

# Ukrainian *Ex Libris* at the End of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as an Instrument of the Intercultural Dialogue

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**Abstract:** The focus of the article is based on modern *ex libris* collection as a significant segment of Ukrainian printmaking, which largely determines its place in the nowadays art world. The paper reviews some transformations of the bookplate from 1991 to the present, specifying the main schools of the Ukrainian *ex libris*, and designating its leading artists. It also characterizes the tendencies that marked the *ex libris* of Ukraine at the turn of the century, the main storylines and the dominant techniques belonging to particular schools. The stylistic characteristics of leading representatives of the most important schools are indicated, trying to emphasize the change of *ex libris* role in Ukraine's artistic processes during the recent years. The attraction of *ex libris* to philosophical semantic codes, to the language of allegory and symbolism is also noted in the article.

**Keywords:** printmaking, *ex libris* / bookplate, engraving / etching

## INTRODUCTION

It is very important to detect the forms of artistic activity within the modern artistic space, independently of the geographical reflection, which would preserve the functions of an instrument for interpersonal communication, serving as a life ring of the intercultural dialogue. One of such forms of the artistic language at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has become the bookplate. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *ex libris* had utterly application functions, serving as an identifying mark of a specific book collection and defining the belonging of a book to a specific library, private owner, monastery,

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etc. In fact it was a resemblance to a name card of a book collection owner, whether it was referring to a specific person or organization. Since the books have been very expensive at the time of the first *ex libris* appearance, printed media only started gaining popularity and the tradition of a manuscript book was not lost yet through the ages, a book was a luxury, a symbol of the wealth of its owner, and therefore it was highly valued. The first *ex libris* served only as a resemblance to heraldic signs or stamps; their artistic quality could not be discussed, as for a long time they were placed at the flyleaf of a book, so they were unseen and carried out only a utility function. This lasted for many centuries and the application aspect of the phenomenon was dominating, that is why the bookplate did not represent an individual interest. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the situation started to change, which led to the fact that, from the last third of the century, we can speak about the regeneration of the bookplate from an appendix of a book to an independent work of art. And Ukraine gained a leading role, proving an outstanding *ex libris* professional level.

#### UKRAINIAN *EX LIBRIS* IN THE LATE 20<sup>th</sup> AND EARLY 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURIES: SHAPING THE IMAGE OF A COUNTRY IN THE INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL SPACE

A special place in the evolution process of the modern *ex libris* belongs to Ukraine. The history of the new bookplate is traced back to 1991, when the nation started to write its own memorial of *ex libris*; since earlier, it is more proper to talk about the Soviet bookplate in general, without any national specificity and distinction of independent schools. The Soviet bookplate is a very remarkable occurrence in the graphic art; almost all leading artists of the country tried to contribute to its creation. But this phenomenon could be analyzed in the context of Soviet art only by means of instruments from an absolutely other methodology, remembering to distinguish strictly between the ideological scope of the works and their professional technical incorporation.

The history of Ukrainian *ex libris* has actually started in 1991, becoming one of the graphic types, which easily conceded to positive alterations. Artists, involved in the creation of a bookplate, had the opportunity to attend international events and to join relevant professional associations, and they created a Ukrainian *ex libris* club, organizing international bookplate competitions in the country. The peak of this process was at the beginning and mid-‘90s; two

international *ex libris* competitions took place in Kiev: “The woman in *ex libris*” (1993) and “There are many religions, but God is one” (1994). The artists shaped and fulfilled the forwarding functions for the popularization process of *ex libris*, and they brought the Ukrainian bookplate to the international field, improving their professional level, introducing new names and creating collections. Among the largest *ex libris* collections in Ukraine, we mention those of P. Nesterenko, S. Brodovich and J. Berdichevsky. During the last years, the enthusiasts of the *ex libris* club have initiated several exhibitions in Kiev, including international ones: “Anniversary Exhibition of Chinese *Ex Libris*”, 2019; “*Tandem* Exhibition of Ukrainian and Czech *Ex Libris*”, 2019 – the participants being mostly young, new coming artists; “The New Year Bookplate Exhibition”, 2020.

