

## Portraits and the Artist: Richard Rothwell's Roman Adventures

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*Abstract:*

Richard Rothwell was an Irish portraitist who was successful in London in the late 1820s. Despite this achievement he felt he had to leave London to acquaint himself with the Italian Masters and see what trends were in demand in Rome in the early 1830s. This chapter analyses how the Italian experience affected his creativity and examines the reasons for his proclivity towards genre and landscape over portraits in works produced up to his death in 1868. Attention is paid to the Rothwell holdings in the National Gallery of Ireland and the National Museum of Northern Ireland. The reasons for the negative reaction to Rothwell's "Italian" art on his return to England are examined while it is also argued that he may have retained his initial success as a portrait painter had he never gone to Italy.

*Keywords:* England, Failure, Ireland, Italy, Portraitist

In 1831 when the Irish painter Richard Rothwell decided to interrupt his successful career as a portrait painter in London in order to familiarise himself with Italian art and with the work of the great Italian Masters of the past, he undoubtedly thought that what he would gain in experience and artistic technique would ultimately enhance his career on his return to London. This was not to be. Rothwell was drawn to Rome as an extraordinary centre of culture which could bring the traveller face to face with the glories of ancient Rome together with many artistic treasures of more recent times. In the nineteenth century the leading romantic painters in Italy were Francesco Hayez (1791-1882), Tommaso Minardi (1787-1871), Ippolito Caffi (1768-1839), Felice Giani (1758-1823) and the Austrian Joseph Anton Koch (1768-1839) who worked mainly in Rome. Representations of Roman and Italian scenery and contemporary life were popular among well-known artists in England and Rothwell may well have been familiar with or heard of "Italian scene in the Anno Santo, pilgrims arriv-

ing in sight of Rome and St Peter's" (1827) by Charles Eastlake<sup>1</sup>, "A Neapolitan saint manufactory" (1832) by Thomas Unwin<sup>2</sup> or "Caligula's Palace and Bridge" (1831) and "Rome burning" (1834) by Turner<sup>3</sup>. Rothwell's desire to become part of this transnational artistic scene and to join successful artists such as Eastlake, Turner and Unwin unfortunately ended in failure as this article will demonstrate.

By the early nineteenth century Rome was still a singular centre for antiquarian and archaeological studies. Many artists from all over Europe travelled there to see the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance, while in earlier decades the Grand Tour brought travellers face to face with famous monuments and buildings of the past. The excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum from 1738 onwards had caught the imagination of these travellers who also wanted to see places like the Capitol Hill, the Forum and the Colosseum in Rome. Italian portrait painters like Pompeo Batoni (1708-1787) often depicted travellers posing near well-known classical sculptures such as the Apollo Belvedere or Laocoön and His Sons or in front of famous monuments of the city to give them a unique souvenir of their visit to the city. Painters and etchers responded to this demand for portable souvenirs and they produced townscapes and views (*vedute*) of the ruins of ancient buildings. The most famous of these was Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1708-1787) whose etchings disseminated an image of a city filled with romantic antiquities. Due to declining patronage from the Papacy, and a less wealthy merchant class, artists consequently responded to the demands of individual travellers and collectors whose personal tastes were reflected in the market for themes from ancient history, legends and myths. There was also great demand for scenes of everyday life, called *bambocciate* in the streets of Rome which often depicted beggars and vagabonds and which gave a sentimental gloss to poverty. Artists painted picturesquely costumed peasants while subject painting of infancy, childhood and old age was created for popular consumption. This then was the artistic scene in Italy and especially in Rome when Rothwell arrived there in 1831. Influenced by what he saw and experienced around him Rothwell now began to move away from portrait painting and ventured into landscape together with the depiction of locals as is apparent from the titles of many of his paintings that were inspired from his first visit to Rome such as "A Roman Street" (1835), "An Italian Girl" (1835), "Calabrian Itinerants, a sketch" (1836), "Flower Girl – 'Piazza Navona'" (1850), "Pifferini – Sunrise, a scene looking from the palace of the Caesars, at the Colosseum" (1850) to mention but a few.

Little information exists about Rothwell's trips to Rome but it is known that Joseph Severn (1793-1879), friend of Keats helped him greatly. Severn had been

<sup>1</sup> Now in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>2</sup> Now in the Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester.

