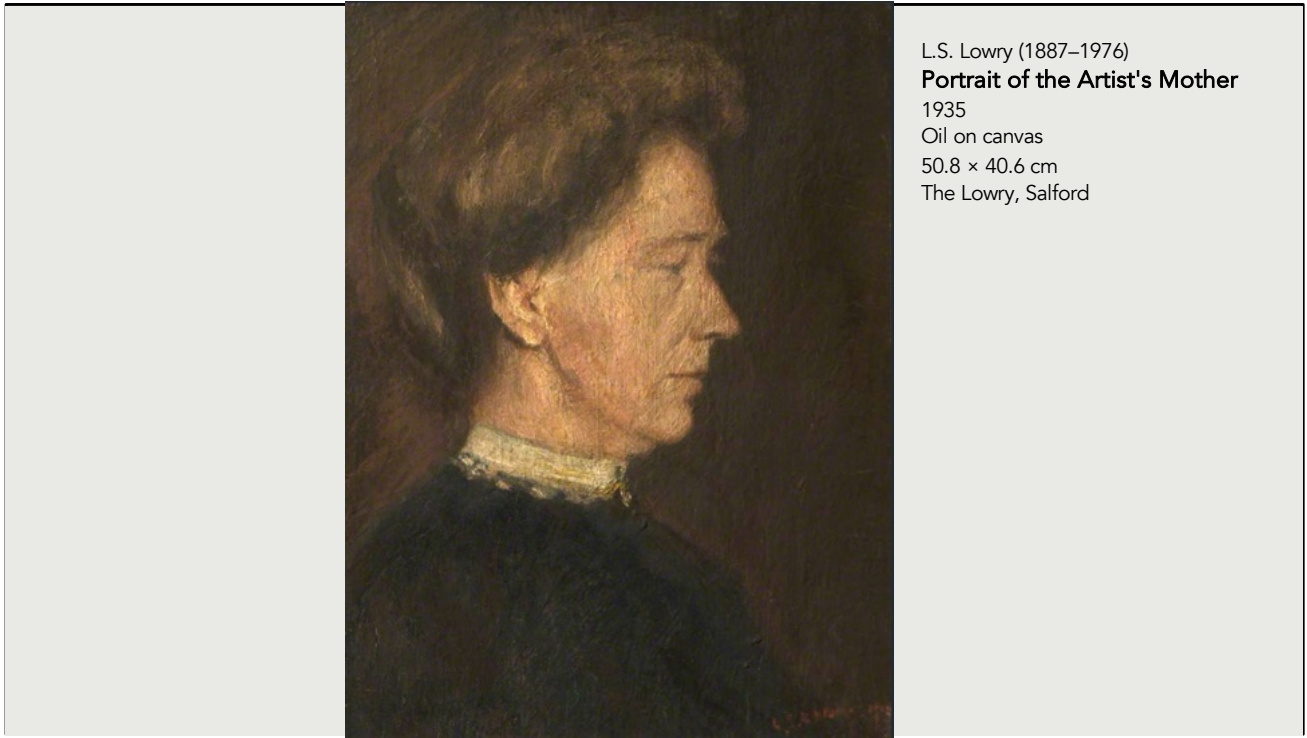
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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Portrait of the Artist's Mother
1935
Oil on canvas
50.8 × 40.6 cm
The Lowry, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 50.8 × 40.6 cm, The Lowry, Salford

Elizabeth Lowry, née Hobson, occupies the emotional centre of her son's biography with an authority that borders on the oppressive. She was a frustrated pianist, deeply disappointed by her circumstances, and made no secret of her contempt for her son's painting. Lowry cared for her from the 1927 stroke until her death in 1939, during which twelve years he was, by his own account, never happy. This portrait was painted while she was still alive, and the rendering is unsparing: the face is gaunt, the expression withdrawn, the posture of a woman who has retreated inside herself. Art historian Julian Spalding has described this as one of the most psychologically acute portraits in twentieth-century British painting precisely because Lowry makes no concession to sentiment. After her death he wrote privately that he would never have painted at all if she had approved, because it was the need to escape her presence that drove him to his studio.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
The Fever Van
1935
Oil on board
38.1 × 53.3 cm
Manchester Art Gallery,
Manchester

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *The Fever Van*, 1935, Oil on board, 38.1 × 53.3 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester

The *Fever Van* depicts one of the most feared sights in working-class Salford: the vehicle that collected those suffering from scarlet fever, diphtheria, or tuberculosis—infections that remained lethal in the region well into the 1930s, despite national improvements in public health. A cluster of figures watches the van depart, maintaining the instinctive distance communities kept from infection. Lowry had a talent for identifying the specific moments at which civic life intersects with private dread, and *The Fever Van* is among his sharpest such images. The art historian Andrew Causey has situated Lowry in the documentary tradition of social realism, arguing that works like this function as historical records of a welfare infrastructure that has since entirely vanished from British streets. The figures do not dramatise their anxiety; they simply stand and watch, which is more unsettling than any expressionistic distortion would have been.

