



[Adolphe Valette \(1876 – 1942\)](#) at [The Lowry](#)

on until Sunday 29th January 2012

Reviewed by [Dr Charlotte Starkey](#) November 2011

Adolphe Valette's haunting impressions of Manchester and Salford sometimes evoke the response, 'Oh, they are so dark!' That is not true of most of them but also not a surprising remark for a few paintings of which it is only partially true. When he painted scenes of *Windsor Bridge on the Irwell, 1909*

,
Albert Square, Manchester 1910,

India House, Manchester 1912, York Street leading to Charles Street, Manchester 1913

, and others, Manchester and Salford were regularly dark, very dark. Engels had described the area close to the River Medlock in 1842 to 1844 (cf.

India House

, Valette) as one of the worst slums in Manchester.

Fog, smog, pea-soupers of an atmosphere which left faces, lungs, clothes and lives filthy, damp and generally pretty dismal enabled Valette to see nocturnes of a ghostly beauty. He is, arguably, one of the first painters to recognise beauty specifically in the commercialised industrial world, certainly to find it in Manchester. In fact, *India House* is reminiscent of Turner in its use of reflected light and in many of his 'Manchester/Salford' paintings Valette's colours are a complex mix of muted tones and colours, creating highlights and depths for emphasis and perspectives, never simple.

The Lowry exhibition of Valette's work is a valuable experience in its own right. Amidst the now-transformed quayside setting of the Salford Docks where once the barges and freighters of the industrial landscape of a turn-of-the-century northern city caught Valette's eyes, his paintings are on display until the end of January, some of them almost yards away from the original scenes he painted. In the adjoining galleries his most famous pupil, L. S. Lowry, has his own inimitable and exhilarating exhibition, and it is an opportunity not to be missed to be able to see both artists, teacher and pupil, next to one another whilst the Valette exhibition is here. One should add, too, that Manchester Art Gallery acquired its own collection of nine of Valette's work, when he finally left Manchester in 1928, including his famous *Albert Square 1910* and *Hansom Cab at All Saints 1910*.

A visit to The Lowry and Manchester Art Gallery would be a natural combined visit; Salford Museum and Art Gallery has two sketches of the Bridgewater Canal by Lowry at the moment (Nov. 2011).

Pierre Adolphe Valette (he would also sign his paintings as Adolf) was born in Saint-Etienne in 1876. He was the third of four children born into a family that earned its living from arms manufacture at a time when the town was gaining importance as an administrative and industrial centre in the Rhone-Alpes region of France. Valette progressed through art school with credit and potential, winning commendations and prizes for his work, and with a distinct bias towards art rather than commerce. He studied at the local School of Art, a foundation that emphasised the connections between art and industry, metallurgy, design and engraving. When Valette moved to Lyon he worked as an engraver by day and attended Lyon art classes in the evening. He went thence to Bordeaux, again working as an engraver and draughtsman whilst attending art school. Throughout this time Valette was coming to the attention of his teachers as an artist of promise and some distinction against a wider context of the growing importance of Impressionist painting in France and Europe.

Details of his movements in these early formative years are sketchy in parts (perhaps explaining the absence of some dates alongside some illustrations in the accompanying informative book for this exhibition) but Valette was certainly living in Manchester by 1905, at the age of twenty-nine. He joined the printing firm of Norbury, Natzio and Co. Ltd in Old Trafford, part of the thriving printing industry of Manchester. They published illustrations, engravings and a wide range of books, and it would be tempting to guess there are as yet unknown works produced by Valette for the company since he did produce commercial posters and the company itself printed and created illustrated works. One senses his affinity with this operation – working with the techniques of printing, the lithographic presses, the materials and colours of the inks, plate-making, papers, silks, lettering and typesetting. The exhibition includes recently discovered works by Valette, references to other work as yet not found for public display. While working for Norbury, Valette, following his earlier routine in France of paid work by day and evening study, enrolled at the Manchester Municipal School of Art in the imposing building which is now part of Manchester Metropolitan University. The plaque outside the renamed Grosvenor building at All Saints commemorates his work there.

As a painter he shows a distinct impressionist influence on early paintings, through his 'Manchester/Salford period' and into his later years in France again. In his rural paintings, *Le Berger et ses Moutons*

,
Shepherd and Sheep under Tree

,
Peasants going Home

and more, the treatment of the pastoral subjects leads to pastel colours, brush strokes and perspectives reminiscent of Cézanne at times. Such can be seen in his paintings of North Wales too. They create a languid frame of reference that is to be found in later work, after leaving Manchester, in the idyllic scenes of southern France. In particular one is reminded of Monet (

Bathers at la Grenouillère, 1869)

in Valette's

L'Échaudage des Vignes

for both painters realist detail gives way to an impression of shape, colour and movement suggesting, in the smaller 'sketches' in Valette's case, pictorial notes for a large composition. Valette uses a number of quite distinctive brushstrokes to capture an instantaneous definition of one colour against another to achieve highlights and modifications of pure colour and tone; and natural light was important for such effects. He, like

[Ford Madox Brown](#)

(currently at Manchester Art Gallery), advocated painting

en plein air

, a tradition of outdoor painting which goes back to Constable and, famously, Turner who was tied to a ship's mast in order to witness a sea storm (c.1842). The nearest Valette would come to this was his observations of the barges on the canal and river systems around Manchester and Salford, but the importance of working in front of the subject was central to Valette and his contemporaries among the French Impressionists to capture the ever-changing effects of light, cloud and movement outdoors.



[near-of-impressionism-in-manchester](http://www.thelowry.com/event/adolphe-valette-a-near-of-impressionism-in-manchester) <http://www.thelowry.com/event/adolphe-valette-a-near-of-impressionism-in-manchester>