



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Active citizen or pest? Civic authorities, democratization and citizenship in inter-war England

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Abstract

In the 1920s, the art collector John Hilditch tirelessly undertook a public campaign to have his objects exhibited at the Manchester City Art Gallery. This article uses his struggle as a lens through which to examine how the relationship between the civic museum and its citizens was reshaped during the transition to mass democracy. Historians have explored how civic authorities responded to the challenge of mass democratization by encouraging their citizens to become ‘active’, but we know little about how the citizens responded to this call. Hilditch’s campaign allows us to see what public platforms citizens could negotiate to become ‘active’ citizens, and just how far they could influence civic policy.

Tony Bennett succinctly captured the paternalistic spirit of nineteenth-century civic art galleries and museums in his remark that while ‘intended *for* the people, they were certainly not *of* the people’ (emphasis in the original).¹ Emerging out of the mid-nineteenth-century social and political reforms, provincial art galleries and museums were seen as an antidote to the consequences of rapid urbanization – weakened social ties, poverty and crime. As with parks and libraries, museums were forms of respectable leisure, promoted by local authorities to improve the lives of the people as well as foster social harmony. The Museums Act of 1845 allowed local councils to establish museums but with only small sums raised through property taxes. This meant the take up was slow at first, and museums were reliant on the generosity of the city’s wealthy from the start. The general public got little say over the running of museums, despite being their intended audience and funders. Civic authorities, in the form of Art Gallery Committees, were in control. A branch of the Municipal Council, these committees were made up of elected councillors and, in most cases, appointed representatives from the city’s educational and cultural institutions. As Kate Hill neatly summed up, these committees comprised men who ‘dominated [localities]

¹T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995), 8–28, 90–109. See also E. Hooper Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London, 1992).

economically, socially and culturally', and up until the middle of the twentieth century, often dominated curators too.²

In general, the public assumed the role of gallery and museum consumers, though local collectors and experts had the opportunity to become knowledge producers by donating and gifting objects and volunteering their knowledge.³ The opportunity to do so was dependent on establishing favourable relations with the gallery committee. Formal introductions through mutual contacts and membership at learned societies were crucial for collectors wanting to woo museums, as well as museums that had their sights on a particular collection. Whether or not a museum accepted a loan or gift depended as much on the perception of the collector as it did the quality of the objects. This meant that donors to museums often occupied similar social groups to those who sat on the Art Gallery Committees, though as Hill has shown, the specific priorities of the museum were important in steering who and what they accepted. Institutions with a more specialist agenda, such as those which were art galleries rather than art galleries *and* museums, prioritized art which narrowed their potential donor pool to those with the funds and an eye for art. In contrast, art museums in small towns, such as Warrington, were more unscrupulous, which meant that they were underpinned by a more diverse social network.⁴

Thus far, scholars have examined the collector–museum relationship with a focus on those who successfully donated to museums.⁵ This article takes a different angle. It uses the case-study of a disgruntled collector who campaigned unsuccessfully to get his objects exhibited. In taking on the civic elites, challenging their authority, this collector's story allows us to examine more closely the power dynamic between the civic museum and its citizens. The collector in question is John Hilditch, who from 1913 until his death in 1930 harangued the Art Gallery Committee (AGC) of the Manchester City Art Gallery (MCAG) over the exhibition of his Chinese antiquities. This article focuses specifically on his antics in the early 1920s as it looks to discern how the relationship between the civic museum and its citizens was reshaped by the forces of political democratization after World War I. As Helen McCarthy has shown, enfranchisement brought in by the Representation of the People's Act (1918) instilled in the people a new sense of entitlement, and new platforms to actively participate in public affairs. McCarthy and others have looked at the democratization of national politics, but we still know little of how democratization impacted public affairs in the local context, and it is here that Hilditch's attack furthers our understanding.⁶

²K. Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums, 1850–1914* (Aldershot, 2005), 29, 53–7, 64–6; A. Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty: Art Museums in Industrial Britain* (Stanford, 2012), 13–16.

³Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums*; J. Moore, *High Culture and Tall Chimneys: Art Institutions and Urban Society in Lancashire 1780–1914* (Manchester, 2018), 252–3.

⁴Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums*, 57–62; K. Hill, *Women and Museums 1850–1914: Modernity and the Gendering of Knowledge* (Manchester, 2016), 47–69; K. Hill, 'Collecting authenticity: domestic, familial, and everyday "old things" in English museums, 1850–1939', *Museum History Journal*, 4 (2011), 203–22.

⁵For examples in the field of Chinese art, see S. Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560–1960* (Oxford, 2007). On local museums, see Hill, *Culture and Class in English Public Museums*, 57–62.

⁶H. McCarthy, 'Parties, voluntary associations and democratic politics in interwar Britain', *Historical Journal*, 50 (2007), 891–912; H. McCarthy, 'Whose democracy? Histories of British political culture between the wars', *Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 221–38; R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England 1914–1951* (Oxford, 2010).

Histories of civic politics in the 1920s have largely been framed around the concept of ‘active citizenship’. This has been used to describe the civic elites’ attempts to deal with the enfranchisement of a politically uneducated electorate, the rise of political apathy and a decline in local pride. The solution, so the elites decided, was to invite the public to actively participate in civic culture, such as civic weeks with pageants and exhibitions celebrating the city’s achievements. The aim was to foster community cohesion and social values such as respectability and responsibility, as well as to instil greater faith and pride in the local authority. As historians like Tom Hulme argue, while encouraging participation, these events still reinforced a civic hierarchy. There were limits to how ‘active’ the citizens could be, as the spatial dynamics of opening ceremonies – with dignitaries opening institutions on platforms elevated above the people – neatly shows. Brad Beaven has also shown how the structural inequalities of these events could become the source of protestation, as evidenced by the Peace Day riots in 1919. Beaven highlights the significance of the local socio-economic and political context in understanding these riots, and thus while it may be true that the lesson the civic authorities in Coventry and Luton learned was that they needed less, not more civic events, in Manchester, where the Hilditch story is based, Hulme describes a thriving civic culture as the authorities looked to combat the perception that Manchester’s glory was fading.⁷

These texts are crucial for understanding inter-war civic culture, but this article offers a new way of thinking about the topic. It does so by adopting a ‘small history’ approach, centred on the story of Hilditch and his confrontation with the civic elites. As Julia Laite has demonstrated, such a method allows historians to examine big historical processes from an alternative perspective, such as how they were experienced at an individual level. Moreover, by zooming in on individual lives, or case-studies, we can see more clearly the nuances of human agency.⁸ Following this, Hilditch offers a valuable lens for illustrating wider trends in inter-war civic culture. Paying attention to the citizens, as well as to the civic elites, this article allows us to ask a different set of questions about ‘active citizenship’, namely how it was understood and experienced by the public, how, when and where it could be exercised and how far it could be used to influence the civic authorities. Through Hilditch, we will see how democratization opened up new opportunities for citizens to challenge the authority of the civic elites, and the headache this caused for the latter. Even though ultimately Hilditch did not get what he wanted, he forced changes, and symbolizes more broadly the moment whereby the relationship between civic authorities and citizens had changed. In the age of mass democracy, the civic authorities could no longer simply ignore those they deemed local cranks.

