

SAMUEL MATHER (1674-1733), c. 1725

Attr. Richard Philips (1681-1741)

oil on canvas

29 3/4 x 25 (75.57 x 63.50)

inscribed, at right: 'VIVERE EST/COGITARE'

Gift of Hannah Mather Crocker, 1815

Weis 83

Hewes Number: 84

Ex. Coll.: Mather family; to sitter's grandniece, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1864, 'National Sailors' Fair,' Boston Athenaeum, no. 207, as 'Samuel Mather of Dublin.'

Publications:

Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1926), 3: 518, 875-80.

Horace Mather, Lineage of Reverend Richard Mather (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood and Brainard & Co., 1890), 100.

Debated in the nineteenth century, the identity of the sitter in this portrait was determined by 1946 to be Samuel Mather, the youngest son of Increase Mather (cats. 80-81).¹ Samuel was born in Boston and, as a young man of fourteen, travelled to England with his father. He completed his studies abroad and graduated in absentia from Harvard College in 1690. He returned to Massachusetts in 1692 and for the next six years preached at various churches around Boston and also took the M.A. at Harvard.

In 1698 Samuel Mather returned to England, where he married and purchased land. He became the minister of Witney in Oxfordshire and built the first Congregational church there in 1712. Mather, who never returned to America, was described by an English biographer as having 'a blunt, forthright manner, tempered, it may be, with humour a trifle hard.' Like his forbears and siblings, Mather was clergyman with publications to his credit. He wrote religious tracts, including A Compendious History of the Rise and Progress of the Reformation (1715) and A Discourse Concerning the Necessity of Believing the Doctrine of the Trinity (1719). One of his most important works was his Memoir of Increase Mather (1725), which brought him critical acclaim in both England and Massachusetts.²

Sometime during the preparation of his biography of his father, Samuel Mather had his portrait painted.³ The attribution of the American Antiquarian Society's canvas to the English artist Richard Philips is based on the existence of a mezzotint of Mather dated c. 1725 (fig. 23). This print, very similar in composition to the painting, was engraved by the English artist John Simon (1675-c. 1755) and bears the inscription 'R. Philips pinx.'⁴ Little is known of this artist's work, and he has been described as a 'capable but conservative London portrait painter working in the mold of Kneller.'⁵ Philips's other sitters included Massachusetts governor Jonathan Belcher, and the Reverend Thomas Wilson, a Scottish Episcopal clergyman.⁶

This portrait of Samuel Mather may have been sent to American relatives after his death. It was in the family's possession in 1804, although at that time it was thought to be a portrait of Samuel Mather of Dublin, Increase Mather's brother.⁷ The portrait was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1815, with images of several other Mather family members (cats. 79-80, 82, 85).⁸

¹ For discussion of the identity debate, see Frederick Weis, 'Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 56 (April 1946): 40-41, and Charles K. Bolton, The Founders: Portraits of Persons Born Abroad, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1926), 3: 877.

² Sibley's Harvard Graduates, s.v. 'Mather, Samuel.'

³ Thomas J. Holmes, 'Samuel Mather of Witney, 1674-1733,' Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts 26 (January 1926): 319. Holmes notes that Mather began making inquiries about the prices of painted and engraved portraits as early as 1715 and seems to have had his likeness made more than once.

⁴ Holmes, 'Samuel Mather of Witney,' 318. A copy of the mezzotint, which exists in two states, is in the British Museum. The print is illustrated in Wayne Craven, Colonial American Portraiture (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 145.

⁵ Richard Saunders, American Colonial Portraits, 1700-1776 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 152.

⁶ John Chaloner Smith, British Mezzotinto Portraits (London: Henry Sotheran & Co., 1884). Simon made mezzotints based on several other Philips portraits.

⁷ Weis, 'Portraits in the American Antiquarian Society,' 41.

⁸ A nineteenth-century copy of this painting is owned by the Antiquarian and Landmark Society of Hartford, Connecticut.