

William Palmer, a Limerick Portrait Painter

Limerick City Museum has a fascinating miniature self-portrait of a Limerick artist William Palmer, with human hair woven.¹ The image of a sad looking man, who had locks of his hair woven into his self-portrait, invited further investigation. I discovered that the subject of the self-portrait was a fairly well known eighteenth century painter who died in his prime. The short and eventful life of William Palmer began in Limerick on 18 November 1763. He was a son of Alexander Palmer, a linen draper in Limerick and he received a classic education from Mr John Carroll and displayed an early taste for drawing and painting. When he was eighteen he entered Dublin Society's School and won a medal in figure drawing. Not long after this, he moved to London and became a pupil of Sir Joshua Reynolds who has borne testimony to his merit. He also studied in the school of the Royal Academy. It is said he learned more in Reynold's studio than most of the students that passed through it. It appears that Reynolds did not trouble himself about the instruction of his pupils and it was recorded that 'the students had the run of the house, could copy what they liked, but beyond that received little attention from their master. James Northcote, the famous portrait painter, one of the few of Sir Joshua's numerous pupils to become distinguished, also recorded that 'the pupils were left to chance and their own endeavours and most of his scholars could never get a decent livelihood, but lived in poverty and died in debt, miserable to themselves and a disgrace to the art.'²

Either Northcote was harsh in his judgement or Palmer was an exception to the general rule, for in 1784 Palmer received his first premium for drawing from the Society of Arts and again in 1785, he obtained another premium for drawings of statues and for the best drawing of an Academy figure. He contributed most of his work to, his alma mater, the Royal Academy. He sent two portraits to the Academy exhibition in 1784 and two more the following year. In 1786 he had fully developed his skill as an artist as he also contributed a crayon sketch and one of his pieces he called 'Natural Philosopher, candle-light'. Two years later, in 1788, he exhibited his work 'Portrait of Louise, the celebrated maid of the Haystack' which he painted in Bristol.³ In August 1788 Palmer returned to his native Limerick.⁴ He set up a practise in the city specialising in portrait painting with oil and miniatures. It is not known how much business he attracted in the short period of less than two years. How-

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ever, there is yet another interesting link to William Palmer in Limerick City Museum. Four half-length, oil on canvas portraits of the Unthank family, which are part of the Limerick City Museum collection, have been attributed to him. The portraits are of husband and wife George and Elizabeth Unthank and their two daughters Margaret and Elizabeth McNamara (nee Unthank) wife of Dr McNamara of Corofin, County Clare. Each portrait has a small white label attributing them to William Palmer, but confusingly each one also has an added note 'incorrect attribution'.⁵ Sadly Palmer's new enterprise was not to last for long. He was finally gaining recognition as an able artist just when his early death cut short his promising career. He died on 26 July 1790 in Bruff after suffering from consumption while travelling from Mallow to Limerick. He was buried two days later in St. John's Church in Limerick.