Background to the dispute

In June 1924, the AGC in Manchester opened an exhibition of Chinese ceramics at their branch gallery in Didsbury. The display was comprised solely of objects from the permanent collection, but one collector – John Hilditch – took offence at being

⁷T. Hulme, *After the Shock City: Urban Culture and the Making of Modern Citizenship* (Woodbridge, 2019), 27–46; B. Beaven, ‘Challenges to civic governance in post-war England: the Peace Day disturbances of 1919’, *Urban History*, 33 (2006), 369–92.

⁸J. Laite, ‘The Emmet’s inch: small history in a digital age’, *Journal of Social History*, 53 (2020), 963–89.

overlooked for the display. Hilditch was frustrated as this was not the first time this had happened. In fact, it was not even the second time. In 1910, when Hilditch had just started collecting Chinese and Japanese art, he had staged an exhibition at the gallery, but in 1913, when the AGC organized their blockbuster Chinese Applied Art Exhibition, he was not invited to participate. When Hilditch got wind of the plans for the 1913 exhibition, and realized he had been overlooked, he wrote to the AGC offering his collection but this proved to be in vain. The AGC purposely delayed their response until it was too late for him to participate. They did so as they were suspicious about the quality of his collection, as well as his motivations to exhibit. Since his exhibition at the MCAG in 1910, Hilditch had started to make a name for himself in elite collecting circles, and not a good one. The nation's leading Japanese art collectors and museum officials witnessed him at auctions selling what they deemed egregious fakes, which he bid on through an alias to raise the price. He then took the fakes to the national museums and tried to get the experts to legitimize their high financial value. Alarmed at this behaviour, the word spread that he was an untrustworthy character, more of a dealer than a collector, his collection dubbed his 'stock'.⁹

While Hilditch's behaviour was bound to concern museum officials, there was an air of snobbery in their discussions about him. Hilditch belonged to a different social, economic and cultural world from the experts he shocked. His was a modest upbringing in a working-class family in Sandbach, outside Crewe in the north-west of England. Socially mobile, he started off as a salesman for Singer Sewing Machine in Manchester before going on to become supervisor and then manager in the 1920s. Moreover, as did many men who traversed the boundaries from working class to lower middle class, Hilditch engaged with high culture, in his case art collecting, both because he loved it, and because of the promise of cultural distinction, and perhaps as an investment too. It was not unusual for people of Hilditch's background to dabble in collecting in the 1910s, though as Heidi Egginton has shown, it was the 1920s that witnessed the most drastic democratization of collecting, as affordable publications like *The Bazaar* and *Exchange and Mart* provided the lower middle and upper working classes opportunity to receive expert knowledge as well as a mail order network to purchase cheap antiques.¹⁰ The way Hilditch was discussed by the art elites shows their concern over the new type of collector. We can read the reference to his 'stock' as evidence of his work in 'trade' colouring perceptions of his collecting. But Hilditch was not a dealer as insinuated. 'Shill bidding' or 'puffing' as it was known was sneaky, but not illegal nor unheard of, and Hilditch was otherwise doing what many collectors did, selling objects he no longer wanted, referring to their exhibitionary history to boost the price.¹¹ The MCAG was worried Hilditch would

⁹J. Hilditch, *Illustrated Catalogue of a Collection of Chinese Paintings, Japanese Paintings and Colour Prints Lent by John Hilditch, Esq.* (Manchester, 1910); Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), MA/1/H190, unpublished letter from Edward Strange to the director of the South Kensington Museum, 25 Jun. 1912; letter from Arthur Morrison to V&A, 1 May 1912.

¹⁰H. Egginton, 'In quest of the antique: the bazaar, exchange and mart and the democratization of collecting, 1926–1942', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 159–85.

¹¹In the absence of a reserve bid, sellers would often enlist agents to bid up objects, as J.W. Turner often did, famously, and probably apocryphally, on one occasion employing the 'butcher's boy'. See W. Thornbury, *The Life of J.M.W. Turner, RA*, vol. II (London, 1862), 148–50. See also F. Meisel, "'Upping the ante": market distortion in auction sales', *Modern Law Review*, 59 (1996), 400–1.

use it to boost his collection's financial value, but overlooked this with other collectors. Indeed, one of the main contributors to Manchester's 1913 exhibition (which Hilditch was overlooked for), the merchant banker R.H. Benson, sold the wares he had exhibited but was invited back to contribute to another exhibition in 1927.¹² If the collection was good enough, and the collector pleasant to deal with, galleries could overlook commercial motivations.

There is also the question of the quality of Hilditch's collection. From the reports of his antics at auctions, the AGC had grounds to be wary that his collection contained fakes, and as we will see, when it was finally subject to the scrutiny of the nation's foremost experts, they found themselves largely vindicated. This is unsurprising. At Singer, Hilditch did well for himself but still had much tighter purse strings than the elite collectors who were financiers and bankers. An autodidact who existed outside the charmed circle of the dealers, collectors and museum experts who helped guarantee authenticity, and with limited cash, he was bound to collect fakes and unfashionable objects, especially as he prioritized the size of his collection over its quality. In 1913, he had over 1,000 objects, half of which were Japanese art, the other Chinese art. By the 1920s, he had reformulated the collection and expanded it, focusing mainly on Chinese art of which he had over 2,000 objects.¹³ Among these, the experts did find objects of 'museum quality', though, even if they deemed them to be a fraction of the collection. The point here is not to discern what was in Hilditch's collection, but to acknowledge how the AGC's perception of it shaped their dealing with Hilditch. What is important is that the AGC did not want to engage with Hilditch, but as we will see, ending up having to.

Hilditch did not take the rejection in 1913 well. He expressed his frustration at the snub in letters to the local press, but the AGC snuffed out the complaints, and kept their suspicions secret, claiming the exhibition's organizer pottery manufacturer William Burton simply did not know of his collection.¹⁴ In 1918, the AGC exhibited Chinese ceramics again but did not invite Hilditch. Afterwards he wrote to the AGC chairman saying that he wanted to loan his objects, and was even thinking about bequeathing them to the gallery. It took three letters and five months to get the AGC chairman and gallery curator to agree to look at his collection and then nothing came of this.¹⁵ Neither were knowledgeable in Chinese art, and we do not know what they told Hilditch during the inspection as there was no further correspondence. The effort it took to get them to see his collection and their silence afterwards suggests they were never going to organize an exhibition. It was just to keep him quiet, and probably for the curator who had joined after 1913 to see for himself who they were dealing with.

