

MATHER BROWN (1761-1831), 1812

self-portrait

oil on canvas

30 1/4 x 25 1/4 (76.80 x 64.14)

inscribed in composition, l.l.: 'My Dear Aunts/Neither time nor/distance [has]/diminished [my] affection.'

Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923

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Ex. Coll.: Sitter; gift to his aunts Catherine and Mary Byles, 1822; passed solely to Catherine, 1832; upon her death in 1837, willed to the Reverend Mather Byles DesBrisay; sold at 'Hon. M. B. DesBrisay Collection Sale,' C. F. Libbie & Co., April 4, 1908, to Frederick L. Gay (1856-1916); to his wife, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1922, 'Early American Paintings,' The Copley Society, Boston.

1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 257.

Publications:

F. W. Coburn, 'Mather Brown,' Art in America 11 (August 1923): 254.

Franklin P. Cole, Mather Books and Portraits through Six Generations (Portland, Maine: Casco Printing, 1978), 204.

Dresser, 1969, 724.

William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States, 2 vols. (New York: George P. Scott & Co., 1834), 1: 270.

Dorinda Evans, Mather Brown: Early American Artist in England (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), no. 162.

Cuthbert Lee, Early American Portrait Painting (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), 290.

Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 47 (Boston: 1914): 289.

Frederic F. Sherman, Early American Painting (New York: The Century Co., 1932), 139.

In 1780, at age nineteen, the painter Mather Brown left his Boston home to pursue his artistic education in England. He had been raised by two maternal aunts, Catherine and Mary Byles, both staunch supporters of King George III, but was also connected on his father's side to the Whig cause. Brown himself was a Loyalist and, although he painted several prominent American patriots such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, he sought prominence and fame by painting the royal family.<sup>1</sup>

In London, Brown studied at the Royal Academy with the American painter Benjamin West (1738-1820). In the Academy's 1783 exhibition, King George III admired Brown's portrait of the Loyalist Harrison Gray.<sup>2</sup> In the 1780s and 1790s, Brown enjoyed great success, eventually

painting portraits of members of the royal family as well as of Americans living and travelling abroad. He also painted historical subjects, including compositions that featured scenes from the lives of Richard II and Henry VII.<sup>3</sup>

By 1812, when he painted this self-portrait, the fifty-year-old Brown was experiencing a reversal of his earlier good fortune. Arrested for debt in 1811, he left London for Liverpool and took on several pupils. He became homesick for America and wrote frequently to his elderly aunts in Boston, who occasionally provided financial assistance. In March 1812 he wrote: 'I told You that I was painting my Portrait for you as a small testimony of my attachment for You. I have since been engaged upon it and I find that every person who comes to my apartment immediately knows and recognizes the resemblance.... I wish my circumstances would allow me to send You a more substantial proof of my attentions such as You have most generously, and I must add, most charitably shewn to me!' In 1812 Brown was elected to an associate membership in the Liverpool Academy but, perhaps because of the war with the United States, lacked portrait commissions. He wrote his aunts: 'I could fill a long letter with the various lamentable difficulties experienced by individuals here in consequence of the stagnation of business; Warehouses laden with Goods for which there is no market - I have many Pictures to dispose of and have placed them for months in various Shops, but cannot dispose of them.'<sup>4</sup>

Ten years later, the artist sent this portrait of himself to Boston. The reasons for the delay are not mentioned in the correspondence, but Brown did send explicit instructions on how to care for the picture: 'I request you will get some person to varnish it, for the Colours will sink in during the voyage. It should be washed first with clean water only (not soap) and then varnished with mastick varnish - but if you cannot conveniently get a person, You may Yourself do it over, (after washing it) with the white of an Egg and a little Rum or spirit, with half a tea spoon full of loaf Sugar mixed together and applied with a clean sponge.'<sup>5</sup> The painting, which his aunts proudly hung with portraits of other men in the Byles and Mather families, remained in the collection of Catherine and Mary Byles until their deaths.

Although his work fell out of favor in America in the second half of the nineteenth century, Mather Brown was rediscovered in the twentieth century. An early historian of his work tried to encourage a re-examination of his life and career, writing: '[We must] consider the quality of his art, his interesting personal contacts with many of the foremost personages of his time, and his genealogical connection with some of the most distinguished of the founders of

New England.’<sup>6</sup> Brown’s self-portrait remained in the family until it was sold at auction in 1908 along with several other portraits of the Byles family, including a portrait by Brown of the minister Mather Byles, Jr. (cat. 23).

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<sup>1</sup> For the most complete examination of the artist, see Dorinda Evans, Mather Brown: Early American Artist in England (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982). Brown’s portraits of Jefferson and Adams are illustrated as plate 3 and fig. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Evans, Mather Brown, 30.

<sup>3</sup> For more on these history paintings, see Evans, Mather Brown, 100-21.

<sup>4</sup> Mather Brown to Catherine and Mary Byles, March 27, 1812, Mather Brown Correspondence, Massachusetts Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Brown to Catherine and Mary Byles, August 26, 1822, Brown Correspondence.

<sup>6</sup> F. W. Coburn, ‘Another Mather Brown in Boston,’ Boston Herald, October 3, 1926, AAS Newsclipping File.