

Bookplate Collecting in the Twenty-first Century

James P. Keenan

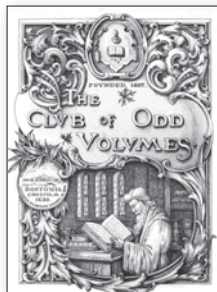
*"Steal not this book,
my honest friend,
For fear the gallows
be thy end."*

Bookplates have been used as marks of pride in book ownership since the mid-fifteenth century. Distinguished artists and their patrons have given serious attention to this art form, creating miniature graphic art prints that adorn books and provide a convenient and personalized way for the book's owner to be identified.



The "Iglar" (hedgehog), for Johannes Knabensberg, Germany, 1450

During the Victorian period, bookplates were made not only for library identification, but as original, signed, numbered print editions for exchange – a tradition that has persisted to this day. Over the centuries, important artists have created superb bookplates with artistic and technical quality that often outweighs their utilitarian purpose. Yet most collectors see these prints as a personal mark in book ownership, where the artwork reflects the owner's interests and his or her



Edwin Davis French, USA, 1895



Ernest James Cross, USA, 1905

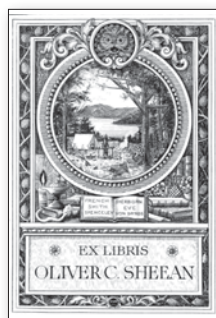
story is told in a unique creation interpreted by the artist

Interest in bookplate collecting flourished in the 1890s. London welcomed the first Ex Libris Society in 1891. Within a year, more than three hundred enthusiasts from England, Europe, and the United States had joined. The pastime quickly spread across Europe and then beyond the Atlantic. In 1896, collectors in the United States formed their first society, the Washington Ex-Libris Society. Since 1922, the American Society of Bookplate Collectors & Designers (ASBC&D, hereafter "the Society"), of which I have the honor of being its director, has fostered a thriving US community. Enthusiasm continues in Canada and Latin America, too.

Collecting is a companionable pursuit that



Frederick Charles Blank, USA, 1925



Arthur Nelson Macdonald, USA, 1942

introduces one to fellow collectors and leading artists. Through this fellowship, we form friendships with ex libris colleagues worldwide, strengthening the sense of community. Bookplates become passports to friendship. As Grace B. Sibley, an American collector living in Australia during the late 1930s, said, "Like music, bookplates speak all languages. They are virtually small ambassadors of friendship and international understanding when exchanged with those of collectors in other countries."

What makes this graphic art form so special is how bookplate collections grow as collectors exchange duplicates. In addition to trading, collectors commission new designs – sometimes partnering with dozens or even hundreds of leading artists – all to expand their holdings. They enjoy keeping detailed checklists and organizing them by artist, technique, and period. As collections grow, some amount to hundreds of thousands.

Ex libris congresses started with the first meeting in Austria in 1953. Initially, they

were national meetings, but they gradually expanded to include other European nations. Early congresses took place in Switzerland, Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and other countries. Eventually, such meetings became truly international. In 1966, the Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Amateurs d'Ex-libris (FISAE) was organized in Hamburg, Germany. This association is also known as the International Federation of Bookplate Societies.

Since its inception, the FISAE biennial congress has warmly welcomed serious bookplate collectors. This international gathering brings together booklovers, art collectors, artists, scholars, historians, librarians, educators, and researchers – all truly passionate about bookplates. At every meeting, attendees



One of the exchange rooms. No money is passed, only the exchange of prints.

enjoy a host of fine exhibitions featuring both historical and contemporary works, usually accompanied by illustrated talks. Additionally, delightful guided tours of the region offer further opportunities for connection, and the lively, friendly exchange of bookplates continues throughout the weeklong event.

Every two years, a different FISAE member nation hosts an international congress. More than forty nations are part of FISAE. For example, our Society organized the twenty-eighth FISAE Congress at the Boston Public Library in 2000 and the thirty-ninth FISAE Congress at Jack London Square on San Francisco Bay in 2022. In the Americas, we also initiated another meeting for enthusiasts from Canada to Argentina. The Interamerican Ex Libris Congress began in the sixteenth-century town of San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico. International participants gathered at the Instituto Allende Fine Arts College, where we led Master Artist workshops, exhibitions, lectures, and exchanges.



