The bookplate, or *ex libris*, as it is called in Latin, was once an important means of identifying whom a book belonged to. A diminutive but by no means simple example of the engraver’s art, a bookplate was a self-proclaimed declaration that the book’s owner and family were educated, well-to-do, and highly respected members of the community.

Not that many centuries ago, when books were the property of religious enclaves and were laboriously copied, one letter at a time, book ownership was not a significant consideration. Few people could read. Gutenberg’s invention of the movable-type printing press in the mid-1400s, one of humankind’s most important developments, changed the course of history. Although still luxury items, books became more available. Individuals and families wanted to distinguish their books from those of others.

The earliest bookplates were heraldic in nature, a family crest or coat of arms, and were drawn or painted directly into the book, essentially becoming a part of the manuscript. Later, as acquisitions increased, owners sought faster, simpler means of identification, and printed images of a single woodcut were used so that the chosen representation could be affixed to each treasured volume. Over time, the artistry of bookplate creation evolved into an elegantly rendered microcosm, an imaginative yet concise interpretation of some facet of the owner’s personality or past achievements.

The earliest known bookplate is believed to be from Germany, around 1450. German painters Hans Holbein and Albrecht Dürer are known to have created bookplates during the early 1500s. As the technology of printing advanced, so did the creation of bookplates. By the beginning of the 16th century, copper plate...
engravings were the standard. The image was incised into a flat copper plate with reversed lettering, the surface was covered with a film of ink, and then it was pressed onto paper manually or mechanically.

As the centuries passed and book ownership became commonplace, the art and craft of ex libris began to lose its vitality. But certain book collectors and scholars, loathe to let this art form slip into oblivion, became interested in collecting the bookplates in addition to the rare books themselves. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, bookplate collecting became quite popular, and organizations dedicated to preserving and promoting the art form sprang up around the world. Two world wars slowed the advance of this activity, but not for long.

Interest in ex libris collecting and in the creation of contemporary designs, particularly in Eastern European countries, where engraving and other graphic arts have been heavily practiced, has remained high. A bookplate may have more intrinsic value than the book that holds it, because the artist’s work is so highly regarded. In some circles, the original purpose of the bookplate, that is, to testify the ownership of a book by revealing in an artistic manner some of the owner’s ideals, has decreased in importance. Professional collectors and serious amateurs have condemned this trend.

Two devoted ex libris admirers and collectors are Teresa Garbulinska Saykaly and her husband, Ronald Saykaly. Teresa Ronald Saykaly's ex libris was created by Jakubowski.

Wojciech Jakubowski is a renowned Polish engraver and arts educator. He earned a master’s degree in fine arts from Nicholas Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, in 1953 and has worked predominantly in the copperplate engraving medium, producing more than 1,000 ex libris to date. He began Biennale Ekslibrisu, The International Biennale of Modern Bookplate Arts, in 1964 with the idea of bringing Eastern and Western contemporary bookplate artists together. The 2002 Biennale marked its 19th year, and of the 1,500 artists who submitted work to be juried by Jakubowski for this event, only 400 were selected to participate.

Jakubowski has had more than 80 one-person shows around the world and has garnered numerous awards. In 1998, at the Gutenberg Museum in Mainz, Germany, the German Ex Libris Society presented him with the Walter von Zur Westen Medal, an award that recognizes lifetime achievement. The society has bestowed this honor on only four artists in the last 100 years.
Saykaly has mounted and curated two ex libris exhibitions at the University of Kentucky W. T. Young Library. The 2000 exhibit took place after the Saykalys attended the 1998 Biennale Ekslibrisu (International Biennale of Modern Bookplate Arts) at Marbork Castle in Poland. Saykaly invited Wojciech Jakubowski, a highly esteemed Polish engraver (see sidebar), and Masao Ohba, a Japanese engraver and the recipient of the first-place award at the 1998 Biennale, to submit several pieces for the UK exhibition. Both artists generously shared their work, and Masao Ohba even attended the opening reception in Lexington.

Saykaly’s second exhibit was held in April 2002 and featured the work of Wojciech Jakubowski from the Saykalys’ private collection. This event celebrated a remarkable occasion: the unveiling of the Wojciech Jakubowski ex libris that the Saykalys commissioned for the University of Kentucky Library. The Saykalys were considering a donation to the university, and they wanted a gift that would express and celebrate the beauty of the new facility and its importance to the commonwealth. The selection of an ex libris, designed by an internationally acclaimed artist whose work they had followed for many years, seemed more than apropos. With its historical connection to books and libraries, its growing significance as an art form, and the fact that it will continue to give in perpetuity, this ex libris is an extraordinary gift.

What is even more intriguing, according to Mary Molinaro, director of the W. T. Young Library, and Paul Willis, former director of the UK Libraries, is that it is one of only a handful of contemporary university ex libris in the country. Other venerable institutions, such as Harvard and Yale, have library ex libris, but they are in the older, more traditional heraldic style. The Saykalys and UK library officials hope that this gift will pioneer a contemporary ex libris trend for college and university libraries.

The Saykalys traveled to Poland this summer to attend the 2002 Biennale Ekslibrisu at Marbork Castle, where they reunited with Biennale creator and longtime friend Jakubowski. At Marbork, serious artists and bookplate collectors from all over the globe celebrated the universal magic of this exquisite and infinitely delicate art form. Careful attention to the meticulous detail and precise articulation contained in these miniature masterpieces opens the door to all the engraver has to say. 

In addition to her love of ex libris, Teresa Garbulinska (Saykaly) is a former concert pianist who performed at the Berkshire Music Festival in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, in 1964 and at Carnegie Hall in New York City in 1965. In this photograph, she is performing at Linuta Castle in Poland.

Masao Ohba’s work combines traditional Japanese printmaking techniques with a distinctive mimeograph technique of his own. His exquisitely tinted, lively fantasy imagery draws on Japanese folk traditions.