The Watercolors of Durs Rudy
New Discoveries in Fraktur

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The great Pennsylvania antiquarian Henry C. Mercer recalled being “astonished and delighted” in August 1897, when he saw a collection of frakturs for the first time, as preserved in a Mennonite community in central Bucks County.1 A month earlier, Edwin Atlee Barber had acquired an 1804 Vorschrift for the Philadelphia Museum of Art because of the striking similarity of its decorative motifs to those on examples of Pennsylvania pottery that he had collected for the Museum.2 Before long, several pioneering collections of Pennsylvania German folk art, a number of which were notable for the illuminated or decorated texts that Mercer called fraktur,3 were formed.

Today, newsworthy discoveries in the field of American folk art, particularly in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century materials, are increasingly rare. This is especially true of those areas identified and collected early in the history of the field. Interest in the folk arts of the Pennsylvania Germans dates back at least one hundred years; while previously undocumented works of significance emerge from obscurity from time to time, highly important discoveries seldom occur, as they did when Mercer and Barber first encountered examples of fraktur.

BIBLICAL TEXT
Lehigh County, Pennsylvania
c. 1830
ink and watercolor on paper
7 x 10
Private collection

As in the other recently discovered works by Durs Rudy, this depiction of Christ’s Crucifixion is a complex work. This recently found fraktur is rich in architectural details.
For these reasons, the discovery of three exceptionally well-preserved but unrecorded frakturs attributed to the gifted artist Durs Rudy recently captured the imagination of scholars and collectors alike. Apparently tucked away for years among the papers of an old Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, family, Rudy’s illuminated biblical texts were discovered just prior to an estate auction to which the family’s property had been consigned.¹⁴ One of the new discoveries depicts Christ’s Crucifixion (Mark 15:34), another, a baptism (Matthew 28:19), and the third, the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:12–15). Each watercolor bears Rudy’s initials and one is dated 1830. Their appearance is especially noteworthy because they provide additional insights into the work of an artist who has intrigued students of the field for many years, but about whom there remains considerable uncertainty.

Although the term “fraktur” gained currency in the field of American folk art following its adoption by Henry Mercer in 1897, its use is recorded in Pennsylvania much earlier.¹⁵ Originally a reference to a style of ornate “broken” lettering, the term today encompasses a wonderful variety of illuminated texts, including writing samplers (Vorschriften), decorated baptismal certificates (Taufscheine), and a host of other forms both sacred and secular, from bookplates to house blessings.¹⁶ Frequently rendered in brilliant watercolors and sharing a traditional corpus of folk motifs, frakturs provide a colorful record of Pennsylvania life, faith, and art from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries.

Durs Rudy was first identified in print as a creator of fraktur by Donald Shelley in 1961.¹⁷ However, since the name was borne both by a father and his son, some uncertainty exists as to which Durs Rudy is to be associated with the fraktur attributed to this hand. The Rudy family arrived in America aboard The Commerce in 1803, disembarking at the port of Philadelphia.¹⁸

They are colorful, spirited, and immensely appealing works of art.
Durs Rudy, Sr. (1766–1843), was Swiss in origin; his son (1789–1850) was born in Baden. According to longstanding family tradition, Durs Rudy, Jr., was an artist “who sketched and painted [the] local countryside.” Although it is to the younger Rudy, tavern owner, shopkeeper, and organist at Neff’s Church, N. Whitehall Township in Lehigh County, that the most ambitious of these frakturs have been attributed, Frederick S. Weiser warns that we must be careful not to assume that the son created them all. Indeed, according to Weiser, Durs Rudy, Sr., was the more skilled artist and penman of the two.

