

Rare Joseph Wright of Derby painting saved for the nation

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Derby Museum and Art Gallery has today unveiled Self-Portrait at the Age of About Forty thanks to a £2,271,621 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund.

The remarkable painting by renowned artist Joseph Wright (1734–1797) will be on permanent public display after centuries of private ownership.

A master of lighting effects

Joseph Wright (1734 – 1797), born in Irongate, Derby, was an English landscape and portrait painter. His paintings often focused on the scientific and technological innovations of the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution originating from the Midlands, where he was based.

A sense of self-confidence permeates his Self-Portrait at the Age of About Forty (circa 1772), which portrays Wright's growing reputation for the lighting effects of his 'candlelight paintings': The porte-crayon he holds has white and black chalk on opposing ends, whilst warm fire light (similar to that of a candle) plays on the folds of his artistic costume.

It is the only one of Wright's ten self-portraits in which he depicts himself as an artist.

Shining light on Wright's working process

The painting comes with an added bonus: its reverse shows a study for the artist's famous candlelight painting An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump. Painted in or just prior to 1768, it highlights the development of Wright's ideas for what is widely considered to be his masterpiece.

Saving the portrait for the UK

The painting has been privately owned since it was completed in around 1772 and rarely exhibited. Wright's works are popular around the world – should his self-portrait have gone to auction, there was a chance it would have left the UK and remained out of public view.

Thanks to the Government's [Acceptance-in-Lieu scheme, administered by Arts Council England](#), the portrait was made available to [Derby Museum and Art Gallery](#) at a special price. Beyond NHMF's major grant, funding was also received from the [Art Fund](#) and a number of private donors.

On permanent display to the public

The painting will be on permanent display in the Joseph Wright Gallery at Derby Museum and Art Gallery. The museum is home to the largest collection of Joseph Wright of Derby works anywhere in the world.

It will be housed in a free-standing case which allows both sides of the painting to be viewed. The case will occasionally be turned to correctly show the different orientations of the two sides of the work – one is in portrait and the other landscape.

The painting will be explored through a series of public and school events and will be digitised on the ART UK database of publicly owned work.

Dr Simon Thurley CBE, Chair, National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "The National Heritage Memorial Fund is delighted to support Derby Museums with a major donation of £2.3million to ensure that this magnificent self-portrait joins their collection.

"This painting has been privately owned since the 1770s and rarely exhibited, so we are very proud that thanks to our grant this work by Joseph Wright, one of Britain's most brilliant and compelling eighteenth century painters, will be on display at Derby Museum and Art Gallery for all to enjoy."

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Lucy Bamford, Curator at Derby Museums and Art Gallery, said: "Not only is it a work of significant artistic quality, but it also adds greatly to the stories that we share around Wright and our visitors' understanding of the artist, helping us to

cement Derby Museums as the go-to place for the study and appreciation of Wright's work on both a national and international level."