<sup>3</sup> Both paintings are in the Tate Gallery, London.

instrumental in founding the British Academy of Arts in Rome in 1821<sup>4</sup> and in this he was supported among others by Sir Thomas Lawrence, then President of the Royal Academy in London whom Rothwell studied with on his arrival in that city. This connection proved useful to Rothwell and Severn duly introduced him to English circles and to other artists and acquaintances thereby making him aware of artistic trends in Rome and Italy at that time. Although Irish by birth Rothwell, who was Protestant, does not seem to have been in contact with Irish centres in Rome such as the Irish College or with the Irish artist John Hogan (1800-1858) who was in the city at that time and who was closely associated with Catholic circles in the city. Rothwell had deliberately left Ireland and had settled successfully in London so he may have felt that he had little in common with the Irish in Rome and may have felt more at ease with English circles in that city.

Rothwell was born on November 20, 1800 in Athlone, Co Westmeath. He was the eldest of seven children born to James Rothwell and his wife Elizabeth Holmes<sup>5</sup>. Little is known of his early life in that town but he must have shown some early aptitude in the field of painting because his uncle, Thomas Watson, who lived in Dublin, took charge of him and enrolled him in the Dublin Society Schools in 1814. While there he became a skilled draughtsman and in 1820 was awarded a silver medal for his studies "in oil from the antique" (Strickland 1968 [1913], 301). During this period he had shown considerable promise as an artist and on completion of his studies he began to work as a portrait painter in Dublin. At this early stage he already had an inflated view of his own talent and soon felt that he had not achieved the success that his ability warranted. For a while he considered abandoning his career as a painter but must certainly have been encouraged to continue his work as a portraitist following his election as an Associate to the newly founded Irish Hibernian Academy in 1823. The following year he was elected a Member of that Academy. This was a considerable achievement for one so young and over the next few years he painted many portraits and exhibited regularly at the Academy from 1826 to 1829<sup>6</sup>. Rothwell appears to have gained popularity as a young artist in Dublin, he painted numerous portraits and many of these early commissions came from prominent people. Between 1826 and 1829 more than thirty seven of these works were exhibited at the Royal Hibernian Academy and included portraits for "Miss Stanfield, of the Theatre Royal", George Henry Pitt, Esq., Archibald Hamilton Rowan Esq., Doctor McCabe, Rev. James Jones, The Lady Dufferin, Lord Dufferin, the Honourable Hans Blackwood, Captain Lord Arthur Chich-

<sup>4</sup> This Academy was initially housed on Via Sant'Isidoro which also doubled as Severn's home and studio. It subsequently moved to Via Margutta but closed in 1936. It had become increasingly side lined following the establishment of the British School in Rome in 1911.

<sup>5</sup> Strickland gives a detailed account of Rothwell's life and work as a painter in 1968 [1913], 300-312.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart 1986 gives details of the work Rothwell exhibited there from 1826 to 1866, 121-122 (referred to henceforth as: Stewart *RHA Index*).

ester, Mrs Gordon, the Right Hon. Lord Viscount Ferrand and several other portraits of unidentified ladies and gentlemen (Stewart *RHA Index* 1978, 121).



Fig. 1 - Self-portrait<sup>7</sup>

An interesting self-portrait from this early period is held in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, and displays the talent that Rothwell had for portrait painting at this time [fig. 1]. It may have been painted in his late twenties/early thirties and was purchased by the National Gallery from a Mrs Dickson in 1887. It is oil on canvas and measures 72x58 cms<sup>8</sup>. The painting shows Rothwell as a handsome young man who is presented sitting from right to left with his right arm resting on a ledge. With his body presented in a triangular fashion the artist is fashionably dressed and the light focuses on his high necked shirt and ruff, his face and upper body. His dark eyes engage vividly and directly with the viewer and much attention is focussed on his face while his cheeks, with their delicate pink hues, bring great warmth and immediacy to the work. Further harmony is brought to the image with his softly tousled reddish brown hair. The brushwork is confident and the portrait shows Rothwell in robust good health while his whole expression would seem to indicate an artist content with his lot in life, his early acclaim and apparent success in Dublin. This portrait is very similar to another slightly darker self-portrait of a younger Rothwell now in the Ulster Museum. In addition to portraits Rothwell had also painted a number of landscapes and had developed a strong sense of colour at this time.