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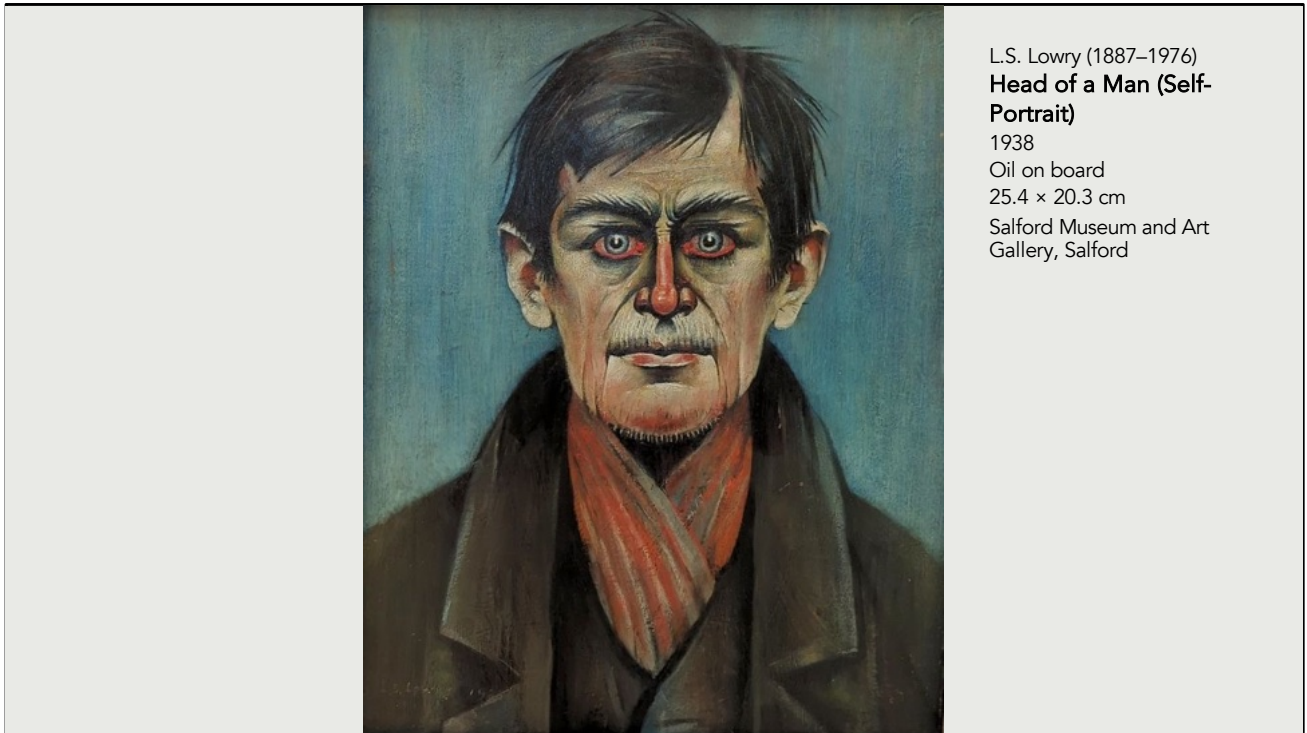
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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Head of a Man (Self-Portrait)*, 1938, Oil on board, 25.4 × 20.3 cm, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford

This small self-portrait, painted a year before his mother's death, is the most psychologically acute of Lowry's self-images. Unlike the resolved formality of the 1925 self-portrait, the face here is haggard, the paint applied with a scrubbing urgency that breaks from his usual evenness of touch. Elizabeth Lowry had been confined to her bedroom for over a decade by 1938, and Lowry was managing a household, holding down his rent-collecting job, and painting in the evenings and at weekends with almost no recognition. The Royal Academy had accepted works from 1932 onward, but London remained largely indifferent. The historian Julian Spalding has argued that this self-portrait encodes everything Lowry chose not to say about his situation: exhaustion, suppressed resentment, and an absolute refusal to abandon the work that his mother considered worthless. It is a portrait made under private duress.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Blitzed Site
1942
Oil on canvas
41 × 51 cm
The Lowry Collection, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Blitzed Site*, 1942, Oil on canvas, 41 × 51 cm, The Lowry Collection, Salford

Lowry did not simply observe the war from a distance — he was stationed on a rooftop above it. During the Second World War he served as an ARP fire-watcher at a Manchester department store, and his standing orders included getting down to street level at first light to sketch the blitzed buildings before the rescue teams moved in and the smoke began to thin. *Blitzed Site*, painted in 1942, is the direct result: a rubble-strewn lot rendered in Lowry's characteristic muted palette of whites, greys, and brick reds, with a handful of tiny figures picking their way through the debris. There is no melodrama, no heroic gesture. The matchstick men simply continue, as they always do in Lowry, against an environment that has been partially erased. The painting is held in The Lowry Collection, Salford, and is one of the most directly autobiographical works in his catalogue — a record of what he saw every morning when he climbed down from the roof.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
The Cripples
1949
Oil on canvas
76.2 × 101.6 cm
Salford Museum and Art
Gallery, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *The Cripples*, 1949, Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 101.6 cm, Salford Museum and Art Gallery, Salford

The Cripples is the work in which Lowry's social observation shades most uncomfortably into something else. The figures—all physically disabled or disfigured—are rendered with the same schematic economy as his crowd scenes, but their isolation from any architectural or social setting gives the painting an almost clinical quality. There is no narrative, no evident sympathy, and no evident cruelty: just observation. Art historian T.J. Clark has described this as one of the most ethically challenging pictures in the British figurative tradition, precisely because it refuses to guide the viewer's response. Lowry collected images of disability throughout his life, and Shelley Rohde has documented his regular visits to hospitals and charitable institutions, not as a philanthropist but as a recorder. *The Cripples* was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1950 to notably divided critical response, a division that has not resolved in the seven decades since.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)

The Pond

1950

Oil on canvas

45.7 × 61 cm

Tate, London

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *The Pond*, 1950, Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 61 cm, Tate, London

The Pond is one of the few Lowry compositions in which the industrial backdrop yields ground to a recreational space. Figures skate, walk, and stand around a frozen pond, their leisure self-conscious and slightly awkward in the shadow of the surrounding mills and terraces. Lowry purchased the picture back himself after it had sold, a habit he maintained throughout his life with works he particularly valued—he died leaving roughly three hundred paintings in his own possession. The Tate holds the work as part of a gift, and it illustrates the subtle tension in Lowry's social observation: the people here are not at work, but they do not seem entirely free either. Critic William Feaver, whose 1976 monograph remains the essential scholarly account, has described *The Pond* as among the most spatially resolved of the mid-period works, the white ground integrating figures and landscape with unusual coherence.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)

Seascape

1952

Oil on canvas

45.7 × 61 cm

The Lowry, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Seascape*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 61 cm, The Lowry, Salford

From the early 1950s onward, Lowry made regular visits to the Northumberland coast, particularly to Sunderland and the area around Seaham, and the seascapes he produced there represent the most radical departure from his established urban subject matter. The sea in these pictures is typically grey-green, the horizon low, the sky wide, and the figures—when they appear at all—are isolated rather than massed. Curator Andrew Stephenson has argued that the seascapes should be understood as psychological landscapes, maps of the solitude that defined Lowry's private life after his mother's death. By 1952 he was living alone in Mottram-in-Longdendale, having left the family home in Pendlebury. The shift from the compressed horizontals of the industrial scenes to the open expanse of sea and sky reads not as subject change but as self-portrait by other means—the same artist, in a different emotional register.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Going to the Match
1953
Oil on canvas
45.7 × 61 cm
The Lowry, Salford (Professional Footballers' Association Collection)

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Going to the Match*, 1953, Oil on canvas, 45.7 × 61 cm, The Lowry, Salford (Professional Footballers' Association Collection)

