

**PASSAGE IV**

This passage describes the American folk art, fraktur.

Fraktur is a uniquely American folk art rooted in the Pennsylvania Dutch (Pennsylvania German) culture. In German, *fraktur* refers to a particular typeface used by printers. Derived from the Latin *fractura*, “breaking apart,” *fraktur* suggests that the letters are broken apart and reassembled into designs. Fraktur as a genre of folk art refers to a text (usually religious) that is decorated with symbolic designs.

- 5 Fraktur was primarily a private art dealing with the role of the individual in Pennsylvania Dutch society and its various rites of passage: birth and baptism; puberty and schooling; courtship and marriage; and death and funeral rites. Special *fraktur* documents were associated with each: the *Taufschein* or Birth-Baptismal Certificate, the *Vorschrift* for the student, the *Trauschein* for marriage, and the *Denkmal* or Memorial. Of these, the *Taufschein* and the *Vorschrift* are the most numerous. Wedding and death certificates are rare because of
- 10 the availability of alternative forms of memorialization, the wedding plate with its humorous inscription and the engraved tombstone.

- In Pennsylvania during the early settlement era, *fraktur* art flowered, at least in part, to fill an artistic vacuum that existed in the everyday world of the Pennsylvania Dutch farmer. While *fraktur* was produced by folk artists, these were not studio artists producing public art for a wealthy clientele, but individuals who, in
- 15 addition to their major occupation, produced private art for individuals. The great majority were either ministers in the Lutheran or Reformed Church or schoolmasters in parochial schools. Because of the close association with religious life, *fraktur* was permitted as an art form in a culture that frowned upon public display in general. As art, *fraktur* both delights the eye and refreshes the spirit with its bright colors, ingenious combination of text and pictures, and symbols drawn from folk culture. For example, mermaids
- 20 were often put on baptismal certificates to represent water spirits that, in Germanic mythology, were believed to deliver newborns to midwives who then took them to their waiting mothers. Still, though art, *fraktur* was rarely displayed even in the home. Instead, it was usually kept in Bibles or other large books, pasted onto the inside lids of blanket chests, or rolled up in bureau drawers.

- Fraktur is uniquely Pennsylvania Dutch, but manuscript art did develop in other American sectarian groups.
- 25 The New England Puritans decorated family registers, the Shakers produced “spirit drawings,” and the Russian-German Mennonites created *Zierschriften* or ornamental writings.