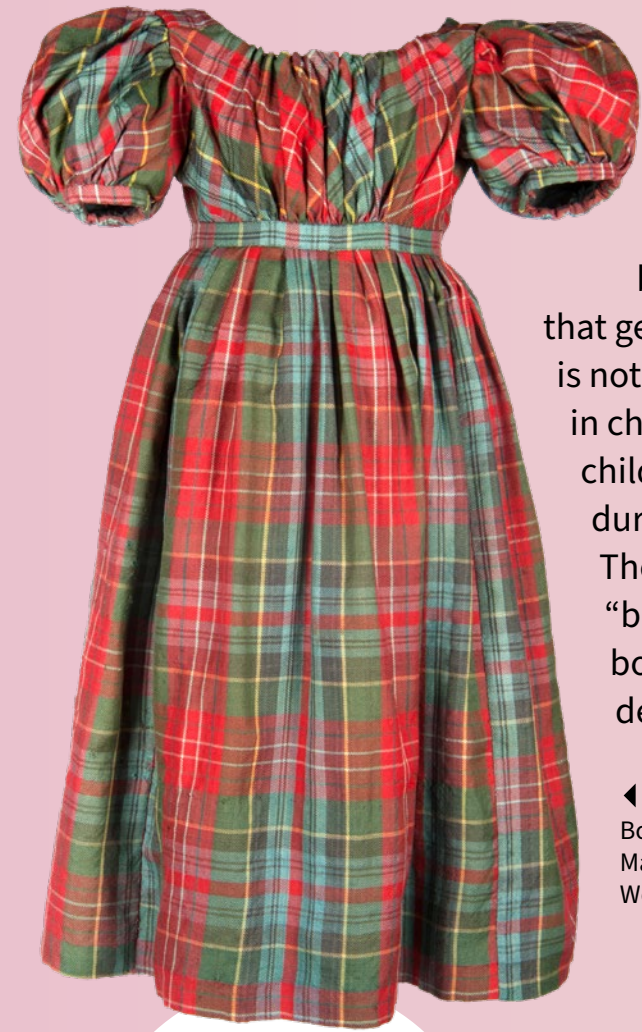


Challenging Stereotypes



It's often assumed that gender binaries (the classification of gender into two opposing categories: male and female) have always been strictly enforced and that gender fluidity is a recent development. However, this is not entirely true. Throughout history, gender distinctions in children's clothing were less rigid, especially in early childhood. Both boys and girls commonly wore dresses during infancy and toddlerhood for practical reasons. The transition from dresses to trousers, known as "breeching," marked an important cultural milestone for boys, typically occurring between ages four and seven, depending on family traditions.

◀ Boy's Dress, c.1833-1835
Maker unknown
Woven wool cst.2.746



In more recent history, fashion has continued to challenge gender norms. Designer Michael Fish, known as Mr. Fish (1940-2016), revolutionised post-war menswear with bold, individualistic designs.

After the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK in 1967, clothing became a powerful medium for men to express identity and defy convention. Designers like Mr. Fish created flamboyant styles, including the iconic "man-dresses," worn by music icons such as singers, David Bowie (1947-2016) and Mick Jagger (b.1943), which redefined traditional masculinity.