The episodes of 1913 and 1918–19 show how Hilditch, finding himself outside the circle of the AGC and their trusted collectors, had to rely on written correspondence to try and forge a connection with the officials but as a result was easily ignored.

¹²*Catalogue of a Portion of the Collection of Early Chinese Porcelain and Pottery Formed by Robert H. Benson, Esq* (London, 1924); *Manchester Guardian*, 27 Apr. 1927, 14.

¹³L. Ryder, 'Museums, culture and the Hilditch collection: the contest for cultural authority in early twentieth-century Britain', University of Manchester Ph.D. thesis, 2020, 57–8, 71–2.

¹⁴*Manchester Courier*, 23 Jun. 1913, 7; *Manchester Courier*, 25 Jun. 1913, 7; *Manchester Courier*, 27 Jun. 1913, 7.

¹⁵Manchester Art Gallery Archive (MAG), Manchester C1 'Hilditch affair', Hilditch to Todd, 19 Nov. 1918; Hilditch to Haward, 28 Apr. 1919; Haward to Hilditch, 6 May 1919.

Unfortunately for Hilditch, the personnel making up the AGC had barely changed since 1913. Frederick Todd, director of an engraving firm, was still chairman, and many of the other members remained, namely Deputy Chairman Carter and E.F.M. Sutton, a Chinese art collector himself. Manchester's AGC supports James Moore and Richard Rodger's findings that committee chairmen ran their committees as 'semi-autonomous fiefdoms'. As an alderman, the chair would not have to face elections and thus his position on the committee was safe. Also, the practice in Manchester meant chairmen were effectively elected for life – usually reappointed without contest every year until their death. This was the case with the AGC, as Todd was chairman from 1912 to 1929, the period in which Hilditch launched his campaign.¹⁶

The biggest change at the gallery since 1913 was that there was a new curator, Lawrence Haward. This posed a new problem for Hilditch as Haward was brought in to modernize and professionalize the gallery along specialist lines, meaning more scrutiny over the quality of acquisitions.¹⁷ Haward's use of experts to judge collections would frustrate Hilditch later down the line. Rumours over his collection and anxieties over his character were a more immediate obstacle for Hilditch in 1924. Todd would have told Haward about Hilditch's commercial impulse, concerns over the authenticity of his objects, as well as his impertinent letters to the press in 1913. On paper, the professional museum run on specialist expert lines looked meritocratic as it was the objects that were judged by experts, but in reality the collector's character still mattered. As Haward explained in his lecture on 'The Problem of Provincial Galleries and Art Museums' at the Royal Society of Arts in 1922, regarding the matter of accepting collections, 'a good deal depends on the donor and nearly everything on the way in which it is handled'.¹⁸

Considering the above, it is almost certain that Hilditch had no chance of being considered for the exhibition in 1924, even if the AGC were going to include local collectors. As well as being concerned about his motives and expertise, the AGC undoubtedly found him odd. He called his house 'Minglands' and often dressed in Chinese robes. This was behaviour that distanced him from the serious, elite collectors who kept the boundary between collection and collector distinct.¹⁹ Moreover, any hopes of reparations for 1913 were dashed in 1923 when he humiliated the AGC in the local press by claiming to have hoaxed them with three fake mandarins during the Chinese exhibition in 1913. Copying the popular Dreadnought hoax performed by the Bloomsbury group, Hilditch took three friends dressed up in mandarin robes to the gallery with the intention of scoring one over the AGC who had overlooked his collection.²⁰ The hoax posed the question: if the officials could not spot a real mandarin, how could the public trust their judgment in Chinese art? But it

¹⁶J. Moore and R. Rodger, 'Who really ran the cities? Municipal knowledge and policy networks in British local government, 1832–1914', in R. Beachy and R. Roth (eds.), *Who Ran the Cities? City Elites and Urban Power Structures in Europe and North America, 1750–1940* (Aldershot, 2007), 52–6; *Manchester Guardian*, 19 Nov. 1912, 7.

¹⁷Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty*, 160–9.

¹⁸L. Haward, 'The problem of provincial galleries and art museums, with special reference to Manchester', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 70 (1922), 637.

¹⁹L. Ryder, 'The Hilditch–McGill Chinese Palace Temple: exhibitions, mass culture, and China in the British imagination in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33 (2022), 129–53.

²⁰D. Jones, *The Girl Prince: Virginia Woolf, Race and the Dreadnought Hoax* (London, 2023).

seems the joke did not come off. When he revealed the joke 10 years later – the delay itself is suspicious – the AGC denied they had been duped, and especially refuted the claim they had given the ‘mandarins’ a civic reception. Nevertheless, Hilditch had got in there first and the story was widely reprinted across the country.²¹ His attempt to undermine the authority of the AGC clearly rankled them and this was a sign of things to come.

Public platforms and the press

Three months into the exhibition of Chinese art in 1924, Hilditch delivered a lecture at Manchester’s Rotary Club on ‘The Art of Chinese Art Collecting’. He used this lecture to publicly criticize the AGC, arguing that studying Chinese art was easier in London than Manchester, not because the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum had more resources, but because Manchester’s gallery officials lacked ‘initiative, enterprise and courage’. Space was being wasted at the MCAG as the same exhibitions had been on display for 20 years and other rooms lay empty. Taking a swipe at the MCAG’s recent design exhibitions, he remarked that people did not visit galleries to see ‘the latest mouse trap, electrical radiator or wireless set’, they visited to see the ‘richest and rarest things made by man’. In an unobtrusive nod to his own collection, he noted that a quality display of Chinese art could be ‘easily accomplished in Manchester’. Finally, he showed off his superior expertise to the gallery by asking who had classified the Chinese wares on display. The classifications, in his opinion, along with the scant information in the catalogue, was another instance of the ‘blind leading the blind’.²²

As a service club for business and professional men, the Rotary Club might at first seem a strange venue for a talk on civic affairs. In fact, the Rotary Club was one of many voluntary associations, along with Women’s Institutes and sports clubs, which proliferated following the extension of the franchise in 1918. Such associations aimed to provide lessons in democratic participation to the newly enfranchised with party politics a proscribed topic, but civic engagement enthusiastically promoted. The Rotary Club was founded on the notion that they were training individuals for citizenship – teaching them to listen and express opinions respectfully, abide by majority vote, elect representatives and act in the interest of the organization.²³ Turning a talk on art collecting into a talk on civic institutions shows how Hilditch engaged with the Club’s ethos. Reactions to the talk suggest it was not considered out of place either. The president of the Rotary Club Councillor Harper and Councillor Goodwin both promised to use their influence in local politics to officially raise the matter of exhibiting Hilditch’s collection at the MCAG.²⁴ Their pledge to raise the issue of exhibiting his collection may have been an empty promise, spurred by politeness, but it does evidence the Club’s role in encouraging non-partisan participation in civic affairs.