Despite this initial success, Rothwell was not content with what Dublin had to offer and decided to move to London in 1829 where he studied briefly with

<sup>7</sup> Permission to reproduce this image here has been granted by the National Gallery of Ireland.

<sup>8</sup> These details are found in *Dossier File 265* on this painting held in the CSIA Archive, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. I am grateful to the National Gallery for permission to use these details together with details of other *Dossier Files* referred to in this article.

Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) who was firmly established as the leading English portrait painter in the early nineteenth century and had been second President of the Royal Academy. He was much influenced by Lawrence's polished style and the latter greatly admired Rothwell's talent referring to him as the "Irish Prodigy" (Crookshank, Glin 2002, 233). This move to London brought Rothwell a certain notoriety and Strickland notes that Sir Edwin Landseer remarked to a friend that "an artist has come from Dublin who paints flesh as well as the Old Masters" (1968 [1913], 301). At this time, according to Crookshank and Glin, he used "a Venetian technique, with thick impasto, glazes and reds" although his "excessive use of bitumen [...] ruined many of his pictures" (Crookshank, Glin 2002, 233). In 1830 he had four paintings exhibited in the Royal Academy and another four in 1831, all of prominent personalities such as Lord Downes, Viscount Beresford and William Huskisson, M.P. (Strickland 1968 [1913], 301). It is interesting to observe that a note on his paintings in the Royal Academy in 1830 states: "Mr Rothwell, it is true, is the fashion and has his door beset with carriages, and fashion like folly, knows no reason and his commissions are numberless"<sup>9</sup>. London had opened a door of opportunity for Richard Rothwell who initially seemed to grab it with both hands. When Lawrence died unexpectedly in 1830, he inherited some of his portrait practice. Rothwell had landed on his feet, his talent was greatly appreciated and there was no shortage of prominent personages willing to pay the now higher fees that his work commanded. His portrait of the poet and novelist Gerald Griffin (1803-1840) now in the National Gallery of Ireland, was probably painted in 1829 when both were in London and befriended each other.



Fig. 2 - Gerald Griffin<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> British Museum Print Room, Whitley Papers, X, 1309.

<sup>10</sup> Permission to reproduce this image here has been granted by the National Gallery of Ireland.

This portrait [fig. 2] which is in the National Gallery of Ireland measures 168x102 cms and was purchased by the Gallery from Mrs P.V. Duffy in 1910 for twenty pounds<sup>11</sup>. Once again the painting is in classical portrait style with the sitter, Gerald Griffin, presented from left to right. Dressed in a fashionable black jacket, grey waistcoat, white shirt and black cravat he is seated against a red chair. His hands do not appear and the emphasis is on the upper body and the sitter's persona. There is considerable profusion of a reddish-brown light in the background which also shows off the painter's confident brush strokes. Light falls on the white shirt and casts reflections on the subject's apparel. A special chromatic emphasis lights up his face with its pink hued cheeks, his fine nose and well defined lips. The sitter's dark eyes engage with the viewer while his brown wavy hair is set against the main background and accentuates the sitter's character. There is clearly a bond of friendship and empathy between the sitter and the painter perhaps as both were Irish and were united in their effort to find fame and acclaim in a new and foreign city. Their Irishness would have brought them together in the challenging new environment of London and it consolidated their friendship as each attempted to find acclaim and recognition in a new city. The portrait of Griffin serves as an important contrast between Rothwell's style before he went to Italy and his subsequent approach to his art.

Despite the fact that Rothwell could have taken advantage of the demand for portrait work especially after Lawrence's death, he seemed to have been acutely aware of his lack of experience both of the work of the great portrait Masters of the past and particularly of an Italian art education in comparison to other contemporary artists. It is highly probable that had he remained in London he would have carved out a good niche for himself in this field, such was the demand for his work among prominent customers. Rothwell however decided to give up what he had achieved in London, put aside commissions he had been given for further portraits, and set off for Italy in 1831 in order to fill this self-perceived lacuna in his artistic formation. Little is known about the initial period that Rothwell spent in Italy but he probably spent much of this time in Rome and visited other major cities such as Florence, Bologna, Milan, Venice and Naples where he would have seen the major works of the great Italian and Dutch portraitists of the past together with the work of contemporary artists in those cities. In Rome Rothwell befriended Joseph Severn, who in all probability introduced him to other Italian cities and art galleries and presumably other artists working in Italy at that time. Severn travelled to Venice with Rothwell to renew his acquaintance with the Venetian Masters, a fact alluded to in a letter from Charles Brown to Joseph Severn<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> These details are found in *Dossier File* 609 of this painting held in the CSIA Archive, National Gallery of Ireland.