Nowadays the bookplate is not perceived anymore as part of a book; it has got in front of the open exhibition field. Having traditions over several centuries, the Ukrainian printmaking has enriched with another independent phenomenon, which synthesized sign traditions of book graphics and features of free graphics as well. From the end of the ‘90s the tendencies of the bookplate as an independent type of graphic art appear permanently, which not only determines the belonging of a book to a specific library, but comprehensively characterizes itself, becoming an object of interest for collectors. To give an impression of its owner, to represent an intimate piece of art, the author of *ex libris* should be able to identify the essence in images, to think figuratively, to know the language of allegory, etc.

The modern *ex libris* proves a complicated typology; in nowadays the personal bookplate is considered the main part, although libraries and different organizations still have their own *ex libris*. Art collectors are vigilantly monitoring the appearance of new artists on the market, ordering a personal bookplate from a new member of the society. Unfortunately such a plan has many disadvantages, the novelty is very transient and the collectors quickly lose interest in the artist after getting his work. Only few maintain on top of popularity, and only thanks to a high professional level and unconventional decisions in their works. In general, “the gold pool” is quite small, made by artists highly demanded, winners of competitions year after year, able to enhancing their professionalism. And many of them are Ukrainian artists.

The bookplate is like the Esperanto language for artists, uniting intercultural combinations of images and symbols. The main fields of

professional work for all of these artists are distinct, so their unifying criterion has become *ex libris* itself. They are professionals in IT and advertising, designers, jewelers, book illustrators, animation artists, photographers, bankers, accountants, sportsmen, etc.

### KIEV SCHOOL OF *EX LIBRIS*

The Kiev School of the bookplate at the confluence of the centuries has a very wide range of techniques. The artists seldom select only one field for their first steps, preferring to experiment many paths. But each of them has his own strengths. The relief printing is beneficially presented in *ex libris* in the works of several generations of artists, firstly known as book illustrators. Such a division into generations is not a simple assertion for the belonging of artists to different chronological phases; this is the evidence of their present differences as regards the means of artistic expression, interpretation of images, composition decisions, reference to the language of the bookplate, conditionality and abstractness of compositions, etc. The experts of the senior generation – G. Malakov (1928-1979), A. Miklovda (1940-2002), V. Bokan (1940-2016), A. Pugachevskiy (b. 1937), V. Lopata (b. 1941), N. Stratilat (b. 1942), and V. Romanenkov (b. 1953) - are known in *ex libris* mostly by xylography. Each of them has succeeded in many fields of work and belongs to different art platforms, from academic learning to underground.

The *ex libris* of V. Romanenkov is monochrome. But his artistic language differs from the image structure and practical techniques of the artists mentioned above. Having the experience of book illustration, the creation of postcards, the design of various kinds of printed products, no less an original practice in jewelry field, the artist transfers his main skills into the bookplate. Being one of the few artists in Ukraine who preserves classical traditions of hand engraving, carrying out all works by hand, he does not appeal to the means of modern techniques; and yet he is rigorous and precise in engraving and jewelry as well. Works by V. Romanenkov were involved in the Encyclopedia of the modern bookplate in Portugal (Figure 1: *Ex libris L. Homiakov*. Plastic engraving, 1998), the artist applying the technique black and white, as well as in several colors, of plastic engraving, and sometimes combining it with gold-plated stamping. Some of his works are carried out with the Congreve technique (Figure 2: *Ex libris Musées de Rouen*. Plastic engraving, Congreve/blind stamping, 1998), creating compositions of “white on white”, which are

unique by their image structure and complexity due to the technology, introducing complicated compositions and ornamental interlacements (Romanenkova 1999b). Their difficulty is also defined by the fact that it is practically impossible to reproduce such piece of work; the image may be perceived thanks to the visual dancing shadows and to the tactile sensitivity alike.



