

## Northern delights: The Wallace Collection's El Greco To Goya exhibition boasts a hoard of Spanish treasure - from County Durham!

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PUBLISHED, 30 September 2017

### [El Greco To Goya - Spanish Masterpieces From The Bowes Collection](#)

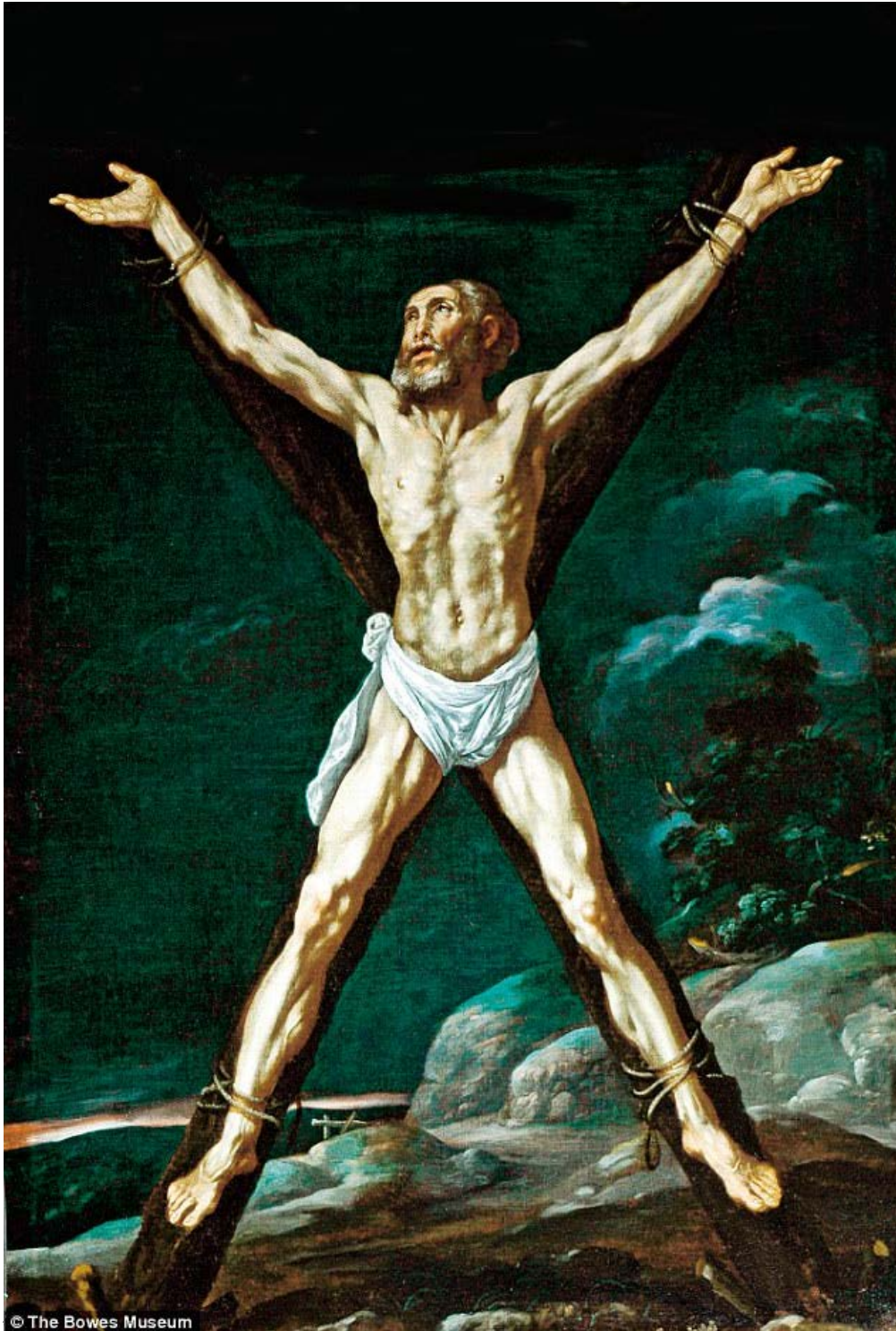
*The Wallace Collection, London*

*Until January 7*

There are only two subterranean rooms and 13 paintings in The Wallace Collection's new Spanish show but it packs a power out of all proportion to its diminutive size.

