Kiev ex-libris school as a xylography traditions keeper in printmaking of modern Ukraine

ABSTRACT

The article is dedicated to Kiev ex-libris school role (EL) in modern Ukrainian printmaking. The loss process by a bookplate of utilitarian, applied functions and its transformation into an independent work of art, collectors’ object of interest with an appreciated art value is described. The ex-libris schools formed in the first quarter of the 21st century are emphasized, the main trends of the bookplate development predominant centers are defined (Kiev, Lvov, Odessa, Luhansk). Printmaking techniques, typical for a particular ex-libris school, are marked. Kiev bookplate school, as one of the leading centers for the classical xylography traditions preservation, is underlined. The most significant masters, working in these techniques, are presented, the technological process evolution is indicated and its main reasons are emphasized. The problem of opposition between the old and new in the art of printmaking is touched upon by example of classical techniques and gathering momentum computer graphics (CGA) coexistence.

KEY WORDS
Printmaking, xylography, chalcography, ex-libris, woof cut, lino cut

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Introduction

On the cusp of the XX and XXI centuries there are trends that are truly considered to be the main ones for these art types emerging in the field of Ukrainian printmaking and graphic design. The first trend lies in a rather rapid movement towards a clear line erasing between the graphic arts and graphic design, the second one – in old traditions and new developments in graphic arts, primarily is in printmaking, that far from always lead to the organic synthesis formation, but more often – to the displacement of one by another. In both cases the computer graphic arts (CGA) popularization in recent years have become the most pronounced reason, to the arsenal of which the artists increasingly resort to, abandoning the means of printmaking classical techniques artistic expression. And this is most clearly manifested in the ex-libris field that has received a new step of its development since the 1990s. If for a very long time from the moment of its appearance and existence, beginning in the 16th century, the bookplate had been performing a strictly applied function, then in the last few decades it rapidly went beyond the utilitarian role and acquired aesthetic qualities. This process ended with the fact the bookplate almost completely separated from the book nature, having lost its dependence on it and turned into an independent work of art. In all countries of the world, where ex-libris has an existence history and demand, this process took place, but the name is slightly different in chronological framework and time. In the USA and Asian countries, the bookplate follows a separate evolutionary path, not having such popularity there and not being so in demand among collectors and graphic arts admires, as in the countries of Europe.
and the post-Soviet ones. In Europe, back in 1966 year, FISAE, the International Federation of Bookplate Lovers, was founded, whose history began in Germany, as well as the history of the bookplate itself, the first samples of which were also published in Germany, Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Ukraine can be called to be among the countries, where the bookplate is especially popular, that is expressed in the presence there a large number of highly professional masters, many collectors, specialized museums, often holding competitions and exhibitions (Romanenkova, 2015a) . In each of the countries the competition and exhibition process has its own specificities: the competitions that have become constant or at least frequent, somewhere dominate (Ruse ex-libris competition in 2019, 2020, the one in Sint-Niklaas, 2019, ex-libris competition in Bristol in 2020, etc. are among the recent examples), specialized publications dedicated to the bookplate are printed somewhere (Belgium – «Graphia», Portugal – «Encyclopaedia Bio-Bibliographical of the Art of the Contemporary Ex-Libris», etc.), some of the countries can boast of relevant societies apart FISAE ((Great Britain – «Society of Wood Engravers», «Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers»; Germany – «Deutschen Exlibris-Gesellschaft»; Italy – «Associazione Italiana Ex Libris»; Russia – «Russian MSC Ex-libris Association (Moscow book-lovers community)», St. Petersburg «Ex-libris Collectors Clubs»; Ukraine – «Ukrainian Ex-libris Club»; France – «Association Francaise pour la Connaissance de l’Ex Libris», «L’Ex Li bris Francaise», etc.) (Romanenkova, Bratus & Kuzmenko, 2021). Competitions organizing and societies creating process has been continuous for the last half of the century, but in Ukraine it has intensified, having given an opportunity to talk about modern Ukrainian ex-libris school birth and a new landmark in its history only since the early 1990s, when the country gained independence. It was from this time the artists overcame the «Iron Curtain», became mobile, got the opportunity to join the international artistic process and become the part of world art field.

