

Maria Catherine Smith (c. 1670-1706), c. 1690

Anonymous

formerly considered the work of Thomas Smith (d. c. 1690)

oil on canvas

27 x 25 1/4 (68.58 x 64.14)

Gift of Edmund Drianan Barry in memory of Catherine Humphreys Barry, 1934

Weis 104

Hewes Number: 104

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to her daughter Catherine Mears Dexter (1701-97); to her daughter Rebecca Dexter Clap (1739-1823); to her daughters Rebecca (1784-1855) and Catherine (1782-1872) Clap; to their niece Catherine Clap Barry; to her nephew the Reverend Charles Alfred Humphreys; to his daughter Catherine Humphreys Barry; to her husband, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1934, 'XVIIth Century Painting in New England,' Worcester Art Museum.

1945, 'Old and New England,' Rhode Island School of Design.

1975, 'The Colonial Epoch in America,' Worcester Art Museum.

Publications:

Dresser, 1935, 139-40, 171.

Dresser, 1969, 719.

Oskar Hagen, The Birth of the American Tradition in Art (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1949), 37.

Gordon Washburn, The Catalog of Old and New England (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1945), 30.

The earliest documentation of the woman depicted in this portrait is dated March 19, 1693, when Maria Catherine Gross joined the Second Church in Boston. The following year, after the death of her husband, mariner William Gross (1665-94), she was appointed administrator of his small estate.¹ In 1697 Maria Catherine Gross was married again, to Samuel Mears, Jr. (1671-1727), a prosperous innkeeper who owned the George Tavern in Boston. Maria Catherine Mears had four children and probably assisted her husband with the inn, which was described as 'an estate of twenty acres, extending to the Roxbury line on the south.... It had orchards, gardens and a site commanding a view of Boston and its harbor on one side and Cambridge Bay with the shore of the mainland on the other.'² Maria Catherine Mears died on July 9, 1706.³

An 1839 history gives the sitter's maiden name as Maria Catherine Smith.⁴ Family tradition maintained that she was the daughter of Thomas Smith, who came to Boston from

England, but there was more than one Thomas Smith in Boston during the closing decades of the seventeenth century. One was a mariner; another a portrait painter who, about 1680, completed a self-portrait (Worcester Art Museum) and copied a portrait of the Reverend William Ames (1576-1633) for Harvard College.⁵ According to family history, Thomas Smith the mariner and navigator was also Thomas Smith the portrait painter. A note written c. 1900 accompanying the portrait of Maria Catherine Smith, states: 'In 1693 Capt. Thomas Smith painted the portrait of his daughter Catherina Maria Smith [sic] who married Samuel Mears, Dec. 7, 1697.'⁶ This notation is problematical, as the death date for Thomas Smith the mariner has been recorded as 1688.⁷ A further complication is that Maria Catherine Smith's brother was also a mariner named Thomas.⁸ This detail has impeded accurate genealogical research, and the exact connection between Maria Catherine Smith and the painter Thomas Smith remains unclear.

In 1986 the attribution of this portrait to Thomas Smith was questioned by art historian Wayne Craven, who argued that stylistic differences between the self-portrait and the image of Maria Catherine Smith were too extreme to be the work of the same artist.⁹ He noted the similarity of Maria Catherine's portrait to the work of the English portrait painters Peter Lely (1618-80) and Godfrey Kneller (1645-1723) and commented on the 'Restoration raffishness, a sensuality and fleshiness, and a devotion to current fashions' exhibited in the portrait. 'In earlier images of New England women such exposure of flesh would have been forbidden, and when Maria Catherine's portrait was first displayed in her Boston home around 1690, it very probably shocked many who saw it.'¹⁰

This painting descended through women in the Mears family and was actively sought for the collection by American Antiquarian Society staff beginning in the 1920s. A former librarian of the Society, Samuel Foster Haven (cat. 65), was related to Captain Thomas Smith on his mother's side and once owned both the self-portrait and a portrait of Smith's wife, now lost.¹¹ The painting of Maria Catherine Smith was owned by one of Haven's cousins and was stored for many years before it was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1934.

¹ Boston Transcript, May 1, 1907.

² Francis Drake, The Town of Roxbury (Roxbury, Mass., 1878), 84-85. The names and birth dates of the Mears children are listed in Boston Transcript, January 15, 1923. See also Orrando Perry Dexter, Dexter Genealogy (New York: J. J. Little & Co., 1904), 36-39.

³ Boston Transcript, February 8, 1905.

⁴ Alvan Lamson, History of the First Church in Dedham (Dedham, Mass.: H. Mann, 1839), 51, 94-96.

⁵ Dresser, 1935, 135. The self-portrait is illustrated in Selected Works (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1994), 180. The Harvard painting was destroyed in a fire during the eighteenth century.

⁶ Edmund D. Barry to Clarence Brigham, July 23, 1934, AAS Archives. Another descendant wrote Brigham: 'Captain Thomas Smith painted the picture, of this I am sure. It was told me By One Who Knew.' (Frances W. Humphreys to Brigham, August 17, 1934, AAS Archives.) The art historian Alan Burroughs notes: 'Maria Catherine Smith [was] traditionally attributed to Thomas Smith in Civil War times, when identity of the artist would be difficult and meaningless to "forge."' (Limners and Likenesses [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936], 13.)

⁷ Samuel Sewall Diary, November 8, 1688, Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection. Sewall records the last illness and funeral of Captain Smith, but does not mention that he was a painter. The Worcester Art Museum, which owns the self-portrait, places the artist's death date at c. 1690.

⁸ Frederick Pratt to Brigham, July 22, 1933, AAS Archives. Pratt believed that Thomas Smith, the father of Maria Catherine, painted the portrait.

⁹ Wayne Craven, Colonial American Portraiture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 116. Louisa Dresser maintained that both pictures were painted by Smith and that he adapted his style to accommodate changing fashions (1935: 136, 138, 140).

¹⁰ Craven, American Art History and Culture (Madison, Wis.: Brown & Benchmark, 1994), 48, 116.

¹¹ Dexter, Genealogy, 39, and Dresser, 1935, 134.