

Fraktur

Folk Art & Family

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LANCASTER, PA. - Fraktur art is naive art at its finest. It corrals folk art, family, and American values tinged with a strong dose of Old World heritage. Fraktur brings all this together on colorful pages that delight the eyes while stimulating a curiosity about their archaic and decorative texts - texts usually written in German, even though they document events in the lives of some of North America's earliest immigrant families.

Fraktur are hand-written manuscripts, or printed manuscripts that are hand-decorated with pen and ink and watercolors. Though made primarily for Pennsylvania-German and German-American families in the second half of the Eighteenth Century and throughout the Nineteenth Century, fraktur are being made even today.

American fraktur had its roots in medieval European decorated manuscript art. Fraktur transferred to this country in the German language with German-speaking immigrants who began arriving late in the Seventeenth Century from the Rhineland-Pfalz area of Germany, from Alsace in today's France, and from Switzerland.

Unlike their European counterparts, however, American fraktur are personal family records. Most European decorated manuscripts are religious texts, secular stories with strong religious themes, or important official documents such as treaties or privileges. While American fraktur may include religious verses, the main text on most American fraktur centers on family events such as births and baptisms. Because American fraktur are personal rather than official documents, they were decorated for fun and were meant to be kept by the family, displayed, and enjoyed.

Most American fraktur originated in southeast Pennsylvania, or anywhere Pennsylvania Germans settled, such as the Shenandoah Valley region of Virginia, West Virginia, western Maryland, Ohio, the Carolinas, New Jersey, and Ontario, Canada. Most Pennsylvania Germans, often called "Pennsylvania Dutch," immigrated prior to 1800.

The fraktur tradition was strongest among rural families. Although printers in Pennsylvania cities such as Allentown, Harrisburg, Lancaster, Reading, Philadelphia, and elsewhere printed the immensely popular birth and baptism certificate (the most common type of American fraktur), fraktur was mostly associated with farm families surrounding these cities, especially during the Nineteenth Century.

The word fraktur comes from the Latin word meaning "broken" - the same as our word "fracture." Most Americans pronounce the word FROCK-tur, and they often use the term to describe decorative German hand-lettering that is akin to Old English Gothic. The word refers to the angular shape of decorative German lettering, often called Gothic lettering.

Generally, early fraktur artists in this country were schoolmasters. One of the earliest was a schoolmaster in Montgomery County named Christopher Dock (1698-1771). Dock wrote a teaching manual in which he touched on the subject of making drawings for his students. By his own account, he made drawings of birds and flowers to reward students who excelled at their studies. Other schoolmasters followed suit by making fraktur drawings such as awards of merit and writing examples, which could be used by students to copy the fraktur alphabet.

Throughout the Nineteenth Century, the fraktur market was dominated by printed forms, especially birth and baptism certificates, most of which were hand-embellished and infilled by professional scribes. Infill refers to the genealogy data usually written by hand on pre-drawn or pre-printed forms. Most Nineteenth Century penmen, or "Ausfullers" (filler-outers) as they often called themselves, were itinerants who infilled printed birth and baptism certificates and/or recorded data in Bibles between the Old and New Testaments.

Schoolmasters made fraktur early in this history of American fraktur - circa 1750 to 1820 - whereas professional scribes using printed forms dominated the fraktur market from about 1810 to 1900. However, there are considerable overlaps in these dates. Some professional scribes began working prior to 1800, and some schoolmasters making freehand fraktur worked until the time of the Civil War.

The freehand frakturist needed paper, a straight-edge, quills or pens, pencils, paint brushes, a compass, a sty-



lus, inks, a pen knife, and pigments to mix watercolors. Fraktur was made on paper. No authentic example of American fraktur on vellum (calf, kid, or sheepskin prepared as parchment) is known. Early American paper was of durable quality because of its high rag content. The majority of fraktur are "full size," measuring approximately 16 by 13 inches, or "half size," 8 by 13 inches. Bookplates and watercolors are usually smaller.

By comparison, European decorated manuscripts often measure 7 by 9 inches, so the size of the paper can be one clue in differentiating American from European decorated manuscripts. Perhaps as important as size in differentiating American fraktur from European decorated manuscripts is the text. In the absence of a location, if the fraktur includes significant family data, chances increase that the certificate is American.

The most critical tool for the fraktur artist and scrivener was his pen. In the mid-to-late 1700s, the pen was made from a quill taken from the wing of the domestic goose. Steel nibs were commercially available by the Nineteenth Century and are in use even today among calligraphers and contemporary frakturists. The steel pen nib afforded a consistent writing line that could be achieved only by constant resharpening of the quill. Much of the fraktur lettering made by the Eighteenth Century schoolmasters is a true work of art, even without border decoration.

Some schoolmasters decorated their writing to the point of being almost illegible, while the handwriting of others was plain. Of course, schoolmasters were not the only ones to master fancy penmanship. The writing of the

professional scrivener who worked throughout the Nineteenth and into the Twentieth Century can only be described as extraordinary.

