

Religious genre in the contemporary Ukrainian ex-libris: schools, techniques, main characteristics

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Abstract

The article outlines the role of religious motives in the Ukrainian bookplate (or ex-libris) in the period of independence of Ukraine from the early 1990s until today. The research provides characteristics of the main aspects of the formation of genre diversity in the new Ukrainian ex-libris, emphasizes the unique role of the religious genre in the small graphic forms, and distinguishes the main categories of religious motives. It is possible to attribute Ukrainian bookplates to a printmaking segment within rigid frames as these works are almost always custom-made. Therefore, the increasing interest in religious motives and promotion of the spiritual genre in the sphere of ex-libris play a pivotal role in the formation of printmaking in modern Ukraine. It did not take long for Ukrainian ex-libris to become one of the favourites at prestigious international contests, a regular exhibition, and a subject of interest to the world's leading collectors. To achieve the aims set in this research, the following methods were applied: chronological method (for the sequential presentation of the studied phenomena), complex method (for their comprehensive analysis), biographical method (for the presentation of basic information about the artistic career of specific authors) and comparative method (for comparing the main features of the individual manner of artists). The analysis was carried out on the material of the creative work of the leading ex-librists of modern Ukraine, working in both xylography and intaglio printing techniques (A. and G. Pugachevsky, K. Antioukhin, R. Agirba, O. Savych, B. Romanov, O. Kryvoruchko, etc.)

Introduction

It was not until the year 1991 that a chronicle of the new Ukrainian art started to be written. Ukraine became an independent country separated by political events from the history of the Soviet cultural layer, through the prism of which Ukrainian heritage had previously been considered. 1991 was not just a nominal date but nothing less than the one which dramatically changed the nature of the artistic processes of the domestic art field. First, these changes affected those segments of art most susceptible to the pressure of the ideological machine because the era of custom-made art

before the 1990s was highly politicized, and the artists were dependent and deprived of freedom of expression. Undoubtedly, custom art has always depended on the customer's needs and wants. Every piece of art being created now is also inevitably subject to interference in the creative process. This trend greatly affected, for example, monumental painting or print-run graphics.

Undeniably, typographic arts such as book illustrations, posters, or postcards are most influenced by the severe pressure from government orders. Consequently, many genres were not developing during that period. For instance, religious and spiritual motives had long been ignored by artists working in graphic arts. As far as the bookplate is concerned, it is possible to attribute it to such a segment of printmaking which exists within rigid frames as these works are almost always custom-made. Therefore, the increasing interest in religious motives and promotion of the spiritual genre in the sphere of ex-libris play a pivotal role in the formation of printmaking in modern Ukraine. The new milestone of the national bookplate begins in the 1990s only. Ukrainian artists, having gotten the opportunity to get rid of the "Iron Curtain," managed not only to revive the bookplate in the sphere of small graphic forms, give it a new lease of life and turn it into a work of art itself, but also present it outside the borders Ukraine. It did not take long for Ukrainian ex-libris to become one of the favourites at prestigious international contests, a regular exhibition, and a subject of interest to the world's leading collectors.

Literature review

Hardly can one call the bibliography of the Ukrainian ex-libris of the late XX – early XXI centuries extensive, as this phenomenon is extremely poorly covered in scientific literature. The evolution of the Ukrainian bookplate has been somewhat thoroughly studied only in the chronological period until 1991, before the advent of the new art in independent Ukraine. The subject of the book graphic arts, in particular ex-libris, in the context of Soviet graphic arts, including the Soviet period, is covered a little more broadly in the scientific works of Y. Belichko, N. Belichko, O. Lamonova, P. Nesterenko.

However, it is possible to consider the development of ex-libris starting from the 1990s from a research perspective only. There has been only one monograph on the Ukrainian bookplate, written by the President of the Ukrainian Ex-libris Club, P. Nesterenko (Nesterenko, 2016). Still, the material analyzed in this monograph, as well as in the thesis of the same author, covers the period until the first half of the XXth century.