<sup>12</sup> Letter 36, dated 17 September 1833 contained in the scholarly website *Romantic Circles* (<<http://www.romanticcircles.com/>>). See <<https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/brownsevern/letters/17sept1833.html>> (05/2016).

Rothwell stayed in Italy for about three years before returning to London in 1834. Some of the paintings he exhibited with the Royal Irish Academy from 1834-1850 have Italian titles such as “An Italian Girl”, “Noviciate Mendicants”, “A Study for a picture of Calisto”, “Titian, a chalk drawing” (now in the National Gallery of Ireland), “Flower Girl – Piazza Navona”, “Alfani Oratore” and “Pifferini” and they bear the hallmark of how his stay in Italy changed his career as a painter.



Fig. 3 - Stella in Rome<sup>13</sup>

The painting “Stella in Rome” [fig. 3] which is now in the Ulster Museum gives a very good idea of the impact that Italy had on Rothwell’s style and paintings. This is a circular oil painting on a square canvas that measures 65.3 cm by 65.3 cm. The subject, a dark haired girl, is presented from left to right, with her right hand resting on the cloth covered balcony ledge, her left hand is holding a bunch of flowers or leaves and she is wearing gold gypsy type earrings and gold chains on her neck. In the bottom centre of the painting is the title “Stella in Rome” and it is signed “R. Rothwell”.

The painting is deftly executed and shows how exposure to Italy and Italian painting had influenced Rothwell at this stage and brought greater light, subtlety and character to his portraits. From the title we can presume that this work was done over the period of his three year stay in Rome and that Stella may have been a real person or Rothwell may also have played on the Italian word *stella* (meaning star) and it could therefore be taken as a reference to the girl’s name and/or her stellar beauty. The mostly darkish background acts as a perfect foil to highlight the fine skin features of this girl. Her dark and luminous hair is piled high on

<sup>13</sup> “Stella in Rome” (c. 1831-1834). Richard Rothwell 1800-1868. Copyright National Museums Northern Ireland. Collection Ulster Museum (BELUM.U152). I am grateful to the Ulster Museum for permission to reproduce this image here.

her head, her white ruched blouse, her coloured and ribbon-decorated sleeves together with her red lips and gold jewellery bring this girl to life. She may have been a gypsy or country girl that Rothwell encountered in the city and there is far more life in her depiction relative to the portraits that Rothwell had painted before he went to Italy. There is great realism in the young girl who is gazing at something or someone, perhaps even a narcissistic image of herself and her own glittering beauty. Rothwell must have brought this painting back to London and probably kept it in his own possession until he died in 1868. It was formally donated to the Ulster Museum in 1943 by the Misses R and F.F. and Mrs R.R. Patterson who were Rothwell's grandchildren. The *Dossier File* on the painting states that it is now known as the "Rothwell Bequest in accordance with the wishes of the donors". A similar copy by Rothwell was once owned by the author and journalist Bruce Arnold and was displayed in the Neptune Gallery Dublin until it was sold at public auction in Dublin in 1974.

Rothwell left Rome and returned to London in 1834 where he presumed he could take up where he had left off in the field of portrait painting. His place however had been taken in the interim by other artists and he was embittered by the fact that patrons no longer flocked to his door or that they did not seem to appreciate his new-found skills as an artist. Had he persisted as a portrait painter he might have regained his former position but, impatient to achieve success, instead he allowed himself be persuaded by Benjamin Haydon (1786-1846), the painter of historical subjects, to try his hand at historical and subject pictures. This was against the advice of close friends and reports that although there was a certain demand for these pictures "of fancy subjects" by collectors in Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, the general public and the Royal Academy did not react favourably to this type of art work (Strickland 1968 [1913], 302). Rothwell's powers of portraiture declined while his relationship with the Royal Academy became fractious as it often rejected his work or he accused it of hanging it badly. Strickland again quotes a contemporary criticism of his pictures which noted that "after years of experience, if not of labour, he has disappointed his friends and fulfilled the predictions of his detractors. His first portrait exhibited was his best" (*Evening Mail*, 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1838, *ibidem*). Some of the few portraits painted at this time suggest that his real talent lay in this area and this is apparent from his acute presentation of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley in 1840 which is now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. His best known subject paintings of this period were "Noviciate Mendicants"<sup>14</sup>, "The Little Roamer"<sup>15</sup> and

<sup>14</sup> This is also known as the "The Poor Mendicants". It was first exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1837.

