

RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

GEORGE ROMNEY

Kendal, Cumbria Dalton-in-Furness, Lancashire 1734 - 1802

Ref: CB 181

*Portrait of Caroline Purling (c.1750-1819)*



Oil on canvas: 28 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in / 73 x 60.6 cm

Frame size: 37 x 32 in / 94 x 81.3 cm

Painted in 1778



Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

# RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

## *Provenance:*

By inheritance from the brother of the sitter, George Purling (d.1840), to their niece Emilia Anne Purling (1782-1859), who in 1804 married Hastings Nathaniel Middleton (1781-1821); by descent to Hastings Burton Middleton, Bradford Peverell, Dorset, by 1900; by descent

## *Exhibited:*

London, Grafton Gallery, Spring 1900, no.16 (lent by Hastings Burton Middleton)

## *Literature:*

G Paston, *George Romney*, London 1903, p.197

H Ward and W Roberts, *Romney*, London 1904, vol. II, p.128

A Kidson, *George Romney, A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, vol. II, New Haven and London 2015, p.477, no.1065, illus.

Caroline Purling was the fourth of the six children, and the younger daughter, of Matthew and Frances Purling of St Helena in the southern Atlantic Ocean (the island to become celebrated as the last exile of Napoleon Bonaparte). The island was chiefly a staging post for British ships bound to and from India, and many of its leading families retained a connection with the East India Company. Caroline's ancestors on both sides of her family had settled in St Helena in the seventeenth century.

Matthew Purling married Frances Wrangham in 1743, the certificate of marriage describing him as 'Factor and planter'. It is not known exactly when Caroline was born but presumptively (on the grounds that it was between the births of two brothers known to have been born in 1748 and 1752), it was in 1750. By the mid-1760s her father was one of the island's three-man governing Council, but at some point thereafter he decided to take his family back to England. Caroline seems to have lived in London for the rest of her life. When she died in 1819, her will, proved in July that year, described her as having been resident in 'Russell Place, Fitzroy Square' and as formerly of 'Devonshire Street, Portland Place'. She seems to have been living at the Devonshire Street address as early as 1778, when she sat to Romney.

Caroline gave eight sittings for this portrait in the space of four weeks in the spring of 1778. Three good reasons may be given for her choice of artist. Firstly, if the Devonshire Street address was already the family's home in London, then Romney was their local man. His studio in Cavendish Square was only a few minutes' walk away. Secondly, Romney was just becoming celebrated as a fashionable society portraitist. He was beginning to attract clients from the highest echelons of the capital's society and was entering upon the period when many of his signature works were created, in the crucible of growing celebrity. And thirdly, Romney's policy of not showing work in public exhibitions, but instead displaying them in a viewing room in his house, conferred upon this space the status of an alternative social rendezvous. Prospective clients could see and choose from the wide range of portraits on the walls their preferred pose and treatment, while men with no intention of sitting for their own portrait could scout the pictures of wealthy young ladies for prospective brides. Hanging one's portrait in Romney's painting room was a known resource for ladies seeking husbands, and since Caroline was twenty-eight years old when she sat for hers, the suspicion must exist that this was a significant

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

# RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

consideration for her. Tellingly, moreover, Mr Purling left his daughter's portrait at Romney's for six months before paying the artist's fee.

In one sense the portrait is typical of Romney's 'product' at the moment he was entering the most dynamic period of his career. It is on a 'three-quarters' canvas measuring 30 by 25 inches, a standard size used by all artists of the period for their head and shoulders portraits. The fee, 18 guineas, was his normal one for that size of work. The gilt frame conforms to Romney's preference for a plain design, even if there is no evidence that he arranged its supply, as he did with many of his clients in the late 1770s. Miss Purling's dress, a mixture of the contemporary and the 'Grecian', is of a kind that Romney was perceived as having helped introduce into high society. The way that the portrait's space is articulated by the flowing lines of the composition – all meeting at the black pin at Miss Purling's breast – is highly characteristic: the epitome of Romney's simple but elegant mastery of design.

