COTTON MATHER (1663-1728), 1727
Peter Pelham (1697-1751)
oil on canvas
35 1/4 x 30 1/4 (89.54 x 76.84) (framed)
Gift of Josephine Spencer Gay, 1923
Weis 77
Hewes Numbers: 78 & 79

Ex. Coll.: Sitter; to his nephew Mather Byles, Sr. (cats. 21-22); 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.
1949, ‘From Colony to Nation,’ Art Institute of Chicago, no. 94.

Publications:
Catalog of the Tercentenary Exhibition (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1936), plate 8.
Dresser, 1969, 720.
From Colony to Nation (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1949), 63.
One Hundred Colonial Portraits (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts), 56.

79
COTTON MATHER (1663-1728), c. 1750
Anonymous
after Peter Pelham (1697-1751)
oil on canvas
32 x 27 1/4 (81.28 x 69.22)
Gift of Hannah Mather Crocker, 1815
Weis 78

Ex. Coll.: Mather family; owned in 1814 by the sitter’s great-granddaughter, the donor.

Exhibitions:
1864, ‘National Sailors’ Fair,’ Boston Athenaeum, no. 211, as by Peter Pelham.
As a grandson of Richard Mather (cats. 82-83) and John Cotton, and the eldest son of Increase Mather (cats. 80-81), 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 in 1685 as minister of Boston’s Old North Church, where he would continue to preach for the rest of his life. Mather was a prolific author of encyclopedic texts on theology, medicine, science, and church history, as well as of the works on witchcraft and the Salem trials on which his reputation has long rested. His *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693) followed a 1689 account of the supernatural, which included his own report of a successful treatment of a girl believed to be possessed.

The author of more than four hundred publications, Mather defined Puritanism not only for his contemporaries but for generations of students of colonial America. In addition to being 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 for advocating inoculation against smallpox during the Boston epidemic of 1721, and led him 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 to 1698 as ‘the great achievement of Christ in America.’ In that study, Mather discussed settlement and the work of the Congregational churches and the sects that arose to
challenge them, gave accounts of the conversions of Indians and the Indians’
relationships with colonial settlements, and included biographies of prominent leaders.¹

Some 1,500 books owned by members of the Mather family were acquired by
Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.) for AAS in 1814. Thomas catalogued the collection
in three parts, one of which was a listing of Cotton Mather’s books. Mather’s writings,
including the as-yet unpublished opus ‘Biblia Americana,’ are testament to the great use
he made of his library.²

Near the end of his life, Mather turned to writing a manual for clergy, a reminder
of the importance of his ministry and of 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, which 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 health, as well as encouragement from
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

Now known to be a copy, the second painting (cat. 79) was once believed to be the
original portrait by Peter Pelham, on which the artist based his famous 1727 mezzotint of
Cotton Mather (fig. 21). In 1943 this portrait was carefully examined and compared to the
portrait of Mather (cat. 78) that was given to the American Antiquarian Society in 1923
by Josephine Gay and to the Pelham mezzotint. At that time it was determined, based on
brushwork and x-ray examination, that the Gay portrait was the original and that this
image was probably an eighteenth-century copy.⁴

¹ For a complete list of his writings, see John Langdon Sibley, Biographical Sketches of Graduates of
Harvard University, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: 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
Literature (New York: Continuum, 1999), 725-31.
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 at the Boston Public Library, Massachusetts Historical Society, and University of Virginia.

3 The New-England Weekly Journal, cited in Dresser, 1969, 718. Because of its historical significance, Dresser called this ‘probably the single most important portrait in the possession of the Society.’

4 Dresser, 1969, 719. The study, organized by Anne Allison, was conducted at the Worcester Art Museum. (See also Anne Allison, ‘Peter Pelham, Engraver in Mezzotinto,’ The Magazine Antiques 53 [December 1947]: 442.)