

Mary Gay Swan (1764-1841), c. 1790

Anonymous

watercolor on ivory

1 1/2 x 7/8 (3.81 x 2.22)

Gift of Frances S. Shedd, 1952

Hewes Number: 117

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; descended through the family to her great- granddaughter, the donor.

Mary (Polly) Gay, the eldest child of the Reverend Ebenezer Gay and his wife Mary Cushing, was born in Suffield, Connecticut. Through her father's church, Polly met the composer Timothy Swan (cat. 118), whom she married in 1784 at the age of twenty. A memoir of Timothy Swan noted: '[H]e married Miss Gay...between whom and himself it is not unlikely that a mutual attachment was the more readily inspired by a similitude of musical tastes and accomplishments.'¹

The young couple settled in Suffield, where their family grew to include fourteen children, ten of whom survived to adulthood. An active church member all her life, she was also remembered for her involvement in the early days of antislavery. 'The abolition cause found in her a most ardent friend and supporter, and this while as yet its advocates were few, and these denounced as fanatics and disturbers of the public peace.' Her daughter Emily Cordelia Swan recalled her mother's love of reading: 'Her education, in accordance with the spirit of the times, was confined to elementary branches, but having access to books, a taste was acquired for reading...which, to no inconsiderable extent, she found time to indulge, notwithstanding her large family; many of the standard works of history, biography, literature, morals and divinity were familiar to her. It may be said that it is rare indeed to meet with a woman educated at that period who had read so extensively'² A strong memory for one of her sons, William Cushing Swan, was of his mother reading: 'She was kind & affectionate & forgiving in her disposition. She loved her children & her friends & was anxious for the promotion of their best interests. Her mind was certainly possessed of many superior traits--it was not of the metaphysical or speculative cast, but was truly practical & it saw clearly and quickly the right bearing of every subject upon which it was bro't to act. I well recollect in our evening readings how tired she used to be of explanations and, when in the fog yourself, how quick a word from her would dissipate the mist.'³

This miniature was painted by an unidentified artist about six years after Mary's marriage to Timothy Swan. In it, she wears her hair elaborately curled and powdered, the top adorned with feathers and flowers, a most fashionable hairstyle for the early 1790s. The tiny miniature itself was meant to be worn as a piece of jewelry, and the gold case is backed with a pin.

¹ Ezekiel Webster, 'Memoir of Timothy Swan,' holographic manuscript, 1842, unpagged, Timothy Swan Papers, 1783-1844, AAS Manuscript Collection.

² Emily Cordelia Swan, 'Obituary of Mary Swan,' Friends of Virtue 4 (December 15, 1841): 371.

³ William Cushing Swan to Timothy Swan, March 28, 1842, Swan Papers.