The first fraktur made on American soil was drawn (circa 1740-1800) by frakturists at the German Seventh Day Baptist Cloister at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. Freehand Ephrata fraktur is distinctive, with thinly applied watercolors in soft tones. Ephrata artists probably made their own colors from one of the many recipes available at that time. Beyond Ephrata, and slightly later, the fraktur artist applied his colors more heavily, usually in red, blue, green, and yellow, and often mixed or sometimes over-painted with additives made from plant resin that provided gloss. Gum arabic and tempura mixtures made with eggs were used by many artists as binders to fix color.

A few artists combined fraktur and cutwork (Scherenschnitte). For this, scissors and small pen knives would be used, although the primary purpose of the pen knife was to sharpen quills. A common technique in Europe that found its way to America was pinpricking. Not often encountered with American fraktur, illuminated letters or decoration would be outlined by multiple pinpricks.

Piecing together the puzzle for identifying artists and scribes has been an especially slow process. Giant strides were made in 1961 with Dr Donald A. Shelley's *The Fraktur - Writings or Illuminated Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Germans*. In



many cases, the actual name of the artist remains unknown, so that "tag" names such as the "Ehre Vater Artist," the "Cross-Legged Angel Artist," or the "Hyphenation Artist," are used to refer to a body of work attributed to one individual. Perhaps most frustrating is that fraktur artists copied one another, sometimes so closely that to distinguish the work of one artist from the work of another is virtually impossible. Thus, making attributions remains a tricky business, and scholars are often resigned to say that a given fraktur is from the "Deep Run School" of artists of Bucks County, or is of the "late Schwenkfelder" type.

Roots of American Fraktur

American fraktur had its roots in European illuminated manuscripts. But American fraktur took a sudden and unexpected turn from its European origins. The change was significant, for unlike European decorated manuscripts, American fraktur began almost at the outset to record family events.

There are many types of American fraktur, but the most popular was the taufschein (the birth and baptism certificate), primarily for Lutheran and Reformed families. This type of decorated manuscript became especially popular following the American Revolution. It is an American rather than a European form.

The taufschein has become so familiar a term to Americans researching their German heritage that researchers have adopted the word into the English language. Hence, unlike German nouns, which are capitalized, the word

"taufschein" - like the word "fraktur," itself - remains lowercase in many references to American fraktur.

Frequently, additional comments are noted on fraktur. Such notations usually include dates of confirmation and marriage, and often the spouse's name. These notations were added long after the fraktur was made, and they delight family historians. But because they are often "scribbled" in the plain script of a descendant, they disappoint collectors for such additional notes often disfigure the page.

A note regarding death is often added in the form of "starb," which means "died," or it is written "dide" or "did" - phonetic spellings of our English word. Usually, the month, day, and year of death are listed, and sometimes the time of day, as well as the date of the funeral and the Bible text read at the funeral. Sometimes there are no words, just the simple arithmetic summing the person's age at death.

The Purpose Of American Fraktur

The purpose of the taufschein was self-evident - to record birth and baptism. But there were many reasons for making fraktur. They were made as teaching tools, to document family events, as religious tracts, to show ownership, or simply for fun. Each type of fraktur served a different purpose. Most types - even those that do not record family data - became personal documents. For example, writing examples (Vorschriften) were made by schoolmasters for their students so they could practice their ABCs.

House blessings (Haussegen) were meant as good luck charms, much like we hang pictures on our kitchen wall that say "God Bless Our Home" or "Home Sweet Home." And bookplates (Bucherzeichen) showed book ownership. Obviously, these have the name of the owner, and some record the birth date of the owner and where he or she resided.

One reason for the many types was that the American fraktur was made for families of various religions. Of course, most were made for Protestant families, but many religious sects came to Pennsylvania, where William Penn encouraged religious tolerance. Religious persuasion often determined what type became acceptable among various families.

Types of American fraktur including family registers, bookplates, bookmarks, poems, birth records, confirmation certificates, marriage records, song books, memorials, Bible records, writing examples, house blessings, New Year's greetings, religious and secular texts, broadsides, watercolors, rewards of merit, and the most common type - the taufschein - remained popular from the Eighteenth to the first decade of the Twentieth Century; the confirmation certificate, marriage record, Bible record, and memorial did not generally become popular until 1850 or later.

Motifs On American Fraktur

Fraktur was an important cultural element of the rural American family from German-speaking Europe. These families were Christian, representing many religious groups, but they all shared a common love of form and color. And since much fraktur - especially the making of taufschein - was commercial endeavor, patrons would not buy certificates they did not like, whether freehand-decorated or printed. Thus, crowns of righteousness and angels may have religious significance, but their place in fraktur is shared with colorful tulips, eagles, peacocks, springing deer, parrots, lions, fish, snakes, alligators, wild turkeys, foxes, griffins, horses, and unicorns.

Then, there are the flowers and birds of every color, shape, and size, that defy taxonomic classification. Add to this hearts, mermaids and mermen, sunbursts, geometric designs, sun and moon faces, and much, much more. Almost all of the preceding were drawn for fun, to delight the eye, and to please a customer. Even later printed certificates no longer looked identical after the gifted hand of the scrivener infilled the genealogy data and the decorator applied the color that took the certificate from blandness to folk art.

