

Timothy Swan (1758-1842), c. 1797

Anonymous

oil on canvas

40 1/4 x 33 1/2 (102.24 x 85.09)

Gift of Frances S. Shedd, 1952

Hewes Number: 118

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his daughter Emily Cordelia Swan (1793-1856); to her sister Charlotte Swan Shedd (1796-1866); to her son Timothy Swan Shedd (1833-1917); to his daughter, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1952-72, loaned to the Worcester Art Museum; exhibited occasionally.

1957, 'Little Known Connecticut Artists,' Connecticut Historical Society, no. 28.

1962, loaned to the Antiquarian and Landmark Society, Suffield, Connecticut, for exhibition in the Timothy Swan house.

1971, 'Early American Paintings from the Collections of the Worcester Art Museum and the American Antiquarian Society,' Worcester Art Museum.

1973, 'Music in Colonial America,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1976, 'Paintings by New England Provincial Artists, 1775-1800,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 12.

1990, 'Between the Rivers: Itinerant Painters from the Connecticut to the Hudson,' Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

1998, 'Vernacular Landscape Painting from Brueghel to Grandma Moses,' Bennington Museum, Bennington, Vermont.

Publications:

Anna Brightman, 'Window Curtains in Colonial Boston and Salem,' The Magazine Antiques 86 (August 1964): 184.

Colleen Heslip, Between the Rivers: Itinerant Painters from the Connecticut to the Hudson (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute, 1990), 38-39.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Little Known Connecticut Artists,' Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin 22 (October 1957): 126.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Little Known Connecticut Limners, 1790-1810,' Art in America 45 (Winter 1957-58): 74 (with incorrect caption).

Nina Fletcher Little, Paintings by New England Provincial Artists, 1775-1880 (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1976), 44-55.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Paintings by New England Provincial Artists, 1775-1800,' The Magazine Antiques 110 (November 1976): 995.

Timothy Swan, a composer of sacred music and secular tunes, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, and at age sixteen was apprenticed to a hat maker in Northfield. Swan's musical abilities may have eclipsed his skills as a hatter, but he pursued both occupations. He is best

known as a composer, music teacher, and publisher of songbooks. He moved to Suffield, Connecticut, in 1782, becoming a member of the town's First Congregational Church and choir. There he met Mary (Polly) Gay (cat. 117), the daughter of the Reverend Ebenezer Gay. Swan and Polly Gay were married in 1784 and had fourteen children. An elderly resident writing to Swan's daughter in 1842, the year of Swan's, recalled: 'Your dear father came to Suffield about the year 1783. Well do I remember his looks, manners and fine singing, all of which charmed my youthful heart as well as that of your mother. It was not long before his songs were sung with much applause.'¹

Swan's first composition, 'Montague,' dates from the mid-1770s, but most of his tunes appear to have been written between 1782 and 1807, while he lived in Suffield. A biographical essay written the year of his death noted: 'His rule in composition was to make the air and throw as much music into it as he was able, then make the other parts harmonize, not forgetting to give them a good share of the melody. Melody was a great object with him.'² His most famous tune was 'China,' composed in 1790 and first performed in 1794. It was published along with other hymns in New England Harmony (1801).³ Swan published fourteen secular songs featuring his own music and poetic lyrics in The Songster's Assistant (1800), which is regarded today as the nation's earliest secular songbook (see fig. 10). Additional secular music appeared in 1803 in The Songster's Museum. These publications are part of the American Antiquarian Society's songbook and hymnal collection.⁴ In addition, a number of Swan's personal papers, including correspondence related to the publication of his tunes and original music books with compositions written out in his own hand, are preserved in the Society's manuscript collection.⁵

This portrait of Swan was painted about 1797, the same year that he and his brother-in-law opened a store in Suffield.⁶ The identity of the painter, who painstakingly recorded the details of his sitter's costume and created a fanciful view framed by a window for the background, has been debated by art historians since 1957.⁷ The attention to detail has led to speculation that the painter was familiar with engravings or may have been an engraver himself.⁸ Although his identity remains unknown, the artist evidently captured an accurate likeness of Swan, who was described by a contemporary as 'above the middle stature and symmetrical proportions, exhibiting a good degree of strength. He had light hair and a complexion unusually delicate, approaching to feminine grace and beauty; but the manly expression of his countenance, open,

sincere, and intelligent, relieved it from this tendency.... [H]is clear, florid, fresh and almost youthful aspect [had] quite an imposing and Oriental cast.’⁹