His death notice appeared in *The Limerick Chronicle*⁶ together with two poems

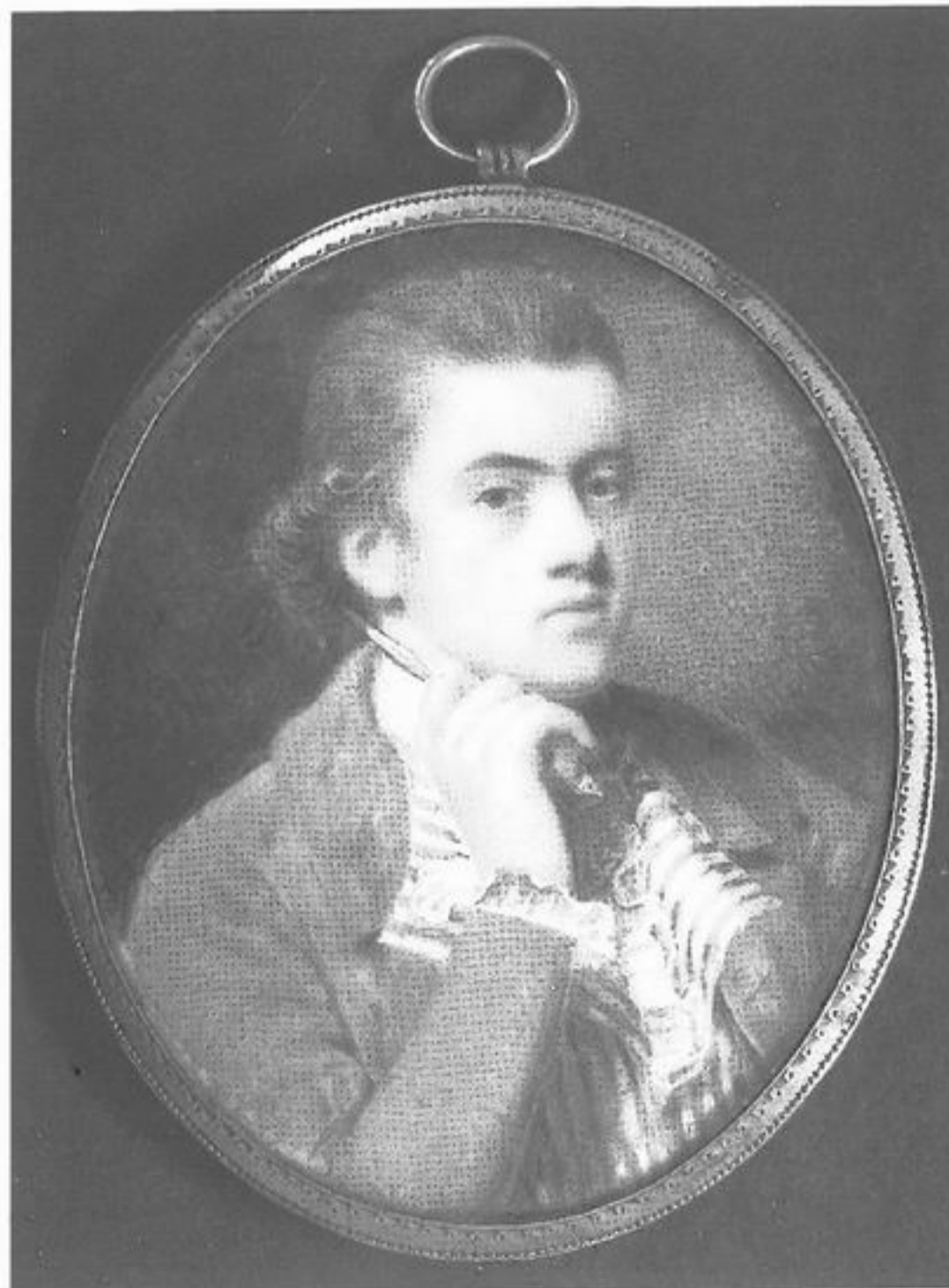
written as a mark of respect to Palmer who also dabbled in rhyme.⁷ One of the poems of twenty eight lines was by Miles Bourke and the other by Thomas O'Brien, of Killa-loe that paid tribute to his young artistic friend went as follows:

With grace divine, while Palmer's hands
The canvas rude illum'd,
The blended tints at his command
A mimic life assumed.
The dimple sinks, the eye-balls roll
Beneath his life-fraught stroke,
The human form confessed a soul,
It lived, it moved, it spoke.
With envy Death the triumph saw,
And said "How vain my art!
If man (against great Nature's law)
Is rescued from my dart.
"Unhurt by time's devouring rust
His works my powers deride,
Yet know—the artist is but dust,"
He said,—and Palmer died.

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SOURCES

- 1 <http://museum.limerick.ie>
The University of Limerick, Visual Arts Office, also holds a miniature self-portrait of the artist.
- 2 Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists, Vol 1 A to K*, (Dublin and London 1913).
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *The Limerick Chronicle* 11 August 1788.
- 5 <http://museum.limerick.ie>
- 6 *The Limerick Chronicle* 5 August 1790.
- 7 None of Palmer's poems appear to have survived.



Miniature self-portrait of William Palmer, Limerick artist, with human hair woven
(Limerick Museum)