The local press printed Hilditch’s talk, ensuring that it found a wider audience than those in the lecture hall. It was common for the local press to publish talks in the

²¹*Evening Chronicle*, 9 Aug. 1923, 5; *Evening Chronicle*, 10 Aug. 1923, 4; *Portsmouth Evening News*, 11 Aug. 1923, 8; *Leeds Mercury*, 10 Aug. 1923, 2; *Boston Guardian*, 18 Aug. 1923, 7.

²²*City News*, 9 Aug. 1924, 6.

²³McCarthy, ‘Parties, voluntary associations and democratic politics in interwar Britain’, 893–906.

²⁴*City News*, 9 Aug. 1924, 6.

city but the coverage this one gained suggests he invited journalists to the lecture, or at least sent in copy. He did have previous experience of engaging the press in this way, such as with the exposé of his hoax. The *Manchester City News* (*City News* hereafter) was Hilditch's closest ally throughout his campaign against the MCAG. Their relationship went back to 1913 when the paper provided Hilditch space to critique the Chinese exhibition. The *City News* was Manchester's leading paper for art comment; self-characterized as 'independent', it maintained an intense focus on civic proceedings.²⁵ As such, Hilditch's case against the AGC was ideal copy for the *City News*, though it would be wrong to see the relationship simply in these terms. Hilditch and the paper's editor John Cuming Walters were friends, sharing interests in art, literature and civic politics. A week after the talk, the *City News* tried to keep the discussion going, and showed support for Hilditch by printing a letter to the editor from 'An Old Art Student', who agreed that Manchester's galleries were stagnating and that the committees should focus on updating displays and providing lectures, rather than buying objects.²⁶

Hilditch's lecture also drew the attention of the popular press such as the *Evening Chronicle* and the *Daily Dispatch*. Both were founded by Edward Hulton who became a key player in Manchester's press industry by providing cheaper, more sensationalist papers. Like their national counterparts, such as the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*, Hulton's papers were part of the 'new journalism' style which was well established by the end of the nineteenth century. These titles did not cater to the social and political elites, but the growing audience of the lower middle and working classes, more and more of whom were able to read and spend surplus wages. Unlike the patrician broadsheets, these papers claimed to give the public what they wanted, and this, they concluded, was human interest stories: police reports, politics, sports and sensationalist news. A melodramatic tone and more exciting visual layouts appealed to the readers but spooked traditional political and cultural elites who complained the papers were a threat to democracy – not only were journalistic standards being corrupted, leading to false information, but the personalized, hostile tone undermined respectable political discussion.²⁷

We need to be careful not to fall into the trap of viewing the popular press as being restricted to reporting base human interest stories. Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy have shown that the popular press did report politics, albeit in a sensationalist way. Their aim was to make what could be seen as boring political news more interesting to the readers and so one of their main strategies was 'to highlight – or, if necessary, to create drama in political life'. In terms of the provincial popular press, Michael Bromley and Nick Hayes have shown how these papers were overly dramatic, but nevertheless served as an outlet for democratic engagement. Underpinned by the journalism of disclosure, they could be 'watchdogs' for local citizens, printing news even if it meant 'discomforting elites'. In order to sell more copies, they reported local issues in sensationalist ways, but they still held the authorities to account on behalf of the public. Indeed, exposing the wrongdoings and shortcomings of the local

²⁵*City News*, 28 Jun. 1913, 7; *Newspaper Press Director*, 68 (1913), 127.

²⁶*City News*, 16 Aug. 1924, 8.

²⁷D. Griffiths, *Plant Here the Standard* (Basingstoke, 1996), 196–200; D. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988), 22–31; A. Bingham and M. Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present* (Oxford, 2015), 3–11; M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain: 1850–1950* (Chicago, 2004), 75–105, 131.

elites was a method of actively courting a lower- middle- and working-class readership, just as the mid-nineteenth-century radical periodicals had done vis-à-vis the political elite. Unsurprisingly, such sensationalist attacks became a source of much ire for the civic elites. In inter-war Leicester, for instance, councillors bemoaned the evening press' histrionic condemnation of the housing proposals.²⁸ Such an approach explains that while the national press was beginning to dominate newspaper reading in Britain after the war, some provincial papers managed to remain popular. This included the *Daily Dispatch* and the *Evening Chronicle*, which in 1923 were bought by national press barons Lord Beaverbrook and Lord Rothermere. Priced at a half penny, the *Chronicle* had one of the largest circulations of all evening newspapers outside London in the 1920s, with an estimated 300,000 copies sold daily.²⁹

Hilditch had put himself on the radar of Manchester's sensationalist papers through his hoax, which he exclusively leaked to the *Chronicle*. The hoax was ideal copy for the *Chronicle* as it turned a civic issue into a harmless melodrama. The coverage of his Rotary Club lecture in these papers, though, supports the argument that sensationalist papers were not only interested in human interest stories, but played an important role in amplifying civic matters. Hilditch played his part by pandering to the papers' style and pushing the boundaries of respectable criticism through his harsh and sarcastic tone. The papers also contributed to sensationalizing the talk even further, namely through the headlines. The *Evening Chronicle* as well as the similarly cheap but slightly more serious *Manchester Evening News* went with the heading of 'WASTED SPACE' while the *Daily Dispatch* went with 'HIDDEN TREASURES', a signal to Hilditch's collection. Nevertheless, all reported his critiques of art gallery policy, showing the editors did take his attack seriously. The result was that these papers provided Hilditch with a platform for public discussion. The *Daily Dispatch* even went as far as to make explicit Hilditch's offer to the AGC which was only insinuated in the talk. Even after being 'refused permission' to exhibit in 1913, the paper reported, Hilditch 'was quite prepared to lend his collection to the city'.³⁰

The coverage of Hilditch's talk differed drastically in the *Manchester Guardian*, which was more expensive and more serious than the papers above. The *Guardian* was also often an ardent supporter of the council's civic initiatives, including the AGC's work. The AGC used the *Guardian* to popularize their exhibitions, and evidence the gallery's social importance, each year publishing the annual gallery attendances.³¹ Separate from the short factual report on his talk, the *Manchester Guardian* defended the gallery in a leader column which condemned what they called Hilditch's 'attack' on the gallery. The editor condemned the 'shallowness' of Hilditch's criticism and defended the AGC and curators who were 'eager' to open another room for the public but were inhibited by the financial difficulties wrought

²⁸Bingham and Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 66–9; M. Bromley and N. Hayes, 'Campaigner, watchdog or municipal lackey? Reflections on the inter-war provincial press, local identity and civic welfarism', *Media History*, 8 (2002), 198–200; on radical press, see J. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, 1992), 84–103.

