

MATHER BYLES, SR. (1706/7-88), c. 1732

Peter Pelham (1697-1751)

oil on canvas

33 1/4 x 28 (97.15 x 71.12) (framed)

Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923

Weis 23

Hewes Number: 21

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his daughters Catherine and Mary Byles, 1788; passed to Catherine, 1832; 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:

1830, Boston Athenaeum, as 'Dr. Byles at the Age of 24,' loaned by Catherine Byles, no. 219.

1943, 'New England Painting, 1700-1775,' Worcester Art Museum.

1975, 'Paul Revere's Boston,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1987, 'American Colonial Portraits,' National Portrait Gallery.

Publications:

Franklin P. Cole, Mather Books and Portraits (Portland, Maine: Casco Printing, 1978), 182.  
Dresser, 1969, 720.

Arthur W. H. Eaton, The Famous Mather Byles (Boston: W. A. Butterfield, 1914), 58.

Edward A. Jones, Loyalists of Massachusetts (London: St. Catherine's Press, 1930), plate 8  
[misidentified as Mather Byles, Jr.].

Richard H. Saunders and Ellen G. Miles, American Colonial Portraits (Washington, D.C.:  
National Portrait Gallery, 1987), 136-37, plate 26.

Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'Byles, Mather, Sr.'

Justin Winsor, Memorial History of Boston, 4 vols. (Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1881), 2: 228.

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MATHER BYLES, SR. (1706/7-88), 1765-67

John Singleton Copley (1738-1815)

oil on canvas

24 1/4 x 27 1/2 (61.60 x 69.85)

Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923

Weis 24

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; in 1784 sent to Mather Byles, Jr. (cat. 23), Halifax, Nova Scotia; sometime in the nineteenth century to Mather Byles DesBrisay; sold at 'Hon. M. B. DesBrisay Collection Sale,' C. F. Libbie & Co., April 4, 1908 to Frederick L. Gay; to his wife, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1930, 'One Hundred Colonial Portraits,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

1936, 'Tercentenary Exhibition,' Harvard University.

1943, 'New England Painting, 1700-1775,' Worcester Art Museum.

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

1976, 'Harvard Divided,' Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, no. 20.

Publications:

Linda Ayers, Harvard Divided (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1976), 51-52.

Franklin P. Cole, Mather Books and Portraits through Six Generations (Portland, Maine: Casco Printing, 1978), 198.

Arthur W. H. Eaton, The Famous Mather Byles (Boston: W. A. Butterfield, 1914), 196.

Barbara Neville Parker and Anne Bolling Wheeler, John Singleton Copley (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1938), 55-56, plate 62.

Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 33 (1923): 291-96.

Jules David Prown, John Singleton Copley in America (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1966), plate 199.

After graduation from Harvard College in 1725, Mather Byles, Sr., followed the calling shared by his grandfather Increase Mather (cats. 80-81) and his uncle Cotton Mather (cats. 78-79), both influential Boston clergymen. Ordained as the first minister of the Congregational Hollis Street Church in Boston in 1731, Byles soon earned a reputation as a preacher. He filled his Sunday sermons with fiery descriptions and witticisms. 'As a preacher his popularity was aided by his large stature and imposing presence, and by the fact that he often lived up to his belief that good sermons demanded "lively Descriptions, a clear Method, and pathetick Language."'<sup>1</sup>

Byles was also a poet and author who, as a young man, often submitted his writings to The New England Weekly Journal. He later published more accomplished works such as A Discourse on the Present Vileness of the Body and its Future Glorious Change by Christ. To which is added, A Sermon on the Nature and Importance of Conversion (1732), and The Glories of the Lord of Hosts and the Fortitude of the Religious Hero (1740). In 1744 Byles published a book of his poetry entitled Poems on Several Occasions. These and other Byles works are part of the imprint collection at the American Antiquarian Society.

As a Tory sympathizer, Byles in 1776 was discharged from the Hollis Street Church, where he had served for forty years. He lived quietly with his daughters until his death. His lengthy correspondence and personal papers are preserved at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Parts of the large library that he inherited from Increase and Cotton Mather are preserved in the American Antiquarian Society.

The earlier portrait of Mather Byles, Sr. (cat. 21) was probably painted about 1732, at the time of his ordination.<sup>2</sup> The sitter wears the crimson robes associated with the M.A. he was granted by Harvard in 1728. The artist, Peter Pelham, was born in London and apprenticed as an engraver before coming to Boston in 1727. He quickly established himself as a printmaker and is regarded as America's first mezzotint engraver. One of Pelham's earliest patrons was Cotton Mather, whose portrait he painted in 1728 (cat. 78).<sup>3</sup>

The success of his uncle's portrait probably led Byles to hire Pelham to paint his own likeness. At the time of the commission, Byles also asked Pelham to produce a small mezzotint based on the finished canvas (fig. 13). The scale of this print suggests that the image was meant to have a limited circulation. Possibly Byles intended to have copies bound into his publications.<sup>4</sup> The original, c. 1732 copper plate and two impressions from it are preserved at the American Antiquarian Society.<sup>5</sup>

Although Pelham painted several portraits of prominent Bostonians, his canvas of Mather Byles, Sr., is the last surviving image that he painted.<sup>6</sup> In 1748 Pelham married his third wife, the widow Mary Singleton Copley, John Singleton Copley's mother. Four decades after Pelham completed his portrait of the young Byles, John Singleton Copley was commissioned to take his aging stepfather's likeness (cat. 22). The result is a pair of images that serve as visual bookends to Byles's life.

Copley's portrait was completed when Byles was at the height of his fame as a preacher and author. Copley also had Tory connections and was acquainted with the Loyalist Byles and his family. Copley, who started his career in Boston in 1753, was well known there by 1765, when Byles commissioned this portrait. In this image, Copley not only recorded Byles's large frame and features but was also able to capture in his sitter's expression a glimmer of Byles's famous wit and sparkling eyes.<sup>7</sup> Byles, who was renowned as a punster, once called a Patriot sentry who had been sent to watch him an 'Observe-a-Tory.'

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. 'Byles, Mather, Sr.'

<sup>2</sup> This portrait was once dated 1739. When loaned by the sitter's daughter Catherine Byles to the Boston Athenaeum in 1830, it was titled 'Dr. Byles at age 24,' indicating that she believed it was painted in 1730.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Pelham, see Andrew Oliver, 'Peter Pelham, Sometime Printmaker of Boston,' in Boston Prints and Printmakers, 1670-1775 (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1971), 133-73.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Saunders and Ellen G. Miles, American Colonial Portraits (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1987), 139.

<sup>5</sup> One of these impressions was bound into a volume that passed through Byles's family to AAS; the other is framed.

<sup>6</sup> Saunders and Miles, American Colonial Portraits, 136.

<sup>7</sup> Almost ten years later, Copley painted Byles a second time. This canvas is in the collection of the University of Halifax, King's College, Nova Scotia, and is illustrated in Jules David Prown, John Singleton Copley in America, 1738-1774 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1966), plate 200. For more on Copley, see also Carrie Rebora et al., John Singleton Copley in America (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995).