Title Joseph Wright of Derby Gallery, Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Author Stuart Burch, Lecturer in Museum Studies, Nottingham Trent University

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Name a famous person from Derby. You can’t? Then you should pay a visit to Derby Museum.

Even before setting foot inside you’ll come face to face with someone who died over 200 years ago but who remains the town’s greatest celebrity.

Emblazoned across the entrance are his name and a self-portrait. The 20-year-old star-in-the-making exudes confidence, arrogance even. And why not? After all, he went on to put Derby on the artistic map. At the height of his fame in the 1760s, Joseph Wright of Derby must have been the Damien Hirst of his day.

Wright remains best known for his dramatic candle-lit depictions of spectacular scientific scenes such as *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768) and *A Philosopher Lecturing on the Orrery in which a Lamp is Put in Place of the Sun* (1766). The former hangs in the National Gallery, London, while Derby Museum is the proud owner of the latter. It is now on show in a room devoted to Wright.

The space has been recently renovated with improved climate control. Its walls are painted a dark charcoal colour. Nearly all the artworks have been cleaned.

They look magnificent: breathtaking landscapes, scenes from popular literature and mythology, plus celebrity portraits. A personal favourite is a depiction of the industrialist Richard Arkwright Junior and his family.

Derby Museum acquired it a decade ago after the government refused to allow the painting to be sold to a foreign buyer. Right next to the frame is a silver plaque. On it is the letter “D” for Designated, indicating that this is one of our non-national museums’ most important collections.

**Wall hang**

All the works are in a single room that is not particularly large, lacks natural lighting, has three points of entry and boasts an ugly flight of stairs going up one wall.

Fortunately, the curators have come up with some ingenious solutions to these challenges.

First, cramming in lots of pictures recalls the tastes of Wright’s day. Derby Museum’s display is spartan in comparison with the Royal Academy’s summer exhibitions at Somerset House, where works were stacked from floor to ceiling. Artists fought like mad for the best spots on the wall; a bitter experience, which ultimately led Wright to cut his ties with the academy.

**Imaginative solutions**

There is another inspired solution when it comes to the hang: it is both chronological and thematic. Insisting on just one starting point would have been impossible given the room’s multiple points of entry. A virtue is made of this, with one of the doorways cleverly flanked by paintings of the Arkwright family.

Following on from the portraits are works depicting science and industry, then a series of mythical and literary subjects and finally landscapes. This anti-clockwise sweep ends with a touching rural scene painted just two years before Wright’s death in 1797.

It is at this point that visitors bump into that unsightly staircase. But in a further smart move this is used to accommodate a series of chalk sketches. These run diagonally up the wall with the steps allowing for close viewing of the works, one by one.

By the time you reach the top of the stairs you are back at the beginning. The final picture on show is a sketch drawn by Wright when he was just 16 years old.

This completes a circle of life that starts and ends with his early years. From the top of the stairs you can look down on a lifetime of achievement. This vantage point accentuates Wright’s trademark contrasts of light and dark.

Dramatic details glow in the dimly lit gallery – a necessary measure to prevent the drawings from fading. In terms of space and arrangement, the exhibition is a real success.

**Designated alchemy**

There are, however, problems. That much is clear from the gallery’s comments book. On its pages unfolds a dialogue between visitors and staff regarding the darkness of the room, the absence of favourites and – most significantly – the small font size and awkward positioning of the text panels.

Many of the criticisms are met with measured responses from the curators that demonstrate a commendable willingness to implement changes wherever possible.

With this in mind, I would like to suggest the inclusion of some sort of feature in the centre of the room. In its current form the space lacks a central focus. A table in the middle ringed by a concise opening text plus additional reading would signpost the collection and introduce Wright to a new audience.

Above the table, perhaps an illuminated model of the wondrous flask seen in *The Alchemist Discovering Phosphorus*? This would give the room its celestial core orbited by Derby’s unrivalled constellation of Wright’s art.

It would also serve to keep alive the wide-eyed wonder of the children huddled around the philosopher as he uses his orrery to reveal the hidden workings of the solar system.

At one point during my visit this painting was brought to life by the arrival of a school group. One of them asked the museum guide whether Wright’s paintings were valuable.

I managed to resist the temptation of shouting, *“Yes, they are incredibly valuable – and they belong to you and to your future children, forever and for free.”*

Derby Museum and Art Gallery is a wonderful place: it is unpretentious, with friendly, responsive staff and brilliant collections. It gets by on very little yet it offers so much in return.

If you want to be reminded just how special and important our so-called provincial museums and galleries are – go and pay a visit to Derby Museum’s famous Joseph Wright collection. It’s designated alchemy.

*Stuart Burch is a lecturer in museum studies at Nottingham Trent University*

**Project data**

* **Cost** £150,000
* **Main funders** Derby City Council; Museums, Libraries and Archives Council; Renaissance East Midlands
* **Project management** Mike Galer (senior keeper)
* **Curator** Lucy Salt (keeper of art)
* **Exhibition design** Lucy Salt; Louise Dunning (exhibitions officer)
* **Lighting** Lucy Salt; Chris Ellis
* **Graphics and labels** Mike Galer; Lucy Salt
* **Hang** C’Art – Art Transport