

RICHARD MATHER (1569-1669), c. 1665

Attributed to John Foster (1648-81)
oil on canvas
30 x 25 (76.20 x 63.500)
Gift of Hannah Mather Crocker, 1815
Weis 81
Hewes Number: 82

Ex. Coll.: sitter, to his son Increase Mather, to his son Cotton Mather, to his son Dr. Samuel Mather, to his daughter the donor.

Exhibitions:

1864, "National Sailors' Fair," Boston Athenaeum, no. 208.
1932, "XVIIth Century Painting in New England," Worcester Art Museum.

Publications:

Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1919), 2: 421.
Old Time New England 15 (October 1924): frontispiece.
Louisa Dresser, XVIIth Century Painting in New England, (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1935), 103-7.

Richard Mather, the first of the Mather family dynasty in America, was born in Lowton, Lancashire, England, and was a clergyman in nearby Toxteth and Prescott before immigrating to Dorchester, Massachusetts, in 1635. The following year he became the minister of the church in Dorchester and spent the rest of his life writing and preaching Congregationalist doctrine. His grandson Cotton Mather (cat. #78) recalled, 'His way of preaching was very plain, studiously avoiding obscure and foreign terms and unnecessary citation of Latin sentences; and aiming to shoot his arrows not over the heads, but into the hearts of his hearers.'¹

Richard Mather supported the colonists' separation from the Church of England and published

Church Government and Church Covenant Discussed in 1643 and A Platform of Church

Discipline in 1649 which, taken together, served as a basis for the organization of

Congregational churches in New England and had far-reaching implications for democratic government.² Mather was also one of the translators of The Whole Booke of Psalmes (1640).³

Commonly referred to as the Bay Psalm Book, it is the first book printed in the colonies.

Mather's sermon notes, and drafts of his writings are preserved in the American Antiquarian Society's manuscript collection.

According to family history, this portrait of Richard Mather was painted from life in Boston in his old age. On several occasions over the years, the painting, cherished as a relic of the early days of America, was restored and 'improved.' By the nineteenth century, the majority of the original surface was lost and what remained was buried under coats of varnish and overpaint. In 1804 the Reverend William Bentley of Salem (cat. #8) saw the Mather family portraits during a visit to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and observed in his diary that '[The portraits] situation does not promise their long preservation.' Of Richard Mather's portrait, he observed pessimistically. 'That of Richard will soon be gone.' Also, that 'It agrees as well as possible with my block print.'⁴ Bentley was referring to the print (fig. #) made by John Foster around 1670 to accompany the publication of The Life and Death of that Reverend Man of God, Mr. Richard Mather. Foster, a Dorchester schoolteacher, began working as an engraver in the 1670s. In 1675 he set up a press and became the first printer in Boston, steadily producing books, almanacs and sermons.⁵ It is generally accepted that Foster based his print of Richard Mather, the first woodcut portrait printed in America, on the painted portrait now at the American Antiquarian Society.⁶

Consideration of the possibility that Foster may have also painted the original portrait of Mather dates from 1935. In her research on Foster, Louisa Dresser noted that his inventory contained 'Colours' and that he was referred to as 'a rare Apelles,' a term used to describe painters, not printers.⁷ In 1950 Virgil Baker noted that Foster had been baptized by Richard Mather and had printed several works written by his son, connections to the family that may have resulted in a commission.⁸ This image of Richard Mather may indeed have come from Foster's hand, however, the deteriorated condition of the portrait makes a definite attribution impossible.⁹

¹ Cotton Mather, quoted in William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, 9 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1859), 1: 79.

² For additional biographical information and a list of Mather's publications Mather, see Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, 1:75-80.

³ The AAS copy has the bookplate and inscription of Isaiah Thomas, who may have acquired the volume from William Bentley. 'After advertising for another copy of this book and making enquiry in many places in New England &c., I was not able to obtain oreven to hear of another. This copy is therefore invaluable, and must be preserved with the greatest care. It is in its original [vellum] binding. I.T. Sept. 20, 1820.'

⁴ William Bentley Diary, August 16, 1804, William Bentley Papers 1666-1819, American Antiquarian Society Manuscript Collection.

⁵ For additional information on Foster, see Samuel Abbot Green, John Foster, The Earliest American Engraver and the First Boston Printer (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1909).

⁶ Frederick Weis, 'Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 91-92.

⁷ Louisa Dresser, XVIIth Century Painting in New England, (Worcester: Worcester Art Museum, 1935), 68-69.

⁸ Virgil Barker, American Painting: History and Interpretation (New York: Macmillan Company, 1950), 29-30.

⁹ Despite its wrecked condition, this portrait has been copied several times. George F. Wright (1828-81) copied the image for the Connecticut Historical Society in 1854. In 1869 the Society granted permission for Asa W. Twitchell to make a copy, and in 1906 Mrs. Harry Thompson of Paris made a replica for a Mather descendant living in Buffalo, New York.