The day before he died, Swan discussed the family portraits with his daughter Emily, who was caring for him. She noted: ‘Father asked me what would be done with the portraites [sic] after he had done with them. I told him if I survived him I would place them in my room.... He said that was the best way.’¹⁰ The painting descended through the family and first came to the attention of the American Antiquarian Society when one of Swan’s great-granddaughters donated his papers in 1927. She planned to retain the portrait during her lifetime but asked if the likeness would be of interest to the Society, writing: ‘Although the picture is quaint and interesting, as a work of art it is extremely absurd.... After my death there will be no one with any especial interest in it or claim to it and I should be glad to feel that it might be of some value to someone.’¹¹ The Society’s librarian replied: ‘By all means we should like the portrait of Timothy Swan, which would be singularly appropriate here as he was a native of Worcester. We do not accept miscellaneous portraits for our gallery, but we do want the portraits of well-known New Englanders, and I consider that Timothy Swan comes under this heading.’¹²

¹ Ezekiel Webster, ‘Memoir of Timothy Swan,’ holographic manuscript, 1842, unpagged, Timothy Swan Papers, 1783-1844, AAS Manuscript Collection. The woman who wrote the letter to Emily Cordelia Swan is identified in Webster’s first draft as ‘an aged friend.’ Later publications have attributed the letter to Lucy Gay Swan, Timothy’s sister-in-law.

² Webster, ‘Memoir of Timothy Swan.’

³ Its popularity baffled some critics. “‘China” is pronounced by the profession to be one of the most “unscientific” tunes ever published, while the people regard it as the most effective.’ (‘A Biographical Sketch of Timothy Swan,’ The Christian Parlor Book [New York: James T. Pratt & Co, 1854], 138.)

⁴ For more on Swan’s career as a composer, see G. Bradford Webb, Timothy Swan: Yankee Tunesmith (University of Michigan Microforms, 1973). In 1987 AAS commissioned David P. McKay to create a compilation of seven of Swan’s most popular tunes, resulting in Homage to a Colonial Tunesmith: Timothy Swan of Worcester (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1987).

⁵ Swan Papers.

⁶ Impartial Herald (Suffield, Conn.), September 20, 1797, and Swan Papers. The store, Swan, Gay & King, closed in May 1798.

⁷ Nina Fletcher Little, ‘Little Known Connecticut Artists,’ Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin 22 (October 1957): 101-3. Little proposed the names of two artists working in the Suffield region: Samuel Hathaway and Carlos King. Two other paintings have long been associated with Swan’s portrait and are assumed to be by the same hand. The first, illustrated by Little on page 127, depicts Swan’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth (Richmond) Gay, holding her infant son William, who was born in July 1797 (private collection). The second, owned by the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, portrays Elizabeth’s sister Deborah Richmond and is inscribed on the verso (on a

lining): 'D. Richmond Age ____, 1797.' (Illustrated in American Folk Portraits in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center [Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1981]: 215, plate 191.)

⁸ Little, 'Little Known Connecticut Artists,' 101. 'The sitter's pose, seated at a window with paneled folding shutters beyond which is a busy landscape reminiscent of academic elements...suggests familiarity with engraved sources.' In 1985 Elizabeth M. Kornhauser proposed the engraver Richard Brunton (d. 1832) as the artist of Richmond's portrait. Kornhauser illustrates the portrait of Richmond, with one of two portraits Brunton is known to have painted, in The Great River: Art & Society of the Connecticut Valley, 1635-1820 (Hartford: Wadsworth Athenaeum, 1985), 162-63.

⁹ Webster, 'Memoir of Timothy Swan.'

¹⁰ Emily Cordelia Swan, 'Reminiscence of Timothy Swan,' March 29, 1842, Swan Papers.

¹¹ Frances S. Shedd to Clarence Brigham, May 25, 1927, AAS Archives.

¹² Brigham to Shedd, June 3, 1927, AAS Archives.