Going to the Match was purchased by the Professional Footballers' Association in 1999 for £1.9 million, then a record for a Lowry at auction, and is permanently displayed at The Lowry in Salford. The scene shows supporters streaming toward a football ground—widely understood to be Burnden Park, the former home of Bolton Wanderers—with the same funnelling momentum as his mill-worker compositions. Lowry was not a football enthusiast; the crowd interested him far more than the game. What the picture makes visible is the social function of mass spectacle: how it organises bodies, generates direction, and temporarily dissolves individual identity into collective purpose. William Feaver has noted that Lowry's crowds never seem joyful in an uncomplicated sense—there is always a gravitational pull, a sense of inevitability about where these people are going and why.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Industrial Landscape
1955
Oil on canvas
114.9 × 152.7 cm
Tate, London

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Industrial Landscape*, 1955, Oil on canvas, 114.9 × 152.7 cm, Tate, London

Industrial Landscape at the Tate is one of Lowry's largest and most architecturally complex compositions. By 1955 he had been painting the industrial north for nearly four decades, yet this late panorama is more spatially ambitious than his earlier work: factories, terraced housing, and chimneys are stacked in a shallow recession that simultaneously feels infinite and claustrophobic. The pale sky, which Lowry produced by priming his boards and canvases and then leaving them for months before painting, has here a particular luminosity that critic Andrew Forge described in 1966 as "neither day nor night but a kind of permanent industrial noon." There is no main subject—the eye circulates without rest. The picture was purchased by the Tate in 1959, a significant institutional endorsement at a moment when British abstract painting dominated critical discussion, making Lowry's figurative industrial scenes appear almost eccentric by comparison.

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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)

Portrait of Ann

1957

Oil on canvas

76.2 × 63.5 cm

The Lowry, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Portrait of Ann*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 76.2 × 63.5 cm, The Lowry, Salford

Ann was one of a small group of women—none of them romantic partners—whom Lowry befriended and painted obsessively in the 1950s and 1960s. He met Ann, whose surname he declined to record publicly, while she was still a child, and painted her repeatedly as she grew up, producing a series of portraits that sit quite apart from his industrial work in both technique and psychological intensity. The faces are more carefully modelled than his crowd figures, the paint applied with genuine delicacy. Biographer Shelley Rohde has established that Lowry's attachments to several young women substituted for the family life he never formed, and that his portraits of them represent his most direct engagement with human individuality. The Salford collection holds the largest group of these intimate works, and their presence alongside the industrial panoramas reshapes any reading of Lowry as purely a painter of anonymous urban life.

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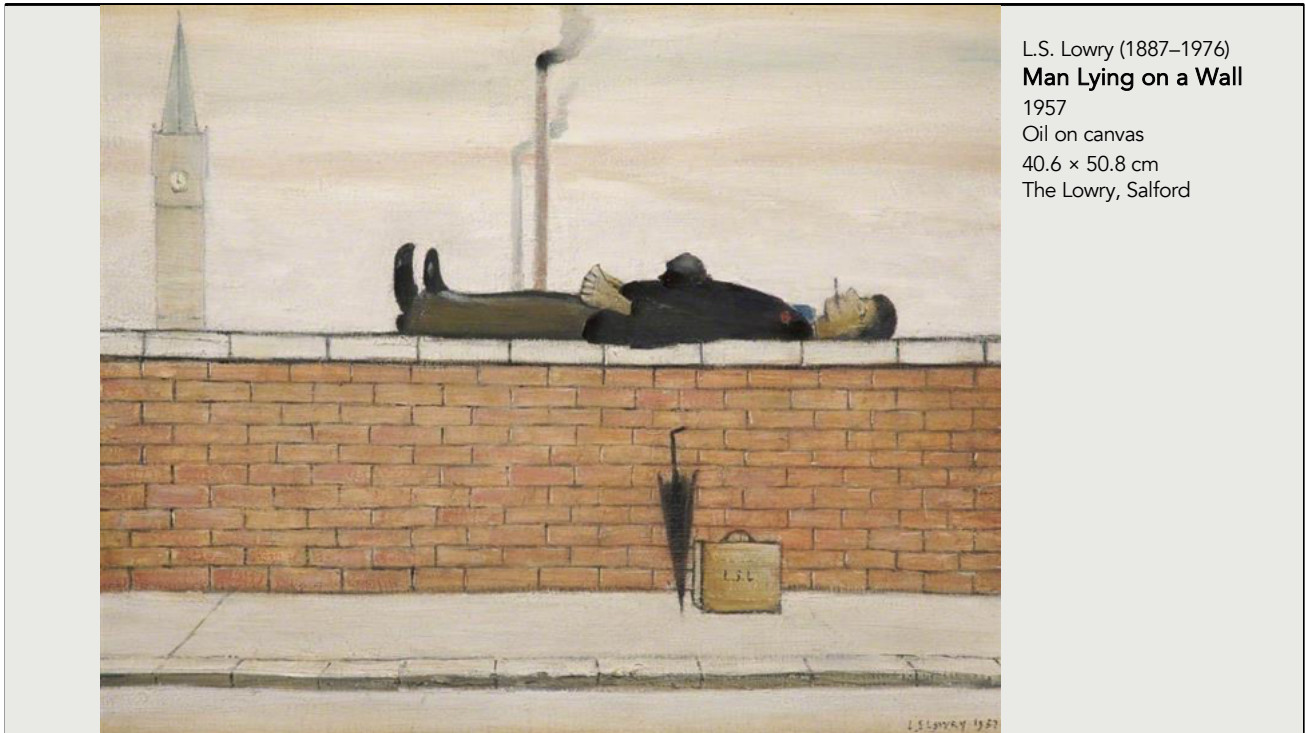
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L.S. Lowry (1887–1976)
Man Lying on a Wall
1957
Oil on canvas
40.6 × 50.8 cm
The Lowry, Salford

