

S IS FOR fraktur

An archaic Gothic or 'black-letter' typeface gave its name to a beloved form of early American folk art rich in inspiration for the embroiderer.

UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED, ALL IMAGES ARE BY KIND PERMISSION OF MRS J JOHNSON AND THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

German-speaking peoples began to arrive on the shores of America in 1682. At the height of the immigration in the middle of the eighteenth century as many as twenty-two ships carrying German immigrants were arriving each year. A small proportion of the newcomers were 'plain people', such as the Amish and Mennonites, but most belonged to

the Lutheran or Reformed Church. By 1759, Germans formed about a third of the population of Pennsylvania, having settled mostly on land to the north of Philadelphia, then the most prominent city in the colonies. This is not the space to describe in any detail the 'cruel filter' of the arduous six-month journey or the shocking realities encountered on ➡

ABOVE Iron gall ink, made from a mixture of ground oak galls, tannins, and iron sulfate, was used for the text on frakturs. It is blackish purple when first applied but turns to brownish black over time and is prone to fading. Red ink was also used.

RIGHT Birth and baptismal certificate for Rosina Gebhart.

Attributed to Henry Young (1792-1861). West Buffalo Township, Union County Pennsylvania, c 1825. Watercolour and ink on wove paper. 31.8cm x 19.1cm.

Translation (from the top): "God alone the glory. Rosina Gebhart. To this married couple, Heinrich Gebhart and his wife Elisabeth, born Gundrum, is a daughter born to the world on the 13th September in the year 1823."

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON, PROMISED GIFT-467



DMC 3822

DMC 3821

DMC 3820

DMC 977

Weeks Dye Works
Blaze

DMC 351

DMC 350

Beautiful Stitch
Winter Greens No 1

No 2

No 3

DMC 520

Gentle Art
Bayberry



OPPOSITE Drawing of a bird for Annie Kriebel. Possibly David Kriebel (1787-1848) or his cousin Daniel, a schoolmaster. Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, c. 1835. Watercolour and ink on laid paper. 10.2 x 14cm. The stylised trails of leaves, tulips and bird lend themselves to embroidery and/or appliqué. Note the various graphic marks, easily replicated in simple stitching, in the feathers of the bird.

BELOW FAR RIGHT 1. BS Bonfire No 1 (thebeautifulstitch.com) **2.** WDW Aztec Red **3.** DMC 921 **4.** DMC 310 **5.** DMC 349 (top) and 347 **6.** DMC 926 **7.** BS Winter Greens No 3. **8.** Top-down DMC 997, Grenadine, DMC 402.

LEFT Drawing for B. Herr. Lampeter, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania 1821. Watercolour and ink on wove paper, 12.7cm x 8.9cm)

It is not known whether B. Herr, aged 8, was the recipient or the artist, but its childlike simplicity suggests that it may have been created by an eight-year old, perhaps the child of a fraktur artist.

arrival. Suffice to say that roughly forty-five per cent of German immigrants financed their voyage by selling themselves into indentured servitude. Nearly half of that number were children. Over time and with huge efforts, the German settlers made significant contributions to their new homeland. Skilled and hard-working, they provided much of the trade in Philadelphia. On the land, they introduced modern agricultural methods imported from Europe. Education was of huge importance to the Pennsylvanian Dutch (a mispronunciation of 'Deutsch') as they became known. Often building a school for a community before they built a church, they printed vast numbers of

books and brought with them the artistic traditions of their diverse European homelands. In 1732, a young Benjamin Franklin founded *Die Philadelphische Zeitung*, the first foreign language newspaper in America, for the German community, printing it using the typeface called Fraktur derived from the 'fractured' black-letter font early European printers had used to produce books that resembled handwritten manuscripts. Although the font is still in use and is certainly popular with calligraphers — there are some beautiful examples online — the word fraktur now properly refers to the illuminated manuscripts created by the Pennsylvania Germans during ➡



See opposite for thread key





the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are examples of fraktur in Germany, and in museums all over the United States, but this article is concerned solely with Pennsylvania German Fraktur. Finding themselves strangers in a strange land, with no town halls or parish churches yet built to hold records of important life events — births, baptisms, marriages and deaths — the Pennsylvania Germans looked to the birth and baptismal certificates of their homeland and reinvented them in a looser, more decorative form, adding details of the parents of the child, including the mother's maiden name. Birth and baptismal certificates are the most common form of fraktur. Some have annotations recording subsequent marriages or deaths, ➤➤

Thread colours for fraktur

FAR LEFT (Top & Bottom images and RIGHT Middle) All details of image on page 25.
(Middle) Drawing of a Man and a Woman (detail) — see foldout for details.