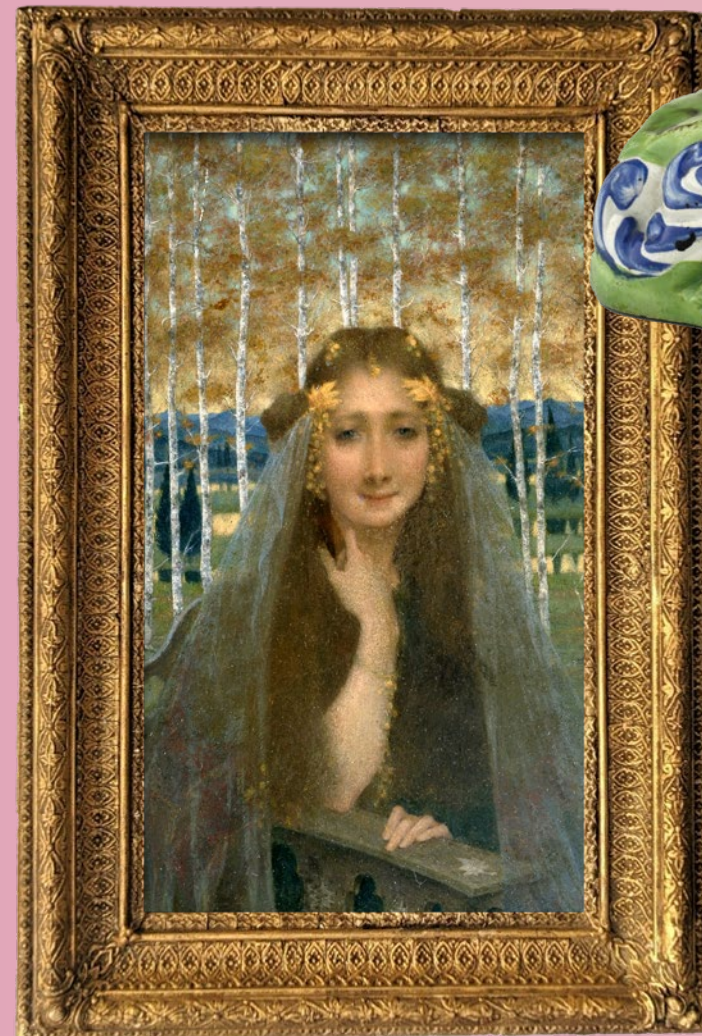


◀ Red dress for small boy, 1840-1910
Maker unknown
Velvet and lace



▶ Friendship figurine, c. 1800
John Walton, Staffordshire pottery, Earthenware, 2004.310

◀ Portrait of Marguerite Moreno (The Autumn Bride), Lucien Lévy Dhurmer, oil on panel 2008.13/B.M



Just Good Friends?

The phrase "just good friends" has often been used to suggest that two people are only friends, even when others suspect there might be something more. In the twentieth century, it became a popular way to discuss celebrity relationships or downplay romantic rumors, especially in cases where

same-sex relationships had to be kept secret. This was particularly relevant in artistic and literary circles, such as the one surrounding French author Colette (1873-1954) and actress Marguerite Moreno (1871-1948). Attributed to Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer (1865-1953), a leading figure in the Symbolist and Art Nouveau movements, a portrait of Moreno captures a woman deeply entwined in Colette's world. Moreno was a close confidante and suspected lover of Colette, whose 1932 novel *The Pure and the Impure* explored gender, sexuality, and eroticism in the wake of World War I. The book documents the LGBTQ+ circles of early twentieth-century Paris, where cross-dressing, lavender marriages (where a gay man and a lesbian women marry for convenience), and gender-fluid fashion allowed people to navigate a society that often forced them to remain "just good friends" in the public eye.

Hidden Symbols

LGBTQIA+ history remains largely concealed. We have an important opportunity to recognise and uncover the hidden symbols that have shaped narratives of love and identity over time.

Peacock feathers have long symbolised homosexuality, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when men used them discreetly to express their sexual orientation. This symbolism mirrors the vibrant plumage of male peacocks, used to attract a possible mate's attention.

Marie Antoinette owned this reversible writing and dressing table with, hidden compartments and mirrors.



▶ Feathers Teapot, 1758
Sèvres and Louis-Denis Armand, (1723-1796)
Porcelain and enamel X.1271

Eighteenth-century gossip pamphlets construed the queen's female friendships as lesbian. They aimed to portray her as an unfit Queen with uncontrollable sexual needs that she prioritised over her role as wife, mother, and Queen of France. Today, she is celebrated as a queer icon, particularly in drag culture, where her fashion and individuality symbolise camp self-expression.

In the eighteenth-century, hidden compartments in writing desks were a way to maintain privacy, much like having a password on your phone today.



▶ Combined writing and dressing table belonging to Marie Antoinette, c.1750 Attributed to Jean-François Oeben (1720-1763)Kingwood, boxwood and oak FW.173

What hidden messages would you write?

Classical Influence

LGBTQIA+ themes are intricately woven into classical myths, presenting relationships and identities that defy modern norms of gender and sexuality. There are many tales that explore love, desire, and self-discovery in timeless ways.

In our collection, numerous pieces reinterpret classical mythology. When viewed through a LGBTQIA+ lens, ancient narratives take on new vitality, affirming the fluidity and complexity of identity across time.