Figure 1

(Personal collection)

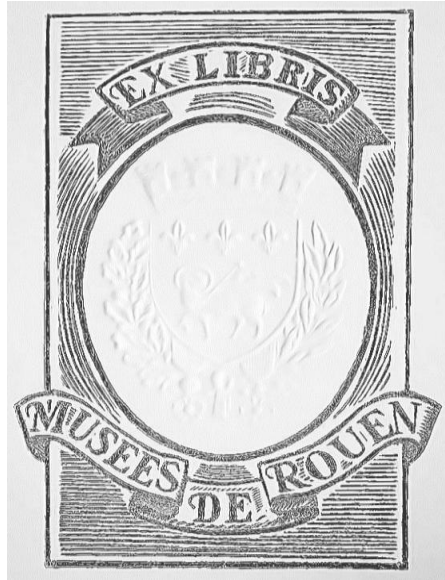


Figure 2

A. Pugachevskiy belongs to the artists of relief printing of the Kiev school, representing the older generation (Berdichevskiy 2007), and staying at the origins of the revival of the Ukrainian bookplate as one of the creators of its new history. Being an artist of printing techniques, working with plastic engravings, he is an irreplaceable participant of all prestigious competitions of *ex libris* and a winner of important international awards in many of them (“Columbus Voyage 1492” International Bookplate Competition, Poland, 1992; “Premio Citta di Casale”, Italy, 1994; “Maus Ketti” International Ex Libris Competition, Luxembourg, 1998). He received the title of the “Best foreign artist of the year”, in Great Britain (International Exhibition 2001), and he is member of several international societies of bookplate artists, such as “Deutsche Exlibris-Gesellschaft”, Germany, and “Society of Wood Engravers”, Great Britain. Occupied with

printmaking, small statuary and sculpture, the artist gained distinction amongst collectors and artists mainly as an *ex librist*. He works with black and white graphic, as well as with multicolored one, sometimes combining dozens of colors in one engraving.

A graphic artist of the Kiev School is R. Agirba (b. 1957), who especially works in the techniques of xylography, as a plastic engraving in different colors. During the last years the artist used some other techniques of engraving, more often with etching. His creative works could be seen in international *ex libris* exhibitions, receiving important prizes of engraving competitions (Spain, 2005; USA, 2011). His etchings are principally monochrome and all compositions are very deep regarding the subject matter. R. Agirba specializes also in design and book illustration, and in transparent aquarelle paintings. His *ex libris* synthesizes features from different fields, transferring the softness color from aquarelle into etching, the compactness and decorative effect from design into xylography. Having a longstanding work experience with the bookplate, he is constantly experimenting with techniques and materials, achieving even newer effects, demonstrating responsibility with the approach to the matter even on the level of selecting the sheet of paper that the artist often manufactures personally.

The representatives of the average generation of the *ex libris* Kiev School, working with techniques of relief printing, prefer to use as foundation more often not wood, but plastic; in the last years they frequently work also with plexiglass and carton, but obviously a qualitative high professional engraving in classical traditions demand either wood or plastic. A well-known Ukrainian artist in the world is G. Pugachevskiy (b. 1966). Like his father A. Pugachevskiy, he is internationally appreciated. His creative work served as a name card of Ukraine in many bookplate competitions in the world, the artist having been frequently awarded prizes (“Barcelona 92”, Spain, 1992; “Druk en Papier FNV Oss”, the Netherlands, 1993; “Warsaw Uprise”, Poland, 1994; “Johan Schwencke Prijs”, the Netherlands, 1995; “II International Show of Xylographic and Linoleul engraved Bookplates Katowice ‘96”, Poland, 1996; “18<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Small Graphic Forms”, Belgium, 1998, and more). G. Pugachevskiy is a member of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers and of the Society of Wood Engravers (Great Britain). The area of professional interest of the artist is varied: easel graphic arts, web design, flash animation, photography, creation of logotypes, *ex libris*, working with the technique of plastic

engraving, in black and white, as well as in colors; and it is a mystery to the viewer the possibility of combining so perfectly and precisely plates of different colors in a composition, where every color is printed from a separate board.