LEFT A collection of suggested threads for fraktur. This image with a full key may be downloaded from the home page at www.carolinezoob.co.uk.

RIGHT (Top) Detail of a birth and baptismal certificate for Eliesabeth König (b. October 28 1801). School of Conrad Gilbert. c.1801. Watercolour and ink on laid paper. The whole image can be seen online at www.philamuseum.org/collection/object/327029.

RIGHT Hand-dyed, subtly variegated 'Winter Greens' thread collection from www.thebeautifulstitch.com.





PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON, PROMISED GIFT-540

suggesting that they became the natural place to record details of family history. As people moved from county to county, pastors often copied the details on the birth certificates into parochial records, and many families have been able to trace their ancestors using these. Fraktur solely for the purpose of recording a marriage are rare: most marriages were recorded ancillary to the birth of a child. As precious family documents, fraktur were often tucked into the pages of the family bible, hymnal or songbooks. Some were rolled up and put into drawers, while others were pasted inside the lids of dower chests or in wardrobes. One genealogist discovered a large wardrobe that was completely covered—inside, back and sides—with frakturs made for various members of the family to whom the wardrobe had belonged. After the Revolutionary War, in which many Pennsylvanian Germans fought on the side of the colonies, birth and baptismal certificates occasionally accompanied letters from war widows claiming a pension.

Other forms of fraktur included writing samples and drawings, some labelled 'Record of Merit', often made by schoolmasters to reward good behaviour, or as



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON, PROMISED GIFT-540

gifts. Portraits, religious texts, biblical events, drawings of houses, house blessings and valentines are other examples.

Reading the captions in *Drawn with Spirit, Pennsylvania German Fraktur from the Joan and Victor Johnson Collection*, one is struck by the varied backgrounds of the fraktur artists. Mostly, they were not trained artists. Many were pastors or schoolmasters who tended to move ➡

ABOVE AND LEFT (detail) Birth and baptismal certificate for Mary Jane Welt. Probably Lycoming County, Pennsylvania 1827. Watercolour and ink on wove paper. 27.9cm x 20.3cm. Miss Mary Jane Welt was born July the 27th A.D 1827 and baptised December the 10th 1827 by the Revd. Jacob Repach. Although a baptismal certificate, there is nothing overtly religious about this charming fraktur by Henry Young, who also created the certificate on page 19.



THESE PAGES
Birth and baptismal certificate for Elisabeth Sechler (b. September 22, 1797). Artist unknown. Probably Northumberland County, Pennsylvania, c. 1820. Watercolour and ink on wove paper, 31.1cm x 38.7cm.

Translation:
"To this married couple, Jacob Sechler and his lawful wife Catharina, born Ziechler, a daughter was born into the world on the 22nd September 1797 in the sign of the scales (Libra)." The delicate designs and subtle colours of this Taufschein are reminiscent of early samplers and offer such rich inspiration for embroidery.

Note the centres of the flowers (left), the graphic 'stitch directions' in the petals and the feathers of the bird, and the exquisite rosebuds. The butterfly motif is apparently very rare on fraktur.

around between the fifty or so counties and townships of Pennsylvania as they changed schools, or acquired farms by marriage. Some had been soldiers, mostly fighting for the American Patriot forces against the British in the American Revolutionary War, some as Hessian soldiers or auxiliaries for the British Army.

Proving which artist created extant fraktur has been a preoccupation of collectors and academics for many years. Not all can be identified – signed fraktur are rare – but, following close examination of styles, repeated motifs and colour palettes, many have been given names such as the Stoney Creek artist or the Cross-legged Angel Artist. Joan Johnson has been collecting fraktur with her husband for over sixty years and says it is a matter of looking: "The motifs are personally adapted by each ➡



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON, PROMISED GIFT-558



ABOVE The framed boxes top left and right contain two verses of a baptismal hymn (1726 and 1731) which often appear on baptismal certificates (see translations below).