At the same time, Romney subtly manipulates the norms of his trade to create the portrait's individualities. There is a story enshrined in the figure's march away from darkness into light, from the constricting and ambiguous tangle of dead foliage behind her to a brightly-lit coastal horizon. The picture's colour harmonies, dominated by the pinks of Miss Purling's dress and the sun-drenched clouds, hint at a warm and optimistic ambience, and yet offbeat accents are inflected with unusual complexity for Romney: the patches of grey, blue, gold and black in the headband, armband, waistband and breast pin pull the eye around the picture and contribute to a multiplicity of focus. The lines of the composition register less as smooth than complex: the angular shape of the tatting shuttle – actually an unusual prop in Romney's female portraits, its signification of a traditional lady's pursuit notwithstanding – breaks up the dominant line from upper left to lower right. Important visual continuities depend on insubstantialities: jagged clouds and the thread that issues from the shuttle and imparts the ineluctable sense that Miss Purling doubles as one of the Fates. Romney has picked up on something edgy and elusive in his sitter and recorded her mysterious foreignness with subtlety and intuition.

**Alex Kidson**

Dr Alex Kidson is the author of the *Complete Catalogue* of paintings by George Romney (2015).

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

## GEORGE ROMNEY

Dalton-in-Furness, Lancashire 1734 – 1802 Kendal, Cumbria

George Romney ranks with Reynolds and Gainsborough as one of the finest society portrait painters of the eighteenth century. The son of a cabinetmaker, he was apprenticed first to his father and then in 1755 to the itinerant portrait painter Christopher Steele. In 1757 Romney set up a portrait practice in Kendal.

In 1762 Romney left his wife and family in Kendal and moved to London to seek his fortune. He specialised in portraits and historical pictures such as *The Death of General Wolfe*, shown at the Society of Arts in 1763. The following year he visited Paris, but was dismissive of modern French art. Romney's society portraits of 1764-73 show a grandeur of treatment and a graceful, elongated neoclassical style.

Romney went to Rome in 1773 with the miniature painter Ozias Humphry, in order to study Italian art, particularly the work of Michelangelo and Raphael. Although he had a reputation for reclusiveness, Romney's broadly-brushed pen and ink drawings of dramatic figural scenes have affinity with the work of Abildgaard, Sergel, Joseph Wright of Derby and other members of the Fuseli circle in Rome.

Romney returned to England via Florence, Bologna, Ferrara, Venice and Parma in 1775. He took a lease on Francis Cotes's grand house at 24 Cavendish Square and quickly re-established his portrait practice. His sitter books record some 1500 sitters between 1776 and 1795; he excelled at painting beautiful and glamorous society women, their elegant poses informed by the study of Italian art. Romney hankered after success as a history painter and produced a painting of *The Tempest* for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery in 1790, as well as his many portraits of Emma Hamilton (then Emma Hart) in allegorical or classical guise. These portraits of Emma are a perfect fusion of Emma's theatrical instinct with Romney's Romantic bravura brushwork; his love for her was not requited.

Visiting Revolutionary France in 1790, Romney admired a flourishing school of history painting in the work of David and other neoclassical artists. His instinct to express himself as a history painter found vent in numerous dashing, emotionally charged drawings, including many on subjects from Milton, but in few large history paintings. In 1798 Romney moved to a new large house and studio in Hampstead, but soon after suffered a series of strokes. The following year he moved back to his long-neglected wife in Kendal and died there in 1802. He was a melancholy, sensitive man, who triumphed in his chosen sphere of portraiture but always longed for recognition in the so-called 'higher' category of history painting. His friend Flaxman wrote of him: 'his heart and soul were engaged in the pursuit of historical and ideal painting', but his stunning portraits are among the most impressive of his century.

The work of George Romney is represented in the National Portrait Gallery and the Tate Gallery, London; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)

RICHARD GREEN

FINE PAINTINGS • ESTABLISHED 1955

Artworks are sold subject to our Terms and Conditions of Sale; copies are available upon request

[www.richardgreen.com](http://www.richardgreen.com)