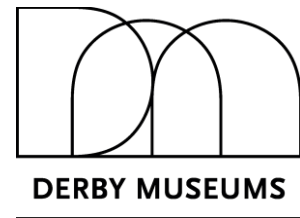


PRESS RELEASE

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Long lost Joseph Wright painting uncovered in Scottish Borders is gifted to Derby Museums

<https://derbymuseums.org/news/long-lost-joseph-wright-painting-uncovered-in-scottish-borders-is-gifted-to-derby-museums/>



Images: (left) Susannah Stewart, representative of the Hall family, and Tony Butler, Derby Museums' Executive Director, unveil *Edward Miller*, Joseph Wright, oil on canvas, c. 1760 (right) Dr Martin Postle, Art Historian, and Lucy Bamford, Derby Museums' Senior Curator of Art and the Joseph Wright Collection, look forward to uncovering more about the newly acquired portrait.

© Derby Museums / Pictoria Pictures

A previously unknown portrait by internationally renowned artist Joseph Wright of Derby (1734 – 1797) has been unveiled at Derby Museum and Art Gallery.

The portrait, which depicts Wright's friend, the musician and composer Edward Miller, was discovered in 2024 by the Hall family while sorting through the belongings of a late relative at a home on the Scottish Borders – described by family members as a “treasure trove of antiques”.

Amongst over 20 family portraits, there were three whose identities were a mystery to the family. One bore a simple inscription on the reverse: ‘Wright’. A single clue to the mysterious identity of the artist.

Joy Hall, who first contacted Derby Museums about the discovery, told how the family had initially considered selling the Wright painting for the value of its frame, until the exceptional quality of one of the works caught her attention. Struck by the detail of the lacework and tassels, reminiscent of



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Wright's early self-portrait in Van Dyck dress – also found at Derby Museum and Art Gallery – Hall began researching the artist, and it was here she stumbled upon Joseph Wright of Derby.

Derby Museums' Senior Curator of Art and the Joseph Wright Collection, Lucy Bamford, worked in partnership with Dr Martin Postle (Art Historian, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art) and Dr Stephen Leach (Independent Researcher) to authenticate the portrait. The sitter was identified as Dr Edward Miller (1735-1807), a prominent composer who in his youth played flute in the orchestra of the famous German composer George Frederic Handel.

Lucy Bamford, Senior Curator of Art and the Joseph Wright Collection at Derby Museums, said:

"It was quite the surprise when I opened my emails one morning to find an email from Joy Hall offering us a suspected Wright portrait.

We are thrilled that Miller's descendant, Susannah Stewart, could join us to unveil the works and give us an insight into the history of the sitters."

Born in Norwich in 1735, Miller moved to Doncaster in 1756 to become organist at St George's Church (now Doncaster Minster). It is believed he and Wright became friends during this period, with Wright undertaking portrait commissions around Derbyshire's neighbouring counties whilst working to establish himself as a professional portrait painter. *Edward Miller* is among a handful of known portraits by Wright connected to Doncaster, three others can be seen at Danum Gallery Library and Museum.

An intriguing label affixed to the back of the portrait, written by a descendant, reveals that Miller's elaborate costume was inspired by the dress of a 'Spanish nobleman' and was worn by him in 1751 when attending the twenty-first birthday party of his friend Charles Watson-Wentworth, Second Marquess of Rockingham – and later Prime Minister – at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire.

Two further portraits were gifted alongside the Wright: one of Miller's granddaughter Ann Miller, and the other her husband, the wealthy Derbyshire lead merchant Joseph Wass. Their home was Lea Green, a large mansion near Matlock, which they built in 1839. Less is known about these two portraits, both attributed to 'Poole of Derby', though it is known that Ann was a close friend of Florence Nightingale, who herself had a family connection with the area of Lea and Holloway. Unusually, Ann managed the family's smelting works after her husband's death in 1852 until her own death in 1882.



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Images: *Ann Wass* and *Joseph Wass*, Poole of Derby (possibly William Poole), oil on canvas, c. mid-19th century

© Derby Museums / Pictoria Pictures

Tony Butler, Executive Director at Derby Museums, said:

"I am absolutely delighted to receive these three portraits into Derby Museums' collections. I would like to thank the Hall family for their generosity in gifting these works, and Robert Shields DL, Longcliffe Quarries Ltd whose support covered the cost of transportation and packing.

Donors and the public put their trust in us as a museum to care for these wonderful objects and works of art. We look forward to continuing to carry out research and uncovering new stories to help us understand the significance of these wonderful paintings to our city and the nation.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that we opened our exhibition Joseph Wright: Life on Paper and this is another fantastic moment in our Year of Wright, as we continue to lead the study and promotion of this most influential and versatile of British artists."

Despite a decade of financial challenges, Derby Museums continues to expand its collections of art. Since 2012, it has acquired landscapes, portraits and fancy pieces by Wright through gift, loan or grant funded purchase.

Joy Hall, who coordinated the donation and whose husband is the five times great grandson of Edward Miller, said:



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“We are so happy to think that local people will be able to enjoy the paintings. My first tentative telephone call to the museum was answered by a lady whose maiden name was Wass and I knew then that I had found the right home for my husband’s ancestors. We would love to know if any relations still in the area come to see the paintings.”

The newly discovered portraits are now part of Derby Museums’ permanent collection. *Edward Miller* is on display in the Joseph Wright Gallery, whilst the two Wass portraits will be displayed at the Museum of Making in due course.

- Ends -

Available for interview

Lucy Bamford, Senior Curator of Art and the Joseph Wright Collection, Derby Museums
Tony Butler, Executive Director, Derby Museums

Images

To receive images, set up interviews, or for more information, please contact:
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Notes for Editors

About Joseph Wright of Derby

Born in Derby in 1734, Wright is an internationally renowned artist, whose paintings and works on paper adorn the walls of major galleries the world over. Derby Museums is home to the world’s largest collection of his work and houses the Joseph Wright Study Room which is home to over 300 drawings and sketches by Wright, as well as engravings, letters and a large library of related books.

About Derby Museums

Derby Museums is an independent charitable trust which is responsible for the rich cultural and creative history of Derby. It manages three sites across the city, the Museum and Art Gallery, Pickford’s House and the Museum of Making at Derby Silk Mill, and holds and curates all the art and collections within them, including the world’s largest collection of paintings by Joseph Wright of Derby.

Derby Museums aims to bring as many of the objects and treasures in the collections into the public domain as is practically possible and present them in ways that delight and inspire, via education and learning programmes, events and exhibitions, in order to share knowledge and inspire creativity and making amongst the people of Derby.



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As a charity Derby Museums relies on funding and grants from organisations and donations from businesses and the general public, all of which is gratefully received in order to ensure that admission to the museums remains free for all.

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About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

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The Fund has been supporting the Museum of Making and its activities programme since 2015, with a major grant of £10,695,000, including an initial £817,300 of Development Funding.

About Arts Council England

Arts Council England is the national development agency for creativity and culture. We have set out our strategic vision in *Let's Create* that by 2030 we want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high quality cultural experiences. We invest public money from Government and The National Lottery to help support the sector and to deliver this vision.

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