**Literature review**

Precisely because of a rather clear divide between the classic bookplate history and its modern «art biography», the ex-libris problem bibliography consists of two research categories – ex-libris works until the 1990s and ones on Ukraine purely modern bookplate from the period of its independence. The first category is represented mainly by unrelated works on the ex-libris history certain aspects from the 16th century: these are researches by N. Belichko, Y. Berdychevsky (Berdychevsky, 1977), P. Vyunik, the Ukrainian ex-libris club chairman P. Nesterenko (Nesterenko, 2002; Nesterenko, 2020), O. Lamonova. Only one dissertation was defended, dedicated to Ukraine bookplate from its appearance to the first half of the XX century, the author of which was the same P. Nesterenko, who later published several monographies on the same topic. This testifies to the lack of complex scientific studies on Ukrainian ex-libris topic, and there are still known to be prospects for research work.

In very rare cases it is possible to find in the literature sources that would illustrate the bookplate creating techniques (Nesterenko, 2002) – there are very few practicing artists among the theoretical developments authors who are well-versed in the technological process intricacies (Kamenetskaya, 2019).

The second sources category covers Ukraine ex-libris of the last three decades. In the bulk of works there are also the ones dedicated to individuals; developments on certain topical issues of this period bookplate evolution: articles by J. Kamenetskaya, the author of still the only dissertation on modern Ukrainian bookplate (Kamenetskaya, 2019), V. Mikhalchuk (Mikhalchuk, 2014a; Mikhalchuk, 2014b), J. Romanenkova (Romanenkova, 1999a; Romanenkova, 1999b; Romanenkova, 2003; Romanenkova, 2015a; Romanenkova, 2015b; Romanenkova et al., 2021; Romanenkova, 2021), T. Safonova (Safonova, 2011), V. Tupik (Tupik, 2017); exhibitions reviews, individual collections characteristics. Ukrainian researchers’ publications about country bookplate, that go beyond it, should be especially pointed out, – this type of prints popularization has become one of the clearest trends in modern graphic art in Ukraine. There are many foreign critics and collectors, and sometimes the artists themselves, Ukrainian ex-librists’ works connoisseurs in the bibliography and sources of authorship. Patrons appeared, both in Ukraine and in the other countries, supporting talented masters’ development, sponsoring exhibitions, publishing books, catalogs (it is S. Brodovich in Ukraine, whose publishing house has issued a lot of monographic studies about modern Ukrainian masters of a bookplate, for outside the country – a Belgian L. Van Den Briele, an Italian M. de Philippis, a Portuguese A. M. da Mota Miranda, etc.)

**Bookplate schools in modern art of Ukraine**

In Ukraine bookplate wide diversity of the last three decades there is a tendency to detach several main centers of its development and popularization that allows us to speak of the independent schools formation, represented by interesting, highly professional masters (Romanenkova, 2021). Each of these centers has its own stylistic features, characteristics collection that allows one or another artist to be referred to a particular school, based not only on the geographical aspect. It is not infrequent that certain deserving masters can be highlighted, outside the school, because noticing the ex-librists among the artists range alongside them gets failure, but they
themselves are so significant and remarkable for the ex-libris history that become independent elements in the picture. One example is Konstantin Kalinovich – a master from Luhansk, where the school as such was not formed, however, this artist became one of the most significant for understanding the modern Ukrainian bookplate and printmaking in general, having a huge competitive and exhibition experience, being in demand among the most famous collectors, having become recognizable for the unique author's style and technique. Andrey Khvorost, representing Kirovograd, Miroslav Korol from Ivanovo-Frankovsk, Orest Krivoruchko from Chernovtsy, Vasiliy Leonenko from Chernigov, Boris Romanov from Severodonetsk, Vladimir Lomaka from Sumy, the famous Odessa resident David Bekker, and others stand out as well. It would be inappropriate to make any mention of them, because their works are peculiar to general picture of the development and compilation of Ukraine bookplate general stylistics at the turn of the XXI century.

