

# Abraham Claassen (1825-1910)

## “Artist and Naturalist”

by D. Frederick Dyck\*

In the Spring of 2022, my sister Christine (Dyck) Sehnert, arose early as usual to do her rounds on the farm: feeding the horses, donkeys, chickens, and the wild turkey and deer that come out of the timber by the creek. She then decided to bake one of her special “Mennonite coffee cakes” and take it on a visit to the cousins/friends/neighbors, Olin and Carol Claassen. The coffee cake is always welcome, and I think Christine is welcome too. She is one of those people others always like to see.

During the visit, Christine was shown an old Mennonite dowry chest acquired by Olin and Carol—not a family piece, but nice none-the-less. On the wall, Christine noticed two framed drawings that reminded her of drawings by our great-great-grandfather Abraham Claassen III (1825-1910) in our family history book titled *Jacob J. Dyck, Am Tract to America*. When she remarked about this, Carol told her that is exactly what they were, and further explained that she and Olin had two sketch books by Abraham as well as various other family booklets of writing and school book exercises.

Christine told me about this discovery in a telephone call. I asked her if she thought that Olin and Carol would permit her to photograph everything or otherwise obtain copies. Her response was immediate and positive. A few weeks later, I had received a couple dozen photos of Abraham Claassen’s Sketch Books #5 and #6 from 1836 and 1837. She also sent photos of the writing exercise booklets by his children.

In 1997, I had received a gift from cousin Arthur N. Claassen. It was a lovely reproduction of a sketch book by Abraham Claassen III. The cover of the booklet was titled *Copies of the Original Sketch book No. 4 of Abraham Claassen 1836 Age 11 Years*. Written on the inside cover

in Abraham’s beautiful calligraphy is: “Abr. Klaassen Simonsdorf, am 1. April 1836.” There follows ten color drawings of birds, flowers, and pen and ink drawings of a horse, boat, tree, and a castle. The back cover has “No. 4” in a wreath of leaves and is dated “am 23 Decbr. 1836.”

With the discovery of Sketch Books #5 and #6, it became clear that Abraham Claassen’s interest in art was more than a passing fancy. He had worked on his art for years and had shown a great deal of talent.

My impression had been that fine art among Mennonites in the form of drawing, watercolors, and painting was a fairly recent phenomenon, a twentieth-century development. Until then, I thought artistic inclinations were expressed in the well-known fraktur decoration of baptismal and wedding certificates, school achievement awards and workbooks, decoration of furniture such as dowry chests, and of course quilts. Wood carving and decorative barn painting are also Mennonite art forms.

Abraham was far from a professional artist, but his sketch books indicated a trend toward fine art. Had there been a Mennonite tradition of fine art prior to the twentieth century?

When it comes to such questions, I am fortunate to have a friend to consult who is an expert in this field. Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen is a retired art history professor at Bethel Mennonite College, North Newton, Kansas, and Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas. With her husband, John Janzen, Anthropology Professor Emeritus, Kansas University, Lawrence, Kansas, Reinhild co-authored the beautiful book *Mennonite Furniture*. When I asked Reinhild about Mennonites and fine art, she sent me a copy of her essay about Mennonite artists titled “Bildente Kunst” with an extensive bibliography in German and English.

Reinhild also sent a printout from the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO) regarding Mennonites and fine art. Although badly in need of an update (originally written in 1955), it is an enlightening article that supplies many leads for further research. Additionally, it provided a good background to better place the art of Abraham Claassen in a proper context.



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Art, as most people (including me) understand it, begins with the Renaissance. In Europe, the Renaissance was in full bloom when Martin Luther began the Reformation in 1517. It could be said that the Reformation was a natural result of the Renaissance with its return to classical thought, literature, and rhetoric. By extension, this would include the Mennonite Anabaptists and the "Radical Reformation" that began in 1525.

The Renaissance in art that began in Italy in the fourteenth century gradually spread to northern Europe. The art of the "Old Masters" coincided with the Reformation era. Mennonite artists of Holland and Flanders were not left out of this Renaissance continuation. They did, however, need to be circumspect because of the ongoing persecution of Mennonites and associated Anabaptist groups such as the Waterlanders. This was part of the Roman Catholic Inquisition begun in 1492 in Spain and the Counter Reformation pursued by Catholic armies of the Holy Roman Emperor. These religious wars reached their zenith in the Thirty Year's War, 1618-1648.

After this war ended with the Treaty of Westphalia, a gradual return to normalcy occurred. This period in northern Europe could be considered a "golden age" of Mennonite art and artists.