Most recorded frakturs attributed to Durs Rudy fall into one of two main categories. In the first, consisting of Taufscheine, bookplates, and a house blessing, the text clearly dominates the composition. Rendered expertly in a distinctive German cursive hand with splendid initial letters, these frakturs are rather formal certificates, reminiscent of European examples. Framing the text of each Taufschein, the house blessing, and at least one of the recorded bookplates is a distinguishing pair of columns with transom, decorated in a restrained fashion with small flowers and, occasionally, other elements. Of these, the birth and baptismal certificate of William Deibert (c. 1815), formerly in the noted collection of Henry S. Borneman and now at The Free Library of Philadelphia, is the most exuberantly drawn and includes a floral garland and the initial “W” richly bedecked with flowers. However, an unrecorded Taufschein made for Michael Finck and now in a private collection lacks Rudy’s characteristic columns.

The three newly discovered frakturs by Durs Rudy fall into the sec-
...most fraktur artists preferred to address religious doctrine symbolically rather than directly. Durs Rudy is not typical in this regard.

In seeking to distinguish between the two artists, it is tempting to assign one format to the father and the other to the son. All of the documented Taufscheine and bookplates were created between 1806 and c. 1821. The dated drawings, on the other hand, are from 1830 to 1842. At first blush, it would appear that these are two separate bodies of work, each executed within circumscribed periods of time. A further consideration of the content of these frakturs, however, undermines this assumption. The use of the distinguishing columns and crosspiece to frame the textual portions of the Taufscheine is a common feature of several of the biblical drawings as well. Indeed, it is the use of this almost identical device in both categories of composition that clearly binds the two formats together. Other stylistic similarities are present as well, including the use of a closely related group of delightful architectural elements in some examples of both categories of Rudy's watercolors. While several of the Taufscheine contain somewhat more refined and carefully drawn calligraphy than the frakturs of the later group, the style of writing is remarkably consistent throughout Rudy's work. Although it may be possible that father and son worked closely together or even collaborated on some frakturs, I believe that it is difficult to sustain a clear and convincing case for two artists.

Until a dated example is found which places that object clearly outside the possible working life of either Durs Rudy, Jr., or Durs Rudy, Sr., or some other form of documentation appears, it will be difficult to make a positive identification. Notwithstanding this uncertainty, Rudy family tradition and the weight of scholarly opinion hold that Durs Jr. created the extraordinary biblical drawings that are the emphasis of this essay.

Among the various categories of Pennsylvania German frakturs, detailed renderings drawn from biblical narrative are among the most rare. Although illustrated Bibles and printed religious tracts were commonly available during the period that frakturs flourished in Pennsylvania, hand-drawn depictions of sacred history are very infrequently encountered. To be sure, occasional examples of this kind of material may be found in the great manuscript illuminations of the Ephrata Cloister and from the hand of such fraktur artists as Friedrich Krebs and Arnold Puwelle, as well as Ludwig Denig, whose hand-drawn illustrated Bible was recently published by the Museum of American Folk Art and the Pennsylvania German Society in association with Hudson Hills Press. The familiar imagery of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is also not un-
TAUFSCHEIN FOR MICHAEL FINCK
Probably Lehigh County, Pennsylvania
C. 1815
Ink and watercolor on paper
8 1/4 x 12 1/2" 
Private collection

Taufscheine were occasionally commissioned well after the birth and baptism of the child. This Taufschein includes architectural elements typical of Rudy's work.

TAUFSCHEIN FOR WILLIAM DEIBERT
Lehigh County, Pennsylvania
C. 1815
Watercolor and ink on paper
7 1/4 x 13" 
The Free Library of Philadelphia

Despite the formality of this certificate, which records the infant's birth and baptism in 1814, it exemplifies Durs Rudy's colorfully exuberant style.

TAUFSCHEIN FOR MICHAEL FINCK
Probably Lehigh County, Pennsylvania
C. 1815–25
Ink and watercolor on paper
8 1/4 x 6 1/2" 
The Free Library of Philadelphia

An illumination of one of Rudy's favorite biblical texts (Matthew 28:18–19), in which Christ sends his disciples forth to preach the Gospel.

