

arts

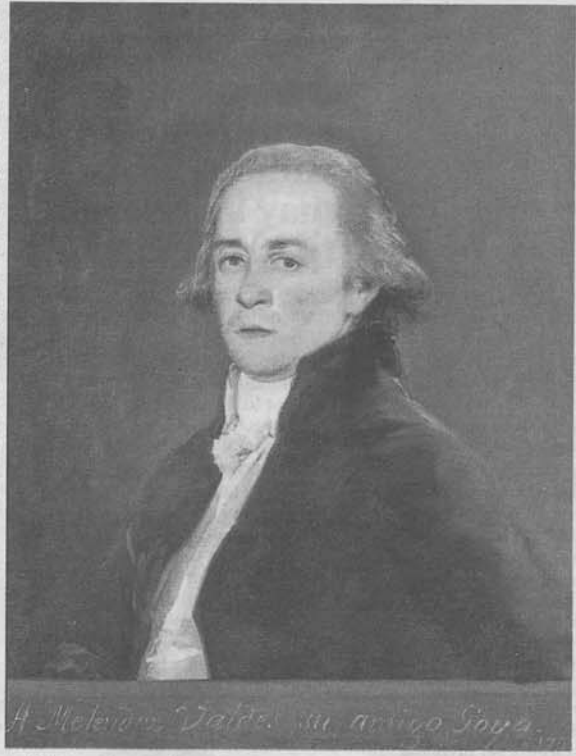
The English landowner, the French actress and their Spanish love affair

Olé! The Bowes' famous collection of art from Spain is visiting London. Nancy Durrant gets a preview

If you want a colourful story, that of John and Joséphine Bowes doesn't disappoint. John was born in 1811, the only son of the 10th Earl of Strathmore and Mary Millner, his live-in, commoner lover (later deathbed bride; they tied the knot 16 hours before he shuffled off). After the earl's death and a legal battle, Bowes eventually inherited his father's vast Durham estates — and the coal reserves underneath them — but not, due to the huffing and puffing at which the British aristocracy excels, his title.

Joséphine (née Coffin-Chevalier) was a Parisian actress at the Théâtre des Variétés, which Bowes, an avid culture vulture, bought when he moved to Paris in the late 1840s. As an illegitimate son he was shunned by his British peers, but his immense wealth and the easier-going nature of Parisian society allowed him to move in the elite circles of that city.

"He probably had more than one lover at that time," says Bernadette Petti, the curator of a new loan



exhibition of works from the Bowes Museum about to open at the Wallace Collection in London, "but there is correspondence between them in the archive of the museum, and they address each other in very sweet ways. He was really attached to her." He

Goya's Portrait of Juan Antonio Meléndez Valdés, 1797. Right: The Immaculate Conception by José Antolínez, 1675

must have been because in 1852 he bought her the Château du Barry in Louveciennes (once home to Louis IX's mistress) as a present for their wedding.

Obviously the masses of money and a lavish lifestyle — Joséphine patronised Charles Frederick Worth, the same couturier as Empress Eugénie, consort of Napoleon III — may have held some attraction for a jobbing actress, but what really cemented their relationship was a shared passion for art. Joséphine was a talented amateur painter — she studied under the landscape painter Karl Kuwasseg and was influenced by Gustave Courbet.

The idea to set up a museum came early in their marriage. "I think when they realised they couldn't have children, they decided to leave their legacy in a different way," explains Petti. "They made it their dream to create a really encyclopaedic collection. The [intended] outcome for them was to educate, and to make these artworks accessible to the wider community of the northeast — this was really philanthropic and ahead of their time."

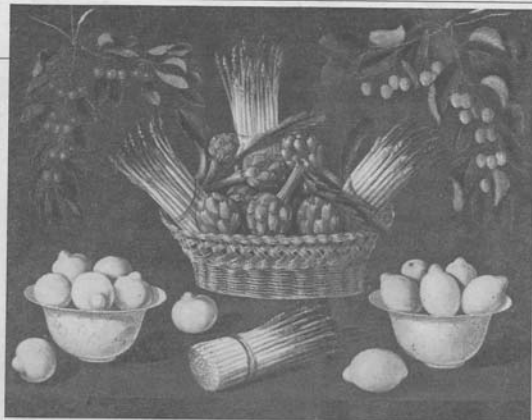
The jewel-like Bowes Museum in Co Durham, purpose-built by the pair — they began the project in 1869 — has to this day an astonishingly comprehensive collection, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, ceramics, archaeological artefacts and a two-headed calf.

The Wallace Collection exhibition, however, is a small cherry-picking from their 80-strong collection of Spanish paintings. *El Greco to Goya: Spanish*



“This is a small but tasty cherry-picking from the Bowes' collection

©THE BOWES MUSEUM



Masterpieces from the Bowes Museum will comprise 13 works that span the golden age of Spanish painting, plus, of course, a flourish of Goya at the end. The Bowes is home to the largest collection of Spanish art in Britain, making it one of the best places to trace its development outside Spain.