A harbinger of this "golden age" was Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn's (1606-1669) portrait of the Mennonite preacher Cornelius Claesc Anglo and his wife Aeltje Gerritsdr. Rembrandt completed this oil painting in 1641 and it hangs in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin, Germany. Later, in 1657, Rembrandt painted Trijn Jans (Catrina Hooqaet), wife of Mennonite preacher Hendrick Jacobsz Rooleeuw. This painting is in the Lord Penrhyn Collection in England.<sup>1</sup>

Some art historians and scholars question whether or not Rembrandt was a Mennonite. Only membership in a Mennonite church is the acceptable proof for them. However, the great biographer Hendrik van Loon says without hesitation that Rembrandt was a Mennonite. Church memberships were not always recorded because of possible persecution. The renowned Rembrandt scholar, F. Schmidt-Degener, says that Rembrandt was the "obvious product of a Mennonite environment." Further

Mennonite connections to Rembrandt are his patrons and the subjects of his art.<sup>2</sup>

Other notable Mennonite-Dutch artists of this period are Carl van Mander (1548-1606) and Lambert Jacobsz (ca1598-1636). In West Prussia, Germany, the destination of many Dutch and Flemish Mennonites in the late sixteenth century through the seventeenth century, Enoch Seemann Jr. (born 1694, Elbing, West Prussia—died 1744, London, England) is recognized as especially talented as a painter and engraver. His portrait of Sir Isaac Newton done in 1725 is noteworthy. Seemann was a member of the Danzig Mennonite Church.

The outstanding modern Mennonite artist from West Prussia is Marie Birckholz-Bestvater, born 1888 at Preussich Konigsdorf near Danzig, West Prussia. After studying in Berlin and München, Germany, 1908-1913, she lived and worked in the Danzig-Zoppot area of West Prussia. After World War II, Ms. Birckholtz-Bestvater immigrated in 1947 to Buenos Aires, Argentina. A few of her works of landscapes of West Prussia survived the war and were taken to Argentina. Today some of her paintings are in the Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas.<sup>3</sup>



*Portrait of Mennonite preacher Cornelius Class Anglo and his wife Aeltje Gerritsdr Schoten by Rembrandt, 1641.*

Moving east geographically, we come to the German-Russian Mennonites of the Chortitza, Molotschna, and Am Trakt colonies in Russia. Heinrich J. Janzen (1844-1904), a teacher and preacher in Gnadenfeld, Molotschna, Ukraine, is considered the first truly talented and skilled of the German-Russian Mennonite artists. Although without formal training, his Molotschna landscapes in oil were of high quality. Six of Janzen's oil paintings were brought to America and were last known to be in the possession of his brother's family.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nanne van der Zijpp, Dirk Kossen and Harold S. Bender, "Art (1955), GAMEO, 1955. Web 28 May 2022. <https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Art&oldid=166238>. Cited hereafter as GAMEO/Art/1955.

<sup>2</sup> GAMEO/Art/1955, hereinafter GAMEO.

<sup>3</sup> GAMEO.

<sup>4</sup> GAMEO.

Additional worthy Molotschna artists are Heinrich's son Hans Janzen. Twelve of his oils were brought to America. A student of Hans Janzen, Woldemar Neufeld, born 1909 at Waldheim, Molotschna, is thought to be the finest artist of the Russian-born Mennonites. He came to Canada in 1924. Neufeld is known for his color prints, watercolors, and landscapes in oil. His works are held by the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, and the Cleveland Museum of Public Art, and many private collectors.<sup>5</sup>

Unique among Russian-born Mennonite artists because of his sculpture is John P. Klassen, born 1880 in Kroingsgarten, Chortitza, Ukraine. Klassen came to the United States in 1924 and became professor of art at Bluffton College. A bust of Menno Simons is among his works.<sup>6</sup>

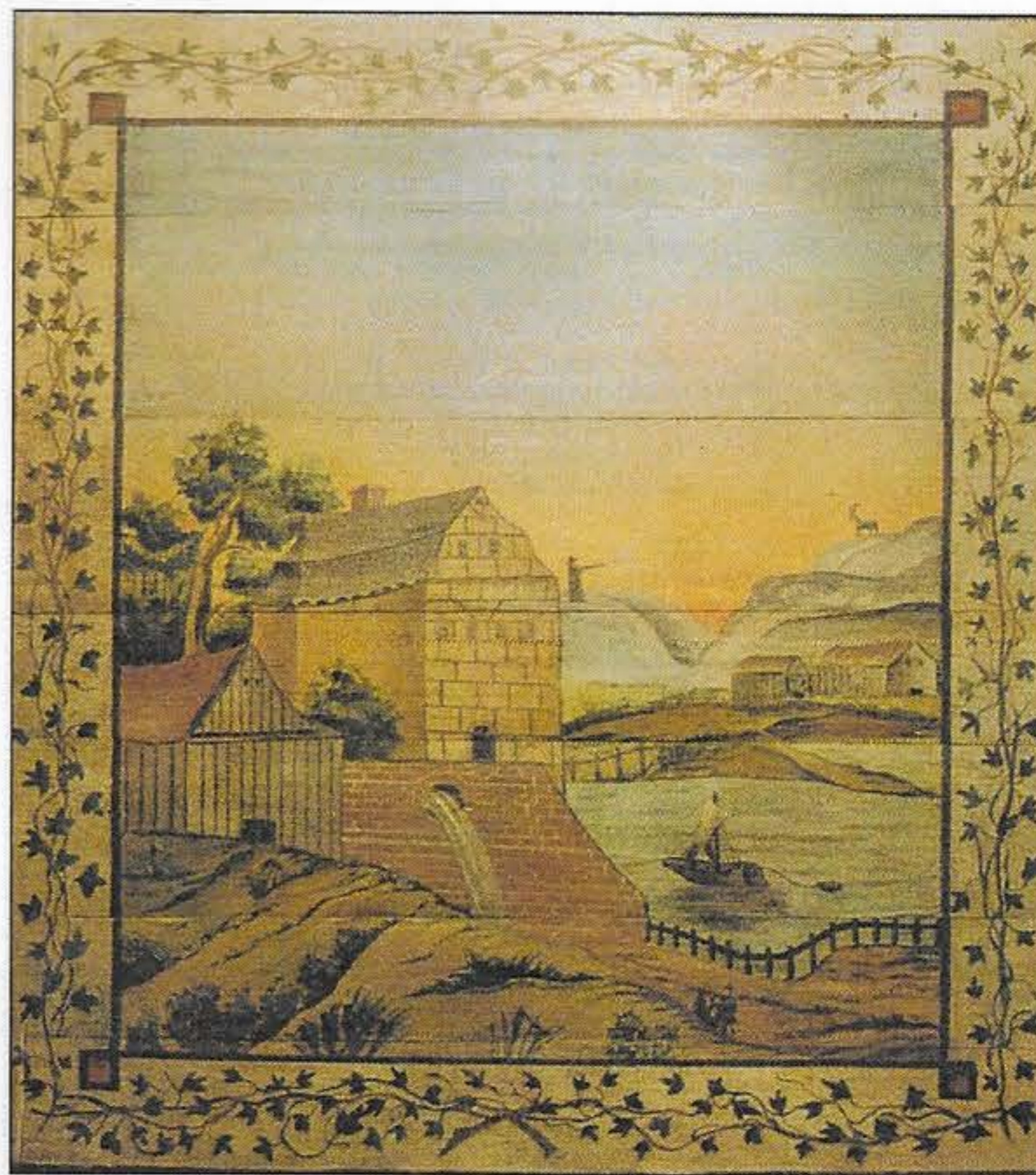
Another Chortitza artist of notes is Jacob D. Sudermann, born 1900, last known about 1940 in a concentration camp in Siberia. Relatives brought some of his paintings to Canada in 1947, including one of the Chortitza Mennonite Church finished in 1931.<sup>7</sup> Also see Werner Loews, *Sketches From Siberia: The Life of Jacob D. Sudermann*.<sup>8</sup>

