

Amanda Rae Perron's Fraktur Art

*Claremont artist keeps
an old tradition alive in her paintings*

By LAURA JEAN WHITCOMB

Photography by JON GILBERT FOX



Ich Glaube (Apostle's Creed in German), watercolor and ink on tea stained paper

Amanda Rae Perron is an old soul. She prefers dark colors, lights kerosene lanterns, crochets and loves history.

Although age is just a number, you're not prepared when Amanda, 29, unveils her latest creation. She's working on a wedding certificate for a friend. The text in the center looks gothic, and is surrounded by an elaborate border of folk art flowers, earthly elements (suns and moons) and birds. The colors, dark and elegant, pop on the antique brown paper. It's a stunning piece of fraktur art, executed entirely by hand. And you would think that a person twice her age created it after a lifetime of practice.

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Connecting to the Past

If you've ever seen a hex circle on a barn or garage, you've seen a version of fraktur. The signs were a tradition of the Pennsylvania Dutch, and so is fraktur, an 18th century and 19th century folk art that elaborately combines calligraphic text, abstract borders and primitive symbolic figures.

Amanda was first introduced to fraktur in 1999. Her father, Ray Perron, was browsing through an *Early American Life* magazine at the Fiske Free Library in Claremont and found an example of an early fraktur. Amanda, who had been drawing since she was 4, was struck by the painting. The style of art — with its symbolic meanings, dark colors and a history all its own — matched her interests.



"Serenity," watercolor and ink on tea stained paper



"Flower Faces," watercolor and ink on tea stained paper. This is considered folk art; traditional frakturs wouldn't have faces on the flowers.

"There is something deep inside me that longs to connect to the past," Amanda says. "Fraktur and folk art speak to my soul. As I paint each piece, I think about living back in the 17th and 18th centuries when immigrants to the New World enjoyed a simpler way of life."

And when Amanda sat down to draw her first fraktur — a little flower — "it came out naturally," she recalls. That doesn't mean it was picture perfect; Amanda was using an old-fashioned pen handle with a brass tip, dipping it in an inkwell and gently pressing the tip to regulate ink flow. "If the tip gets stuck in the paper, ink splatters and you're done."

Amanda found a woman in Walpole, N.H., who drew fraktur but did not teach it. She did want to learn how to crochet, so they swapped knowledge. To learn more about the art, Amanda purchased books on fraktur, soon buying every volume the Landis Valley Museum in Lancaster, Penn., had to offer. "We'd go through one book, call them back and ask, 'What else have you got?'" says Ray, a woodcarver and antique collector.

Nothing Is without Meaning

While poring over examples of the art, Amanda taught herself another language: German. She learned about the different groups of fraktur artists — Amish, Mennonite and the Ephrata Cloister — and could recognize the individual types of fraktur, down to the particular colors of each county. The Perron family, including mother Cheryl and sister Naomi, took a trip to

Did You Know?

Most major American museums, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, include fraktur in their collections.

Lancaster to visit the Landis Valley Museum, a living history museum that collects, conserves, exhibits and interprets Pennsylvania German material, culture, history and heritage. "We toured the farmland of Pennsylvania, stopped at a root beer stand for homemade root beer and visited with people," says Amanda.

Working with huge sheets of Carson watercolor paper, Amanda experimented with tea stains to provide an antiqued look. "I was told to use a hot tea stain, but hot bubbles and feathers the paper so it won't hold the ink properly," she says. "I tried sponging a cold tea stain and that worked." Darker stain looks older, but Amanda can create a lighter stain for those who don't like the look. "Some folks say, 'Oh, it has a mark on it. A water spot.' They don't realize that it is supposed to be there."

Once the paper is dry, Amanda uses a pencil to sketch the fraktur. Then she gets out her wooden ink box full of Higgins ink in a variety of dark colors — brown, black, red, blue — and selects brown to ink the design and black for the text. Then she'll use watercolor paints to fill in the flowers, birds and other embellishments. She'll spend 20 to 30 hours on a fraktur.

Fraktur

(Noun): From the Latin word *fractura* ("breaking"), fraktur is a German word which describes an antiquated style of black letter writing. This, however, is its literal definition. Fraktur has commonly come to mean a type of certificate, most popular from the late 1700s to 1900, used by the Pennsylvania Dutch to document births, deaths, family genealogies and land purchases. The most delightful — and highly prized by collectors — of these types of fraktur are those bordered and illustrated with Pennsylvania Dutch symbols.