L.S. Lowry (1887–1976), *Man Lying on a Wall*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 40.6 × 50.8 cm, The Lowry, Salford

By the late 1950s Lowry began populating some canvases with a single figure rather than the crowds for which he was famous, and *Man Lying on a Wall* is the most discussed of these isolates. A man lies face-up on a low wall, arms at his sides, in a posture that might indicate rest, despair, or simply exhaustion—Lowry withholds all contextual information that might decide the question. The background is a featureless pale ground. William Feaver has interpreted this and similar single-figure works as autobiographical, reflecting the growing loneliness of Lowry's life in Mottram. He had declined an OBE in 1955, a CBE in 1961, a knighthood in 1968, and membership of the Royal Academy—a systematic refusal of public recognition with no close parallel in British cultural life. These late sparse compositions feel like the visual correlate of that sustained withdrawal.

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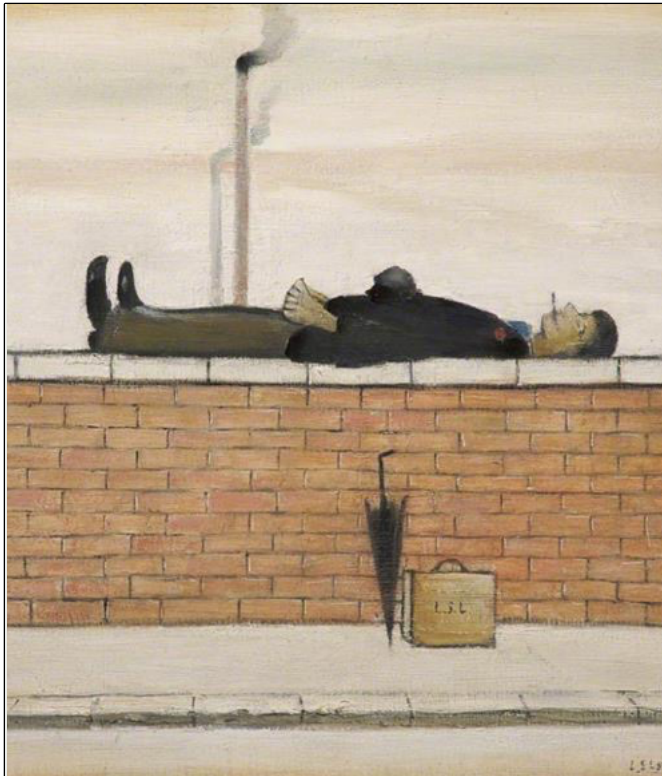
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DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

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L.S. Lowry
Man Lying
on a Wall
(detail)
1957



L.S. Lowry spent his entire working life in the industrial north of England, producing a body of work that is instantly recognisable and yet persistently underestimated. He declined every official honour offered to him — OBE, CBE, knighthood, Companion of Honour — preferring anonymity to recognition. He died in Glossop in February 1976, leaving behind roughly three hundred unsold works.

That brings me to the end of this talk. Thank you for your time and attention.



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