'I am baptised, I stand in the union through my baptism with my God. This I say with a joyful mouth. In the cross, in sadness, anxiety, and need, I am baptised, for that I am happy. The joy stays eternally.'

'I am baptised, if I die immediately, what harm to me is the cool grave? I know my homeland and my inheritance that I have with God in heaven. After my death is prepared for me, the joy of heaven, the celebratory dress.'



RIGHT Drawing of flowers in vase. Attributed to the Ehre Vater Artist. Northampton County, Pennsylvania, c.1820. Watercolour and ink on wove paper. 21.6 x 16.5cm.

LEFT Birth and baptismal certificate for Catharine Elser (b. August 22, 1795). Attributed to the Ehre Vater Artist (active c 1722-1828). Warwick Township, Lancaster County, c 1795. Watercolour and ink on laid paper 33cm x 35.6cm. The image of the horse and rider, which appears in another certificate produced in a different township within Lancaster County, was printed using a copper plate; the rest of the artwork was done by hand. The trees are especially suggestive of embroidery or you could replicate them with very fine silk thread for the marks and silk paint.



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON. PG-497

artist, so the same type of bird or flower looks unique in the work of each maker.” Although some artists employed a subtler colour palette, one of the chief characteristics of Pennsylvania German fraktur is exuberant use of colour. If one had to choose dominant colours, then vermilion or ‘yellow-red’, Prussian Blue, and ochre come to mind, with all the variant shades those primaries might produce either through dilution or mixing. Scientists, conservators and curators have studied the media used by fraktur artists for decades and concluded that they used commercially available pigments, bought from local shops and peddlers

or by mail order from Europe. Watercolours for domestic use became available in America by 1820. An advertisement by a chemist in the Pennsylvania Journal of March 29, 1764 lists items ‘Just imported in the last vessels at Philadelphia, from London....’. Colours mentioned include white lead, red lead, ochre, umber, Spanish brown, Prussian blue, verdigris, lamp black, ivory black, smalt, carmine, ultramarine, vermilion, flake white and Indian ink (see colours on page 23). This palette remained fairly unchanged throughout the eighteenth century until the discovery of new pigments and material such as cobalt and chrome. Sometimes, gum ➡

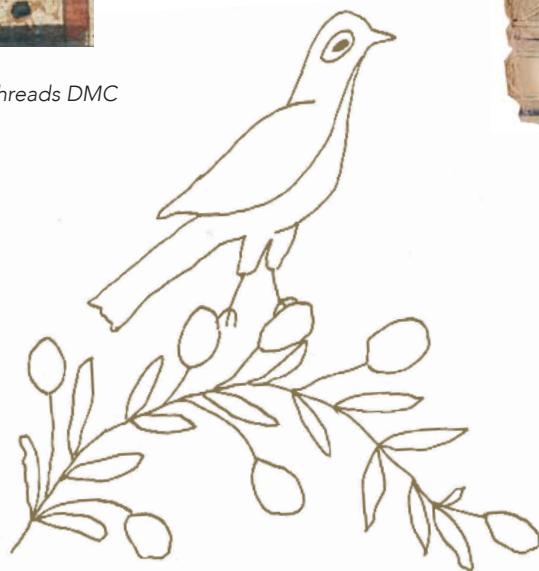


RIGHT Drawing of a house and barn for Cornelius Heiler or Catharine Raser. Possibly Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, March 4, 1848. Watercolour and ink on wove paper, 19cm x 25.4cm. An embroiderer might take inspiration from this curiously romantic drawing: the delicate foliage, reminiscent of lapis inlay, the improbably tall birdhouse, the stars and the simple shapes of the buildings. Note the tiny details of the the blinds and the potted plant on the windowsill.

LEFT Drawing for Daniel Borckholter. Possibly Berks County, Pennsylvania, 1811. Watercolour and ink on laid paper. 14cm x 10.2cm. So many ideas for embroidery leap out of this charming, humorous little drawing: the patterned pitcher, leaf trails, the bird and owl, the dahlia-like flower top right. the stem flanked by tiny 'French knots'.