Sappho, the ancient Greek poet, from Lesbos in Greece, was born around 612 BC. Sappho is one of the few ancient writers whose lyrical poetry has endured. She is immortalised here with a scroll in her hand, featuring the final stanza of a poem where she calls on Aphrodite, the goddess of love, to help her in the pursuit of another woman. Sappho represents an early voice in queer history, and her name is synonymous with lesbian identity.

How might we see classical and historical ideas and icons through modern ideas of gender and sexuality?



◀ Sappho, Ancient Greek writer of lyric poetry, 1848
James Pradier (1792-1852)
Silver M.234

Gender Non-Conformity

Within the LGBTQIA+ community butterflies symbolise transformation, resilience, and the discovery of one's true self. The butterfly's metamorphosis mirrors the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming people and as a symbol has been adopted by this community.

Even before transformation, the potential for a butterfly exists within the cells of the caterpillar.

This resonates with those navigating their gender identity and reflects their innate authenticity.

The chrysalis symbolises the process of becoming. Like the chrysalis, transition requires strength and patience, highlighting the courage it takes to redefine oneself.

As you explore the museum, keep an eye out for hidden butterflies woven into our paintings, ceramics and textiles.



Finally, the butterfly emerges vibrant, free, and unmistakably unique, it represents the beauty of living as one's truest self.

The butterfly reminds us that transformation is a natural and universal experience. As you encounter butterflies in the collection, reflect on the courage it takes to grow and the importance of celebrating diverse identities.



Dutch Golden Age painter Bartholomeus Breenburgh (1598–1657) illustrates a narrative from the pastoral play *Il Pastor Fido* by Italian dramatist Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538–1612). The play centres on the female nymph, Amaryllis and her secret love of the shepherd boy Mirtillo.

Unbeknownst to her, Mirtillo reciprocates her feelings and dresses as one of her nymphs to join in their kissing game.

Breenburgh's painting vividly portrays the two key moments from the play. On the left, Amaryllis has chosen Mirtillo as

the winner of the kissing game and crowns him with a floral wreath. Despite his female presentation, his true self is revealed in their kiss, love triumphs, and the pair eventually marry. In the bottom right corner, two women continue the kissing game as the scene is presented as a safe space to express same sex attraction in whatever form.

For contemporary viewers, the painting offers a powerful depiction of love that transcends gender, celebrating connection and affection over societal norms.

Lets look again

This object trail was co-produced with *Be You at The Bowes* group members. It is part of a much wider project that aims to offer new possibilities for interpreting artworks.

These objects offer a starting point to guide us as we broaden our understanding of gender, same-sex desires and perspectives. Highlighting the long history of an LGBTQIA+ community that is as old as humanity.

Use this trail to explore the collection; discover new narratives and to look again at old ones.

WHAT IS BE YOU AT THE BOWES?

Be You at The Bowes is the first LGBTQIA+ working group of its kind at the museum. We come together to discuss identity, gender, and representations of the body. We recover untold stories that relate to our own lived experiences with the aim of revealing the diversity of sexuality and gender present in the collection.

Museums are more than just physical buildings, and historical collections aren't just about the past.

Museums are spaces where stories are told, revealing who we are, where we've come from and who we might become.

Hercules' legend often downplays his romantic relationships – not just with women, but with men too.



Cup and Saucer c.1730
Jingdezhen Porcelain
X.5631

Museum records catalogue this couple as heterosexual, but we continually reassess our collection. What genders do you see?

Amaryllis Crowning Mirtillo
Bartholomeus Breenburgh
(1598-1657)
Oil on canvas
B.M.122

RECOGNISING LGTBTQIA+ HISTORIES

Throughout history, members of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/ally) community are often overlooked and their histories erased or suppressed due to stigma and persecution. Many erased themselves from view for the sake of self-preservation, or lived private lives outside of accepted sexual and gender norms, leaving only fragments of their histories behind for us to interpret. By looking at our collection in another light and actively welcoming the lived experiences of those who identify as LGBTQIA+ we can find new ways to experience the story and emotions our objects hold.

INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT MORE?

Be You at the Bowes meets regularly online and in the museum. For more information, visit www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk or email learn@thebowesmuseum.org.uk

If you're unable to find any of the objects included in this trail, please ask a member of our helpful Welcome team who'll be happy to point you in the right direction.