The first thesis on the bookplate at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries in Ukrainian art criticism in 2021 was written by Yu. Kamenetskaya (Kamenetskaya, 2021). The rest scientific studies on the Ukrainian ex-libris are limited to individual articles in Ukrainian and foreign scientific editions. It should be noted that such scholars as Yu. Kamenetskaya (Kamenetskaya, 2018; Kamenetskaya, 2019; Kamenetskaya, 2019b), V. Mykhalchuk (Mikhalchuk, 2014; Mikhalchuk, 2017), P. Nesterenko (Nesterenko, 2016), Yu. Romanenkova (Romanenkova, 2014; Romanenkova, 2015; Romanenkova, 2017; Romanenkova, 2021a; Romanenkova, 2021b; Romanenkova, 2021c; Romanenkova & Bratus & Kuzmenko, 2021; Romanenkova, J., & Paliychuk, A., & Mykhalchuk); T. Safonova (Safonova, 2013), V. Tupik (Tupik, 2017) have significantly contributed to the research on ex-libris.

Among their articles are those devoted to individual masters and specific motives in their works—for instance, Yu. Kamenetskaya attempted to analyze the religious genre in the Ukrainian ex-libris (Kamenetskaya, 2019b). However, this attempt cannot be considered exhaustive and successful since the material under study is limited to three or four artists, and most of the text of her article is dedicated to the ideological aspect.

Therefore, it can be stated that the religious genre in the modern Ukrainian bookplate has not yet been the subject of independent and complex fundamental analysis. This fact substantiates the necessity of further research into this subject. The popularization of religious motives in the ex-libris is relevant like never before since it is evidence of the revival of interest in the spiritual sphere, faith, and the change of dominants, which has become possible only for the last three decades as a result of the global transformation of the worldview paradigm of Ukrainian artists.

Methodology & Results

To achieve the aims set in this research, the following methods were applied: chronological method (for the sequential presentation of the studied phenomena), complex process (for their comprehensive analysis), biographical approach (for the presentation of basic information about the artistic career of specific authors) and comparative method (for comparing the main features of the individual manner of artists).

Ukrainian ex-libris at the turn of the XX and XXI centuries has several dominant trajectories of its development. However, each became popular in the art field, first in Ukraine, then in Eastern Europe and then across the globe. First, it is necessary to mention the formation of the main schools, so-called epicentres of the development of the bookplate, each of which has its evolution algorithm and is represented on the art market by many unique artists.

Ukrainian ex-libris schools: main techniques, experts

Over time, several leading schools have taken shape, and the artists belonging to them have quickly become popular far beyond the Ukrainian borders, which allowed them to promote the Ukrainian bookplate abroad. It is possible to consider the artists of Kyiv school (R rightfully. Agirba, K. Antiouukhin, A. Burovy, S. Burovy, R. Vygovsky, Y. Galitsyn, A. Miklovd, A. and G. Pugachevsky, O. Savych, M. Stratylat, V. Taran, A. Faktorovych, S. Kharuk, A. Kharuk, etc.) and Lviv school (O. Denisenko, B. Drobotyuk, S. Ivanov, R. Romanishyn, S. Khrapov, etc.) so called market leaders in the graphic arts. Nevertheless, there are Ukrainian artists developing ex-libris in other cities too, such as Odessa (D. Becker), Kharkiv (A. Litvinov, M. Neymesh), Dnipro (S. Borovsky, I. Kolyadyna, A. Khvorost, V. Khvorost), Severodonetsk (B. Romanov), Lugansk school (K. Kalynovych), Mariupol, Mukachevo, Sumy, Chernigiv, Ternopil, Chernivtsi, who are well worth attention (Romanenkova, Paliychuk, Mykhalchuk, 2021).

It is interesting to observe what techniques the representatives of the particular school give preference. Ex-libris is a good field for experimentation in both xylography and intaglio printing. Moreover, computer graphic arts have been added to the list of tools for creating a bookplate. It should be mentioned that historically the artists of the Lviv school demonstrated a high professional level in intaglio printing. There is a plethora of highly skilled etchers residing in this Ukrainian city.