²⁹R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 503–7; *Advertisers' A B C.: The Standard Advertisement Directory*, vol. 36 (1922), 523.

³⁰*Evening Chronicle*, 7 Aug. 1924, 6; *Manchester Evening News*, 7 Aug. 1924, 5; *Daily Dispatch*, 8 Aug. 1924, 4.

³¹On *Guardian* support for civic initiatives in the inter-war period, see C. Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment and Modernity in Liverpool and Manchester 1918–1939* (London, 2016); and Hulme, *After the Shock City*. For an example of a glowing review of the gallery's annual performance, see *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Aug. 1927, 11.

by the war. They intimated his commercial motives too. They made clear they did not have Hilditch in mind, but noted how galleries had to be wary of collectors looking to boost their profits.³² Characterizing Hilditch as rude, misinformed and self-interested, the *Guardian* weaponized three traits which stood in antagonism to the ideals of healthy democracy. Their language echoed that of the social and political elites in the inter-war period, who, in response to the war's erosion of social deference and challenge to the natural social hierarchy, as well as the disturbing riots that followed the war, invested renewed vigour in the importance of fair play, restraint and moral earnestness. Rowdiness, which was often a legitimate form of active, assertive political participation before the war, was now condemned as overly aggressive, fuelled by class hatred, and anti-British.³³

When viewed alongside other museum protests of the time we can see how tame Hilditch's 'attack' was. Before World War I, suffragettes caused an outcry by vandalizing paintings in galleries across the country, including the MCAG, in what Suzanne MacLeod reads as a broader attack on the patriarchal culture that galleries and their paintings symbolized. Moreover, in 1921 amidst economic turmoil and widespread unemployment in post-war Liverpool, the National Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement occupied the Walker Art Gallery in protest at the low levels of poor relief.³⁴ Like these protesters, Hilditch saw the gallery as a symbol of inequality, but with the goal of getting his objects exhibited he understood he had to use less aggressive tactics. He had to play the game of civic politics. In a way, this made Hilditch more of a threat to the civic authorities: the more respectable the criticism, the harder it was to dismiss in front of the public. The *Guardian's* response shows how in a world where 'active' citizenship could be appropriated and exploited, the defenders of patrician models of political leadership were forced to make explicit the difference between legitimate and harmful performances of political commentary. Hilditch's 'attack' was a world away from the physical protests, but in the eyes of the *Guardian* he had still overstepped the mark, and this needed to be made public.

The *Manchester Guardian's* leader column spoke on behalf of the AGC as they noted 'the tongues of officials are usually tied', a reference to the notion that civic authorities had to appear dignified, restrained and impartial, and responding to vicious attacks could upset this image. This was true of the AGC as their main way of dealing with Hilditch involved ignoring his criticisms. Chairman Todd outlined the AGC's approach for dealing with bad 'active' citizens at the annual Athenaeum Club dinner in February 1925. He argued 'the art gallery could always meet and deal with honest and straightforward criticism, but there was another kind of criticism, spiteful and vindictive, which could be treated only by silent contempt'.³⁵ Hilditch's name was not mentioned during this speech. Todd knew better than to show the gallery's prejudices but Hilditch definitely felt they had him in mind – he demanded Todd reveal who he was referring to.³⁶ At the Athenaeum, Todd wanted to make clear that

³²*Manchester Guardian*, 8 Aug. 1924, 8.

³³J. Lawrence, 'Forging a peaceable kingdom: war, violence, and fear of brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89; J. Lawrence, 'The transformation of British public politics after the First World War', *Past & Present*, 190 (2006), 185–216.

³⁴S. MacLeod, 'Civil disobedience and political agitation: the art museum as a site of protest in the early twentieth century', *Museum and Society*, 5 (2006), 44–57.

³⁵*City News*, 7 Feb. 1925, 5.

³⁶MAG, Manchester C1 'Hilditch affair', Hilditch to Todd, 28 Feb. 1925.

the public were encouraged to get involved in civic affairs but they had a certain image of citizenship in mind. Anything that overstepped the boundary of respectability was unhelpful and undemocratic.

It is interesting, then, that Hilditch's Rotary lecture did draw a response from the otherwise silent AGC. In a letter to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, Todd explained that it was 'Mr. R. L. Hobson of the British Museum, who is the greatest authority on Chinese porcelain in the country' who catalogued the Chinese objects on display.³⁷ Sticking to the issue of art knowledge, Todd exercised his 'silent contempt' over Hilditch's comments on the gallery's wasted space and the AGC's lack of courage. Drawing on Hobson's objective expertise, Todd had an appropriate opportunity to publicly defend the gallery and belittle Hilditch's claims to expertise. This way, he sidestepped being drawn into a sparring match over the behaviour of the gallery which could risk the AGC's reputation, especially if they were seen as treating Hilditch impartially. Moreover, Todd used the opportunity to outline who the AGC considered to be an expert, qualifying Hobson's authority through his position at a national museum. This was in tune with the wider trend in the art world, whereby national museum curators with Oxbridge degrees were increasingly valued as *the* experts in the field. Todd's eagerness to associate the gallery with Hobson shows the importance the AGC felt in policing the boundaries of art expertise at a time when collecting was becoming more democratic, and when the media was awash with stories of tricksters and conmen who were exploiting the socio-economic and cultural transformations caused by World War I.³⁸ For the AGC, Hilditch represented the threat of bogus art expertise as well as faux public service, and Todd's letter to the *Manchester Guardian* was their way of relaying this to the public without compromising the AGC's propriety.

While the *Guardian* clearly backed the AGC, they did give Hilditch the chance to defend himself. In another letter to the editor, Hilditch replied to both the leader column and Todd. To Todd, he contested Hobson's expertise by asking for proof of his classifications, and for the leader column, he played down the aggressiveness of his lecture. He had 'no axe to grind', so he claimed, and his comments were intended to '*emulate the creed of the Rotary Club in service, not self*, as the object of its members is the quickening of individual interests in everything affecting the public welfare' (emphasis in the original). Quoting the Rotary Club's motto, Hilditch clearly understood the role of the organization in encouraging public debate and used it to defend his critique. Appropriating the notion of public service, he framed his lecture as constructive criticism for the good of the city, not an unfair, selfish attack. As such, we gain an insight into how the democratic ethos of voluntary societies was experienced and appropriated by the public. Allowing Hilditch to explain himself, we can see how the *Guardian* provided a platform for public debate – even for criticisms they considered unfair. However, restricted to the columns of the editor's correspondence meant that Hilditch could have little impact. This was exposed when neither Todd nor the editor replied to his letter.