<sup>15</sup> It was first exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1843.



“The Very Picture of Idleness”<sup>16</sup> all now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. These are attractive sentimentalised pictures of peasants and recall similar subject scenes that he would have seen during his first stay in Italy.

In 1847 he became so discouraged by his lack of success and patronage and by his own heightened feeling of unfair treatment by the Royal Academy that he left London and returned to Dublin. From then until his death in 1868 he changed residence and country at a rapidly increasing pace as he constantly searched for the recognition he dreamed of and ardently craved in the world of art<sup>17</sup>. From London he had sent paintings regularly for exhibition and sale to the Royal Hibernian Academy in Dublin but ceased exhibiting with them in 1846. He had already resigned his membership in 1837 but on his return to Dublin in 1847 he was again re-elected an Associate and then a full Member and began exhibiting with them the following year possibly in the hope of finding new patrons and buyers for his art work. Despite the Hibernian Academy’s generosity of spirit towards him he resigned once more in 1854 when he was made an honorary life Member of the Academy (Strickland 1968 [1913], 303) but that institution continued to exhibit work by him right up to 1866.



Fig. 4 - The Mother's Pastime<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Painted in 1843.

<sup>17</sup> The Stewart *RHA Index* notes his various addresses from 1834 until 1866. In London he lived in Newman Street and 31 Devonshire Street, Portland Place; in Dublin he lived in Rose Cottage, Rathfarnham and he is also listed as living at different addresses in London, Belfast, Leamington in Warwickshire and finally in Via Felice, Rome.

<sup>18</sup> Permission to reproduce this image here has been granted by the National Gallery of Ireland.

In 1842 Rothwell married Rosa Marshall, the daughter of a Belfast doctor, with whom he had several children. The marriage initially brought him great happiness and also introduced him to prominent figures in Belfast and Northern Ireland who commissioned work from him. The painting, "The Mother's Pastime" [fig. 4], now in the National Gallery of Ireland, may well be a portrait of Rothwell's wife and their first child and it reflects his new found happiness as a husband and father. First exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1844 and then in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1845, it was subsequently purchased by the Royal Irish Art Union for £120 and given as first prize to P. Watters Esq. from Killiney. In 1942 it was purchased by the National Gallery of Ireland from Miss Edith Watters (presumably a descendant of P. Watters) who in a letter addressed from 12 Eaton Square, Monkstown, Co. Dublin, states that she "is pleased to accept" the offer of £50 from the Gallery for this picture<sup>19</sup>. It now forms part of the Rothwell holding in the National Gallery and the image was featured on a supplement to the *Irish Independent* entitled *Mothers and Babies* which was published on March 11, 2000.

This painting shows a mother with her young child. She is seated on a chair and is presented from left to right. There is a bright blue/green landscape in the right hand background while the left hand background features dark trees. The mother is obviously rejoicing in her happy and contented child who is standing on her lap and dressed in a white bonnet and flowing white gown. The mother is clothed in the classical Italian Venetian colours of deep yellow, blue and red while light rays dance on her hair, her bared shoulders and particularly on the folds of her sleeves and dress. There is a strong Italian influence here ranging from the vibrant chromatic tones to details like the red coral necklace and pearl pendant worn by the child or the discreet bracelet worn on the mother's arm. Her hair style is fashionably swept back from her face and gathered into a brocade ribbon at the back of her head, a feature that further highlights the sheer joy in the face and body movements of the mother towards her child.

<sup>19</sup> Details of this letter are in *Dossier File* 1102, CSIA Archive, National Gallery of Ireland.