Fraktur motifs are open to interpretation. Some scholars have placed heavy emphasis on finding religious meaning in what is drawn on fraktur. They suggest the tulip, with its three lobes, represents the Trinity. The peacock represents resurrection from the dead. The Celtic Knot which, like the circle, has no beginning or end, represents eternity, and so on. Certainly, religious overtones can be found, but it can be argued that the fraktur artist drew these motifs for aesthetic rather than religious reasons. After all, the tulip was balanced, colorful and easy to draw.

In European decorated manuscripts, we see the work of artists who successfully attempted detailed scenes of soldiers bearing arms, interior views of homes, ships on the high seas, men in combat with monsters, and complicated religious scenes. But most American fraktur have relatively simple decoration consisting of colorful flowers, birds, and geometric designs.

For American frakturists, it may have been a practical matter to draw birds and flowers. American fraktur was often a commercial activity. The target consumer may have been the mother of the family - especially for taufscheins. Probably both parents wanted taufschein for their children, but it may have been the mother who made the actual selection. Perhaps to her, birds and flowers represented the harmony of family life.

The struggling schoolmaster wanted to sell his fraktur and there was safety in birds and flowers - economic

safety, religious safety, and political safety. Birds and flowers met the family's cultural need for color and decoration, as well as the desire to document the growth and success of the family.

While some artists, such as Durs Rudy, Sr (1766-1843), may have favored religious scenes such as the crucifixion or a baptism scene, this was not the norm. In fact, such religious scenes were difficult to draw, and since most fraktur artists had little or no training in art, they rarely attempted such themes. Baptism scenes were depicted on many printed birth and baptism certificates, but here engravers were capable of creating details needed to picture complicated scenes.

Occasionally, fraktur artists and printers used fraktur to make a political statement. But even printer Wilhelm Schopflin (1777-1825) found his support of the French Revolution was not shared by his customers. So he modified his woodblocks to remove offensive political elements.

Fraktur artists were self-taught artists, so they were more comfortable with plants and animals - if admirers did not hold them to anatomical correctness - but few drew the human body. Yet some of the most intriguing - and comical - figures of fraktur are people. Many people pictured on fraktur are symbolic, such as ladies symbolizing faith, love, and hope. But patriotic figures such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Andrew Jackson appear on fraktur-like watercolors, generally copied from printed broadsides or from pictures in books or newspapers.

Soldiers and hunters are present on fraktur, as are Adam and Even. More rare are drawings of actual people. As a whole, Pennsylvania Germans shied from self-portraiture, feeling that such drawings were vainglorious.

The most common flower seen on fraktur is the tulip. Tulips became immensely popular in Europe when they were introduced there in the mid-1500s. Because tulip motifs are so ubiquitous on fraktur, they are used to identify artists. Almost every fraktur artist had his own version of the tulip and because most fraktur were not signed, the tulip often becomes the key for attributing works.

The artist's inspiration for his birds was limited only by his imagination and the colors on his palette. The bright plumage and polka-dots were additions made just for fun. The perky robin in an upright stance was known, but most birds on fraktur were of unknown species. Just as realistically depicted birds were difficult for these untrained artists to draw, so too were flora and other fauna. But fraktur artists were not attempting to accurately record nature. Instead, they simply delighted in nature's beauty, color and variety - made more infinite by the fraktur artist's imagination.

Fraktur that record current - and not so current - events are relatively rare. Probably more than any other motif recording a current event, the comet is seen on fraktur manuscripts. Even these are relatively rare, but they do illustrate the Pennsylvania German's fascination with astrological omens. Astrological and astronomical symbols were well known to Pennsylvania Germans, mostly through almanacs. These played a major role in the lives of German farming families, who used almanac calculations as guides for planting and harvesting.

In all, motifs on fraktur were plucked from the rich inheritance of Old World folklore. This folklore included a mixture of nature, superstition and astrology, plus Biblical, pagan and mystical interpretations of life. These Old World traditions were soon coupled with an American influence, which meant that the wild turkey, the Carolina parakeet, the bald eagle and other motifs specific to the Pennsylvania German's new environment, were incorporated.

By the end of the Nineteenth Century, much fraktur was written or printed in English. Obviously, English certificates became easier to sell. Printing technology also had a significant impact on American fraktur. Although many collectors prefer the spontaneity of freehand fraktur over printed forms, Victorian tastes demanded prints. In the Nineteenth Century, it became more fashionable to have an elaborately detailed printed taufschein than a naively drawn freehand example.

Although the appearance of fraktur changed, its purpose remained true - to document events in the lives of families. Eventually, about 1900, this purpose underwent a subtle change, for printed certificates were given to individuals as tokens of "rites of passage" commemorating confirmation, marriage, even high school graduation. Such certificates were now in the domain of all Americans, not just the Pennsylvania Germans.

The blend of text and art on fraktur conveys their feelings of self-worth, self-expression, creativity and most important of all, family.



