

# The Watercolors of Durs Rudy New Discoveries in Fraktur

GERARD C. WERTKIN



**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.

**T**he 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.



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.<sup>4</sup> One of the new discoveries depicts Christ's Crucifixion (Mark 15:34), another, a baptism (Mat-

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works of art.**

thew 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>







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One of three newly discovered frakturs by Rudy, this work illuminates the story of the Prodigal Son, which is found in Luke, Chapter 15. It reads clockwise from the bottom right. Durs Rudy has initialed and dated this work.

Durs Rudy, Sr. (1766–1843), was Swiss in origin; his son (1789–1850) was born in Baden.<sup>9</sup> According to longstanding family tradition, Durs Rudy, Jr., was an artist “who sketched and painted [the] local countryside.”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, according to Weiser, Durs Rudy, Sr., was the more skilled artist and penman of the two.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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-





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

In this newly found illumination of Matthew 28:19, Rudy returns to a favorite theme. A similar depiction of a baptism by Rudy may be found in a fraktur now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but without the architectural detail shown here.

ond category of this work. Unlike the *Taufscheine*, these drawings are fully developed compositions based on biblical narrative and presented either separately, in series, or, in several known examples, as a metamorphosis.<sup>14</sup> In these, it is the imagery, rather than the text, that is emphasized. They are colorful, spirited, and immensely appealing works of art.

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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 sepa-

rate 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 fraktur, 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.<sup>15</sup> The familiar imagery of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is also not un-





**BIBLICAL TEXT**  
Probably Lehigh County,  
Pennsylvania  
c. 1810  
Ink and watercolor on paper  
8 3/4 x 6 1/4"  
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.

**TAUFSCHHEIN 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.



JOAN BRODERICK

**TAUFSCHHEIN FOR MICHAEL  
FINCK**  
Probably Lehigh County,  
Pennsylvania  
c. 1815-25  
Ink and watercolor on paper  
8 3/4 x 12 1/4"  
Private collection

*Taufschheine* were occasionally  
commissioned well after the  
birth and baptism of the child.  
This *Taufschheine* includes archi-  
tectural elements typical of  
Rudy's work.



commonly seen. These, however, are exceptions to the rule. Perhaps adhering to Protestant scruples against idolatry, most fraktur artists preferred to address religious doctrine symbolically rather than directly. Durs Rudy is not typical in this regard. He turned regularly to the principal events of the New Testament and to the promulgation of religious doctrine.

The use of fraktur by Durs Rudy to promulgate the Christian faith may be seen in the texts he chose to illuminate. 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 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.

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; 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.



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.)
- 2 Barber Correspondence file, Letter to John T. Morris, July 8, 1897. Research Archives, Philadelphia Museum of Art. Quoted in Jack L. Lindsey, "Selected Works by African-American Folk Artists: A Recent Installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art," *Folk Art*, vol. 17 (Winter 1992/93), p. 63.
- 3 Mercer, op. cit., p. 424. Mercer and other early scholars used the spelling "fraktur."
- 4 See Dick Cowen, "Folk artist's tracts bring \$156,000 bid," *The (Allentown) Morning Call* (February 8, 1992), pp. B3, B17; Dick Cowen, "High bid attributed to frakturs' content," *The Morning Call* (February 19, 1992), p. B4; Lita Solis-Cohen, "A Folk Art Find," *Maine Antiques Digest* (April, 1992), p. 36-B. The auction took place at Zettlemoyer's Auction Center in Fogelsville, Pa. on February 6, 1992. The sellers chose not to be identified.
- 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 or Illuminated Manuscripts of the Pennsylvania Germans*

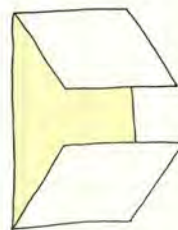
(Allentown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, 1961) pp. 22–23. There is no general agreement among American scholars as to proper usage for the term or how completely it is to be anglicized. It often appears with an uppercase "F" as it would appear in German. In its plural form, it appears 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.

- 7 Shelley, op. cit., p. 121. Recognition in print of Rudy as an artist, although not with specific reference to fraktur, occurred much earlier; see Charles Rhoads Roberts and others, *History of Lehigh County, Pennsylvania* (Allentown, Pa.: Lehigh Valley Publishing Company, 1914), vol. 2, p. 467.
- 8 Ralph Beaver Strassburger, *Pennsylvania German Pioneers* (Morristown, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society, 1934), vol. 3, pp. 132–133.
- 9 Beatrice B. Garvan, *The Pennsylvania German Collection* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982), p. 367.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Scott T. Swank and others, *Arts of the Pennsylvania Germans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company for the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1983), note to Plate 34.
- 12 Corinne P. Earnest and Russell D. Earnest, *Papers for Birth Days: Guide to the Fraktur Artists and Scribes* (Albuquerque: Russell D. Earnest Associates, 1989), p. 344.
- 13 Frederick S. Weiser and Howell J. Heaney, *The Pennsylvania German Fraktur of The Free Library of Philadelphia* (Brenigsville, Pa.: The Pennsylvania German Society and The Free Library of Philadelphia, 1976), vol. 1, pl. 57.
- 14 Beatrice B. Garvan and Charles F. Hummel, *The Pennsylvania Germans: A Celebration of Their Arts 1683–1850* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1982), p. 163, pl. 120, p. 171. Only one documented drawing by Rudy does not have a religious theme. It is a charming portrait of General Washington, now in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- 15 Don Yoder, ed., *The Picture Bible of Ludwig Denig: A Pennsylvania German Emblem Book*, (New York: Hudson Hills Press in Association with the Museum of American Folk Art and the Pennsylvania German Society, 1990).

## METAMORPHOSES

Lehigh County, Pennsylvania  
c. 1832  
Ink and watercolor on paper  
In four parts, each 4 x 6 1/4"  
Opens to 4 x 12 1/2"  
Lehigh County Historical  
Society

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



Top half page opened



Both half pages opened



## DURS RUDY'S CHORAL BOOK

Title page  
Lehigh County, Pennsylvania  
1814  
Ink on paper, leather bound  
6 x 11"  
Lehigh County Historical  
Society

One of two hand-written music books by Rudy in the collection of The Lehigh County Historical Society. Rudy, a Lutheran, served as organist of a church in N. Whitehall Township, Pa.





Half pages closed