Fig. 5 - Study of a Smiling Child<sup>20</sup>

This portrait [fig. 5] measures 39 cm x 36 cm and was purchased by the National Gallery of Ireland at Christie's London in 1882 and it may well be the "Study of a Child" shown at the Royal Academy in 1848. It featured in an Exhibition, "A Celebration of Childhood", at the National Gallery in 2004<sup>21</sup> and it was also shown in the National Gallery *Diary* for 2015. It is a warm and vivid portrait painted by Rothwell sometime in the mid-nineteenth century and shows the ability that he had as a portrait painter where he avoids the sentimentality often used in Victorian pictures of young children. A further example of this talent is the portrait he painted in 1826 of the curly haired young boy, James Warwick Macauley, eldest child of Frederick William Macauley and Anna Macauley (whose portraits he also painted) which is now in the Ulster Museum. The smiling child in the image presented here looks directly and engagingly at the viewer and epitomises what is called the "speaking eyes" of many subjects presented by Rothwell in his work. Set against a blue/green/brownish background the child is presented in classical triangular form and his light coloured gown shows off the artist's brushstrokes. The child's pale face, pink cheeks and sparkling eyes make warm contact with the viewer while his tousled chestnut hair adds to the sense of merriment and humour that the child embodies. It is clear that fatherhood further enhanced Rothwell's ability to capture the innocence and playfulness of sitters like this young child.

<sup>20</sup> Permission to reproduce this image here has been granted by the National Gallery of Ireland.

<sup>21</sup> Details taken from *Dossier File 223*, CSIA Archive, National Gallery of Ireland.

The restlessness of Rothwell's character is borne out in the itinerant life endured by his wife and family. Following their marriage in 1842 Rothwell lived with Rosa in London for five years until he returned to Dublin in 1847. The death of their first child, sometime around 1852, affected him deeply and he returned with his family to London. In 1854 he went to America where he hoped to have more luck as an artist and left his wife and family with her friends in Belfast. His work was appreciated in Boston but he decided against setting up home in America. On his return he took the family instead to Rome for the next year and a half before returning with them to Leamington in Warwickshire in 1858. While in Rome he continued his painting and also concentrated on variations of the subject painting "Calisto" [Fig. 6] which he considered to be his masterpiece.



6 - Calisto<sup>22</sup>

Two letters that Rothwell wrote to Mr Mulvaney (of the National Gallery of Ireland) show that he considered "Calisto" to be his finest work and he wanted it to be purchased for the Gallery. The first letter from Leamington dated July 12, 1860 states:

I have done with passion for Art. My youth was given to the dream of posthumous fame, - to leave something that would outlive me was my proudest aspiration;

<sup>22</sup> Permission to reproduce this image has been granted by the National Gallery of Ireland.

and now having wound up my Knowledge on a picture which was intended by a late friend to have it presented by him to the National Gallery, he died suddenly before his will was legalized, - the picture returned to me and I intend to have it seen in Dublin. I think it a work carried as far as Modern Art has gone, and I should like it to be presented in your National Gallery. The picture is my Calisto, which I have gone over again and again, adding to, and pruning, until it has arrived at that state of perfection on which my judgment cannot add another touch.

Another letter sent from the same address and dated July 23 reiterates his exalted opinion of this painting:

I show this picture of Calisto as one, for delicacy, for beauty of colour, drawing and richness of background as equal to anything which we poor Moderners can exhibit, and I should like it to take its place in a National Gallery [...] You can scarcely form any idea of the time which I bestowed on my Calisto model after model whenever I found one that I thought would add a hair's breadth to its refinement, and dashed money at it, - therefore I now expect now [*sic*] to be paid for it.<sup>23</sup>

There is no evidence that Mulvaney purchased the picture from Rothwell. One such copy is now in the National Gallery of Ireland and was purchased in 1901 from Shepherd Bros, King St., London, for the sum of £40. Measuring 3ft by 3ft8" it is signed R. Rothwell. A picture of the same subject was exhibited by Rothwell at the British Institution in 1837 - a larger picture it measured 3'6" by 5'4". The title "Calisto" is a variation on the Latin *Callisto* which derived from the ancient Greek *Kallistos* meaning "most beautiful". In Greek mythology Kallisto was a nymph who was changed in to a bear by Hera as a punishment for her love affair with Zeus. He in turn placed her in the sky as the constellation Ursa Major. Originally sighted by Galileo in 1610 Callisto is one of the four brightest satellites of Jupiter and the third largest satellite of the solar system. The choice of name (Rothwell drops an "l" in the name perhaps to anglicise it) together with the artist's description of this painting gives us an idea of how far Rothwell had moved from his original talent in presenting portraits of real people to an abstract subject representing beauty in a work that he considered close to perfection.

