

Media Release

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The Bowes Museum Reopens Its Founders' Galleries, Offering a Bold New Perspective on Its Origins



Caption: The reimagined Founders' Galleries offer visitors a fresh perspective on Joséphine and John Bowes and The Bowes Museum, bringing their story to life for new audiences and future generations.

The Bowes Museum has reopened its completely reimagined Founders' Galleries, unveiling a contemporary interpretation of its origin story shaped by new research, community collaboration and a renewed focus on the lives and partnership of Joséphine and John Bowes. The transformation offers a more open, human and compelling exploration of the visionary couple behind one of Britain's most remarkable purpose-built museums.

Supported by **Art Fund, the Headley Trust, the Pilgrim Trust and the Wolfson Foundation**, the revitalised galleries are the result of more than eighteen months of

archival research into original records, correspondence and objects. This work reintroduces Joséphine and John Bowes as individuals and as partners, revealing overlooked perspectives on how they lived, worked and created together. The result is a more relatable and engaging account of the couple and the museum they founded.

True to the Bowes' spirit of experimentation, the new galleries embrace flexible layouts that encourage non-linear exploration. Objects have been brought down from high-level displays to invite intimacy and personal reflection, while visitors are encouraged to move in and around the installations, engaging with stories in ways that feel immediate and alive. Wall hangings created in collaboration with **artist Zoe Allen** and community members of the **Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services** in Middleton and Teesdale enrich the space with contemporary voices.

For the first time in forty years, all three gallery spaces have been fully redesigned to reconnect with the surrounding Teesdale landscape. Light, views and architectural details emphasise the relationship between the museum's French-inspired design and its rural setting. Visitors will gain fresh insight into the inspirations behind the museum's creation — from the Bowes' life between Paris and County Durham to the mining wealth that enabled John Bowes to realise their ambitious vision.

A renewed emphasis is placed on **Joséphine Bowes as an artist and cultural figure in her own right** and her work has been centred to highlight her technical skill and ambition, challenging outdated assumptions about her role. As a woman who exhibited at the Paris Salon and collected works by living artists, Joséphine held a rare position of creative freedom and leadership in 19th-century Europe. Her artistic legacy extends beyond the galleries and is echoed in **Meg Fletcher's striking flag installation** on the museum's terrace.

Three Galleries, Three Distinct Visitor Experiences

- **Gallery One** introduces Joséphine and John Bowes as collectors and foregrounds Joséphine's artistic practice. A salon-style arrangement, incorporating furniture from the founders' home and objects they acquired for the museum, creates a dynamic, less static display.
- **Gallery Two** focuses on the museum's design and architecture. A frame structure offers window-like views onto the surrounding landscape, while sketches, plans and correspondence illuminate the purpose and construction of the building.
- **Gallery Three** explores how the Bowes built their collection. A contemporary "stack" of objects evokes a museum store, with mirrors allowing visitors to view ceramics alongside fine art and decorative furniture.

A Community-Shaped Transformation

Community voices have played a crucial role in shaping the new galleries. **Artist Emma Tominey** and members of local community group, **Weardale Together** reflected on Josephine's story and created mixed-media collages which sit alongside objects tracing Josephine's life. This community-led approach places historical narratives in dialogue with lived experience, forging new emotional connections and reinforcing the museum's role as a cultural resource for people across the North of England and beyond.

Many items previously kept in storage have now returned to public view. Visitors can explore **twice as many objects as before**, presented through enriched storytelling in thoughtfully designed environments. Together, the three galleries honour the Bowes' legacy while embracing contemporary perspectives, inviting visitors to reflect on how the museum came into being – and how it continues to evolve as a future-focused organisation.

Quote

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

“The reimagining of the Founders’ Galleries is a defining moment for The Bowes Museum — a renewal of the founders’ extraordinary vision through continuing research, object storytelling and amplifying our community’s voices. This transformation is not about redisplaying objects; it’s about reawakening stories, rekindling connections and inviting our communities to shape what the museum means for today and into the future. The galleries offer revitalised spaces that honour our past and embrace the future.”

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Notes to Editors:

PRESS IMAGES can be found [here](#)

www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk

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)

Year round admission to The Bowes Museum is £25 for local members (residents of County Durham and Darlington), £28 for members (residents elsewhere), £20 for a day ticket, £22 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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