

The Bookplate: a design made to measure

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This text is the teaching proposal for a design exercise based on the creation of a personalised bookplate, emphasising on the motivational aspect of introspection which goes with it. In order to gain a better understanding of this subject, the text is documented and contextualised within the parameters of the humanistic culture to which it belongs.

Before we begin to talk about the subject, and in order to gain a better understanding of it, allow me to contextualise it in the same framework as the great revolutions in history, because it is clear that the world has evolved thanks to the significant advances which have resulted from a series of revolutions in the world. The first really great revolution was the Agricultural Revolution which came about during the Neolithic period 10,000 years ago in the Fertile Crescent of the Near East, with the discovery of cultivation and a sedentary way of life which resulted in an alternative lifestyle to the nomadic lifestyle, and the domestication of animals.

This revolution was followed by others of equal importance: the Urban Revolution and the Revolution of Writing, both of which took place some 4,000 bC. The first of these gave rise to concentrations of humans in small tribal nuclei together with the benefits that this brought about, and the second, the representation of graphic signs for spoken language, facilitating understanding and communication. This became a determining factor in the history of humanity, in that it left behind written documents.

Other kinds of revolution have marked humanity since the birth of Christ: the Printing revolution of the 15th century, which was of a cultural nature, the French Revolution in the 18th century, socio-political in nature and, above all, the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries which was made up of a series of parallel revolutions which were technical, economic, scientific, demographic, socio-political, etc., and led to fundamental changes on the face of the world. Sociologists and economists recognise that the Industrial Revolution divided human history into two distinct periods, both qualitatively and temporally: the time prior to the Industrial Revolution known as the Cycle of Death and Agriculture and the time following it known as the Cycle of Life and Business. On the eve of the Third Millennium of the post-industrial era, another revolution is clearly emerging: the Revolution of Robotics and Information Technology in the context of a multi-cultural, intercommunicated and globalised world.

It is appropriate to give a concise description of these revolutions in order to provide better contextualisation of the subject of bookplates with which we are con-

cerned. It appeared at the very heart of the Printing Revolution at the end of the 15th century and was broadly diffused during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries within the context of the pan-European Art Nouveau of the nineteenth century *fin de siècle*. It is therefore a question of gaining deeper understanding of the sense of the suggestive, fantastic, symbolic, magical art lavished over six hundred years of history.

Notes for a contextualisation of bookplates

Although bookplates – those stamps of ownership pasted into the front cover of a book – actually appeared for the first time just after the invention of the printing press in the second half of the 15th century, it would be easy to assume that, considered functionally as simple manuscripts, bookplates had accompanied books throughout the three thousand years or so of their existence.

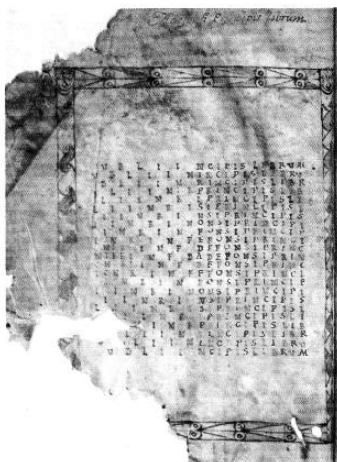
In fact, such documents are not lacking in the pre-bookplate period before the invention of the printing press. As an example, take the sky-blue enamelled clay plaques, inscribed in dark blue hieroglyphics, that were used in the 14th century before Christ by the 18th Dynasty Egyptian Pharaoh, Amenophis III (1405-1372 B.C.), on the casks containing scrolls of papyrus from his library.¹

In general terms, it can be said that the most abundant examples of functional bookplates seen before the age of the printing press, were the decoratively bordered inscriptions, hand-written by copyist monks and code miniaturists in both the early and late Middle Ages, especially for the use of the ecclesiastical and civil nobility, which made up scarcely five per cent of the population.

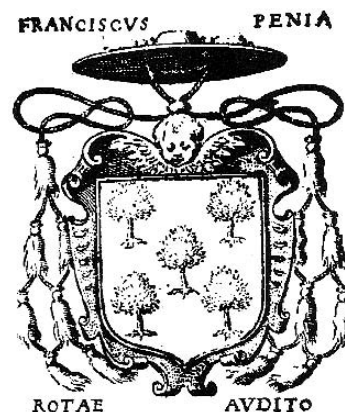
However, it is worth mentioning that the first hand-written bookplates known in Europe form part of a rich collection of mediaeval Mozarabic bookplates, produced in



Plaqueta de ceràmica esmaltada utilitzada pel Faraó Amenofis III i la seva esposa. (segle XV a. J.C.) en una cassegada dels papyrus de la seva biblioteca.