There are some sublime Goyas and an El Greco, of course, but also other, often revelatory, pictures by less well-known artists, such as court painter Antonio de Pereda, whose presence can still be felt through the layers of worked impasto on the surface of his strange and compelling *Tobias Restoring His Father's Sight* (1652), a painting that contains what might be the finest fish in Spanish art.

All of the works are culled from The Bowes Museum in County Durham, and are part of the collection formed by the wealthy philanthropists John Bowes and his wife Joséphine during the 19th century. Now, rehung in the metropolis, they defiantly proclaim the dazzling cultural patrimony of the Victorian north.



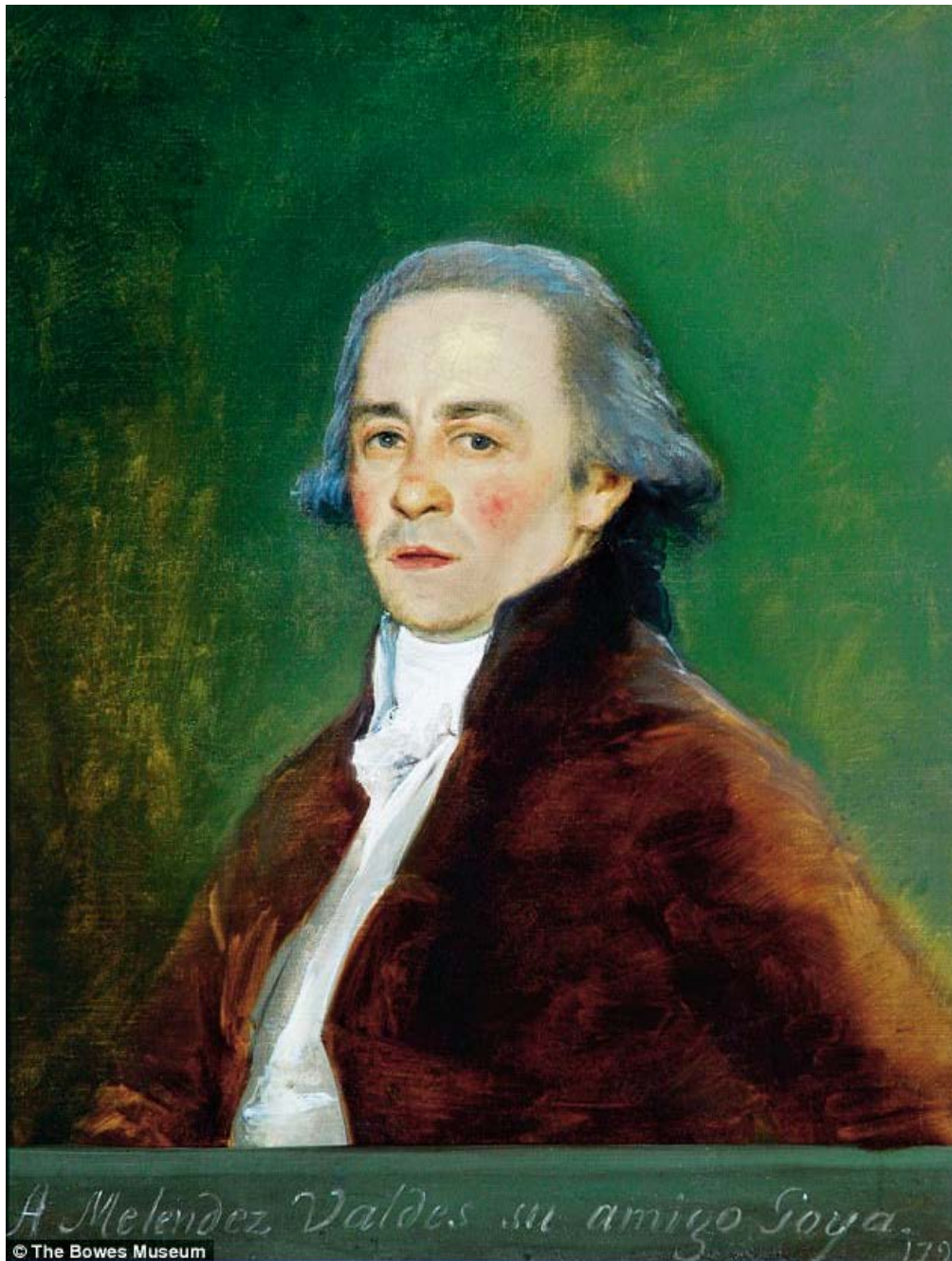
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All of the works are culled from The Bowes Museum in County Durham. Above: Luis Tristán de Escamilla's *The Martyrdom of St Andrew*