In the Samara-Am Trakt region near the Volga River was born Alexander Harder. He moved to Germany in 1924 during famine years in Samara. Harder is best known for an oil portrait of Menno Simons done for the 1936 Mennonite World Conference.<sup>9</sup>

In the period from the late seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, art was flourishing in nearly all of Europe. This did not include Mennonites in West Prussia, or in the United States. Prohibitions against portraiture, depicting the human form, and fine art as a career for adults contributed to a near total lack of art in these places. This makes Abraham Claassen's sketch books from early nineteenth century West Prussia rare items.

Closer scrutiny of Abraham's Sketch Book #4 raised some questions for me. If this was book number four, how many were there, and how many still existed? And where are they today? Did Abraham ever do something more than sketch books? Did he continue his pursuit of art into adulthood?

When working on my family history book in the late 1990s, I recalled that cousins Olin and Carol Claassen had traveled to Poland in recent years and visited Mennonite sites in the area formerly known as West Prussia, Germany. This included the Claassen ancestral farm and home near Simonsdorf, West Prussia. Fortunately, my extended family is close knit and some letters from me produced positive results from Olin and Carol. They sent a large batch of photos from their trip to Poland.



Wall mural painted on wood ca1800, from the interior of the Claassen ancestral farm house in West Prussia, Germany (Poland). Size is 60"x72".

Included with the 4"x6" photos was an 8"x10" photo of a painting on wood by. Stylistically, it was cruder than the sketch book paintings leading me to think it was done by a younger Abraham Claassen. However, how much younger than 11 years could he have been?

Olin explained that this mural-sized painting had been painted by Abraham Claassen. Rather an unknown, itinerant artist had done the painting, probably before Abraham was born. That placed this painting in the folk art category, and accounts for the style difference. Olin further explained that this mural had been part of an interior house wall at the Claassen farm in West Prussia. After a brief negotiation with the Polish farmer who was the current owner of the house (being used as a barn), the section of the wall with the painting was sawed out. The painting was then shipped to Switzerland for preservation work and restoration before forwarded to Olin and Carol in Kansas. When I saw this 8"x10" photo of the wall mural in the Claassen ancestral home, I knew it had been in my book! It is, along with other photos Olin and Carol

<sup>5</sup> GAMEO.

<sup>6</sup> GAMEO.

<sup>7</sup> GAMEO.

<sup>8</sup> (2018). Mennonite Heritage Archives, 500 Shaftesbury Blvd., Winnipeg, MB R3P 2N2, Canada, info@mharchives. <http://www.commonword.ca/Browse/836>.

<sup>9</sup> GAMEO.

graciously provided. At this time, there was no mention by Olin and Carol of Sketch Books #5 and #6.

When planning the format of my book, I decided I wanted to use Abraham Claassen's paintings/drawings from Sketch Book #4 at the beginning of each chapter. Not only would it add color, but it would also familiarize readers with Abraham the artist. He would be more than a name and set of dates in the genealogy.