1- Ex. llibris manuscrits pertanyent a Alfons III (848-922) del regne astur. Les lletres. Es tracta d'una pàgina mitjana continguda en un exemplar de les *Enchiridion* (social) amb la inscripció: *l'latius Adolofoni Principis Librorum receptos in laboribus postingredia in una simplici i robustissima carta. An en un ara, es el document més antic conegut a Lugo amb funcions d'es-llibres o marca de biblioteca.*



Ex-llibres feudal de pertanyent a Monseñor Francisco Peña (1540-1612) amb un impatori de la Bossa, revisat a Roma representant la Corona d'Aragó.

¹ In the lower part of this plaque, now held in the British Museum in London (inventory n° 22,878) is the title of the roll of papyrus accompanying it, Book of the fig tree and the palm tree, and in the upper part, a reference to the owners in the following inscription: "The good God Amenophis III, who gives birth, beloved by Ptah, to the King of both Kingdoms and the Queen Tin, who lives..."

the Iberian Peninsula between 8th and 12th centuries after the birth of Christ.

They basically consist of handwritten inscriptions on the body of an illuminated initial from the text, or unique marks made especially for a particular book using the rich and often labyrinthine ornamentation which is original and exclusive to the Peninsular.²

It is understandable, then, that in the period which preceded the invention of the printing press, books, which were appreciated by only a very small minority, often associated with powers of religion as custodian of culture, were expensive and rare as a result of being laboriously produced by hand using costly materials.

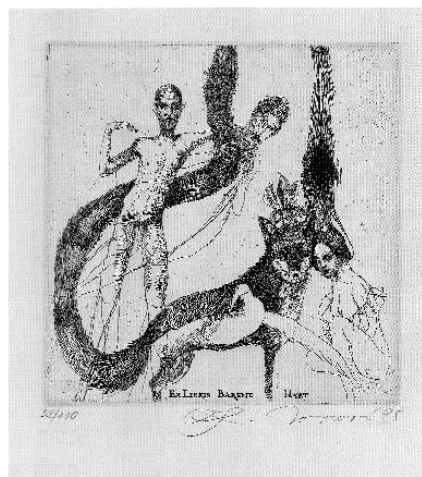
Placed in this context, it is not surprising that books were worth as much in hereditary terms as a coat of arms and were physically chained to the bookshelves in

some libraries or churches. They even resulted in the excommunication of those who wrongly appropriated them, absolution being granted only by the Holy Father, as can be read in the bookplates of the University of Salamanca, among others.

The true period of the bookplate covers two periods, clearly differentiated in time and concept: the Classical Period, dominated by heraldry which lasted from the end of the 15th century to the final stages of the 19th century (c.1480-1880), and the Modern Period, from the end of the 19th century to the present day. Naturally, the first of these periods accompanied the changes which took place in the evolution of heraldic art, and the second, in a similar manner, has evolved alongside the development of contemporary art. It should be stated that, having outlived heraldry, the bookplate would not have prospered, but for the new social fabric which was created by the industrial revolution. Thus it turned full circle.



Advertiment d'excomunió, d'absolució reservada al Sant Pare, contra qui s'apropia d'algun llibre de la biblioteca de Salamanca (seg. XVIII).



27- Escultura calligràfica realitzada l'any 1996 per Katerina Veselá per a Biseril Dini. L'obra creada d'aquesta artista eslovaca, alumna d'Albin Štamský, demostra conceptualment tota la capacitat de direcció de l'arquitecte.

² The first study of these bookplates was made by Jesús Domínguez Bordona: "Mozarabic Bookplates" in the *Spanish Archive of Art and Archaeology*. Madrid: n° XXXII, 1935, pp 153-163.

It is within this context that, with the rise to power of the middle-classes in the international Modernist era, a new concept of bookplate appeared – artistic as opposed to heraldic – which led to the creation of symbols for individual libraries with a stamp of modernity, as well as the creation of associations and, above all, the appearance of collectors of bookplates as a second lease of life or function for the libraries' identifying marks. This culture, and the signs which accompanied it, increased their circle of influence and long gone was the time when they represented the property of a small, privileged minority. So, slowly but surely, the bookplate culture became democratised and that is why, during the twentieth century, the use, and especially the collection of bookplates became so popular.

