THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF EX-LIBRIS

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Abstract. *The study presents an analysis on the evolution of the art of ex-libris. It was established that throughout the centuries, culture, status, artistic movements, and technology shaped bookplate design. Each design flows out of the previous ones and incorporates symbolic elements iconic in the society of the time. During the Renaissance, greater attention was placed on the coat of arms, indicating the status of the family, while in the modern times it allowed greater creativity and portrayed the owner through everyday objects. Nowadays, ex-libris are of great interest to collectors and historians alike.*

Keywords: ex-libris, bookplate, heraldic

Introduction

Bookplates, or ex-libris, are personalized paper tags applied to the first pages of books to mark ownership. Initially, being an indicator of prestige and status, they were used both in personal and institutional libraries. The aesthetic and printing techniques evolved over the years and are now objects of value for collectors, museums, and book enthusiasts.

Ever since people started gathering writings and forming their libraries, there came a need for marking ownership over their written possessions. With this, came the invention of bookplates, which served the purpose of representing their owner and reflecting his status in society, occupation, and personal attitudes on different matters. Bookplates have a rich history and are varied in both style and craft techniques, being a clear reflection of society.

Before ex-libris

The oldest bookplates which indicate ownership date back to the 14th century BCE, in Egypt. They were small blue ceramic plates, used as tags for boxes with papyrus rolls. The hieroglyphs were encrusted in dark blue and stated the owner's name, and the title of the work. The bookplate of Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis III and his wife, queen Teie (fig.1) is currently exhibited at the British Museum. Their names are written inside two cartridges, this signifying their status as pharaoh [4].

Figure 1. Egyptian bookplate, exhibited at the British Museum [6]

Before Gutenberg invented typography in the middle of the 15th century, European books were handwritten on parchment in monasteries. The few owners who could afford these limited-edition manuscripts would sometimes sign the covers with a cross or a few words, but these never evolved into the elaborate designs we encounter in later centuries [3].

The first true bookplates

The oldest ex-libris that came in the form of a paper tag is the German 1470 ex-libris, belonging to the monk Hildebrand Branderburg (fig. 2). It was printed with black ink using woodcut technology. This technique involves carving out the design from a block of soft wood and pressing the ink-covered wood on paper to create an image. Afterwards the bookplate (fig. 2) was colored manually. The image represents an angel holding a coat of arms with a goat. The chromatic scheme is defined by the complementary pair of red and green and the colors blue, yellow.

Figure 2. The bookplate of Hildebrand Branderburg, the 15th century, from the archives of Farber University [9]

Another 15th century bookplate (fig. 3) belonged to the German priest Johannes Knabensberg, known by the nickname „Igler", which translated means „hedgehog". This ex-libris showcases a hedgehog chewing on field flowers and contains the words: „ Hans Igler das dich ein Igel kuss", which translates to „Hans Igler, the hedgehog may kiss you". This comes as a warning to whoever borrowed his books, saying that if he returns the book, he will be greeted with a kiss, otherwise, he must fear the hedgehog's needles [7]. Phrases like these were commonly incorporated into the design of ex-libris as they added a touch of personality and humor to the piece.

Figure 3. The bookplate of Johannes Knapensberg [7]

The spread of the ex-libris in the 16th -17th centuries

In the 16th and 17th century, ex-libris spread beyond the borders of Germany to other European countries, like England, France, Italy, and the Netherlands [2]. The initial simple style was exchanged for intricate ornaments which showcased various floral, architectural symbols as well as valuable objects and supernatural beings. The prominent sign of ownership was the coat of arms, by which the owner could be identified even if his name was absent from the bookplate [5]. These were popular among the wealthy and were considered a sign of status and refinement.

The first English bookplate, which dates to back 1574 (fig. 4) represents a coat of arms, decorated with leaf-like elements, a knight's headpiece, a wild boar, and a ribbon containing the slogan „Mediocria Firma". This bookplate was given as a sign of gratitude to Nicholas Bacon, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I for his book donations to the Cambridge University Library [2].

Figure 4. The bookplate of Nicholas Bacon, 1574 [2]

Styles of the 18th and 19th centuries

As a result of heavy industrialization, the number of books and bookplates increased considerably as they were starting to become more affordable. At the beginning of the 18th century, the Armorial style dominated the art of ex-libris. Its key features included the symmetrical cartridge where the coat of arms fits, architectural and decorative elements with a specific texture like brick or fish scales and an overall formal aspect. This style remained in fashion for a long time [1].

The middle of the 18th century was characterized by the style Chippendale, deriving from the French artistic movement rococo, and inspired by Thomas Chippendale's furniture designs. The ex-libris can be recognized by the asymmetrical cartridge containing the coat of arms and the continuous ornaments [1]. It was also common for the bookplates to include objects related to the owner's occupation, like weapons for a military or caduceus for a doctor.