Including Abraham's art also fit into my overall goal of making this family history book a visual experience as much as a reading one. Many extended family members (first through third cousins, some once or twice removed, dozens of people) contributed hundreds of old photographs of people and places and contemporary photos of heirlooms and artifacts. Trimming the number down to 150 used in the book required some tough decisions. There was nothing at that time (ca2001) that indicated to me that anyone had additional art by Abraham Claassen.

With the discovery of Sketch books #5 and #6, I could make a comparison with #4 and see Abraham's skill was



*Claassen's ancestral home built in the 1700s, West Prussia, Germany (today Poland). Photo ca1985.*

improved and he tackled tougher subjects. Most notably, he had drawn several persons, a young girl with a puppet, and a young boy playing a musical instrument for his dog. This drawing reminded me of the famous label on the RCA Victor records, the dog listening to a Victrola record player with the caption, "His master's voice."

Depicting people in art at this time was rare among Mennonite artists. In 1697, Danzig Mennonite portrait artist Enoch Seeman Sr., born 1661, was placed under the ban for violating the second commandment, "Thou shalt

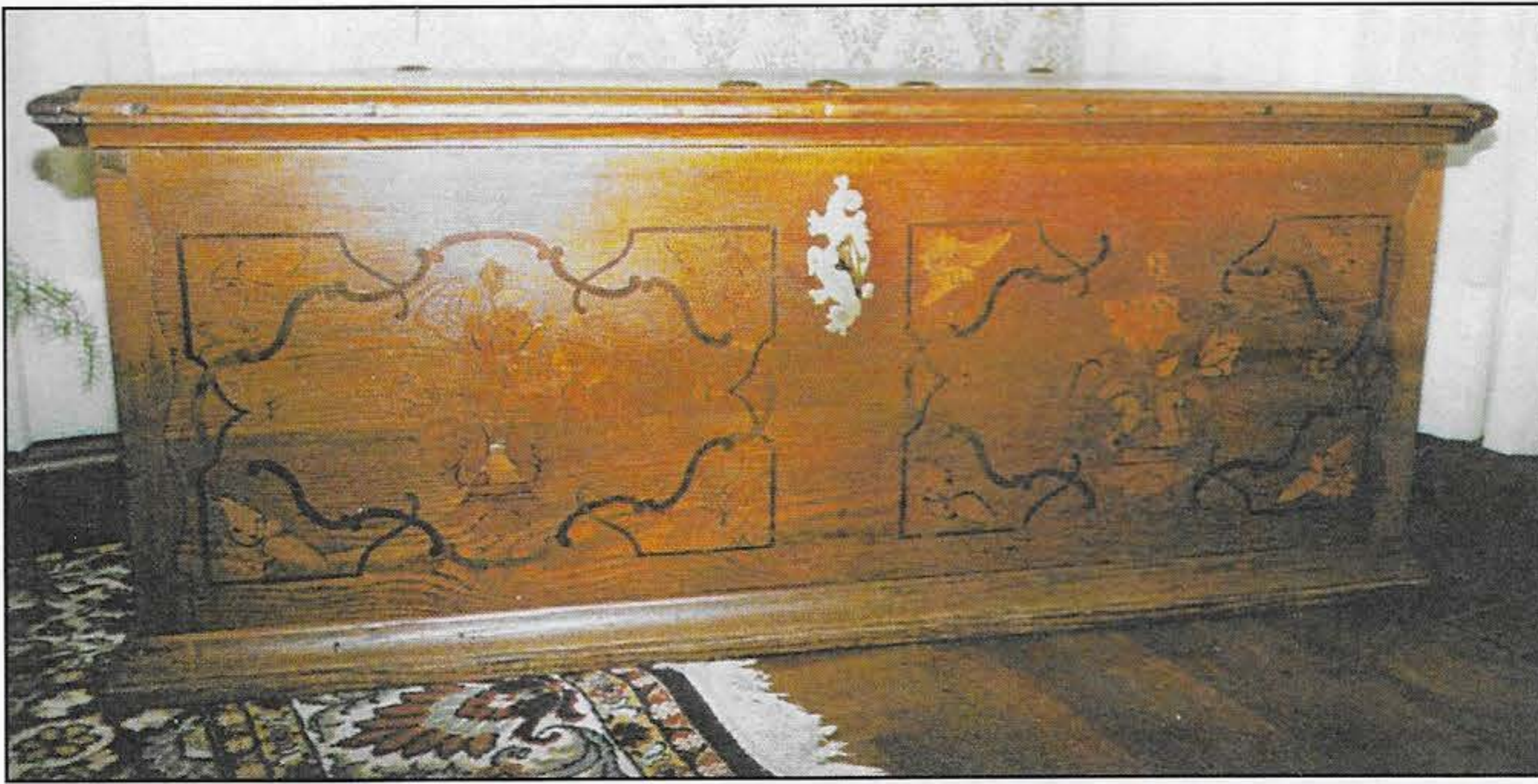
not make unto thee any graven image." Seemann was reinstated after he promised to limit his art to landscapes and decoration (fraktur). This prohibition on Mennonites in West Prussia lasted until after 1850. Even then Mennonites were not allowed to be professional artists, only amateur work was tolerated.<sup>10</sup>

It is a fair assumption that any type of instruction or tutoring in art was not available to Abraham III except for one important source, his father. Only one example of artwork by the father, Abraham II (1771-1857), is known at present. This treasured fraktur art is a highly decorated New Year's greeting to his parents, dated January 1786. See accompanying plate from the book *Fraktur Malen und Schönschreiben* by Ethel Abrahams.

