# Fraktur: An American Folk Art Rooted in Old-World Traditions

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**This birth announcement and birth certificate for Daniel Ocksenreiter reads "Daniel Ocksenreiter was born in the year 1815 on the 10th of January at 8 P.M. in the sign of _____ in Upper Mahanoy Township, Northumberland County, in the state of Pennsylvania. He was baptized on _____by Pastor Hemping. The sponsors were Michael Brosius and his wife Catharina. The parents are name Michael Ocksenreiter and his wife Catharina, Johan Georg Brosius's legitimate daughter.**

As immigrants from Germanic Europe assimilated into the American melting pot to form our early nation, they brought Old World artistic traditions to their newly settled land. Countless artisans perpetuated a heritage that we acknowledge today as an outstanding Germanic contribution to American Folk Art.

It was William Penn's founding of Pennsylvania that set in motion the first substantial migrations from German-speaking groups in Europe, the upper Rhine country of Germany, Alsace (now in France), and the German cantons (districts) of Switzerland. Penn made two trips to the Netherlands and Germany in 1671 and 1677, respectively, and his philosophy of religious and economic freedom was further disseminated in pamphlets and through agents hired to recruit colonists. Glowing accounts of the New World were also echoed in publications such as Daniel Falckner's *Curieuse Nachricht von Pennsylvania*, a 1702 tract describing a country where "fertility is excellent...[and] whereby all things grow with a more rapid energy, and give one a second harvest, just as plentiful, if not more."

As these immigrants adapted to life in America, customs and arts were transplanted, changed, and eventually influenced by and shared with neighboring communities. Folk art in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland took many forms, often determined by the regional characteristics of the different regions but usually inextricably tied to aspects of work and domestic life. Rich, brightly colored decoration embellished ordinary items. In America, Germanic craftsmen continued their artistic expression with traditional Rhenish motifs – the heart, tulip, sunwheel, flowers, and birds – on furniture, pottery, tools, and documents.

Of the Old World visual repertoire of symbols, many of them having both religious and non-religious meanings, the heart occupies a central place. Considered the source of understanding, love, courage, devotion, sorrow, and joy, the heart is symbolic of many facets of earthly life and pertains to every member of the human race. Flowers, most often the tulip, reflect the fragility of life. Birds, such as parrots and eagles, display an interest in the natural world. Angels, crowns, and the pervasive sun or sunwheel with its variation of the whirling swastika or fylfot, were also popular graphics.

Foremost among American arts that incorporated these early motifs is fraktur. In American usage, the word "fraktur" takes on meaning that goes beyond its original German designation, defined by Alexander Schem in his 1871 *German-American Conversation Lexicon* as a word used in the printing trade for a font or type-

face. Fraktur, a shortened form of *Frakturschriften* (Fraktur Writings), is derived from the Latin word *fractura* meaning a broken or fractured style of lettering or calligraphy. There are two traditional explanations. As a fraktur is handwritten, the writing instrument is lifted from the paper after each letter is completed, which leaves a "break" between letters. The second explanation is that it refers to the breaking up of formerly round forms in the typeface, such as the O or U letter. The writing may or may not center around a text (usually religious), but it always is decorated with symbolic designs of the Pennsylvania German tradition.

Oral history states that Henry C. Mercer, a pioneer collector of Pennsylvania folk art, needed a term to designate forms of Germanic illuminated writings, and that he chose "fraktur" as a convenient and appropriate term for the paper art. When people in the antiques profession needed a word to describe the material they were finding in rural auctions and farmhouses, they picked up the Americanism "fraktur," and it has remained in widespread use. Originally fraktur referred to a handwritten or painted manuscript work, but today it has come to mean either a handwritten or a printed work, with or without text. As historian Don Yoder wrote in his introduction to the catalogue for the 1969 exhibition of Pennsylvania Fraktur at the Landis Valley Farm Museum in Lancaster, "As an art form, fraktur is graphic art, two-thirds calligraphy and one-third drawn symbol. The combination of calligraphic text, abstract borders and primitive symbolic figures, makes up a total which is more than the sum of its parts."