However, one may truly talk of independent ex-libris schools in several art centers of Ukraine, each of which is marked by a large number of ex-librists. First of all, this is the Lvov school (with its main representatives in the person of Sergey Ivanov, Sergey Khrapov, Oleg Denisenko, Oleg Andreev, Igor Bodnar, Artem Bulka, Valeriy Demyanishin, Boris Drobotyuk, Olga Fedoruk, Orest Gelitovich, Igor Yanovich, Yaroslav Kachmar, Yuriy Kohk, Yevgeniy Kozenovich, and others), the Kharkov school (represented by Vadim Aleksandrov, Viktor Igumentsev, Alla Khmel, and others) and, of course, the capital’s art center – Kiev bookplate school. Printmaking techniques, where ex-librises are created, can be called one of the most significant features that determine the characteristics of a particular school. Each school has its certain preferences, they might most be clearly defined in the Lvov school – chalcography techniques have been dominating there for a long time, at most it is either pure etching, which is used without mixing with other techniques (C3), or several techniques complex combinations, whose tooling is synthesized in one sheet: etching, mezzotint, aquatint, soft ground etching (C3C5C7). Lvov bookplates colour range is often quite monochrome and black-and-white compositions are not infrequent. Although masterfully executed multicolour etchings can be also found (V. Demyanishin).

Kiev ex-libris school at the cusp of the XX and XXI centuries

But the capital school is characterized by its technical preferences polyvector nature. Tamara Balenko, Sergey and Anatoly Burtsoyov, Arkady Faktorovich, Victor Romanenkov, Yuriy Galitsyn, Stanislav Gavrilyuk, Konstantin Kozlovsky, Vasiliy Lopata, Nikolay Stratilat, Aleksandr Savich, the Kharuk brothers, Vladimir Taran, the Pugachevsky creative dynasty, Konstantin Antioukhin, Yulia Kamenetskaya, Ruslan Agirba, Aleksandr Savich, Ruslan Vigovsky – only a small part of the masters, representing Kiev school in the international art field. There are black-and-white and colour xylography, lino cut, lithography, congreve printing (blind), etching, mezzotint, aquatint, soft ground etching, copper and steel engraving. Many artists have a shot at both xylography and chalcography techniques. Bent for computer graphic arts, as one of the more and more popular in the bookplate creation, has become the main trend in the last few years. It is notable this choice is made most often by the representatives of the artists’ young generation (Y. Kamenetskaya), more rarely – by the middle one (R. Vigovsky) (Figure 1), while the older generation adheres to classical prints techniques, not replacing them with CGA tooling.

