Bookplates, or Ex Libris as they are often known, can be found throughout the book stacks of any large library. They range in design from the very simple to the extraordinary and serve as a mark of ownership to identify the owner of books. Many simply have the owner’s name or initials, some have the family crest, and still others are very personal works commissioned to exemplify the interests of a particular person or family. Scholars using the research collections of a library are often surprised by the discovery of a lovely bookplate in the front of a volume indicating the provenance of the book in their hands. Many of these plates often have more intrinsic value than the books that they mark. A plate indicating that a particular book is from the library of a noted historical figure can have great value by itself.

The need for bookplates arose with the development of the printing press when multiple copies of books were produced rather than books being unique hand produced items. Owners of books had a need to identify their own copy of the book to differentiate it from the others that were printed.

Bookplates generally fall into one of three categories: heraldic, typographical, or graphic. These small artworks are printed using traditional printing techniques such as etching, engraving, lithography, or woodcut. The earliest examples of bookplates were produced in Germany in the late 15th century. Two of the three known 15th century examples of bookplates were connected with the library of the Carthusian monastery at Buxheim, Germany and were placed in the volumes to commemorate the donation of the volumes to the library. These plates were woodcuts and were heraldic in nature as were most examples
produced before the 18th century. Bookplates in England date from one belonging to Cardinal Wolsey in 1525, from France from 1574, from Sweden in 1575, from Switzerland in 1607, and from Italy in 1623.

The “Golden Age” of bookplates and bookplate collecting started in about 1875 and continued through the nineteen twenties. During this time the bookplates of low quality proliferated to a point that many collectors lost interest. Additionally, with the rise of public libraries the need to build up personal libraries in order to have reading material decreased and the bookplate became a less needed commodity. As a result the number of artists working in this medium declined, particularly in the United States. In recent times there has been a renewed interest in this art form. Ex Libris exhibits and meetings have revived interest both from artists and collectors.

Even through times of less interest libraries have continued to hold a general appreciation for the book arts and have maintained a long-standing interest in bookplates. Many libraries still continue to have special bookplates designed that acknowledge special donors and collections. It is therefore natural that an exhibit of bookplates be mounted in a library.

The University of Kentucky Library is extremely pleased to host the exhibit of the bookplate art of Mr. Wojciech Jakubowski of Poland and Mr. Masao Ohba of Japan. While both artists are of the same generation and both produce bookplates their experiences, techniques and styles are vastly different from one another.
Wojciech Jakubowski was born in Starograd Gdanski, Poland in 1929. He graduated in 1953 with a Master’s Degree in Fine Arts from Nicolas Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, where he then secured a teaching position that he held for nine years.

For the first part of his career Mr. Jakubowski’s work was primarily devoted to woodcuts and copperplate engraving. In 1960 he stopped doing woodcuts in order to explore dry point, but continued to do copperplate engravings. Mr. Jakubowski’s work since then has primarily been copperplate engraved bookplates. His work is extraordinarily detailed and incorporates a wide variety of imagery. His subjects include the human figure, animals and other figures from nature, in addition to more abstract and symbolic images. The well-known Polish philosopher Professor W. Tatarkiewicz once stated that, “these miniature works are perfect in two ways: first because they strive for perfection; and second because they achieve this perfection to a high degree.”

Mr. Jakubowski has exhibited internationally and has received wide acclaim for his work having won numerous awards and prizes. He was the initiator and organizer of the International Biennale of Modern Bookplate Arts in the Castle of Malbork, Poland.

Masao Ohba, born in 1928 in Japan, has been actively working as a printmaker for over forty years. He creates delightful brightly colored bookplates using a unique paperscreen printing technique. This technique developed by Mr. Ohba combines traditional techniques inherent in Japanese printmaking with distinctive mimeograph printing techniques. His imagery draws on the
Japanese folk traditions with the motifs including birds, animals, and the human form. His work is typified by these colorful and playful images. His work draws heavily on mysticism in nature and his bookplates often include philosophical epithets or Japanese aphorisms.

Mr. Ohba is an honorary member of the NIKKI Art Association, the Fukuoka State Art Association, and served as a visiting professor for the SKANska Art Academy in Sweden. He has exhibited internationally at museums in Asia, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South America, and North America. He has won numerous awards including the 1st prize from the 17th International Biennale of Contemporary Ex Libris in Malbork, Poland in 1998.

This exhibit is significant because we are fortunate to have work representing two of the best artists in the world who work with bookplates. It is a highly specialized format, but with this exhibition it is possible for viewers to see the variety that is possible in this format. The artists are from Asia and Europe, one works in color the other in black and white, they use different printmaking techniques, their imagery is markedly different and yet both of these artists have devoted their lives to making Ex Libris for books and for collectors. This art form is gaining in popularity both in Europe and in Asia and the small masterpieces have become collectible in their own right. Visitors to the University of Kentucky Libraries now have an opportunity to view these masterworks that will perhaps spark interest in Kentucky.

Mary Molinaro
Team Leader
William T. Young Library
University of Kentucky Libraries
For More Reading


