

It's the Year of Wright...

...at the Wright time. And in the Wright place.

Joseph Wright is widely regarded as an artist who was completely in tune with his age: capable of illustrating the dramatic advances which were being made in the arts, science, philosophy, and religion in what was a golden era for the City of Derby.

Better known to the world simply as "Wright of Derby", the year ahead will not simply earn his work even greater acclaim, but will also help to carry his name - as well as that of his home city - to a much wider audience.

The Year of Wright will help Derby to become one of the most talked about cities in Britain.

The main focal point is a major exhibition, organised by The National Gallery and Derby Museums Trust, [Wright of Derby: From the Shadows](#), which will be staged in London from 7 November 2025 to 10 May 2026.

It was 1765, when visitors to the Society of Artists in London were treated to a viewing of the first of what is now his world-famous series of 'candlelight' paintings, in which the strong contrasts of light-and-shadow highlight the dramatic effects of his subjects. Caravaggio and Rembrandt had both already perfected the technique; but Wright was known by his contemporaries as the leading British artist in this style.

From the Shadows will be the first exhibition dedicated to Joseph Wright at the National Gallery, and the first exhibition to focus on his 'candlelight' series. The exhibition is organised in partnership with Derby Museums where it will travel in 2026.

It will focus on Joseph Wright's career between 1765 and 1773, during which time he made a series of candlelit scenes. On show will be a number of masterpieces from this period including 'Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight', 'A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery in which a lamp is put in place of the Sun' and 'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump'. This marks the first time in 35 years that these works will be brought together.

'An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump', incidentally, is in The National Gallery's top ten most-asked-about paintings in its collection.

Seventeen artworks in the exhibition will be coming from Derby Museums, which holds the world's largest collection of Wright's work.

Kicking-off the Year of Wright, meanwhile, Derby Museums has already lifted the lid on an artist who enjoyed national acclaim and took the 18th century art world by storm - but who rarely left Derby, a place that deeply shaped his identity and artistic output.

Notable 'exceptions to the rule' periods when he studied in the London studio of Thomas Hudson; when he studied classical art and architecture while on honeymoon in Italy; when his family fled the city during the Jacobite Rebellion (and Bonnie Prince Charlie's brief but fateful stay in Derby); and during a three-year spell when he was based in Liverpool - where, to distinguish him from an artist named Richard Wright, people first started calling him 'Wright of Derby'.

But, by-and-large, he lived and worked in Derby, where he produced accurate portraits of the Midlands industrialists and entrepreneurs of the time. His painting of Sir Richard Arkwright, for example - which is on loan from a private collection and hangs in the Joseph Wright Collection in Derby - is the one now faithfully reproduced in virtually every publication dealing with the Industrial Revolution.

So it is fitting that Derby Museum and Art Gallery's latest exhibition is [Joseph Wright of Derby: Life on Paper](#) (now running to 7 September); and the over-riding message for

anyone wanting to find out more is that “you can’t experience Joseph Wright without Derby”.

A birthplace memorial at 28 Iron Gate in Derby (an armillary sphere similar to the one featured in 'A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery'), his tombstone in Derby Cathedral, and most importantly of all, The Derby Museum and Art Gallery featuring the unrivalled Joseph Wright Collection can be all found today within the city centre. (For more details, visit www.visitderby.co.uk).

Life on Paper showcases over 70 of Wright’s rarely seen personal drawings and sketches, peeling back the curtain on the master of light and shade.

And Wright’s earliest drawing, *Head of Silenus* (c.1745), is being shown here in public for the first time, following its recent discovery in a private collection. Thought to be a copy of a local inn or street sign made when he was 11 years old, family memoirs indicate that this is how Wright trained himself to draw, often keeping his drawings secret by hiding them in the family’s attic.

The National Gallery exhibition later this year, meanwhile, is expected to put Wright of Derby onto a stage normally reserved for the likes of Constable and Turner.

ENDS

Editors Notes

Derby’s identity was shaped over 300 years influenced by the Enlightenment, a period of scientific, philosophical, and artistic development. That spirit of creativity and invention still resonates throughout the city today. A culture break campaign created for the year, entitled [Enlighten Yourself. Make it Derby](#), celebrates the city’s rich history and its legacy of making.

Key dates in the ‘Year of Wright’

- To 7 September 2025: *Joseph Wright: Life on Paper* at Derby Museum and Art Gallery.
- July-August 2025 – Joseph Wright online resources to go live.
- 7 Nov 2025: *Joseph Wright of Derby: From The Shadows* opens at the National Gallery.
- 10 May 2026: *From The Shadows* closes.
- 12 June 2026: *From The Shadows* opens at Derby Museum and Art Gallery (reuniting *Bird in the Air Pump* and *The Orrery* in Derby for the first time in 80 years).
- 1 Nov 2026: *From The Shadows* closes.

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