

Media release
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Vivienne Westwood: Rebel - Storyteller - Visionary
28 March – 6 September 2026



This spring, The Bowes Museum, home to one of the country's most significant fashion collections, will host a major retrospective dedicated to Vivienne Westwood (1941–2022). Focusing on Westwood's iconic designs from the early 1980s to the 2000s, *Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary* celebrates the legacy of Britain's most provocative and imaginative designer, whose influence continues to shape global fashion. More than 40 ensembles, along with individual garments, accessories, jewellery, and ephemera from the collection of Peter Smithson, will be joined by never-before-seen garments from private collections, as well as loans from Manchester Art Gallery and Fashion Museum Bath.

The exhibition in the Fashion and Textiles gallery is arranged to evoke a working atelier, complete with rolls of fabric, sewing machine, pin cushions and tailoring shears. Calico toiles and garments digitally deconstructed by the Fashion Department at Northumbria University reveal Westwood's construction techniques, from bias cutting and pleating to screen printing and distressed fabrics. The reimagined atelier will showcase the craft behind Westwood's rule-breaking design.

In the main exhibition space, innovative curatorial design, inspired by traditional salon hangs, will see walls adorned with corsets and T-shirts, alongside panelling, paintings and mirrors from The Bowes Museum's Collection. Westwood's designs will be laid out chronologically from the mid-1980s to the protest T-shirts from the early 2000's.

The exhibition will chronicle how the Vivienne Westwood label evolved over time, framing its history through the Worlds End years, the Westwood years and the Kronthaler years. Key milestones include the introduction of the orb synonymous with the brand, winning British fashion designer of the year in 1990 and 1991, Westwood's marriage to Andreas Kronthaler (b. 1966) and the restructure of the company into Gold and Red labels, marking a different approach to design and manufacture

Westwood was a dedicated researcher of historical dress and visited The Bowes Museum in 2006. Reflecting this connection, the exhibition will juxtapose over 80 historic objects from the museum's own collection with her designs, emphasising shared themes and artistic references. Dramatic gilded mirror frames from the museum's collection echo the theatrical picture frame from which models emerged in Westwood's *Voyage to Cythera* (A/W 1989/90) catwalk show, while works from the *Portrait* (A/W 1990/91) show, which drew inspiration from eighteenth-century art, will be presented alongside Pierre Jacques Cazes's (1676–1754) *La Naissance de Vénus – The Triumph of Venus*, featuring putti imagery echoed in Westwood's designs.

Vicky Sturrs, Director of Programmes and Collections at The Bowes Museum, says:

“Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary celebrates one of the most daring British designers in fashion history and marks a significant moment for The Bowes Museum as we continue to champion bold voices in fashion. Despite moving to London at 17, Vivienne never lost her Northern roots, and her fearless creativity still resonates powerfully with this region. Vivienne opened *Fine & Fashionable: Lace from the Blackborne Collection* two decades ago here at the museum and now her own work returns in conversation with the art and ideas that inspired her. As the North continues to nurture extraordinary emerging designers, we hope this exhibition inspires them to see fashion as both craft and activism. It stands as a reminder of how influential Northern creativity has been, and continues to be, in shaping British fashion.”

Rachel Whitworth, Curator (Fashion and Textiles) at The Bowes Museum, says: “Vivienne Westwood's designs were revolutionary not only in their appearance but in the way they were constructed. She broke the rules of design, experimenting fearlessly with technique, proportion and historical reference. She drew from the past, created for the present and remained sharply conscious of the future. *Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary* highlights her eccentric, innovative approach and the extraordinary imagination that transformed her into one of Britain's most influential designers.”

Peter Smithson, Associate Curator and Vivienne Westwood collector, says “Vivienne's approach to design and construction was as unique as she was. A golden thread of storytelling ran through her collections, an endless creativity fuelled by a thirst for history and culture. Each look represented a character, scene or moment; every detail had a purpose. Vivienne spent a lifetime shocking and delighting in equal measure; in disregarding trends and blurring the lines between fashion and art, her work remains timeless. Drawing from a lifetime of collecting, it is a privilege to be able to share so many iconic looks for visitors to enjoy and continue to honour Vivienne in doing so.”

The exhibition is accompanied by a wide-ranging public programme of events, including workshops where visitors can learn the techniques used by Westwood, talks from Peter Smithson offering deeper insight into his collection and more. These activities invite visitors to explore the themes of *Vivienne Westwood: Rebel – Storyteller – Visionary* in greater depth and to engage directly with her fashion.

This exhibition results from a collaboration between The Bowes Museum, Associate Curator Peter Smithson, private collectors and Manchester Art Gallery and Fashion Museum Bath. It is not an institutional partnership with the Vivienne Westwood brand.

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Note to editors:

PRESS IMAGES can be found [here](#).

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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

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

Admission to The Bowes Museum is £17.70 for local members (residents of County Durham and Darlington), £20.00 for members (residents elsewhere), £19.50 for a day ticket, £21.45 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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