

# HISTORICAL CONTEXT

## Why was the School commissioned and what was its purpose?



The School was commissioned because of two main historical conditions:

### Firstly, Birmingham needed more craftspeople

There was an economic necessity to educate artist/designers with drawing and modelling skills to feed into local businesses. As early as 1800 Birmingham was hailed as the workshop of the world. Thousands of small workshops developed specialist craft trades. New productive processes, such as electroplating (patented in Birmingham in 1840) required craftspeople including engravers, painters, modellers and decorators.

Birmingham's industrial development was built on the creativity and flexibility of its workforce. Luxury goods such as jewellery of the highest quality and design were exported abroad and contributed to the prosperity of the city. Economic importance gave these creative occupations prestige, social status and a high income.

### Secondly, Birmingham was culturally ambitious

There was national prestige to be gained in encouraging the creative arts. An extensive infrastructure already existed for

teaching drawing, painting and exhibiting in learned societies. At the Birmingham Society of Artists, there was conflict between exhibiting art work at the Academy or promoting designers that were needed by the town's manufacturing industries. Wealthy patrons argued that craftsmanship in industrial design was of national economic benefit and that this should take priority.

In 1885 the first locally managed Municipal School of Art was opened in Margaret Street, Birmingham. Pioneering, it included art education for women, and was inspired by Arts and Crafts principles. What appeared for the first time in art education, was the discipline of design taught through drawing and modelling.

To feed this Central Art School, pupils aged 13-15, attended up to 20 local Branch Art Schools, the largest number in any city including London. Moseley Road Branch Art School was commissioned in 1898 and opened in 1901. The school selected local talented pupils from a broad social background, artisans, middle and working class. Acceptance was principally by recommendation from elementary head teachers. Evening and day-release classes received funding assistance from local employers.