The Kiev School of *ex libristis* has also an excellent range of artists who make bookplates that are characterized by the domination of the intaglio printing technique. Often there are synthesized, applying for example only etching.

Among the etchers, we mention K. Antioukhin (b. 1965), a creator of works filled with deep philosophical meaning, in complicated compositions, of multilayer signal and allegorical combinations (Romanenkova 2015). Being a constant participant of bookplate international competitions and the award winner of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Exhibition in Kiev (1994), he also works with easel graphics and bookplate primarily exploring the monochrome (see Figure 3: *Ex Musicis Riet de Haas*, 1998), combining etching, aquatint, mezzotint and soft-ground etching. His artistic language is complicated, the images are quite unique, and sometimes they are hypertrophic ugly; but exactly this set of features attracts the viewer.

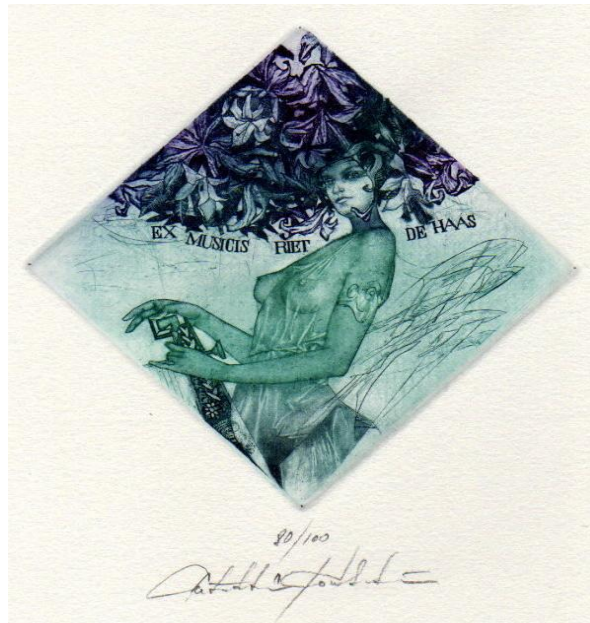


Figure 3 (From personal collection)

## LVOV SCHOOL OF BOOKPLATE

The Kiev ex librists may present a fair amount of high professional works in the techniques of engraved printing; the specific foundation of its bookplate masters being the etching. This technique is the main language of creating *ex libris* in the case of Lvov School. High professional masters of engraved printing, well known in the world, belong to it. The gold pool of the Lvov School includes A. Aksinin (1949-1985), S. Hrapov (b. 1956), S. Udovichenko (b. 1956), S. Ivanov (b. 1957), O. Denisenko (b. 1961), R. Romanishin (b.1957). It is a strong competitive school, offering a synthesis of the highest execution methods and of complicated compositions, always attracting collectors and enthusiasts of graphic. If the graphic could be called “the art not for everyone”, then the Lvov *ex libris* is “the art for the selected”. Only a narrow circle of masters is capable to create works of such a level, which is characterized for the graphic works of the Lvov experts. The Lvov *ex libris* differs by a complicated multilevel subject matter, each piece of sheet represents a method of communication as a way of bringing to the viewer the artist’s philosophy through a labyrinth of symbols and signs, guiding towards new levels of self-organization. The most specific Lvov bookplates are created with intaglio printing technique, and the artists are traditionally famous because their beautiful etchings.

One of the most internationally recognized ex librists of the Lvov School is S. Hrapov, a member of the Austrian Ex Libris Society, of the American Society of Bookplate Collectors and Designers, and of the National Union of Artists of Ukraine. His creative career includes participations in many international exhibitions since 1991 and a lot of personal exhibitions in the world: Netherlands (1998, 1999, 2003), Austria (2001), Turkey (2005), USA (2006), Czech Republic (2008), China (2009, 2013, 2014), Russia (2011). Starting from 1997 the name of S. Hrapov is regularly listed among the winners of international bookplate competitions in Poland (1997, 2000, 2016), Ukraine (1998, 2018), Canada (2002), Turkey (2003, 2018), Bulgaria (2003, 2016, 2018), and China (2006-2009, 2011-2013). For more than twenty years, S. Hrapov is working with the bookplate, creating about two hundred graphic sheets. His pieces are kept in different countries’ collections. Their vast majority is monochrome, impressing as reserved and refined ones in the palette of bookplate, by a personal artistic



manner of realizing stylized images (Figure 4: *Ex libris O. Premstaller*. Etching, 1995).