"The peculiarity of the collection is that you can see different schools of painting," says Petti. "You can see [the work of] artists lesser known outside, but crucial to the development of Spanish art, and in particular the golden age [more or less the whole of the 16th century] is well represented."

As well as El Greco and Goya, the show includes painters you'll likely

never have heard of, such as Blas de Ledesma, José Antolínez, Claudio Coello and Juan Bautista Maino. The collection as a whole is of varying quality, but, says the Wallace's director, Xavier Bray, a Spanish-painting specialist who curated last year's *Goya Portraits* show at the National Gallery in London, "these are the best".

They are indeed a choice bunch. There's a striking *Martyrdom of St Andrew*, for instance, by Luis Tristán de Escamilla, a Toledo-based artist considered one of El Greco's most talented pupils. The dark background betrays the influence of Caravaggio (Escamilla probably travelled to Italy in the early 17th century), but also,

Tobias Restoring His Father's Sight by Antonio Pereda y Salgado, 1652. Top: Still life with Asparagus, Artichokes, Lemons and Cherries by Blas de Ledesma, 1602-14. Top right: A Levitation of St Francis after Jusepe de Ribera, 1630-50

says Petti, "the influence of El Greco is really visible. The style is eclectic, you have the elongated figure, the muscles, the use of colour... Velázquez apparently proclaimed himself a follower of Escamilla."

Then there's *Tobias Restoring his Father's Sight*, an Old Testament scene by Antonio Pereda y Salgado, a highly skilled Madrid painter known for his still lifes (take a look at the fish). The painting betrays the influence of the Venetian tradition in its stunning pastel colours and dynamic, fluttering drapery. Or how about Coello's magnificent portrait of Mariana of Austria, Queen Regent of Spain from 1665-75, with her outrageous Habsburg jaw (intermarriage was common in that particular family; she had been betrothed to Prince Balthasar Carlos, but when he died

**“
Their dealer got them a very good deal indeed on the paintings**

aged 16 the sudden lack of an heir meant she was obliged to marry his father, her uncle, Philip IV, instead).

And there's the *Levitation of St Francis*, described as "after" Jusepe de Ribera. It is a curious but captivating work picturing the saint rising heavenward, his eyes bloodshot and arms outstretched, as if towards the apex of his encounter with God. It usually hangs high on the wall at the Bowes, so this is a good opportunity for visitors to indulge in armchair attribution. Bray, praising its "wonderful realism", is inclined to think that it might be by Ribera himself, although Petti is more cautious. "It's difficult to say without

doing technical investigation and a little bit more archival investigation," she says. "It is a possibility, but it's speculation." Still, she concedes, "it is a very good painting".

The Bowes' little-known gems are even more precious, considering how unusual they are in relation to what else was being bought then. Richard Wallace, the illegitimate son of the 4th Marquess of Hertford, on whose collection the Wallace was founded, was a contemporary of the Boweses — and was in Paris buying art at the same time, having inherited a fair bit of cash along with his father's collection (to the irritation of the 5th Marquess).

Their approaches to collecting were different. "Wallace bought at auction at a very high level," says Bray. He spent serious money on the most sought-after artists, such as Velázquez and Murillo, neither of whom is represented in the Bowes collection.

John and Joséphine, on the other hand, didn't attend the large Paris sales, preferring to forge close relationships with dealers, the most important of whom, for the Spanish collection, was Benjamin Gogué, who was acting simultaneously as agent for Elisa Rodas, the widow of the Conde de Quinto. A courtier and politician, De Quinto had been the director of the Museo de la Trinidad in Madrid, the collection of which was largely made up of masterpieces seized by the state during the dissolution of the Spanish monasteries in 1835-37. This position allowed him to add to his own collection, probably from items that were not selected for the museum, says Petti — although this part of the story is, she concedes in the slightly angsty tone of voice of one who does not want the Spanish state looking too hard into the provenance of the masterpieces in her care, "really blurred".

At any rate, De Quinto left Elisa in urgent need of liquidity, and Gogué, either because he liked them or because they were paying him better, negotiated the Boweses a very good deal indeed on lump purchases of his paintings. The people of the northeast, and now down south, have much to thank him for.

Ultimately the exhibition presents an opportunity for visitors to get a better overview of the richness of Spanish painting than either of the galleries involved could provide in isolation. Plus the Prado can't beat the Wallace's afternoon tea.

El Greco to Goya: Spanish Masterpieces from the Bowes Museum is at the Wallace Collection, London W1 (020 7563 9500), from Wednesday to January 7