

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

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The Phillips Museum of Art/Franklin & Marshall College

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 Henping. 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-