<sup>10</sup> GAMEO/Art/1955.



*Fraktur-decorated New Year's poem by Abraham Claassen II (1771-1857) from Fraktur Malen und Schönschreiben by Ethel Abrahams.*



*Justina van Bergen (1780-1853) dowry chest with inlaid roses on the front, inspiration for her son Abraham Claassen.*

Abraham II was first married to Sophia Berckmann (1777-1819) and together they had 11 children. Of the five sons, only Gerhard Claassen (1819-1913) lived to old age. The life spans of the six daughters ranged from 23 to 65 years. After Sophia's death, Abraham II married his first cousin, Justina (Histina) van Bergen (1780-1853), on December 2, 1821. Justina came from an illustrious family among West Prussian Mennonites. Her grandfather Gerdt/Gerhard van Bergen I (1704-1771) became the second elder of the large Heubuden Mennonite Church in 1741. Her father, Gerhard II (1741-1790), was minister and deacon in the Elbing-Ellerwald Mennonite Church in the northeast part of the Vistula Delta of West Prussia.<sup>11</sup>

Justina had never been married before so at age 41 having children was risky. Any dreams she had had of her own children were likely fading until Abraham II proposed. Literally overnight, Justina became step-mother to six daughters and four sons, and soon gave birth to two healthy children: Helena born April 30, 1823, and Abraham III born July 18, 1825.

A combination of circumstances made Abraham III a "favorite son." He was the youngest child in a large family. No doubt his sisters and brothers treated young Abraham as their special project. He would never want for attention because his mother was busy. Not that she neglected him, but all indications are that she doted on her youngest child and only son.<sup>12</sup>

An early showing of talent and a propensity toward drawing was probably encouraged by Abraham's parents. Equally important, he was given artist's supplies and allowed the time and freedom to pursue his passion. This is important to recognize. Not many of the early nineteenth-century farm families could afford to indulge a child in this way.

Abraham's inspiration could well have begun with the fraktur art of his father and other things he saw in and around the family home. In Sketch Book #4, there is a color drawing of a rose that may have been inspired by the dowry chest of Abraham's mother Justine. There are two large inlaid roses on the front of this dowry chest made ca1790.