For the Wallace, which has its own Spanish Golden Age treasures, to join forces this way is both far-sighted and innovative.

On coming face to face with El Greco's punch-to-the-heart *The Tears of St Peter* (1580-89) in room one, you'll be very glad they did it. The Crete-born icon painter has gone in and out of favour.

Right now, he's firmly in – El Greco's *St Dominic In Prayer* sold for a record breaking £9.15 million at Sotheby's in 2013 – but at the Wallace he shares space with artists you can be excused for not knowing. Such as Blas de Ledesma. His *Still Life With Asparagus, Artichokes, Lemons And Cherries* (1602-14) can be seen as a delightfully naive celebration of Spanish agricultural abundance or, as three lemons roll free of their bowls below three bunches of asparagus, a repeated invocation of the Trinity.



In *Portrait of Juan Antonio Meléndez Valdés* (1797), Goya paints his friend with transcendent realism, cheeks blotched with drink and eyes reflecting the artist's own intensity

The second room of this show feels like a demented private chapel. A Madonna rises on the wall in José Antolinez's *The Immaculate Conception* (1650-75), a one-time altarpiece that still invites the viewer to fall to their knees.

A stark *St Andrew* by El Greco's assistant Luis Tristán de Escamilla looks heavenwards from his X-shaped cross; on facing walls queens dressed as nuns emerge from backgrounds of azure silk and more Virgins hover.

In *A Levitation of St Francis*, attributed to a follower of Jusepe de Ribera, St Francis actually takes flight, patched habit slit by the wounds of Christ, as he rises untethered through the clouds.

As ever, though, it's Goya, the visionary troubled by the darkest dreams, who offers the show's most disturbing point.

Wallace director Xavier Bray brought the acclaimed *Goya: The Portraits* to the National Gallery in 2015 and he scores again here with two wonderful works in room one.



© The Bowes Museum

***Interior of A Prison* (1793-94) is a harrowing dungeon scene painted on a sheet of tin where architecture exists purely to frame a spectral arch of light**

*In Portrait of Juan Antonio Meléndez Valdés* (1797), Goya paints his friend with transcendent realism, cheeks blotched with drink and eyes reflecting the artist's own intensity.

Next to that hangs *Interior of A Prison* (1793-94), a harrowing dungeon scene painted on a sheet of tin where architecture exists purely to frame a spectral arch of light. The abandoned prisoners, like the gaunt sinner in Goya's *St Francis Borgia Helping A Dying Impenitent* that hangs in Valencia Cathedral, are all sinew and damnation, but look closely in the gloom and you can see that one unfortunate dandy has just arrived in jail.

By now, you might feel incarcerated yourself. The Wallace Collection basement is possibly the most intense space in London right now, but you do need to come up for air.