Currently, the FISAE (International Federation of Amateur Ex-Libris Societies)³ consists of almost 40 associations throughout the world, among them the Catalan Association of Ex-librists (ACE) which we founded in Barcelona in 1989, and was the fourth association to be established in Catalonia in the twentieth century. The aim of these associations is to promote the culture of bookplates through national and international meetings, the organisation of exhibitions and competitions, the specific publication of specialist volumes and magazines on the subject and, above all, the creation of bookplates for collectors. Currently, the East – Japan and China – are also active participants in this cultural movement.

The bookplate as an object of design

A closer look at the world of bookplates makes us realise just what riches are hidden within them. In fact, there are clearly many different ways of reading bookplates since we can approach them from a number of different angles,

such as the theory they contain, their historical development, the different ways in which they are produced, their aesthetic qualities, their philosophy, the sociological movements generated around them, the titles of their owners, the specialist literature which they have propagated, etc. Our aim is to approach them from the conception of the bookplate as a personalised made-to-measure design object, since this has often been a successful exercise in the art and design classes that I have taught.

Few artistic disciplines are able to personalise in the way that bookplates can, with the possible exception of portraits and self-portraits in painting, sculpture or photography, which offer, more than anything, a like image in terms of physical appearance. The bookplate goes further, thanks to the use of symbols and allegories, and is able to represent abstract ideas metaphorically, through images or artistic themes that go beyond the purely material aspect of the physical portrait.

That is because what determines the essence of a bookplate, apart from being a mark of ownership for the books in a library, is the fact that it is a symbol of identity for its owner, that is, a psychological portrait of the person who possesses it in professional, emotional and ideological terms. The artists Antoni Ollé i Pinell clearly expressed this in his prologue to a work by Josep M. de Riquer i Palau "The bookplate is not simply a mark of ownership, it is a symbol of personality, of the loves and emotions of the person for whom it has been specifically made. The artist (the designer) has to know how what position to take and how to rise to this kind of psychological work, they have to give all their energy and wrack their brains to find the best way to elegantly express the material and spiritual nature of the owner"⁴

³ FISAE is an international organisation founded in Hamburg in 1966 thanks to the driving force of Italian collector Gianni Mantero, who encouraged the European bookplates movement during the mid-twentieth century.

⁴ Josep M. de Riquer i Palau: *Ex-libris and ex-librism*. Collection "The Paper Bird III". Barcelona, Edicions Millà 1952. 2nd vol. p. 11.

As with any human manifestation, the bookplate is, therefore, a valuable document which informs us of aspects which lie above its own materialisation and go beyond its visual representation.

In terms of results it is, to a large extent, this aspect of bookplates being considered as made-to-measure design objects that my students have often found the best, most highly motivating starting point for their own work. Far from the coldness of a commissioned exercise, the students, when faced with the task of designing a bookplate for themselves or for someone else, feel obliged to undertake a work of personal introspection, which is always pleasing and satisfying in the degree of involvement which it requires.

Far from being a psychological intrusion into the life of my students, the assignment of making a personal bookplate, like a designer suit, in teachers' parlance, has also helped me to reduce distances and motivates students right from the start, and has always been a well-received task. In this case, the result is secondary because, while addressing question of taste, aesthetics and cultural baggage and, at the same time, the composition and skill of the design, everyone gives what they know how to and are able to give. However, the first step is already decided – design as a form of introspection and recognition at a time when so many other demands distract us from what is essential. I am sure that an ade-

quate understanding of an ecological design begins with the cathartic design of oneself, because an inward glance is always beneficial.

By way of an epilogue

Not even as an academic exercise would I propose the design of a personalised bookplate as a test of the *homo symbolicus* that we have within us. If it is true that the graphic architecture of bookplates documents and bears witness to the passing of time and styles, then bookplates are no less able to iron out the most recalcitrant creases and crinkles of human nature, thanks to their use of symbols and allegories. In this light, it can be said that bookplates, insofar as being psychological portraits of their owners, have become privileged, silent, documentary testimonies of the greatest human ideals on earth.

In terms of the future, it would therefore seem that the subject of bookplates will continue to attract a public, albeit small and selective, which is able to synthesise through the form and colours of the images used in the production of a personalised iconography. Whether placed in books or freed from this servitude, bookplates will continue to be to a greater or lesser extent, cultural objects, items for study and research, and will always provide aesthetic enjoyment. We shall leave it to the anthropologists and psychologists to explain the deeper reasons for this.

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