The Winged Victory of Samothrace (1863)
B.M.S.125



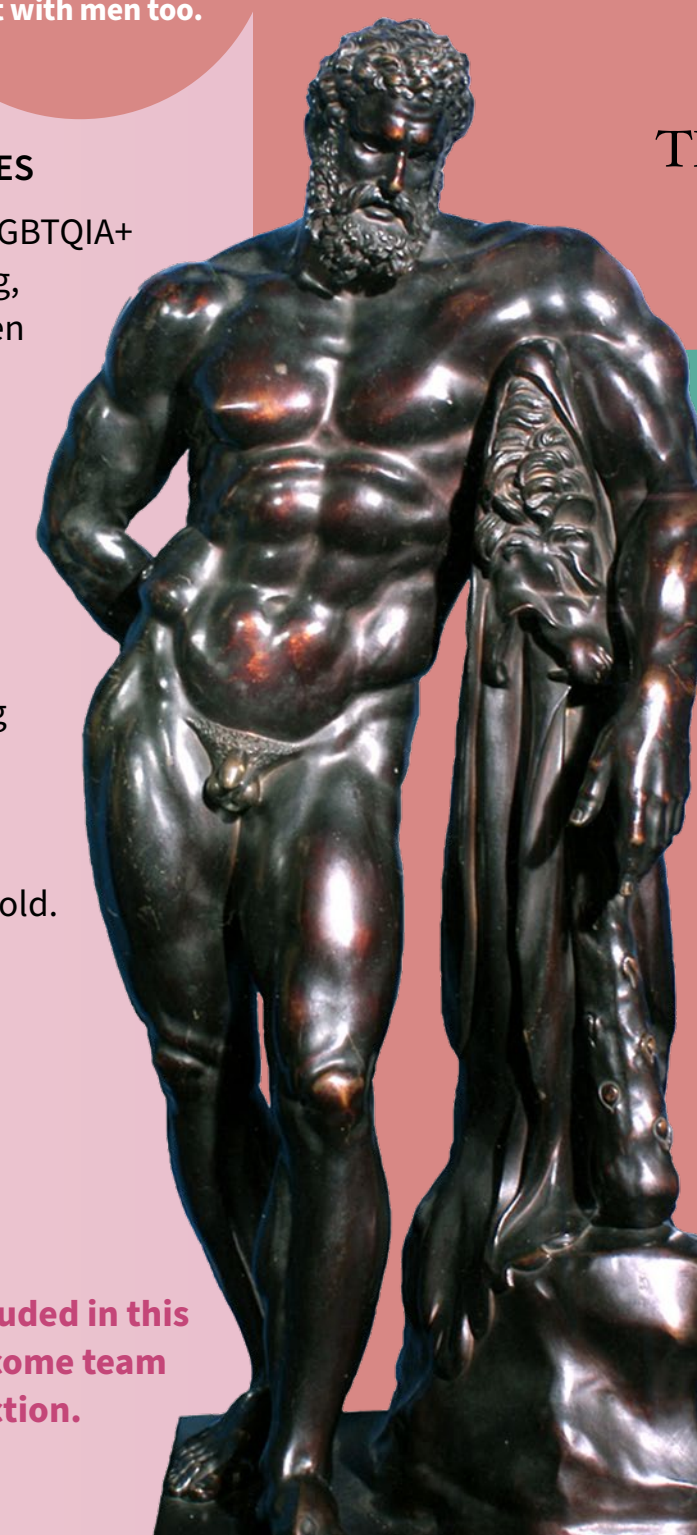
The Winged Victory served Zeus and aided in the abduction of Ganymede, the most handsome mortal man. He became Zeus' lover.

OBJECTS – A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Objects are embodiments of lived experiences. They hold and induce emotion. Our understanding of objects is continually growing. Informed, not only by historical context but, by the awareness, attitudes, and ideas our evolving society offers us.

Importantly, they can help us challenge our assumptions, offer different perspectives and shape understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. Historical record is usually constructed by those who conform to the social norms of their time, often erasing marginalised stories. This can overwhelmingly restrict history to parameters set by a handful of individuals; let's open it back up together.

Bronze Hercules, 1850
M.243



THE BOWES MUSEUM

Be you at
The Bowes
LGBTQIA+
Object trail



Use this trail to discover more about the collection. Look out for this symbol across the museum and scan to find out more.