They create their graphic sheets using the techniques of etching, aquatint, mezzotint or soft varnish. Often many of these techniques are combined in one composition, which leads

to an exciting result from a technical point of view. Moreover, artists do not usually use etching in its pure form; even if it is, the works are predominantly monochrome. Coloured etching is also quite rare. The absence of dominant techniques characterizes the Kyiv school; artists try themselves in xylography, intaglio printing, and flat-bed lithography, though the latter is not one of the ex-librists' favourites). Often the artists are doing experiments beyond the classical techniques of printmaking. This is how book sheets created utilizing computer graphic art appear, which takes them beyond the framework of pure book graphic arts and allows considering them in the context of graphic design. In addition to the apparent progress in technology, there is also a real disadvantage in this process in evaluating ex-libris as a work of art and a collectible. Even though the computer graphic arts toolkit greatly facilitates implementation of the idea technology-wise, and the possible number of printed copies increases significantly due to the absence of wear on the printing plate, such a bookplate is much less attractive to a collector and consequently has a lower price. The point is that this bookplate does not have a high degree of exclusivity in comparison to the classical techniques of printmaking. Any print copy made from a printing plate for woodcut or etching is valued higher. Wood board, zinc, copper, etc., have certain restrictions on the print run, which the printing mould can maintain, affecting the cost of the work.

Moreover, if a client asks to destroy the printed mould (it happens sometimes), the price immediately becomes immeasurably higher after producing a certain number of copies. In the case of creating an ex-libris using the computer graphics technique, all these details are not considered. Not to mention the fact that those

who are skilled at computer graphics techniques and those who possess skills in printmaking techniques are different categories of artists. With the help of a computer, any experienced user who has an idea of the specifics of working with certain software can easily create the design, which leads to the mass production of low-quality products and, as a result, the devaluation of the bookplate and the inflation of the phenomenon as such. In contrast, woodcut or etching techniques can be mastered by professional artists only (Kamenets'kaya, 2021). It is much more challenging to track down or identify the genre preferences in the modern Ukrainian ex-libris. All artists are experimenting in different genres, and hardly is it possible to single out the dominant thematic lines in their work. Often, ex-libris is custom-made, so it would be incorrect to discuss thematic preferences since a client chooses the theme. The exceptions are when a client gives an artist the freedom of choice in terms of the theme or when it comes to a thematic exhibition or a contest for which this work is specially created. Such events provide an opportunity to see the entire palette of religious ex-libris. For instance, the first international exhibition of the bookplate "There are many religions – God is one," which was held in Kyiv in the winter of 1993-94, featuring works by artists from Belgium, Hungary, China, Russia, Ukraine, France, Czech Republic, etc. united by the religious genre. This contest became very indicative (Romanenkova, 2021). However, it is possible to accentuate the chronological aspect: the more time passes since the liberation of the artists from ideological pressure, the more often they turn to the religious genre in their works of art.

The revival of interest in the religious motives and their promotion in the field of the bookplate in the last three decades has led to a spe-

cific differentiation of these motives in a large array of works belonging to Ukrainian artists. In particular, it is possible to distinguish dominant graphic sheets of mainly Christian – Old Testament and New Testament subjects, images from Islamic, Buddhist, Judaism, and Hindu religions, and works of art depicting certain religious characters like Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, some of the most revered saints, as well as Buddha, Shiva, Yahweh, Sabaoth, etc., the images of the temples and churches – both specific and abstract. It is also worth mentioning the bookplates with the image of an angel as there are quite a few, and they are very distinctive. The bookplates with religious symbols like the cross, apple, fish, eye, menorah, etc., are probably the most abstract and generalized among others.

Another aspect worth paying attention to is the presence of both naturalistic images and stylized ones in religious compositions, which significantly expands their range.

A particular theme rarely becomes the basis of a bookplate since the restricted format of the work somewhat limits the author's imagination. Therefore, multi-figure compositions are not typical. However, when it happens, we see technically complex works, the creation of which requires virtuosity and technological sophistication. The perfect examples of such works are the ones by S. Kirnitsky "PF-2002 for Joop en Aafke Lenten" (dry point, mezzotint, 2002), "PF-2002 for Joop en Aafke Lenten" (dry point, mezzotint, 2006), E. Kozanevich (EL A. Warwarov, etching, aquatint, plastic engraving), gravures by Olexander Savych. This artist from Kyiv often turned to religious motives, and one of his works, probably the most distinctive one (collective bookplates dedicated to seven owners at once, black and white plastic engraving),

was rewarded with a prize from the Ukrainian Ex-libris Club at the exhibition-contest in 1994 in Kyiv. This is a complex multi-figured work of seven stories inscribed in a circle, each containing a mini composition on the religious genre. There is a menorah with a characteristic male profile next to it, an interpretation of Rublev's Trinity, Buddha, etc. It is the quintessence of human understanding of God and faith in different parts of the world. This generalizing image reduces the idea that God's only conceptions about him differ, i.e., the issue's external, ritual, and attributive sides.