Figure 4 (From personal collection)

In a close stylistic manner, is the creative pattern of S. Ivanov. One of the great artists of Ukraine, S. Ivanov is known as a painter, as well as the creator of easel graphic, book illustration and *ex libris*. In the field of graphic, his sheets of work are monochrome, using the gradations of tone in a rich palette as a tool of artistic expression (Figure 5: S.Ivanov, *Ex libris J. Peijnenburg*. Etching, 1994).



Figure 5 (From personal collection)

The exhibition biography of S. Ivanov is impressive; and no less, the participations in international competitions. His works are always excellent, due to their complicated compositional structure, concision of the palette and depth of the tone. The artist often transfers the principles of work with the easel graphic or even pictorial art into the bookplate; the composition is therefore narrative, using multi-layer materials and expanding the painting canvas or the sheet for easel graphic, creating a kind of polyphony of allegoric structure in the language of symbols.

The same features could be observed in the works of O. Denisenko, who, like most of the bookplate artists of Ukraine, is much better known outside of the country. Starting from the year 1992, works of O. Denisenko have been exhibited several times in Sweden (1992, 1994, 2007), Belgium (1997), the Netherlands (1998), USA (2000, 2003), France (2000, 2004, 2009), Slovakia (2001, 2009, 2012), Romania (2001-2002), Russia (2002), Finland (2004), Germany (2005), Bulgaria (2006-2009, 2012-2013), Macedonia (2006), Italy (2007), Denmark (2009), Poland (2009), Czech Republic (2012), Canada (2012), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2013), Switzerland (2016). More than thirty of his works were awarded with the first prize of international bookplate competitions. He is not only a graphic artist; he also works in the fields of book illustration, icon painting, sculpture and pictorial art, continuously looking for a new artistic language and execution technique. Denisenko synthesizes the fantasy of the image structure and the allegoric language, leaning towards symbolism and significance, by a rigorous meticulousness of the technical incorporation (see Figure 6: *Ex libris M. P. de Haas*. Etching, 1998).



Figure 6 (From personal collection)

O. Denisenko is the author of a new technique; his attraction becoming “levkas” - a new word in arts, created on the base of the synthesis of carefully learned traditions and their interpretation from the author. This is a vivid example of the ingenious manner of the artist, by the combination between a traditional mode used for centuries in the icons creation and recent innovations. Thus, it is hard to explicitly classify his works based on an encyclopedic education and a very good knowledge of the icon painting art, graphic techniques and script combinations. The script has a special place in his graphic sheets, not only bringing a semantic charge, but also carrying out a decorative function. The image structure is close to the stylistics of the medieval and Renaissance works, first of all of Bosch and Bruegel’s motives, which is emphasized in many appreciative reviews.

## CONCLUSION

Apart from the Kiev and Lvov schools of the modern bookplate, the Ukrainian *ex libris* means the work of other important artists, especially as regards the graphics of small forms. Some of them could be perceived as founders of conditions for the creation of individual schools; for example, the bookplate creator D. Bekker (Odessa), the etcher K. Kalinovich (Lugansk), the master of plastic engraving and linocut B. Romanov (Severodonetsk), the *ex librist*s N. Neimesh and O. Krivoruchko (Chernovtsi). Each of them develops an individual creative style, but bears features of the Ukrainian *ex libris* schools; and thus, they are recognized and appreciated throughout the world, being devoted to making the bookplate as a significant art object of high value and an instrument of intercultural communication.

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