Richard Wagener,
USA, 2000



Artemio Rodriguez,
Mexico, 2009

The basics of bookplate collecting remain unchanged in the twenty-first century. In our network, congresses are an important opportunity for networking; by attending you can participate in bookplate auctions and get to know the members through correspondence and exchanges. You may just fall victim to “ex libris mania” – a gentleperson’s pastime. For your library collections, you should commission bookplates in your name from a few artists, to have materials for exchange, and you’ll meet the world’s best artists at a congress. Be selective and always, always strive for the best. The true drama and excitement of bookplates lies in exchanging ideas and forming friendships between collectors and artists, whether in person, at a congress, or through correspondence.

Bookplate aficionados collect both historic ex libris and contemporary prints. The first World Congress I attended was in Sapporo, Japan in 1992, hosted by the Nippon Ex Libris Association. There, I formed lifelong friendships with leaders in our field.

Interest in ex libris has ebbed and flowed over the years. For instance, it notably subsided during World War II, then gathered renewed momentum in the 1950s. Enthusiasm for bookplate art continues in most

countries. In the twenty-first century, renewed interest is visible in the Americas. Exciting movements in the book arts thrive. Meanwhile, hundreds of top artists, printmakers, and book illustrators create exquisite works throughout Europe, Russia, and Asia.

If you are curious about historic ex libris, you may be delighted to discover how many collectors eagerly exchange old examples for new creations. As you step into this welcoming world, consider making the creation of your own bookplate. There is a real joy in seeing your unique ex libris in your books at home. If your interest in bookplates springs from a love of book arts, designing a personal bookplate feels even more rewarding.

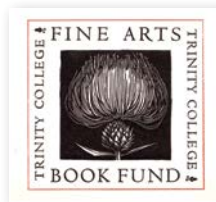
Commissioning a Bookplate

Luc Van den Briele (1930-2024), a well-known Belgian collector and author, stated: “An ex libris should be a synthesis of the ideas and feelings of both artist and client. The artist’s commitment must be notably present, but the subject chosen by the commissioner must leave its mark on the result. The assignment is the heart, and artistic expression is the blood that makes it beat. The one cannot exist without the other.”

Those new to the art of the bookplate may need some guidance in commissioning designs and becoming acquainted with the process of building a traditional collection. Do not cut any corners in reproducing your bookplates. They should always be examples of fine printing, using archival-quality papers and neutral pH adhesives. Commissioning the best artists you can afford gives you the greatest value for exchanges. This pastime allows you to collect ex libris by the most important printmakers and book artists in the world today. Bookplates have been designed by artists and engravers such as Albrecht Dürer, Thomas Bewick, Paul Revere, Kate Greenaway, Aubrey Beardsley, Marc Chagall, M. C. Escher, Rockwell Kent, Leonard Baskin, Barry Moser, and



Rockwell Kent, USA



Barry Moser, USA

many others. Your collection will likely have tremendous value in the future.

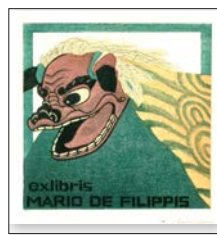
Leading Chinese and Japanese printmakers produce fine, beautiful, multi-color woodcut bookplates. Artists throughout Eastern Europe and Russia have turned out exquisite mezzotints and aquatints. Wood, copper engravings, serigraphs, and etchings are created by artists in Western Europe. Works are produced in various media in Canada, the United States, Mexico, and South America. Despite these trends toward sophisticated design and execution, the contemporary bookplate is often simpler in concept and design than the bookplates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

To organize your collection, sort bookplates by period, country, and designer for clarity. If the designer is unknown or anonymous, use the owner’s name in alphabetical order. You can also group prints into clear categories, such as institutional bookplates (including public libraries, clubs, societies, and subscription libraries) or by design theme (book piles, armorials, pictorials, calligraphic prints, book labels, book stamps, or super libri). Feel free to create additional categories that suit your interests or the focus of your collection.