Two months later, Hilditch wrote privately – and politely – to Todd offering to lend his collection for exhibition.³⁹ Hilditch was extremely optimistic if he thought

³⁷*Manchester Guardian*, 9 Aug. 1924, 11.

³⁸M. Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (London, 2016).

³⁹Manchester Central Library (MCL)/GB127 Council Minutes/Art Galleries Committee/12, 'Meeting, 20 Nov. 1924'.

the AGC would accept his invitation considering his public criticisms of the gallery. In fact, Hilditch most likely did not expect the AGC to look beyond his criticisms and accept his collection. Instead, he was hoping that his public criticisms would force them to engage with him, for this became his tactic, publicly criticizing the AGC and then writing privately with an offer, slowly ramping up the pressure. This time, the AGC replied that they ‘regret being unable to avail themselves’ of exhibiting his collection but gave no reason, presumably because they did not feel like they owed him one.⁴⁰ Again, we can see how, when limited to written correspondence, even after applying some public pressure, those outside the gallery network could exercise little influence over gallery policy. Irritated by the AGC’s response, Hilditch replied more pointedly. Done with asking, he started telling. He told the officials they were denying ‘the ratepayers of Manchester opportunity in rate supported Institutions’ the chance to see his collection.⁴¹ By making his personal grievance over the exhibition of his objects a concern of the ratepayers, Hilditch could kill two birds with one stone: he appeared altruistic and reminded the officials of their subservience to those funding the gallery. Playing the ratepayer card, he tapped into a rhetoric that had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century when, in response to rising rates from increased municipal investment, individuals used their positions as ratepayers individually, and collectively, by forming pressure groups such as the Ratepayers’ Association to defend their interests.⁴² The topic of rates was a sore point in Manchester in the 1920s. Between 1915 and 1922, rates in Manchester had almost doubled. Moreover, this was of particular significance for the AGC. Since the late nineteenth century, the AGC had campaigned for a new gallery as they had outgrown their premises, but without the financial backing of a private citizen to support the venture, they had to continuously try and win public support. As the AGC pushed again in the 1920s for a new gallery, both sides of the debate continued to make reference to the gallery’s value to the ratepayers.⁴³

While waiting for his reply, Hilditch continued the ratepayer angle in another public lecture, this time during his talk on Chinese pottery at the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Birkenhead in early December. Hilditch started his talk with a barrage of criticisms. Undermining the AGC’s status as responsible guardians of civic property, he remarked that the MCAG ‘harboured dust and dirt’, as seen with the ‘dust-wreathed divinities’ on display. The AGC had ‘denied the ratepayers the right of seeing some of the finest Chinese treasures in this country’ and the ratepayers ‘saw precious little that was worth looking at in return for the £2,000 per year grant to that institution’. His reference to the £2,000 cost of the gallery to the ratepayers was canny, as this was a sensitive topic for the AGC. When the gallery was established in 1882, the Royal Manchester Institution’s collection and building were transferred to the Manchester Corporation on the condition that the council committed an annual grant of £2,000 for purchasing pictures. This grant gave the gallery a competitive edge

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, ‘Meeting 18 Dec. 1924’, 67.

⁴²G. Crossick, ‘The petite bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century Britain: the urban and liberal case’, in Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (eds.), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1984), 74–7.

⁴³Wildman, *Urban Redevelopment and Modernity in Liverpool and Manchester*, 28. On the AGC’s campaign for a new gallery, see Moore, *High Culture and Tall Chimneys*, 205–15; *Manchester Guardian*, 5 Jul. 1923, 9.

over its competitors, allowing it to form a permanent collection, but it was often a source of tension.⁴⁴ In a heated council debate in 1910, when the council's legal obligation to provide the grant expired, it was decided that the grant be curtailed. After tireless canvassing from the AGC, it was reinstated later that year.⁴⁵ Hilditch was once again raising the question of whether or not the AGC deserved the public's contribution. As he saw it, they were wasting money. In the 'eyes of connoisseurs', he argued, the AGC's recent purchases would be 'on the scrap heap fifty years hence'. Turning his attention to the behaviour of the officials, he cast them as ill equipped for public service. He proposed that a sign should be placed above the gallery entrance which would read 'To exhibitors of priceless antiquities – abandon hope all ye who enter here. We prefer prejudice, puerility and puff-puff.'⁴⁶

Again, the papers reported his talk, including those in Birkenhead where he delivered the lecture. Once again, he had made his personal disagreement with the AGC newsworthy. The *Guardian* limited the story to a small article, situated it out of the way on the page and referred to Hilditch's 'attack' in the headline. If the *Guardian* was trying to balance giving Hilditch's concerns a platform without amplifying them too much, the other papers did the opposite. The *Birkenhead News* reported his full lecture, including the sections on Chinese pottery, but their header set the tone as they capitalized on his ready-made headline 'Prejudice, Puerility and Puff-Puff: Amazing Attack on Manchester Art Gallery'. Manchester's sensationalist press ensured that the story had legs beyond the lecture. On the back of Hilditch's comments about the gallery's hygiene, the *Manchester Evening News* sent a journalist to inspect its cleanliness and found a way to dramatize the discovery that the gallery was actually clean.⁴⁷ A month later, in January 1925 the *Evening Chronicle* gave Hilditch space to pen two articles on the AGC's most recent picture purchases. He again condemned the AGC for wasting rates. Adopting the register of the paper, and appropriating the common sexist imagery used in art comment in such papers, he joked that the AGC's purchases reflected 'the feverish haste of women running toward a bargain counter'.⁴⁸ Hilditch was unabashedly antagonistic and aggressive, which the sensationalist press lapped up. He gave them not just commentary on civic affairs in a melodramatic, even comedic, way, but his dispute with the gallery had become a story in itself.

Hilditch was clearly fed up with asking nicely through private correspondence. He still had no reply to his letter offering his collection. On 23 December, after his lecture at the Lady Lever Art Gallery he privately wrote to the AGC again, reminding them that they had stated they would discuss his offer at the next meeting. He knew the meeting had come and gone and he was still waiting for a response. To pressure the AGC he referred to his talk at the Rotary Club and the Lady Lever Art Gallery, and the press's coverage of it. He claimed to have received over 200 letters of support regarding his first talk, and more than 40 for his second. Clearly, these talks were intended to serve as warnings to the AGC. Until they engaged with him, he would keep on attacking them. This time Todd wrote back.