BIBLICAL TEXT
Probably Lehigh County, Pennsylvania
C. 1810
Ink and watercolor on paper
8 1/4 x 6 1/2" 
The Free Library of Philadelphia

The Free Library of Philadelphia

A representation of Adam and Eve formerly in the Unger collection and now at Winterthur; and a depiction of a baptism originally in the collection of Elie Nadelman and Maxim Karolik and now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. To these important examples must now be added the three wonderful watercolors discovered last year.

The Free Library of Philadelphia

The use of fraktur by Durs Rudy to promulgate the Christian faith may be seen in the texts he chose to illustrate. These include Chapter 28 of the gospel of St. Matthew, in which Christ sends his disciples forth to preach the gospel, one example of which was formerly in the Borneman collection and is now at The Free Library of Philadelphia; a representation of Adam and Eve formerly in the Unger collection and now at Winterthur; and a depicition of a baptism originally in the collection of Elie Nadelman and Maxim Karolik and now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. To these important examples must now be added the three wonderful watercolors discovered last year.

Ink and watercolor on paper
8 1/4 x 6 1/2"

The Free Library of Philadelphia

As is common in other frakturs of the era, Durs Rudy's figures are presented anachronistically in the dress of the late eighteenth century rather than in that of the period described. Generally drawn in profile, Rudy's figures each have characteristically large, square jaws and large eyes. His is a colorful world. The three newly found frakturs are especially interesting for their architectural features as well.

Each of the three recently discovered frakturs shown here illustrate a different theme from one of the three Synoptic Gospels, themes to which the artist regularly returned. The Crucifixion, for example, is closely reminiscent of a panel in a Lehigh County Historical Society metamorphosis by Rudy; the baptism recalls the Rudy fraktur in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; and the Prodigal Son theme mirrors another Rudy metamorphosis. Despite the similarities, these images are more complex and more fully developed than those of the previously recorded frakturs.

When Donald Shelley first documented the work of Durs Rudy he referred to the artist as "mysterious," perhaps because his work is so different from that of other fraktur artists.

SUMMER 1993 FOLK ART 37
Since 1961, when Shelley made this observation, however, we have come to know Rudy better, from the richness of the legacy he has left. The three frakturs recently discovered serve to confirm the conclusion that he was a richly gifted artist who was committed to church and community.

NOTES
1 Henry C. Mercer, “The Survival of the Mediaeval Art of Illuminative Writing among the Pennsylvania Germans,” American Philosophical Society Proceedings 36 (September 17, 1897), p. 425. (Also issued by the Bucks County Historical Society as No. 2 in its “Contributions to American History” series.)
3 Mercer, op. cit., p. 424. Mercer and other early scholars used the spelling “fraktur.”
5 See William M. Fahnestock, “An Historical Sketch of Ephrata; together with a Concise Account of The Seventh Day Baptist Society of Pennsylvania,” in Felix Reichmann and Eugene E. Doll, Ephrata As Seen by Contemporaries (Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 1953), p. 168. Originally published in 1835, the article refers to the Fraktur schrifften at Ephrata Cloister: “large sheets of elegant penmanship, or inkpaintings, — many of which are texts from the scriptures, done in very handsome manner, in ornamented gothic letters. . . .”
6 For a discussion of the origin and use of the term “fraktur,” see Donald A. Shelley, The Fraktur-Writings of Illuminated Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Germans (Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 1961) pp. 22–23. There is no general agreement among American scholars as to proper usage for the term or how completely it is to be anglicized. It often appears with an uppercase “F,” as it would appear in German. In its plural form, it appears with and without the final “s.” In addition to Pennsylvania, the art of fraktur flourished in other places where Pennsylvania Germans settled, including Virginia and Ontario.
10 Ibid.

DURS RUDY'S CHORAL BOOK
Title page
Lehigh County, Pennsylvania c. 1832
Ink and watercolor on paper
In four parts, each 4 x 6½" Opens to 4 x 12½"'
Lehigh County Historical Society

Providing religious instruction and lessons in Christian morality, the metemorphosis allowed the reader to turn its half pages up or down to view a progression of changing images.