On an overly dark background that is relieved by a glimpse of bluish sky the figure of Calisto is presented asleep with her body naked from the thighs up with her left arm posing languidly against her hair. This pose recalls depictions of Venus by Italian artists such as Giorgione and Titian

<sup>23</sup> Both letters are found in *Dossier File 506* on this painting in the CSIA Archive, National Gallery of Ireland.

which Rothwell would certainly have seen in Venice but here the comparison ends. The figure is lying on a white sheet laid over a gloomy yellow brown surface. The upper part of Calisto's body has warm skin tones while the lower part is draped with white and dull red sheets with light picking out her covered knees. Apart from the attractive skin features of the body the overall impression is of leaden dullness and the painting lacks real life. Near the sitter's arm is a toppled-over jar with paint brushes almost as if the artist is saying, as indeed he did in his letter to Mulvaney, that he could do nothing to further perfect this painting.

Rothwell had placed all his hope on this work and it was exhibited together with two other paintings in the Royal Academy in 1862. Rothwell was furious with the way the pictures were presented to the viewing public and complained bitterly to the Academy. He considered them to be "so badly hung, placed in an obscure corner, high up, almost beyond my recognition" (Strickland 1968 [1913], 304) that it was difficult to see them let alone value them for their worth. Rothwell then wrote a vehement protest to Lord Granville, President of the Exhibition:

The pictures I contribute were considered elaborate works of Art [...] by painters of reputation. And now that an indignity has been publicly heaped on me, I am obliged to come from my privacy and as publicly proclaim the wrong. In honourable rivalry with the best painters in England I contributed my works, for I play with no second class [...] After the injury aimed [...] at me, I am entitled to have my pictures placed in the midst, side by side with those the boasted painters of England, if only for a day – an *hour*. (Strickland 1968 [1913], 304)

Rothwell published these and other letters of protest in pamphlet form and vowed never to exhibit his work in the Royal Academy again. Following this rebuff he left Leamington and brought his wife and children to Belfast where they presumably stayed once more with friends and family. He himself set off for Paris and Brussels where some of his work was shown and much appreciated. From there he returned to Rome where he lived in Via Felice and he worked on poetical subject paintings which he still hoped would bring him the acclaim he longed for. However he caught a fever and died on September 8, 1868. His friend Joseph Severn arranged for him to be buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome where a small block of travertine with a headstone of Carrara marble marks his grave (Black 1980, 207). Eileen Black points out that Strickland was mistaken both when he gave Rothwell's death as September 13 and in believing that he was buried beside Keats in the Protestant Cemetery. Black points out that Joseph Severn is buried beside his friend Keats while Rothwell is buried elsewhere in the cemetery.



Fig. 7 - Photo of Rothwell's Grave<sup>24</sup>

The photograph [fig. 7] reproduced here shows the headstone on Rothwell's grave and the inscription reads "In memory of Richard Rothwell, Painter, Died September 8<sup>th</sup> 1868, Aged 68". This grave in the Protestant Cemetery (also known as the Cimitero Acattolico) is to be found in area 2, row 16, grave number 20 and it is interesting to note that a descendant of Rothwell, one Richard Rothwell Bolton, who was born in London in 1939 also died in Rome in 1985 and is buried in the same grave.

The poem "From a Museum Man's Album" written by John Hewitt (1907-1987) gives an insightful overview of Rothwell's life and of his relationship with people:

[...] Take, for instance, the tall large-knuckled woman in tweeds<sup>25</sup>  
 whose grandfather was an artist of repute,  
 and had his quarrel with the Academy  
 and wrote his angry letters, and marginal notes  
 on those from his friends and patrons (O pitiful letters,  
 I keep your copies safely in a metal drawer.)

<sup>24</sup> This photo was taken at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome on March 15, 2016. The correct location of Rothwell's grave is area 2, row 16 (not 14 as stated by Black), grave 20.