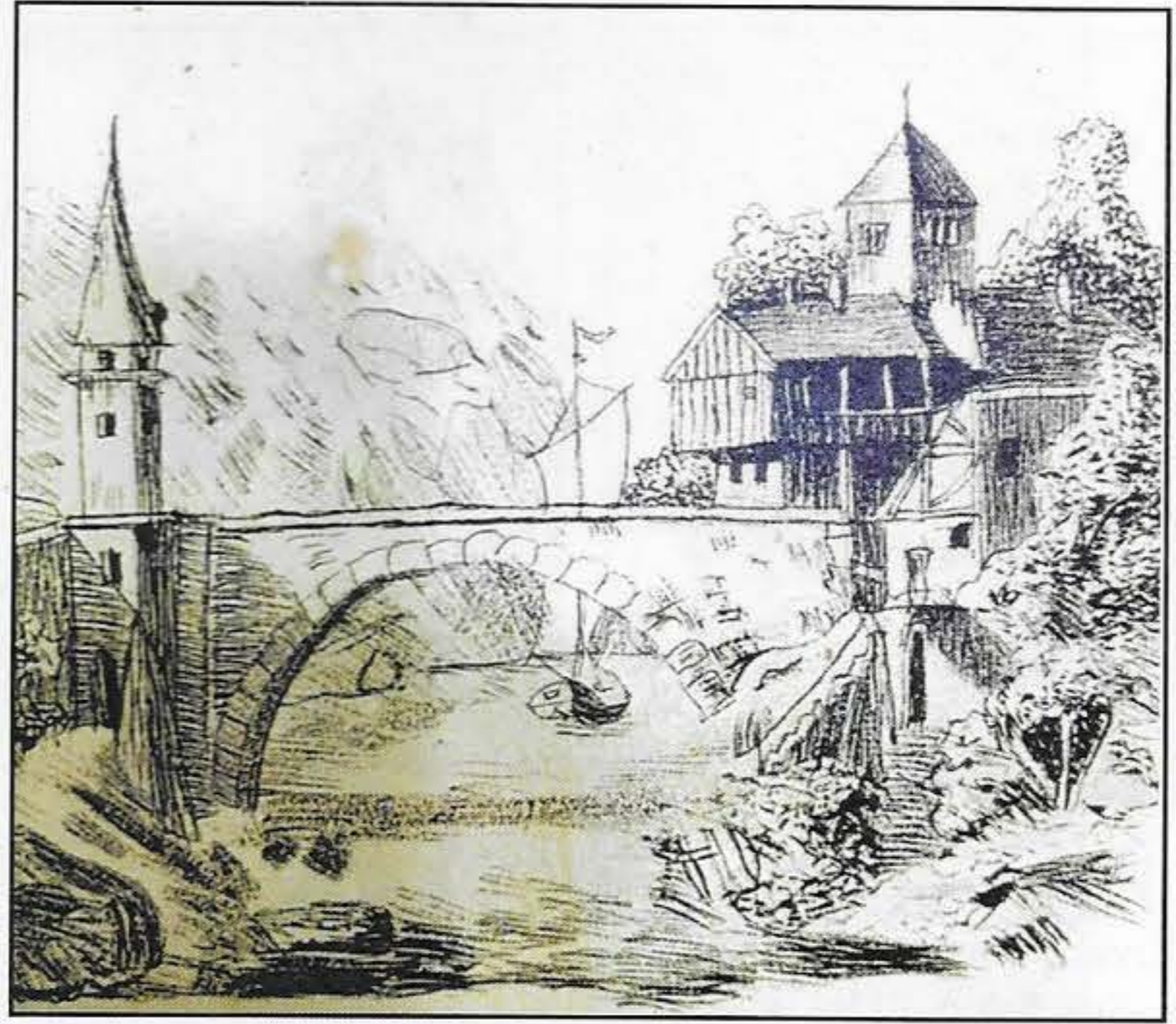
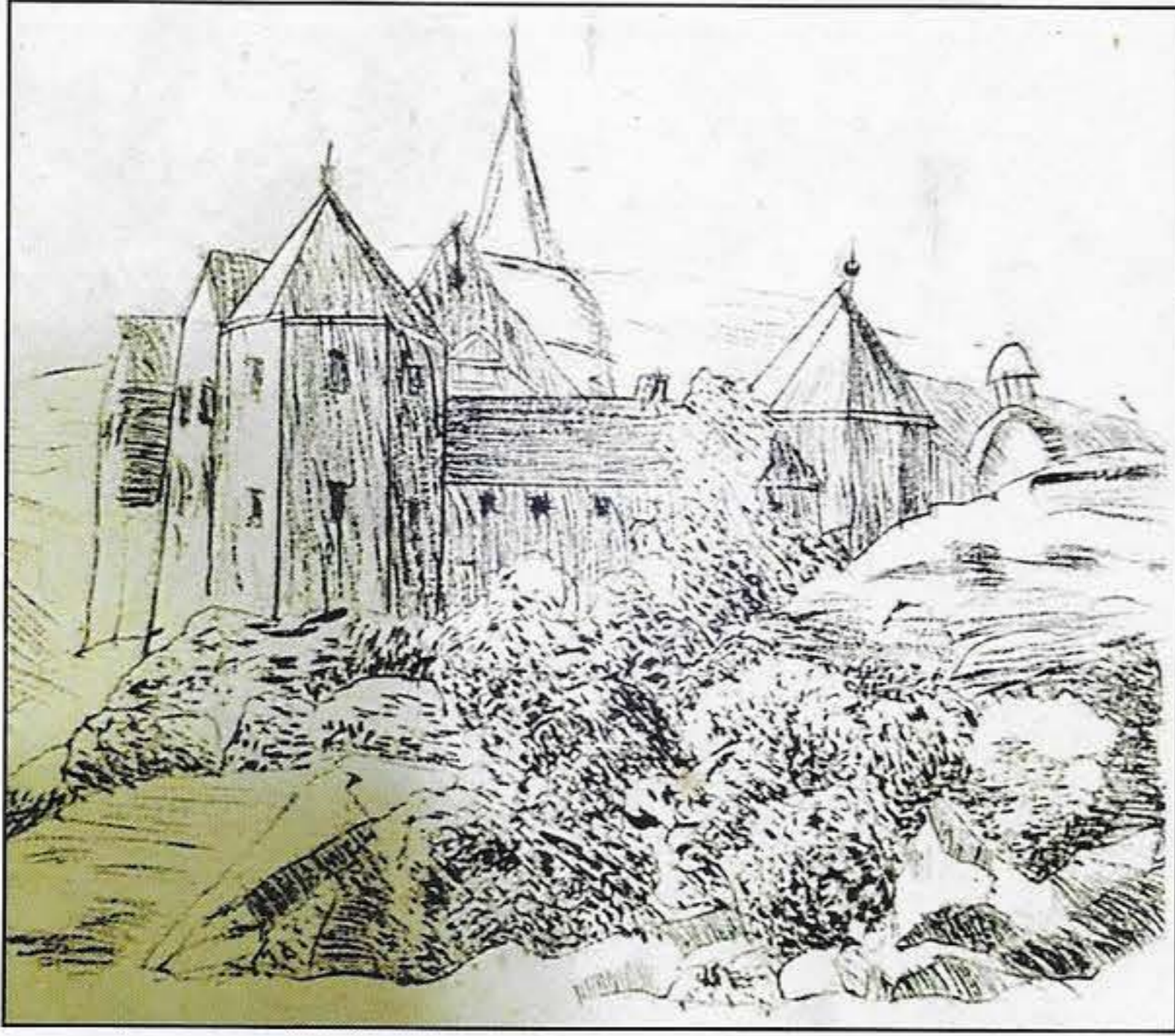
Also in #4 are two well-done pen and ink drawings of sections of the massive teutonic Knights castle/headquarters at Marienburg, West Prussia. This castle was situated just east of the Claassen family farm near Simonsforf, West Prussia. It was just a short walk for young Abraham. Buildings are not easy to draw because if proportion and perspective are not correct, it is immediately obvious. Those two sketches are outstanding for an 11-year-old boy.

