

Media release
19.02.2025



Jan Mytens, *La Duchesse de la Valliere (Mistress of Louis XIV) crowning with flowers the King, who is disguised in female attire*, date unknown, ©The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle

LGBTQIA+ History Month: Celebrating Queer Stories Within The Bowes Museum's Collection

The Bowes Museum is proud to celebrate LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual) communities throughout the year and LGBTQIA+ History Month this February, by highlighting a queer love story in the new Conversation Wall display. This Conversation Wall was co-created with community members of Be You@TheBowes* and is on display from 15 February.

The Conversation Wall exhibit features a large oil painting titled, *La Duchesse de la Valliere (Mistress of Louis XIV) crowning with flowers the King, who is disguised in female attire*, by Jan Mytens.

The story follows Amaryllis, a female nymph, and Mirtillo, a male shepherd, both secretly in love with each other. Mirtillo disguises himself as a female nymph, embracing his femininity, to enter a kissing contest judged by Amaryllis. However, Amaryllis sees through Mirtillo's disguise and crowns him with flowers. And so, this painting subverts and challenges traditional gender norms, all whilst showcasing a historical romance.

The painting references the sixteenth-century pastoral play *Il Pastor Fido*, by Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538-1612). Louis XIV (1643–1715) and the duchesse Louise de la Vallière (1644–1710) are cast as Mirtillo and Amaryllis respectively.

The Bowes Museum has also launched a variety of initiatives to engage LGBTQIA+ communities, including:

*Be You @TheBowes is an LGBTQIA+ co-production community working group. It is the first of its kind at the museum, teaming up with regional partners and working as a community to learn from one another and grow together. The group investigates queer themes within the collection such as same-sex desire, chosen family, activism and more. The group contributes to the museum's curation including the Conversation Wall display and is developing an object trail from the museum's collection of fine art, ceramics, and textiles. Future dates for meetings include 4 & 18 March, 1, 15 & 29 April, 13 & 27 May 2025.

The free LGBTQIA+ tours highlight objects and artworks with LGBTQIA+ stories spanning from Ancient Greece to the 20th century, including iconic pieces and hidden gems alike. Visitors will discover about how objects and artworks can be read with a queer lens through hidden references and symbolism. These tours welcome everyone and take place on 28 February, 28 March, 25 April & 30 May 2025.

The Bowes Museum is thrilled to partner with Curious Arts, a North East based arts and youth charity championing and developing LGBTQIA+ artists and communities. As part of their growing digital archive, Curious Arts invites visitors to bring personal objects to be photographed and digitally stored and will be at the museum on 22 February 2025, free for visitors who wish to take part.

Eleanor Thirlway, Co Production Curator at The Bowes Museum, expressed:

“We are extremely proud of this LGBTQIA+ programming, it has been a joy to work on. Queer art history is an important part of The Bowes' story, and we are committed to uncovering and sharing LGBTQIA+ narratives with all our visitors. We look forward to bringing even more LGBTQIA+ programming in the future.”

Anita Hope, a member of Be You @TheBowes, said:

“The Bowes Museum is a formidable building from the outside, and I was apprehensive going along to my first Be You group there. How wrong I was, lovely warm welcome from the staff to the two leaders of the Be You group. It's a lovely inclusive space, where you can explore the collections, ask daft questions – and more importantly be yourself! I hope this will be the start of something bigger, beginning with the Conversation Wall currently highlighting LGBTQIA+ history Month, to the BeYou Trail! Keep up the momentum and fantastic work!”

The Bowes Museum recognises that there are many more LGBTQIA+ narratives and practices that need to be examined, showcased and discussed. This programming, along with past LGBTQIA+ initiatives, marks an essential step in addressing historical exclusions and creating a more welcoming and inclusive cultural space.

To find out more about LGBTQIA+ history month 2025: <https://lgbtplushistorymonth.co.uk/>

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Note to editors:

Download an image of *La Duchesse de la Valliere (Mistress of Louis XIV) crowning with flowers the King, who is disguised in female attire* [here](#).

About The Bowes Museum

The Bowes Museum is a charity managing a Grade 1 listed accredited Museum and Grade 2 listed parkland in Barnard Castle. Founded by Joséphine & John Bowes 150+ years ago, this purpose-built Museum brings together an extraordinary, Designated collection of European fine and

decorative art as a cultural resource for the people of Northern England, where today we celebrate artists, designers and makers.

The Bowes Museum receives funding from Durham County Council and, as a National Portfolio Organisation, receives support from Arts Council England. Arts Council England is the national development body for arts and culture across England, working to enrich people's lives. [artscouncil.org.uk](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

The Bowes Museum is a member of the Discover Durham partnership of attractions, whose commitment is to promote Durham as an exciting and vibrant group travel destination and to provide the travel trade with a professional and knowledgeable service. [discoverdurham.co.uk](https://www.discoverdurham.co.uk)

Admission to The Bowes Museum is £16.00 for local members (residents of County Durham and Darlington), £18.00 for members (residents elsewhere), £19.00 for a day ticket, £20.90 for a day ticket including gift aid. Under 18s, full time students and carers are free.

As a registered charity (number 1079639) The Bowes Museum needs to generate more than half of its income each year to care for the historic collection, buildings and parkland. Your donations are vital to that work. Visit thebowesmuseum.org.uk/support/ for more information.



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