Fraktur art is found wherever there was settlement of Germans and Swiss during colonial times and where succeeding generations migrated following the push of the frontier. The largest number of examples comes from Pennsylvania, followed by the Shenandoah Valley of western Virginia, Maryland, and Ohio. As an art of the people, it was often religious in nature, taught primarily by schoolmasters in German schools affiliated with church congregations in rural communities where life centered around the church.

Private Collection

**Taufschein for Susanna Kauffeld (1818). The "heavenly curtain" design is a trademark of the anonymous "Stony Creek" artist, so named because many of his works were for members of the Lutheran and Reformed Zion Congregation at Stony Creek in Shenandoah County, Virginia, from 1805 to 1824.**

There are a few exceptions. Among the earliest known examples of fraktur art are creations of the Ephrata Cloister, a monastic community in Pennsylvania founded by Conrad Beissel, a German Pietist who came to America in 1720 seeking spiritual peace and solitude. In its heyday – from about 1735 to 1765 – the community constructed the most complete printing establishment in the colonies at that time and produced many exquisite fraktur manuscripts. Three other groups – the Mennonites and the Amish, largely of Swiss origin, and the Schwenkfelders from Silesia – also practiced fraktur in home and school. Although art for worldly display was forbidden by the Amish and Mennonites, fraktur did appear to a small extent in family records, bookplates, bookmarks, and tokens of remembrance. One noted Old-Order Amish artist, Barbara Ebersol (1846 to 1922) of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, was an innovative practitioner of fraktur. The majority of German-speaking practitioners, however, were members of the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches, and they are responsible for what we consider the great American folk art.

Many fraktur pieces are birth and baptismal certificates called Taufscheine (baptismal certificates). In the Upper Rhine area it was customary for a godparent to ask a local schoolmaster to write or draw a *Göttelbrief* (souvenir of baptism), which would be given to the parents for safekeeping until the child grew up. This custom arrived in America but, instead of godparents, it was the parents who commissioned the Taufschein. The document took on more importance here because of the population's mobility so that the document took on a quasi-legal authority proving age and church affiliation. This differed from Europe where people tended to stay in one place their entire lives so that when a baptism was entered into the records of the local church, it could easily be found.


Private Collection

**Taufschein for Peter Rolar (1804). In the hamlet of Keezletown in Rockingham County, VA teacher Peter Bernhart painted and wrote numerous Fraktur. This display of colorful birds in a multi-colored garden is a favorite motif.**

In addition, fraktur commemorated confirmation, marriage, or even in a rare instance, the death of a child. Because the Mennonites and the Amish did not practice infant baptism, they substituted the *Geburtsschein* (birth certificate). Fraktur writing decorated Vorschrift, a writing specimen of either a teacher or student. Decoration also appeared on Rewards of Merit, which a teacher would present to a good student, a Haus-Segen or house blessing, a bookplate, hymns, Bible records, title pages, and music books. In 1995, Rev. Frederick S. Weiser, a retired Lutheran minister and Pennsylvania-German historian, published *The Gift is Small, the Love is Great*, a book about tiny fraktur that were originally mistaken for bookplates because they were often tucked into Bibles or books for safekeeping. Weiser's research revealed that Christopher Dock (circa 1698 to 1771), a schoolmaster in some of the oldest Mennonite settlements in Pennsylvania, began a practice of rewarding students with little gifts or fraktur the size of greeting cards, and that the many varied examples that had been found over the years were the work of schoolmasters who made these small tokens of encouragement for students in the parochial schools of the Mennonite and Lutheran churches. Their production virtually ceased with the introduction of public education in Pennsylvania in the 1830s.

Although the flowering of hand-drawn fraktur art ended in the mid-nineteenth century, printed examples to be filled in with appropriate dates and added designs continued well into the twentieth century. Whether German-speaking settlers blended in with their neighbors or set themselves apart, as did the Mennonites and Amish, there remained a strong desire to express Old World heritage. Today, contemporary artists working in the folk art tradition like to copy antique fraktur designs and patterns. Their timeless beauty continues to resonate. **GL**