— *definition from About.com*

Every fraktur element has a meaning. For example, with the hex signs, tulips meant faith, stars meant luck and birds meant happiness. The colors also had meaning: Red for emotions, yellow for love of man and the sun, green for growing things, blue for protection, white for purity and brown for Mother Earth. Whether the fraktur artist was creating a birth certificate, bookplate or love letter, everything — right down to the border — was chosen for a reason.

This is why Amanda loves fraktur — it tells a story, and she can tell a story through her painting. “Modern art is great, but it doesn’t really tell a story,” she says. “We don’t want to lose the history that’s been passed on.” She describes how Mennonite schoolteachers would create a fraktur as a reward for a student. “I can’t help but think how creative they were in providing inspiration and direction to their young students.”

Father and Daughter

Frakturs were kept in the family Bible or in a hope chest. “The Amish don’t frame anything. It’s considered worldly,” she explains, noting that many of the 18th century frakturs are not symmetrical because framing wasn’t a consideration for these artists. Amanda’s creations are balanced because eventually they find their way into frames.

This is where Ray’s wood carving expertise comes in handy. His basement workshop includes a table saw; a stack of hardwood picture frame moldings from Chester, Vt.; can after can of stain and paint; and a jigsaw he created that is, in itself, a fine piece of Yankee ingenuity. “I worked in a machine shop for years,” he says.

Ray hand paints each frame to match Amanda’s frakturs. He uses all archival materials, and, depending on the subject of the fraktur, includes hand carved details on each corner, such as a star. And speaking of those corners, they are tight and accurate. “It took me time to perfect the technique,” Ray says. “People always ask, ‘How did you get the corner so tight?’”



“One Blood,” gouche on paper, is an Amanda original. Symbols and colors represent equality between cultures; we are all “one blood.”

It’s a nice father/daughter activity; creating art, preserving history and sharing it with others. It’s also nice for Amanda to be able to create and not worry about whether it will fit into a standard 8-by-10 frame. “I don’t think about size when I draw it,” she says. “I draw it and dad says, ‘How do you expect me to frame that?’ I do have some standard sizes like 8-by-10 and 11-by-14, but I like odd shapes and odd sizes and that’s the reason for dad’s frames.”

Away from The Quill

When she’s not painting, Amanda and her sister Naomi teach piano and flute to kids of all ages. The Sounds of Music studio is upstairs in the family home in Claremont, and 40 students visit every week. Amanda is also an accomplished seamstress, making her own clothing as well as for others. She’s been burning the midnight oil creating dresses for two upcoming weddings.

But it is the fraktur that delights

and inspires her. Amanda will spend hours with clients discussing what they would like incorporated into the painting, such as children’s names on the branches of a tree. “It’s the way they used to do it,” she says.

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Take a Trip into the Past

Landis Valley Museum, a Pennsylvania German living history village, is a place where the present meets the past. The museum contains a diverse collection of artifacts and historic buildings, telling a simple story with a common theme: The historical identity of the 18th and 19th century German population in Pennsylvania and Lancaster County. Learn more at www.landisvalleymuseum.org

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Amanda, at home in Claremont, holds some of her art meticulously framed by her father Ray.

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Amanda is currently exhibiting at the Stonewall Gallery in Grantham, N.H.; the Northlight Digital Gallery Space in the Tip Top Media & Arts building in White River Junction, Vt.; the Vermont State Craft Gallery in Windsor, Vt.; and the Landis Valley Museum.

"Amanda's work hangs in local galleries so we can see reactions of people who appreciate art. Purchase is the compliment," says Ray. He tells the story of a man from Quechee, Vt. who took one look at one of Amanda's folk art frakturs, a little horse holding a giant flower, and said, "I want it." Another fellow on eBay chased one of Amanda's frakturs until the very end of the auction because it reminded him of a hex sign that was auctioned from his uncle's farm in Pennsylvania. "We love to hear that the art is hanging in a prominent place in their home."

Amanda is one of the few artists keeping the tradition alive — and creating her own place in

fraktur history. She paints the traditional frakturs with dark colors — deep red, forest green, brown and mustard yellow — but really expresses herself in her folk art paintings.

"Bright orange is one of my favorite colors," she says. "Whimsical dancing horses, nodding flower faces and geometric shapes all play a part in my more contemporary folk art paintings. Some of these are created with strong internal interpretations while others are just for the whimsical delight." UVL



"JoySong," watercolor and ink on tea stained paper