

JOHN BUSH (1755-1816), 1791

HANNAH ACKLEY BUSH (1767-1807), 1791

Attr. John Mackay or M'Kay

oil on canvas

38 1/2 x 32 (97.79 x 81.28) (framed)

John Bush: signed, l.l., in red paint: 'M'Kay Pinxt'; and l.r.: 'MacKay'

Hannah Ackley Bush: signed, l.r., in red paint: 'M'Kay/1791'

Gift of Louise Pratt Harthan, 1896

Weis 20, 22

Hewes Numbers: 19 & 20

Ex. Coll.: Sitters; possibly to his son Richard Platt Bush (1786-1868); owned by his nephew John Bush Pratt (1808-95); to his niece, the donor.

Exhibitions:

John Bush:

1949, 'From Colony to Nation,' Art Institute of Chicago, no. 80.

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

Hannah Ackley Bush:

1939, 'Life in America for Three Hundred Years,' Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 44.

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

1949, 'From Colony to Nation,' Art Institute of Chicago, no. 81.

1949, 'Likenesses of America, 1689-1820,' Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, no. 29.

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

Publications:

John Bush:

Dresser, 1969, 726-27.

Hannah Ackley Bush:

Alan Burroughs, Limners and Likenesses (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 98, plate 73.

Connoisseur (November 1939): 245-46.

Dresser, 1969, 726-27.

William Dunlap, History of the Rise and Progress of the Arts of Design in the United States (New York: George P. Scott & Co., 1834), 317.

Nina Fletcher Little, 'Old and New England,' Art News (January 15, 1946): 16.

After the death of his first wife in 1788, John Bush married Hannah Ackley of Fishkill, New York, on December 24, 1789.¹ Three years later, when his new wife was twenty-four and he was thirty-six, Bush commissioned these remarkable portraits. The artist took great care to depict the

elegant costumes of both sitters accurately, including such elements as the painted miniature of John Bush worn by Hannah on a black ribbon (see detail). In 1879 the family genealogist commented on John Bush's love of fine clothing: 'He was inclined to dress well and make a grand appearance.'²

Although the two portraits are clearly signed, the identity of the artist has remained elusive, but it may have been John MacKay/M'Kay, who first listed himself as a glazier and ornamental painter in New York City directories in 1790. A search of several New York newspapers from the 1790s has not revealed any advertisements for MacKay's business, but it would not have been unusual for an ornamental painter to take likenesses.³ A few additional works by this artist have been identified, including a full-length image of a New York child, Catherine Brower, which is signed 'MacKay' and dated 1791, and an unsigned pair of portraits, John and Ruth Stanley Mix, dated 1788.⁴

It was the wish of John Bush Pratt, a prominent Worcester businessman (and a grandson of John Bush) who was active in local politics, that these two portraits and those of John and Charity Platt Bush by Matthew Pratt (cats. 17-18) be reunited at the American Antiquarian Society. The two pairs of very different portraits of John Bush and his wives offer evidence of eighteenth-century portrait patronage and changing taste. A descendant had his own theory about the commission for the second pair, writing in 1896: 'I reckon that wife No. 2 had to look at [the] Portrait of wife No. 1, so No. 2 Wife [had] John Bush made up to look younger and she tried to outshine No. 1.'⁵

¹ For many years the woman in this portrait was thought to be Abigail Adams Bush, the third wife of John Bush. As Bush did not marry Abigail Adams until 1807, and the MacKay portrait is dated 1791, the subject must have been Hannah Ackley Bush.

² Dr. William Frederic Holcombe, The Bush Family, 1879, Connecticut Historical Society Manuscript Collection, typescript by Elaine Bush Prince (Framingham, Mass.: 1980), 90.

³ Deborah Chotner, American Naive Paintings (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 247. The author also notes that a printer named John M'Kay was at work in New York between 1813 and 1823.

⁴ Catherine Brower is at the National Gallery, Washington, D.C.; John and Ruth Stanley Mix is at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, Virginia.

⁵ Holcombe to Edmund M. Barton, November 27, 1896, AAS Archives.