An example from this style is the French bookplates from the 18th century (fig.5). Their asymmetrical coats of arms are each completed by two lions, a crown, and branches of leaves. The curved lines in the composition give a dynamic impression.
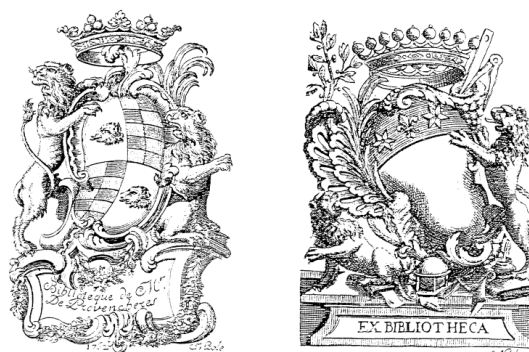

Figure 5. French bookplates of the 18th century [3]

The 19th century is characterized by a free flow of imagination, supported by printing techniques that were more advanced and less expensive. This is when ex-libris started to be created for collectors, one example being the Polish engraver Kajetan Wincenty Kielisiński, who made many bookplates for his clients, reflecting their personalities and lifestyles [10]. In this period, we start to notice an increasing popularity in depicting human characters and the artwork itself gains an illustrative style.

Contemporary ex-libris

Ex-libris started losing popularity as books became an ordinary object in most homes. Their role evolved from an indicator of prestige to an occupation reserved for graphical artists, collectors, and book enthusiasts. Throughout the 20th century, artists experimented with various styles, from colorful illustrations, intricate calligraphy to pop art and abstract representations (fig. 6). Various printing techniques like metal engraving, laser printing and even computer graphics were used.
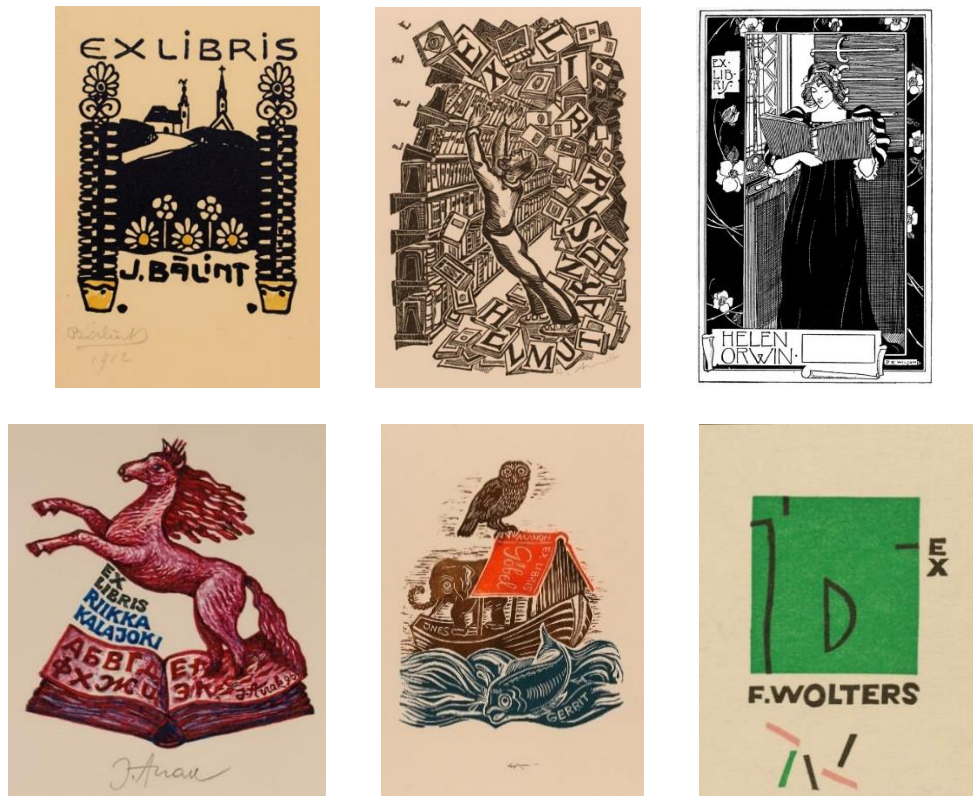

Figure 6. Bookplates exhibited at the Frederikshavn Art Museum [8]

Conclusions

Over the centuries, bookplates have gained and fell out of popularity. However, despite not being common in the current era, studying ex-libris can give insight into the minds and societies of the time. Each graphical element had symbolic meanings and were often connected to the identity of a status holder in society, having the role of a business card.

Landmarks in the creation of ex-libris are heraldic elements, architectural and floral symbols, chromatic arrangements, and societal trends. Printing techniques mentioned, such as woodcut and metal engraving, are also an area of interest for book and art enthusiasts.

Regardless of digitalization, ex-libris still remains a timeless way to personalize and add worth to a book collection. Ex-libris have served as the representatives for time periods, countries, book-holding institutions, private collectors and will continue to be of great value.

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