» Figure 1: Vigovsky R. EL Armand Bohr. CGA. 2009

This speaks not only of certain tendencies in techniques choice within Kiev ex-libris school, but also gives emphasis to another trend – the bookplate gradation probability from book’s elements, book graphic arts’ segments to the field of computer design, that increasingly crosses critics’ lips. However, it will be yet only the one of the events development options if, as time progressed, the CGA more and more displaces academic prints with all the variety of its techniques. Unfortunately, such a possibility exists because academic classical techniques with all their complexity are less often accessible to artists, young masters infrequently are able to use them professionally. Moreover, the professional art education degradation level does not aid classical techniques preservation and development. Another reason for the academic printmaking techniques risk of disappearance is the economic aspect, i.e. materials’ high price. Lino
cut remains among the still more accessible one, lithogra-
phy, as before, is a rather expensive pleasure, there-
fore, it cannot be referred to the favorites in the list of
techniques used by bookplate masters. Wood cut might
typify the evolution of technological aspect in xylography.
Quite a lot of stages have passed from the academic
interpretation to the technique modern reading, both
the materials and icon obtaining process peculiarities
have being changed. If initially only certain wood types
were used to create engravings, using the xylography
 technique (wood cut is more often known for its solidity),
then in recent decades it is increasingly possible to meet
with engravings on cardboard, organic glass, and plastic.
Various plastic types have been used for a long time as
the most popular and accostable synthetic substitute
for wood, which is expensive due to its naturalness. It
can be of different thickness, up to very thin, not much
thicker than heavy paper. Coated with black colour and
used as a base, it allows to attain a soft, flowing stroke.
Artists as well use organic glass to create bookplates
(e.g., N. Stratilat often resorts to it), which cannot be
considered an equivalent substitute for wood due to a
different structure that does not give the velvety stroke
that is possible, when engraving is created on a wood
base. Cardboard, which is also used as a basis for printing
form creating, cannot be absolutely accepted as wooden
boards substitute; working on it leads to the destruction
of xylographic sheet true creating process understanding.
While copying, the cardboard gets soaked quite quickly,
absorbing the paint, goes through a limited circulation
and absolutely cannot give a clear, finely-honed pic-
ture, a stroke of pinpoint precision, which is possible
for wood or plastic. Due to its availability, cardboard is
often used in higher educational establishments, when
students-artists learn the technology ropes. But this is
particular what should not be allowed – getting used to
bad material from the very beginning leads to the fact
the artist too often allows himself afterwards a com-
promise in technology, artificially simplifying printing
form creating process that results in a loss of icon qual-
ity. Wood cut, especially on hard boxwood, is far from
being possible for every master, even physically. This job
requires a well-positioned, firm hand and a perfect eye.

Plastic has become an equivalent but cheaper synthetic
substitute for wooden forms. It is often used by modern
ex-librist of the Kiev school. Quality materials have al-
ways been a significant formula for future work success.
The masters of the old school, classical training still oper-
tate today according to this principle. Unfortunately, the
younger generation inclines to simplify the process, that
compromise the quality of works. In addition to the basis,
on which the printed form for xylography is created, pa-
per has always been of no small importance – of certain
solidity, textures, shade. Today, despite the widest range
of paper types used for printmaking, more and more
masters, who try to preserve the xylography classic tra-
ditions making paper by hand, appear. The Kiev artist of

Georgian origin R. Agirba began to use handmade paper,
following the Luhansk graphic artist K. Kalinovich, known
in many world countries for his author’s books, created
completely by hand. He, like many masters representing
Kiev bookplate school, tries his hand at both xylography
and chalcography techniques. His earlier ex-librises were
created mainly in the xylography technique – they were
plastic engravings, both black-and-white and in several
boards, polychrome (Figure 2). The works created in
this particular technique have brought the fame and
prestigious awards to the master at more than 20 inter-
national exhibitions. Recent years the master has given
preference to etching, making reprints on handmade
paper, thus, demonstrating one of the main Kiev school
trends – artists’ experiments in different techniques, as
opposed to, for example, Lvov ones, who traditionally
prefer chalcography.

Many Kiev ex-librists such as, for instance, V. Romanen-
kov, V. Taran, Y. Galitsyn, A. Savich, V. Lopata, and others
work in the same technique. Sometimes xylography tool-
ing and congreve (blind stamping) synthesis experiments
can be observed, in some cases gilding comes into use,
i.e. xylography is enriched with printmaking methods
and means (V. Romanenkov). The representatives’ of
the Pugachevsky dynasty creative works are character-
istic by many criteria, they are definitely can be called
the xylography traditions keepers in the modern Kiev
ex-libris. Arkady and Gennady Pugachevskys – father and
son – are two generations representatives, each of which
has become a quintessence kind of the most remarkable
features inherent in both generations. This is manifest-
ed both in the technique choice and images character,
which each of the masters stylizes in his own way.