All threads DMC



Arabic was mixed with the pigments which made the colours more intense.

Fraktur were created mostly on laid paper until around 1820, when wove paper became more readily available. In laid paper you can see the lines (see the fraktur on page 21) whereas wove paper has a smoother surface, making it ideal for

watercolour and ink. Most early fraktur was created entirely freehand, with the occasional addition of printed images, such as the horse and rider on the fraktur on page 28, or the use of woodblocks to print motifs. Some artists covered nearly all of the paper with decoration, others had a sparer style. It has been noted ➡



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: PROMISED GIFT OF JOAN AND VICTOR JOHNSON, PROMISED GIFT-660

ABOVE Birth and death certificate for Samuel R. Stiles (b. April 12, 1805). Burlington County, New Jersey. c. 1806. Watercolour and ink on laid paper. 18.4cm x 22.9cm.

*'No more the pleasant Child is seen
To please it's [sic] Parents Eye.
The tender plant so fresh and green
is gone into Eternity.'*

The elaborate borders and delicate branches resemble textile braids and embroidery. This is not a Pennsylvania German fraktur, but an example of a distinctive group of fraktur made for Quaker families in Burlington county.



that the decoration is, very often, purely decorative and surprisingly lacking in any connection to any religious texts which may be incorporated.

For the embroiderer, fraktur offers endless inspiration. Many of the motifs will be familiar to quilters – the tulips, pairs of confronting birds, trails of leaves and flowers, angels, fantastical fish, mermaid and people. Borders play an important part – around hearts, around the edges – some intricately patterned, some painted a single colour. Examples of how these might be translated into stitch can be seen in these pages as well as in the enclosed foldout.

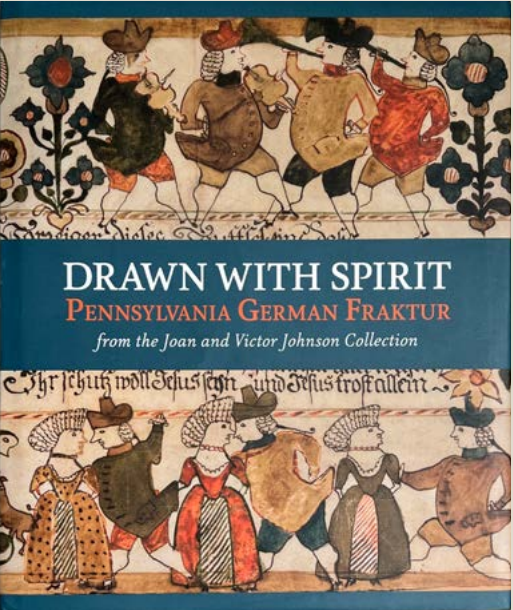
In *Drawn to Stitch*, there is an interview by Ann Percy with collectors Joan and Victor Johnson, whose collection forms the book and has been promised in its entirety to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. When asked what they thought people might get out of seeing their collection hung at the Museum, Joan Johnson replied:

"I think...the public will see what an interesting, intelligent, creative group of people the Pennsylvania Germans were, how much they were like us, how much they enjoyed creating, how proud they were of their children. People looking at the fraktur will be able to identify with it...People of German descent are still everywhere in the greater Philadelphia area, and I think they'll relate to the collection and be proud of their heritage." ❖

With heartfelt thanks to Mrs Joan Johnson and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. This article has drawn heavily on the majestic book by Lisa Minardi, *Drawn with Spirit* (see below). Browse philamuseum.org to see other examples of fraktur in their collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Drawn with Spirit (see below).
Richard Hofstadter *America at 1750, A Social Portrait*.
Lisa Minardi and Joan Irving *The Changing Nature of Fraktur Studies* (*Winterthur Primer, Antiques & Fine Art*).
[Link to a 1797 map of Pennsylvania](http://link.to.a.1797.map.of.pennsylvania.digital.libraries.psu.edu/digital/collection/maps1/id/30069/)



Produced by the
Publishing Department
Philadelphia Museum of Art
ISBN 978-0-87633-262-7 (PMA)
ISBN 978-0-300-21952-1 (Yale)