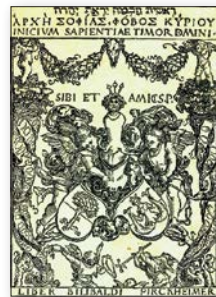
Once you commission your first bookplate, you’ll have prints for library identification and exchange. Members of our Society can find a directory and exchange lists on our website. You will need an idea that reflects your tastes and interests in literature, music, hobbies, family, and heraldry – the subjects are endless.



Katsue Inoue, Japan



Keiko Tsurusawa,
Japan, Multi-color
woodcut



Pirckheimer book-
plate, 1504, by
Albrecht Dürer



Paul Revere, USA

The American Society of Bookplate Collectors & Designers

The Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, charitable organization founded in 1922 to further the art and study of bookplates. We are an association with subscribers worldwide and we have a growing membership throughout the Americas. For more than a century, it has built a tradition of advancing the interest in bookplate art. We accomplish this through our publications, exhibitions, conferences, and electronic media.

Now in its 104th year, we are proud to be among the oldest societies worldwide. We are still going strong as we plan new exhibitions, publications, and competitions. We also continue to grow our international museum collection of more than one hundred and twenty-five thousand bookplates and thousands of books, exhibition catalogs, society journals, with more than fifty donated collections. Our collection is unique in the US because we have antique examples along with fine contemporary prints. Continuing participation and contributions from all corners of the globe make our society both valuable and vibrant.

The Society and Victoria University in New Zealand sponsor competitions to present outstanding book artists to the public. Our tribute to Truman Capote featured the "Breakfast at Tiffany's" bookplate competition exhibition, initially hosted by the Book Club of California

in 2025. Building on this momentum, we currently offer four exhibitions of contemporary bookplates – *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *The Tribute to George Steiner*, *James Joyce's Ulysses*,



Calligraphy by Johanna van den Brandt, Belgium

and Eugenio Montale's *Ossi di Seppia* (Cuttlefish Bones). Montale won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1976. Our publications always feature the world's top book artists, printmakers, and engravers. We offer bibliophiles the opportunity to commission bookplate artists. Our January newsletter highlighted Argentine artist Julieta Warman and profiled her more than two hundred bookplate engravings. It also featured articles on American Art Deco pioneer Mac Harshberger and another on Rev. Jonathan Fisher, an early American bookplate artist and printer.

§§



Mac Harshberger, USA



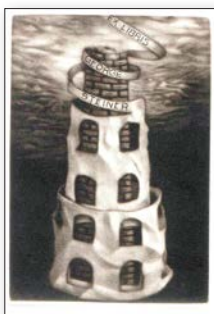
Julieta Warman, Argentina

You will not want to miss the forty-first International FISAE Bookplate Congress. This will take place in the beautiful coastal city of Varna, Bulgaria, September 1-6, 2026. Attendance will be strong, given the central location, and will provide global networking and collaboration opportunities for bookplate enthusiasts. English serves as the primary communication language at international bookplate congresses. If you have questions, comments, or want to get involved, please contact us at info@bookplate.org or write to ASBC&D, P.O. Box 14964, Tucson, AZ, USA 85732-4964

Contemporary World Bookplates



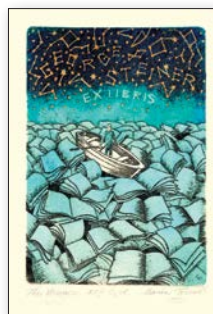
Anthony Russo,
James Joyce Ulysses



Deborah Chapman,
Canada, George Steiner



Julieta Warman,
Argentina, Jazz, JPK



Marina Terauds,
George Steiner



Richard Wagener



Sergei Hrapov, Ukraine,
H.P. Lovecraft, JPK



Hristo Kerin, Tighrope



Kalinovich, A Selle



KM Bak, Tribute to
George Steiner



Paul Klee, Michaud



Kalinovich, Isolde Kern