<sup>25</sup> This was more than likely Miss Rosa Patterson, Rothwell's granddaughter, whom Hewitt met in 1943 re the donation by her family of "Stella in Rome" to the Ulster Museum.

Her mother had been part of the caravan  
he trundled through Europe, eloquent, passionate, poor.

Now she offers us a few early copies  
made in his student days when Rubens hit him  
like a boy's first cigar;  
a badly-cracked circular head-of-a-girl  
with flowers on a balcony,<sup>26</sup> from his Roman days [...]. (Larkin 1973, 427-428)

Rothwell showed huge promise as a young artist and was especially gifted in the art of portraiture. His early sojourn in London exposed him to the art fashion of the day and despite his lack of training in classical Italian art he had acquired sufficient command of draughtsmanship and character depiction to attract the attention and custom of prominent people in that city. There is no doubt that his first trip to Italy would have made him aware of the vibrant colours and painting skills used by the great Masters of the past. His mistake seems to have been in not realising that by absenting himself for three years from the competitive art scene in London his place would inevitably be taken by others eager to satisfy the needs of patrons anxious to have their persona recorded in portraits. Furthermore, by ill-advisedly concentrating his major efforts on historical and subject paintings, he moved away from his area of strength in portrait painting and this was something that he failed to realise after he left London for Italy in 1831. Even in later life he persisted with many Italianate themes even though patrons and the public did not appreciate his work in these areas and were slow to buy them. His persistence with landscapes and Italian scenes is apparent in the titles chosen for four paintings displayed in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1860: "Rome from 'The Esquiline Hill'", "A Study from Nature – Glendalough – Guides to the Churches on the look-out for Tourists' baskets", "Venice – 'The Canal Grande' and Either Admiration of Contemplation or both". Meanwhile in the British Institute titles such as "A Thing of Beauty is a Joy forever", "Il Ventaglio", "The Pastime", and "The Woods of Rocco di Papa" were shown from 1850 to 1858 while the Royal Academy displayed "Addio pro Sempre", "A Remembrance of the Carnival" and "The Student's Aspiration" in 1862. The Italian experience had obviously deeply influenced his work. However, Rothwell's was not strong in these areas of painting and this more than likely accounts for the rejection of some of his work by the Royal Academy and probably explains the poor display position often afforded them during Exhibitions. All of this augmented his sense of dissatisfaction and unhappi-

<sup>26</sup> An obvious reference to the painting "Stella in Rome" which has a significant number of cracks on the surface of the painting.



ness. His portraits in the National Gallery of Ireland<sup>27</sup> bear ample testament to his skill and ability as a portraitist while the painting, “Two Children on a Bank near Glendalough” (also in the National Gallery), is a stylised and somewhat romanticised rendition both of the children and of the landscape in the background and as such it has significantly less appeal than his portraits. The Rothwell holdings in Dublin show us both Rothwell’s strengths and weaknesses as a painter. Driven by his artistic vanity and by his longing to achieve fame and success throughout his life he mistakenly placed all his delusional hopes in “Calisto” in which he could find no fault. When it did not achieve the success he craved he was angry and failed to understand why people did not respond to his artistic endeavour.

In many ways Rothwell’s life epitomises that of the promising young artist in the early and mid-nineteenth century whose precocious talent promised great things. However the ill-advised use of this talent together with his inability to realise where his real strength lay made him an average painter as opposed to one who could have achieved significant fame as a nineteenth-century portraitist especially at home and abroad. His time in Italy afforded him the possibility to encounter different styles and forms but on his return to England, he was unable to reconcile these with the trends in portraiture in the Anglophone world and was unable to regain the prominence he enjoyed in London from 1829 to 1831. Although Italy opened up new worlds to him it was ultimately not a successful sojourn and, in contrast to the successes of other Irish artists who left Ireland to work abroad such as James Barry (1741-1806), Daniel Maclise (1806-1870) and John Hogan (1800-1858), Italy did not professionally enhance Rothwell’s career. He may have made artistic and stylistic advancements but professionally his work suffered after his time in Italy. Rothwell’s career is therefore a curious example of one whose career never went back to or surpassed its earlier promise following his time in Italy.

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<sup>27</sup> “Matthew Kendrick”, “Study of a Smiling Child”, “A Self Portrait”, “Gerald Griffin”, “The Young Mother’s Pastime” and “Patrick Redmond”.

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