> Figure 2: Agirba R. EL Klaus Thoms. XG/6. 1996
Their creative biographies are quite demonstrative in one more aspect: they are «unofficial» prominent representatives, one can say – of Ukraine graphic arts underground layer, in particular, of the Kiev school. Neither Arkady nor Gennady are included in the official art community – they are not members of the National Union of Artists of Ukraine, do not have awards received within the country, in actual fact do not exhibit within Ukraine. Arkady Pugachevsky (who died in 2021), like his son, had only a few personal exhibitions in Ukraine in the early 1990s. (1990 – Lvov, 1991, 1992, 1995 – Kiev), i.e. at the beginning of Ukrainian bookplate renaissance, and it was he who was one of this process originators. But at the same time he was a member of «Deutschen Exlibris-Gesellschaft» (Germany) and «Society of Wood Engravers» (Great Britain), winner of grand prix, first prizes, special prizes at dozens of international exhibitions in Belgium (1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1999), Poland (1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2001, 2003), Italy (1994), Japan (1998), Lithuania (1993, 1994), the USA (2001, 2006). Master’s works posthumous exhibition was also being prepared outside his own country – his talent connoisseurs in China were the first who decided to pay respect to the artist memory.

Gennady Pugachevsky is also not included in the artists community recognized in his country, well-treated by the authorities from art. He did not even receive a specialized education, having left the institute’s walls without completing his studies. But it did not prevent him (rather – helped forward) from receiving the Associate Fellowship of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers (Great Britain) status and became the Society of Wood Engravers (Great Britain) member. The master received the most significant awards at prestigious exhibitions and bookplates and applied graphics competitions in Spain (1992), Lithuania (1993, 1997), the Netherlands (1993, 1995, 1997, 1998), Poland (1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2001), Denmark (1994), the USA (2001, 2006), France (1997), Italy (1994). It is thanks primarily to A. and G. Pugachevsky the Ukrainian bookplate was recognized outside the country. They are long-time participants in the FISAE congresses, it was they who organized bookplate first international exhibition-competitions in Ukraine (1993, 1994) in the cooperation with the president and several members of the Ukrainian ex-libris club founded in the 1990s.

Arkady Pugachevsky had been working in plastic engraving technique for many years and his hobby was not limited to ex-libris. His sheets could be either black-and-white, with the stylization maximum degree, conventionality and closeness to the sign system, or coloured. And if the artist’s prints can be rather large sized (Figure 3), then the ex-libris was usually quite chamber (Figure 4). Pugachevsky’s Sr. graphics’ technique can be called an etalon – his engraving tool gave a birth to compositions of amazing polish, the highest level of professionalism.

Gennady Pugachevsky, in spite of the fact he studied xylography under his father, has a different images style, more delicate, fragile, light, but his compositions performance level is high as well, if not to say it more strikes with scrupulousness and pinpoint precision. Greater sensitivity to the spirit of the time is the main thing that distinguishes Gennady’s work from his father’s artistic searches. There is not only ex-libris in the technique of plastic engraving but web-design, computer graphics, water colours, logo, graphic design, etc. in the artist’s arsenal as well. Belonging to a younger generation has its impact. It should be noted the ex-libris itself, as well as the sheet of his prints (Figure 5), was also created by Gennady in the permanent xylography technique, more often in colour. Moreover, its polychromy sometimes
reaches uniqueness – some compositions are printed from 15-17 boards. At the same time, the combination process during printing becomes almost inimitable and requires the highest level of technical skill (Figure 6). G. Pugachevsky’s imagery is more sophisticated, refined, his oeuvre includes much more non-objective compositions, stylization reaches a high standard while there is a fine sense of humor in object compositions, although stylized, but more meaningful and close to naturalist representation in his father’s works.

Conclusions

Kiev modern ex-libris school can rightly be considered one of the most universal: on the one hand, its representatives are trying to extend their technological experiments range to the maximum, working in techniques of both chalcography and xylography, having a tolerant attitude to innovations, trying their hand at computer graphic arts, synthesizing classical techniques tooling. But, on the other hand, it is the Kiev masters, who might make the most tangible contribution today to xylography academic, classical techniques preserving process, resorting to xylography to create a bookplate. And it is precisely because of the Kiev ex-libris school representatives Ukrainian wood and plastics engraving is known far beyond the borders of the country, which became possible because of the intense exhibition and competition artists’ activity, their mobility and readiness for the Ukrainian ex-libris presentation at a creative event of any level.

References


