

COTTON MATHER (1663-1728), 1727
Peter Pelham (1697-1751)
oil on canvas
35 1/4 x 30 1/4 (89.5350 x 76.8350) (framed)
Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923
Weis 77
Hewes Number: 78

Ex. Coll.: Sitter, to his nephew Mather Byles; to his daughters Catherine and Mary Byles in 1788; passed solely to Catherine in 1832; through the family until 1908, when it was sold at the 'Hon. M[ather] [Byles] DesBrisay Collection Sale,' C. F. Libbie & Co., April 4, 1908 to Frederick L. Gay; to his widow, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1930, 'One Hundred Colonial Portraits,' Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
1936, 'Tercentenary Exhibition,' Harvard University.
1939-40, 'Life in America for Three Hundred Years,' Metropolitan Museum of Art.
1943, 'New England Painting 1770-1775,' Worcester Art Museum.
1949, 'From Colony to Nation,' Art Institute of Chicago, no. 94.
1971, 'Early American Paintings from the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum and the American Antiquarian Society,' Worcester Art Museum.
1977, 'Wellspring of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum.
1992, 'Days of Judgement: The Salem Witch Trials of 1692,' Essex Institute.

Publications:

William Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit. 9 vols. (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), 1: frontispiece, engraved by A.H. Ritchie.
One Hundred Colonial Portraits (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts), 56.
Catalog of the Tercentenary Exhibition (Harvard University, 1936), pl. 8.
From Colony to Nation (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1949), 63.
Louisa Dresser, 'Paintings Owned by the American Antiquarian Society,' The Magazine Antiques 95 (November 1969): 720.

Grandson of Richard Mather (cat. #82) and John Cotton and the eldest son of Increase (cat. #80), Cotton Mather was virtually guaranteed a prominent position in the Congregational Church in New England. It was not immediately apparent, however, that he would continue in the clerical tradition after graduating from Harvard College in 1678 (M.A. 1681). He pursued interests in science and medicine before ordination as minister of Boston's Old North Church in 1685, where he would continue to preach for the rest of his life. He was a diarist and a prolific author of encyclopedic texts on theology, medicine, science, and church history, in addition to the works on witchcraft and the

Salem trials on which his reputation has long rested. The Wonders of the Invisible World (1693) followed a 1689 account of the supernatural that included his own report of the successful experimental treatment of a girl who was possessed.

Author of more than four hundred publications, Mather defined Puritanism for those who heard his sermons, his contemporaries, and for the study of colonial America. But he was more than a prominent preacher. He was an Enlightenment figure whose interests in medicine and science won him election as a fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1713, propelled him into the public arena by supporting inoculation against smallpox during the Boston epidemic of 1721, and to write a comprehensive medical handbook, The Angel of Bethesda (1723-24). Magnalia Christi Americana, Or the Ecclesiastical History of New England (1702), is his account of the period from 1620 and 1698 as 'the great achievement of Christ in America.' In it, Mather included surveys of settlement, the work of the Congregational churches and the sects that arose to challenge it, accounts of the conversion of Indians and their relationships with colonial settlements, and biographies of prominent leaders.¹

Some of the books owned by members of the Mather family, some 1500 volumes, were acquired by Isaiah Thomas for AAS in 1814. Thomas catalogued the collection in three parts, one of which was a separate listing of Cotton Mather's books. Mather's writings, including the as-yet unpublished opus 'Biblia Americana' are testament to the heavy use to which Cotton Mather put these volumes.²

At the end of his life, Mather turned to writing a manual for clergy, a reminder of the importance of his ministry and the way he wished to be remembered. Manuductio ad Ministerium (1726) is a practical guide to training for ministry and a balanced life. The year before his death, Mather was also writing and publishing sermons and short essays, including The Terror of the Lord: Some Account of the Earthquake that Shook New England that reflected on the significance of the 1727 earthquake in Boston, and Restitutus, The end of life Pursued and then the Hope in Death enjoyed by the Faithful, a treatise written after recovering from severe illnesses. Mather battled with recurrent illnesses through most of 1727, and his sickness, along with the encouragement of his family, may have inspired him to sit for this portrait (cat. #78). At his death, an obituary

described him as ‘perhaps the principal Ornament of this Country and the greatest Scholar that was ever bred in it.’³

¹ For a complete list of his writings see John Langdon Sibley, Biographical Sketches of Graduates of Harvard University (Cambridge: Charles William Sever, 1885), 1: 42-158. For biographical information on Mather, see Kenneth Silverman, The Life and Times of Cotton Mather (New York: Harper & Row, 1984) and Reiner Smolinski, ‘Cotton Mather,’ in Steven R. Serafin, ed., Encyclopedia of American Literature (New York: Continuum, 1999), 725-31.

² For more on the Mathers’ books, see J.H. Tuttle, ‘The Libraries of the Mathers,’ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 20 (1910): 269-356. A caveat: in it, Thomas’s three catalogues were silently reduced to a single alphabetical listing that obscures provenance and omits approximately 500 titles. Other Mather collections are found at the Boston Public Library, Massachusetts Historical Society, and the University of Virginia.

³ The New-England Weekly Journal, cited in Louisa Dresser, ‘Paintings Owned by the American Antiquarian Society,’ The Magazine Antiques 95 (November 1969): 718. Because of its historical significance, Dresser called this ‘probably the single most important portrait in the possession of the Society.’