⁴⁴Woodson-Boulton, *Transformative Beauty*, 42–53.

⁴⁵Moore, *High Culture and Tall Chimneys*, 210–14.

⁴⁶Chethams' Library (CL)/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, 'Birkenhead News, 13 Dec. 1924', 70.

⁴⁷*Manchester Evening News*, 11 Dec. 1924, 6.

⁴⁸*Evening Chronicle*, 3 Jan. 1925, 6; *Evening Chronicle*, 10 Jan. 1925, 5; Pamela Fletcher, 'Consuming modern art: metaphors of gender, commerce and value in late-Victorian and Edwardian art criticism', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 6 (2005), 157–70.

He informed Hilditch that the AGC had met and discussed his letter but had ‘unanimously resolved “that the letter lie on the table”’.⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, Hilditch did not take this well. Once again pushing the ratepayer line, he replied that he was going to write to every AGC member to come view his collection as they were all ‘servant[s] of the Ratepayers’. He attached a copy of his ‘City Lovers of Dust’ article in the *Manchester Evening News* and asked if Todd had read it yet.⁵⁰ At the same time, he tried to annoy the AGC into submission by petitioning the chief inspector of the Public Health Department to investigate the hygiene of the gallery, recommending the gallery to be ‘closed down and proper time given for another good cleaning’. The inspector passed these complaints onto the AGC, which, unsurprisingly did not engage.⁵¹ However, all these attempts did ultimately have an impact. Ramping up his campaign, and showing no signs of letting up, eventually led to the AGC considering his collection for exhibition.

The AGC changed their minds in March 1925, after six months of constant attacks. The decision came when Hilditch publicly announced in the *City News* and the *Daily Dispatch* that owing to the AGC’s indifferent attitude toward his collection and the lack of courtesy they had shown toward him, he was considering revoking his plans of bequeathing his collection to the gallery. He said he would give the collection as a ‘free gift’ to the city after his death, but only in return for ‘one favour, which seems comparatively small’, that during his lifetime the AGC exhibit ‘part of the collection in the Art Gallery as a special exhibition’. Of course, the promise of an exhibition meant his gift would not be ‘free’. This was a subversion of the well-established practice of the philanthropic bequest. To turn the screw even further, he made it out that the AGC’s behaviour would mean the public would miss out on over 67,000 objects worth an ‘estimated’ total of ‘a quarter of a million sterling’.⁵² Put simply, the gallery had a choice, let Hilditch have a small exhibition, or risk costing the public a collection worth a monumental sum.

Hilditch had a large collection which had cost him a lot, but these figures were gross fabrications. If he was trying to impress the AGC with the size of his collection and its financial worth then he was barking up the wrong tree. Not only would they have seen through his hyperbole, but the gallery was directed by a curator who had explicitly expressed displeasure at huge collections, and for whom discussing art’s value in financial terms was likely a signal of poor taste. Hilditch’s claims did not have to impress the AGC though, they just needed to grab the attention of the press and public, and aggrandizing his collection in this way spoke to the cultural values of the popular press. Moreover, the precision of Hilditch’s financial evaluation suggests there was more significance to the number than its immensity: £250,000 was the exact amount touted as required to construct a new site for the gallery.⁵³ Aware of the AGC’s frustration over failing to justify and raise the £250,000 needed for their much-desired new gallery, Hilditch was mocking them by pretending to possess assets worth the exact amount. This must have angered the AGC, even if none of the papers spotted the connection when reporting his offer. Instead, their coverage focused more broadly on the impact his decision would have on the public, in particular, the

⁴⁹MAG, Manchester C1 ‘Hilditch affair’, Todd to Hilditch, 30 Dec. 1924.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, Hilditch to Todd, 16 Jan. 1925.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, Hilditch to sanitary inspector, 3 Jan. 1925.

⁵²*City News*, 14 Mar. 1925, 5; *Daily Dispatch*, 14 Mar. 1925, 5.

⁵³*Manchester Guardian*, 3 Jul. 1924, 11.

financial loss.⁵⁴ The story even gained national attention with the *Sunday Express* reporting the story under the headline '£250,000 Bequest Revoked: City to Lose Vases worth £20,000'.⁵⁵ None of the papers questioned Hilditch's claims to his collection's extravagant value, though this does not indicate that his claims were taken at face value. As the press coverage of The Dreicer Art Collection (referred to as 'The Million Dollar Art Collection'), and the purchase of Gainsborough's *Blue Boy* for £200,000 in 1921 attest, expensive art collections made good copy.⁵⁶ The newspapers may have printed Hilditch's letter and reported the story not because they believed him, but for reader interest. After all, Hilditch had provided another ready-made story, this one of lost treasure that further exposed and fuelled the friction between him and the AGC.

With the offer in the press, Hilditch started phase two of his plan. He invited a cadre of local artists and art critics to come view the collection; their insights would be published in the *City News*. In fact, it was the *City News*' editor John Cuming Walters who had suggested this idea, and who had helped put Hilditch in touch with the artists and critics. One of the suggested critics was assistant curator of the art gallery, William Batho. The *City News*' obituary for William Batho suggests the paper had a very good relationship with the assistant curator, who was described as "one of the best" to a Pressman, being both 'sympathetic and helpful'.⁵⁷ Walters probably felt they had more chance of convincing Batho than Haward who was clearly not interested in Hilditch. The plan was to use the artists' and critics' comments on Hilditch's collection to make the case for its exhibition in the MCAG. It succeeded in getting the AGC to engage with Hilditch, and did so even before the artists had gone to see the collection. Batho, upon receipt of the letter from Hilditch, told the AGC of Hilditch's movements which then led to the decision to finally consider Hilditch's collection.⁵⁸

Hilditch's tenacity had paid off. Just four days after his bequest offer was published in the *City News*, and two days after he sent his letter to Batho, the AGC instructed the town clerk to contact Hilditch, accepting his previously ignored invitation to view his collection. They told Hilditch they would consider his objects for exhibition, provided they could bring their experts with them to make the selection.⁵⁹ The AGC's volte-face shows how through making a nuisance of himself, Hilditch had worn the AGC down into at least considering his collection. The AGC had gone from treating him with 'silent contempt', to employing the nation's two foremost experts, R.L. Hobson from the British Museum, and Bernard Rackham from the South Kensington Museum, to come to Manchester to see his collection with the view to exhibit it. Moreover, this led to the chance to exhibit some of his wares. On the whole, the experts were unimpressed by his collection. Scrutinizing the collection according to the connoisseurial values of authenticity, rarity, artistic value and material condition, they largely found it wanting, perhaps unsurprising considering Hilditch's

⁵⁴*Daily Dispatch*, 23 Jun. 1925, 5; *City News*, 14 Mar. 1925, 5; *Daily Dispatch*, 14 Mar. 1925, 5; *Evening Chronicle*, 31 Mar. 1925, 6.