Flowers of several varieties are the subject of many drawings in Abraham's sketch books. Mennonites have long been noted for their well-tended gardens and orchards so these drawings were made from plants close at hand. Some are readily identifiable: pansies, roses, lilies, petunias. Some are not and even appear to be fanciful flights of imagination.

There are quite a few birds in the sketch books, pen and ink, some in color. A saddled horse, large oak tree and a river or harbor-type masted boat with men at the oars.

<sup>11</sup> D. Frederick Dyck, "Descendants of Gerhard van Bergen (1704-1771), Correcting Errors in the Chronicle 'Der Berg.'" *Mennonite Family History*, July 2012.

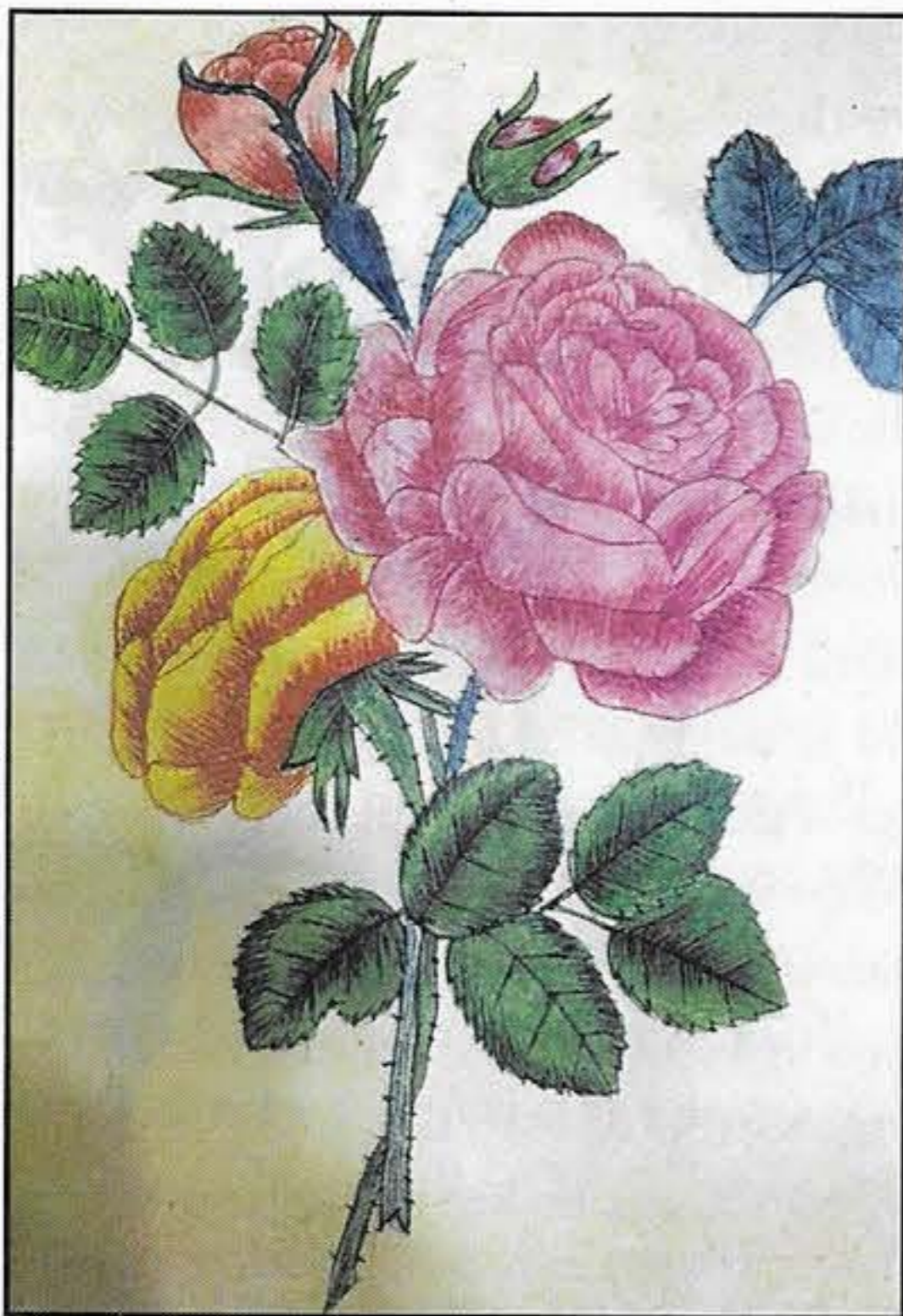
<sup>12</sup> Ernest G. Claassen (1895-1996), "Abraham Claassen, Vistula to Plum Grove" (private printing, 1975). Children of Abraham Claassen II and Sophia (Berckmann) Claassen: Elisabeth (1797-1854), Maria (1798-1864), Justina (1800-1843), Sophia (1801-1849), Jacob (1804-1831), Johann (1805-1830), Abraham (1808-1808), Agnetha (1809-1833), Margaretha (1812-1876), Abraham (1815-1822), and Gerhard (1819-1913). )



Teutonic Knights headquarters castle at Marienburg, West Prussia (Poland). Abraham Claassen sketched portions of this castle.



