

Antiques THAT Mark THE Moment

by Constance Hershey



Fig. 1: Fraktur for Anna Maria Schmitt, Christian Mertel, circa 1800. Watercolor on paper, 12 x 15 inches. Courtesy, Dietrich American Foundation.



The Philadelphia Antiques Show marks its fiftieth year in 2011. For half a century this highly regarded event has set the standard for excellence in the world of American antiques, featuring prominent dealers showcasing rare and extraordinary works. Since its inauguration in 1962, each show has also been distinguished by the presentation of a curated loan exhibit, with objects borrowed from museums, professional institutions, and private collections. This year, the loan exhibit brings together items associated with forms of celebration through centuries of American history.

For Pennsylvania-German communities of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, *frakturs* provided powerful testimony of a child's entry into a faith and a culture. These intricate hand-decorated documents recorded the birth and baptism of a child, citing the child's name, its parents and its community. Occasionally they also included the child's sponsors and the ministers who performed the baptism.

The birth and baptism of Anna Maria Schmitt in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, was celebrated around 1800 in a *fraktur* illustrated by Christian Mertel (Fig. 1), who emigrated from Germany to Pennsylvania in 1773 and died in 1802, and is believed to have worked as a schoolmaster in Dauphin County for most of his life. Like many *fraktur* artists, he drew from a rich vocabulary of motifs and employed them in a distinctive style. The opposing unicorns that flank the text like heraldic supporters are among his most striking images.

A pair of cans made by Philadelphia silversmith Philip Syng Jr., circa 1750–1755 (Fig. 2), is ornamented with a more conventional heraldic display of the arms of the families of Lynford Lardner and Elizabeth



Fig. 2: Pair of silver cans, Philip Syng, Jr., 1750–1755. H. 4 $\frac{3}{8}$, Diam. 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Left: Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of Lynford Lardner Starr (1992–156–2); Right: Independence National Historical Park (9965).



Fig. 3: Redware plate, Unknown maker, Pennsylvania, nineteenth century. Diam. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Private Collection.

Branson, married in Christ Church, Philadelphia, in 1749. The engraved shield identifies them as husband and wife cele-

brating their union. Lardner was an associate of Thomas, Richard, and John Penn, sons of the first governor of Pennsylvania, William



Fig. 4: Pair of footed goblets with overglaze portrait of Lafayette. Glass with copper lustre glaze. H. 4½, Diam. 3½ in. Probably English, ca. 1824. Courtesy, Germantown Historical Society.

Penn. Lardner came to Philadelphia to advance their interests and his own. The arms on his silver testified to his position among the city's elite.

In southeastern Pennsylvania, potters working in red clay created a wide range of objects for their community. Most of them have been lost, but many of those that survive are documents in clay, recording dates, celebrating events, or making wry comments on life, love, and society. An unknown potter scratched a richly patterned federal eagle into the surface of the plate in figure 3.

President Washington was young America's great icon; at his death he was mourned like a lost parent. When the Marquis de Lafayette, who had been Washington's aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War, came to the United States in 1824-1825 he was welcomed eagerly. Lafayette's year-long tour was by invitation from President Monroe to celebrate the nation's fiftieth anniversary. In every state, he was feted with parades, receptions, dinners, and balls. His visit is the first event in the new nation that can be said to have generated commercial souvenirs. Lafayette's image was seen on all sorts of



Fig. 5: Fireman's parade hat for the Liberty Company, containing labels of hatmaker Joshua Van Sant, and painter Geo. J. Roche and Son. Baltimore, 1820-1835. Painted pressed felt. H. 6½, Diam. Brim 12 in.

objects, often with variations on the slogan "Welcome America's Guest" (Fig. 4). Towns and cities throughout the states he visited still bear names like Fayette Street, Lafayette Hill, and Lafayette Park.

Parades like those generated by Lafayette's visit were an essential feature of nineteenth-century American life. They were as much about competition as celebration, and they gave clubs, professional organiza-

tions, and ethnic societies a chance to display their size and smartness. The fireman's parade hat shown here (Fig. 5) was worn by a member of the volunteer Liberty Fire Company of Baltimore between about 1820 and 1835. Its owner is unknown, but its maker is well documented. Joshua Van Sant apprenticed to a hatmaker in 1817, built a successful firm, and remained in the hatmaking trade until 1835. This elaborate maker's label suggests the stature of Van Sant's company. Van Sant retired from business in 1835 to seek political office, rising through county offices and boards to become state representative, mayor, and city comptroller before his death in 1881. The Liberty Fire Company was incorporated into the Baltimore City Fire Department in 1858, when the expanding city made a central fire department essential.

Urban growth made a reliable water supply a necessity by the end of the eighteenth century. In 1798, Philadelphia's government established a committee of prominent merchants to deal with the problem. After more than twenty years the Watering Committee celebrated the completion of a water management system whose technological innovation drew engineers and planners. The complex of classical buildings in a natural setting made the Fairmount Waterworks an idyllic subject for America's artists. (Fig. 6)

One of the most significant national celebrations of the nineteenth century was Philadelphia's Centennial Exhibition of 1876. Covering almost three hundred acres, comprising 249 buildings and structures beside the Schuylkill River, with roads, avenues, gardens, and a railroad, it opened on May 10 and closed on November 10, selling 9,910, 966 admission tickets. Today, the expansive green park that runs along the west bank of the Schuylkill River is an eloquent reminder of the fairgrounds that once stood there.


Not all fairs are monumental.



Fig. 6: *Fairmount waterworks, the dam, and the entrance to the Canal*, James Peale, Jr. (1789–1876), before 1823. Framed 27 x 37 inches. Photograph courtesy Schwarz Gallery.

Fig. 7: Selection of jointed wooden figures and accessories from the Humpty Dumpty Circus, Albert Schoenhut Company, Philadelphia, early twentieth century. Average H. 7 in. Courtesy, Philadelphia History Museum.



Philadelphia toymaker, Albert Schoenhut, made it possible for a child to own a personal circus. The Schoenhut Company's "Humpty Dumpty Circus" toys (1903–1935) featured a whole cast of performers, a menagerie of animals, and a range of circus accessories (Fig. 7). 

The Loan Exhibit of the 2011 Philadelphia

Antiques Show celebrates the artifacts of celebration with these and over fifty other objects.

Constance Hershey, curator for several private collections, is loan exhibit curator for the 2011 Philadelphia Antiques Show and has consulted for several years on exhibits for the show.