⁵⁵CL/Phelps/1/8/2/Book 1, 'Sunday Express, 15 Mar. 1925', 73.

⁵⁶*Manchester Guardian*, 7 Sep. 1921, 12; *Daily Mail*, 14 Nov. 1921, 9.

⁵⁷*City News*, 28 Aug. 1931, 4.

⁵⁸MAG, Manchester C1 'Hilditch affair', Hilditch to Batho, 17 Mar. 1925, Haward to Hilditch, 24 Mar. 1925. In this letter, Haward tells Hilditch how the committee discussed an invitation one of its members received to see his collection, and that they wanted that invitation extending to the whole committee.

⁵⁹MCL/GB127 Council Minutes/Art Galleries Committee/12, 'Meeting 19 Mar. 1925', 79.

autodidactism and limited means. However, the experts suggested there were some quality objects which the AGC could accept for exhibition and maybe even as a gift.⁶⁰ Following this advice, the AGC informed Hilditch they would exhibit some of his wares, but only those selected by the experts, a move which further indicated Hilditch's position below the curators on the expert hierarchy. Nevertheless, it is significant how despite their obvious dislike for Hilditch, the AGC were going to exhibit his collection just to appease him. Finally, Hilditch had forced an offer to exhibit his collection from the AGC. He accepted, but then pulled out after seeing the experts' selection. He wrote to the AGC complaining that their selection – 46 objects – was too small. Indeed, this was a small amount considering he had over 2,000 objects, and it looked even smaller considering he had boasted over 60,000, but that was his fault. He gave them new terms: he would only exhibit if he could choose the objects.⁶¹

The AGC met Hilditch's U-turn with profound relief. Curator Haward wrote to Sir F.G. Kenyon, director of the British Museum, who had authorized Hobson's involvement in the issue, that the selection was

such a shock to the owner that he has, fortunately for us, refused to exhibit them. As he had previously written stating that he would accept our offer to exhibit what the experts chose, he has now, we consider, brought us successfully out of an awkward dilemma and has no case whatsoever to put before the public.⁶²

Haward's relief that they would not have to exhibit Hilditch's collection shows just how much he had frustrated them, and the threat he posed. Hilditch was not just annoying, but had caused an 'awkward dilemma'. Hilditch was awkward because of his attempts to engage the public in the dispute – Haward was specifically worried about whether Hilditch would have another case to 'put before the public'. As such, we can see how the AGC were anxious about maintaining public support and that Hilditch's decision to make the disagreement public, and make it about the gallery and the public, did influence the AGC's behaviour. Todd claimed to the experts to 'never take note of anything he writes and I certainly never answer any of his letters in the papers', but it is very clear that the AGC were across, and rattled by, his antics. Haward even wrote to Sydney Davison, curator at the Lady Lever Art Gallery, asking for a full copy of the Birkenhead press's report of Hilditch's lecture to find out exactly what he had said.⁶³ Hilditch was too dangerous to ignore; he had to be monitored and engaged with, even if this meant compromise for the AGC.

Haward was far too optimistic in thinking Hilditch would have no case to put before the public. For the next five years, until his death in 1930, Hilditch persistently used public platforms to try and undermine faith in the AGC and make the case for his collection, and he continued to gain support from the press, the public and even councillors. However, the AGC never budged, constantly falling back on their offer of exhibiting the 46 objects chosen by the experts.⁶⁴ Hilditch had ultimately got the

⁶⁰V&A/MA/1/H190, Hilditch Collection – copy of report.

⁶¹MCL/GB127 Council Minutes/Art Galleries Committee/12, 'Hilditch to Committee, 12 Nov. 1925', 114.

⁶²MAG/Manchester C1 'Hilditch affair', Haward to Kenyon, 20 Nov. 1925.

⁶³*Ibid.*, Haward to Davison, 25 Nov. 1924, Todd to Hobson 11 Sep. 1925.

⁶⁴I explore these attempts in my book, *Connoisseurs and Conmen: John Hilditch, Museums and the Contest for Cultural Authority in Early Twentieth Century Britain* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

AGC out of an 'awkward situation' by renegeing on the deal. The fact that he could not get them to exhibit his collection in the way he wanted exposes the limits of his agency – fundamentally, the AGC called the shots. Nevertheless, he had, with the help of the press, forced the AGC into listening and engaging with him, and shown that in this new era of mass media and mass democracy the silent treatment was no longer a viable method of dealing with frustrated citizens.

Conclusion

Using a 'small history' approach, this article has offered a new perspective on inter-war civic culture. Zooming in on Hilditch's struggle with the AGC in the mid-1920s, it has explored how democratization was experienced, understood and exercised by local citizens, as well as its limits. It has shown how 'active citizenship' was not just something promoted by civic authorities. On an individual level, 'active citizenship' equipped citizens with a sense of entitlement, along with languages and practices that could be used to challenge the authority of the very proponents of civic engagement. In particular, this article has shown how the new types of journalism gaining momentum in the 1920s provided a new media culture for democracy that refashioned the power relationship between civic authorities and citizens. No longer could the authorities rely on the local press as cheerleaders for their projects or expect criticism to be in line with what they considered fair in terms of its content and tone. The relationship between civic authorities and citizens had changed, and this was something the former would have to learn to deal with.

While the extremes Hilditch went to in his fight against the AGC might lead us to dismiss him as a historical aberration, unrepresentative of the wider public, it is more useful to think of him as the 'exceptional normal', a concept coined by micro-historian Eduoardi Grendi.⁶⁵ Hilditch was in many ways exceptional, but his concern over the public's role in civic politics was typical of the time, as the press coverage of his campaign demonstrates. In this sense, Hilditch was as much a symbol as well as a symptom of the new era of mass democracy. Moreover, Hilditch's 'exceptionality' allows us to exploit one of the main benefits of 'small history', that of determining agency. Through Hilditch, we can see just how willing the civic elites were to bend to the demands of the public, which throws into sharp relief the limits of 'active citizenship' and democratization. His story shows the civic elites' anxieties over democratization, and how it forced them into a new relationship with the public. No longer could they simply ignore those who made a nuisance of themselves, even if they did not necessarily have to pay heed to all their demands. In giving us a clearer picture of the limits of democratization in the inter-war period, I hope this article spurs more 'small histories' on the topic, especially into those determined and entitled citizens who were, and continue to be, the thorn in the side of civic authorities, but are often dismissed as cranks.

⁶⁵J. de Vries, 'Playing with scales: the global and the micro, the macro and the nano', *Past & Present*, 242 (2019), 23–36.