



RECORDS OF PASSAGE:

NEW ENGLAND ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS IN THE FRAKTUR TRADITION

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design
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"Records of Passage," a beautiful term, accurately describes the work in this exhibition. A less elegant title might be "Vital Statistics," for this is an exposition of statistical material. It is a display of the records New Englanders once kept of the landmarks in their lives. Recorded in these small documents are the principal events of family history.

One little watercolor tells us that Nancy White was born on May 7, 1769. Another memorializes Malachi Brown, who, with his brother William, died in 1789. A larger work records the fact that Sergeant Major Winthrop Eager retired from the U.S. Infantry on May 22, 1811, and two dozen or more set out the essential details - marriages, births and deaths - of family life. As a group, these watercolors and drawings have a gentle innocence that is beguiling. They are fresh, optimistic, and wonderfully evocative of the time in which they were made. They commemorate the energy and enthusiasm of the first days of our Republic.

As common as these records were, no one has suggested a simple name that functionally describes them. Their Pennsylvania counterparts are called "frakturs," a title that is alien to me. It does not conjure up in my mind an expression of the unique vision of our young nation. It is too suave a word for the ordered clarity of New England pieces. "Fraktur" does not introduce a body of art that is as thrifty and straightforward as a Maine farmhouse. The New England records bide their time with becoming modesty until a title suggesting their local innocence comes to hand.

These watercolors and drawings were made in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Their range is as broad as the graphic arts of their time. The most common are the family records and their variants, the birth and death records. The residuum is almost too diverse to classify. It includes valentines, true love knots, copybooks, calligraphic exercises, schoolgirl maps, rewards of merit, and metamorphoses. There are decorated survey maps, trade cards, mottoes, and a large corpus relating to the death of George Washington. His place in the hearts of his countrymen is amply defined in delicate watercolors.

Presentation pieces expressing appreciation for services at a funeral exist, as do all manner of Masonic references. There are Masonic birth records, family records, commemorative drawings, and death records. I know of decorated manuscript music sheets, perpetual calendars, patriotic sayings, and even a pen and ink replica of an eighteenth century sampler. Finally, there are log books, account books, and bookplates.

Visually, the images range from firm graphic assertions to gentle aesthetic concoctions. Few are soft or sentimental. They follow established precedents which, in some cases, can be traced to England and the Continent. Much of the Masonic material and the true love knots are derived from English forms. Occasionally, a work is so

zany and idiosyncratic as to be fairly labeled "folk art." That term is too loosely applied these days, but where the maker follows a different drummer, his work may merit the title.

Not a great deal is known about the makers. Many of the pieces were the occasional work of schoolchildren. A few were produced by professional artists, some of whom can be identified by name. Moses Connor, a schoolteacher, worked in central New Hampshire about 1813; Moses Banks did illuminated surveys in southern Maine about the time of the Revolution; and William Saville, of Gloucester, Massachusetts, produced a large body of records and memorials early in the nineteenth century. A professional called the "Heart and Hand Artist" appears to be the most productive of all. His family records have been found from Maine to Ohio, and although he flourished in the 1850's - more than a decade after the tradition had come to an end - his work retains the firm linear control found early in the century. It is unmarred by the Victorian excesses of his time.

In an age when modesty is not at a premium, these demure water-colors are almost unknown. Because of their openness, their naive expectancy, and their utter charm, they deserve a wide audience.

Philip M. Isaacson
Guest Curator