Right: Tobacco tin, match holder with fleur-de-lis and calling card belonging to Abraham Claassen.



Paintings of flowers from Abraham Claassen's Sketch Books #4, #5, #6, 1836-1837.



This was probably a common sight on the nearby Vistula River in West Prussia. Another source of inspiration for boats and buildings is a small pipe tobacco container found in the belongings of Abraham III. This container is made of brass or bronzed tin and is engraved with a Dutch harbor scene. Rows of houses are set near the wharf and water with masted ships at anchor. A reference to the herring fleet going to sea is in the Dutch language. Nested inside this oval container was a beautifully painted calling or place name card with Abraham Claassen's name. Also located inside was a metal container for stick matches with a carved pattern on the bottom to strike matches.

It is not known if this pipe tobacco container was purchased in West Prussia or if it came with the earliest Claassen family immigrants from the Netherlands to West Prussia. According to cousin Ernest G. Claassen (1895-1996), author of our first family history book in 1975 titled *Abraham Claassen Vistula to Plum Grove*, the first Claassen known in West Prussia was Gert Claassen of Schmerblock in 1552.

My opinion is that this tobacco container came to West Prussia with one of our early van Bergen ancestors, perhaps in the mid to late 1600s. This opinion is based on the large amount of van Bergen material I found in the Justina van Bergen-Claassen dowry chest in 1966. Abraham III had inherited this chest from his mother and brought it with him to America in 1876. Among the oldest items in this chest were journals of van Bergens dating back to the early 1700s. A set of shaving razors, brush, mirror, and a compact case were engraved with the initials "GVB" for Gert van Bergen (1704-1771). Abraham Claassen's III own journal was here as well.<sup>13</sup>

However, none of his sketch books or other examples of his art were in this dowry chest. These were apparently divided between his children: John (1864-1927), Abraham (1867-1948), Justine (1870-1951), and Helene (1878-1968). The oldest child, Anna (1862-1949), who



*Abraham Claassen (1825-1910) and wife Anna (Bergmann Claassen (1838-1917), ca1890.*

was my great-grandmother, received the van Bergen dowry chest and its contents.

As Abraham III aged, it appears he gave up "childish things." Most notably, this means his art. By the time that Abraham was six years old, all of his brothers except Gerhard had died. This had to be a huge blow for the family. Sons were farm labor.

From the Gerhard Claassen "journal," it is learned that when he was old enough and had sufficient experience, he began a career of managing other people's farms in the Vistula Delta of West Prussia. This left Abraham III to work and run the Claassen farm with his father, Abraham II, until the father died in 1857—the years that Abraham III married Anna Bergmann (1838-1917). Did Abraham III miss his art? I suspect so, but he kept these feelings to himself.

<sup>13</sup> "Abraham Claassen, *Vistula to Plum Grove*."



*Abraham Claassen (with hat) and wife Anna to his right with their children and grandchildren, summer 1905, at the Claassen family home in Butler County, Kansas.*

His own journal mostly recorded important events: birthdays, deaths, baptisms, and marriages. A major exception is a detailed account of the family's immigration to America in 1876.

Abraham's handwriting in his journal is beautiful—a hint of his artistic ability. The only item that the family has today that shows Abraham's artistic ability later in life is a bread/carving board with a flycatcher bird incised on the reverse side. This was done about 1885 as a gift to daughter Anna Claassen-Harder (1862-1949) married in 1881 to Jacob Harder (1849-1937).

None of Abraham's children exhibited signs of inheriting his artistic ability. They all, however, showed great appreciation of natural beauty, the things Abraham learned to draw and paint. This manifested itself in flower gardens, vineyards, and orchards. Also tending the natural timberlands along the Henry Creek and Whitewater River that were part of their farms near Plum Grove, Kansas.

Not until the generation of Abraham's great-grandchildren did the "art gene" show up again. Great-grandson Walter Dietrich Dyck (1922-2012) was a professor art at the University of Vermont and left a large collection of his art to his family. Other genes were also inherited by Walter because he looks remarkably like Abraham III.

In the generation of great-great-grandchildren, my sister Maria Louisa Dyck-Jansson (1951-2016) showed

early artistic ability. She received lessons in oil painting beginning at a young age and continued painting her entire life. Her portrait of composer Ludwig van Beethoven and her desert landscapes are memorable.

Today most people would marvel at the hundreds of known descendants of Abraham Claassen III and say that this is his greatest legacy. True enough. Others might point to the number of highly successful farmers who are among his descendants. They have carried on a tradition of agriculture in the family that is hundreds of years old. Abraham's original purchase of a few hundred acres of Santa Fe Railroad land in Butler County, Kansas, in 1876 is still owned by family and has been much added to. This too is a fine legacy.

There is one more part of his legacy that I think Abraham would take great pleasure in. For this, I will defer to Adolf Ens and Lawrence Klippenstein. At the end their review of my family history book *Jacob J. Dyck, Am Trakt o America* in the 2001 *Mennonite Historian*:

*"This book is much more history than genealogy, richly illustrated with maps, photographs (historic and contemporary), and full-color reproductions of many sketches and paintings by artist and naturalist, Abraham Claassen (1825-1910). Glossy paper and sharp photographs make this an unusually attractive volume."*