Jesus Christ and Our Lady I ex-libris

Among the most popular bookplates are those featuring the images of individual characters in the middle, mostly series of works dedicated to Jesus Christ and Our Lady. Artists depict the images of Christ in different techniques in both monochrome and polychrome bookplates:

- Black and white engraving by Y. Tsuprik "Ex-libris 94", intaglio.
- O. Kryvoruchko: Ex-libris by V. Klima, reser-vage, 1994. Well known is the image of Our Lady
- B. Romanov: Ex-libris by T. Dolinovskaya, plastic engraving, 1994.
- V. Lomaka: Ex-libris by P. Nesterenko, plastic engraving, 1994.
- V. Taran: Ex-libris by B. Gavrylyshyn, linocut, 1994.
- O. Opanashchuk: Ex-libris by I. Sabat, lino-cut, 1994.
- O. Savych: Ex-libris H. Pungs, plastic engraving, 1994 (fig.1) (Kamenets'ka, 2019b). The distinctive and very beneficial rhythmically wise motive of the Crucifixion is also often used by the masters:
- V. Leonenko: "EL Romas Jurelionis", linocut.

- O. Savych: ex-libris Hermann Wies, plastic engraving).

Old Testament in bookplates.

Numerous images of saints or Old Testament characters are also widely presented in ex-libris:

- G. Pugachevsky: "St. Ursula" – ex-libris Werner Grebe, plastic engraving, 1997.
- G. Pugachevsky: "St. Sebastian" – ex-libris Hermann Wies, plastic engraving, 1996 (fig.2).
- G. Pugachevsky: 'Adam and Eve' – ex-libris Joop Slied, six-colour plastic engraving, 1995.
- G. Pugachevsky: "Adam and Eve" – ex-libris Hildegard Pungs, six-colour plastic engraving, 1995.
- G. Pugachevsky: "Adam and Eve" – ex-libris LA Aarsen, seven-colour plastic engraving, 1996.
- G. Pugachevsky: "Adam and Eve" – ex-libris Birgit Gobel, ten-colour plastic engraving, 1998.
- G. Pugachevsky: "Moses" – ex-libris PE vd Velde-Rath, ten-colour plastic engraving, 1996.
- R. Agirba: "St. Sebastian" – ex-libris Hermann Wies, etching, aquatint, mezzotint, 2003) (Kamenets'kaya, 2021).

Image of an angel in ex-libris

There are myriad bookplates in which the image of an angel, often an archangel, becomes the centrepiece. Since this image is wonderful both in form and rhythmically, often characterized by exquisite style and musicality, it is highly beneficial to artists as a pictorial motive. It is possible to see the stylized images of angels that are barely readable in semi-abstract design (K. Antioukhin: Ex-libris EEM., etching, 1994) or

more realistic ones (Y. Galitsyn: EL R. Jurelionio, plastic engraving, 1994). In many bookplates by A. and G. Pugachevsky, the images of angels are also very stylized and thus attractive.

The image of the angel became one of the leading ones in the graphic arts by these representatives of the Kyiv school of ex-libris, father and son (Mikhalchuk, 2017). Especially Pugachevsky Jr. turns very often to this subject, both in black and white graphic arts and multicolour graphic arts. This master has become one of the most famous Ukrainian etchers across the borders of Ukraine. Due to his numerous awards at prestigious international contests, the Ukrainian ex-libris is highly thought of in the foreign art space.



EXLIBRIS H. PUNGS

Figure 1: Savych O. Ex-libris H. Pungs, Plastic engraving, 1994, Source: personal collection



Figure 2: Pugachevsky G. "St. Sebastian", Ex-libris Hermann Wies. Plastic engraving, 1996 Source: personal collection

The artist was among the originators of the revived bookplate in independent Ukraine. Due to his father's and his efforts, the first exhibitions of ex-libris were held, the Ukrainian ex-libris club actively functions, and graphic arts of small forms became an effective tool for popularizing domestic art. The artist works in the plastic engraving technique and colour engraving, creating unique multi-coloured compositions, always of a small size. The image of an angel is a cross-cutting theme throughout all his work:

- "The Gospel" – Ex-libris J. Rhebergen, eight-colour plastic engraving, 1991.
- "Angel" – bookplate in memory of Alexander Men, eight-colour plastic engraving, 1991.
- "Angel of Science" – Ex-libris R. Jurelionio, black and white plastic engraving, 1992.
- "Before and after midnight" – Ex-libris V. Molchanov, eight-colour plastic engraving, 1992 (fig. 3).
- "Inner World" – Ex-libris G.P., black and white plastic engraving, 1992.
- "Angel" – Ex-libris M. De Lange, eight-colour plastic engraving, 1994, First prize and medal at the 'II International Show of Xylographic and Linoleum engraved bookplates' in Katowice in 1996.
- "Angel" – Ex-libris B. Junod, nine-colour plastic engraving, 1994, Medal for the "6th International Biennial of Small Graphic Forms and Exlibris' in Wielkopolski in 1995 (fig. 4).
- Christmas Star – Ex-libris Agaath & Jos Van Waterschoot, eight-colour plastic engraving, 1995.

Many of these works of art were created using the most complex combination of printing from several plates containing six to ten colours, which only a few contemporary artists can do since it requires the highest level of technical skills and professionalism.

Abstract images in sacral bookplates

The image of the Christian shrines, in particular, the image of churches and cathedrals, is prevalent in Ukrainian ex-libris. Often these are conventional abstract images are identified with symbols of faith:

- M. Bondarenko: Ex-libris L. Korzh, linocut, 1994.
- B. Romanov: Ex-libris K. Motrych, linocut, 1994, awarded the Second Prize of the Kyiv International Exhibition-Contest "There are many religions – God is one" in 1994.
- A. Pugachevsky: "Moscow domes" – Ex-libris H. Stopikowski, plastic engraving, 1993.
- A. Pugachevsky: "Bell ringing" – Ex-libris M. Humplik, plastic engraving, 1995.
- R. Agirba: Ex-libris Museum Grudiadzu, plastic engraving, 1994.
- R. Agirba: Ex-libris Luc van den Briele, plastic engraving, 1994.
- Pugachevsky's graphic sheet (Ex-libris Jadvyga Ciurlionyte, plastic engraving, 1989);
- the church of St. Yura in Lebedin (Ex-libris V. Jejerin, plastic engraving, 1992).
- Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra (Ex-libris Ivo Prokop, plastic engraving, 1996).
- St. Andrew's Church in Kyiv (Ex-libris Sergey Brodovych, plastic engraving, 2006, fig. 6) by the same artist.

The ex-libris by A. Pugachevsky is highly illustrative because abstract images of temples of different religions are combined in one sheet, united by the image of stylized candles – this is the visualization of the concept "There are many religions – God is one" (A. Pugachevsky, Ex-libris G. Blum, seven-colour plastic engraving, 1994, fig.5).

This ex-libris presents sacred architectural monuments of the leading world religions. However, they are relative, schematic, and compositionally united by three burning candles in a single flame, which vividly demonstrates the idea laid down in the exhibition contest for which this woodcut was created.

Religious architecture in ex-libris

Sometimes the specific landmarks of religious architecture are featured in the bookplates of Ukrainian artists:

- the bell tower of St. Sophia of Kyiv is depicted in the I. Saratovsky's ex-libris (Ex-libris B. Zhelekhovsky, linocut, 1994);
- the St. Anna church appears in A.

Undoubtedly, in this case, the works are characterized by a lower level of stylization and are more realistic, which makes the landmarks recognizable.

Those bookplates, in which a symbol related to the spiritual sphere became the basis of the composition, seem to be the most laconic, conventional and symbolic in nature. To understand and interpret such works of art, the audience must possess extensive knowledge of philosophy, semiotics, and religious studies, as these masterpieces often have hidden philosophical meanings. A shining dove is featured in B. Drobotyuk's ex-libris (Ex-libris M. Dobotyuk, mezzotint, 1994), and the fish became the centrepiece of one of N. Kovalets's bookplates (ex-libris, etching, 1994), the cross attracts our attention in R. Agirba's work (ex-libris Mecislovas Reinis, plastic engraving, 1992), the eye surrounded by symbolic rays are depicted in the graphic sheet by E. Khrapko (ex-libris V., linocut, 1994). Often, such works are either black and white or monochrome, of a discreet colour palette, as the main emphasis is on the semantic content of pictorial motives.



Figure 3: . Pugachevsky G. "Before and after midnight." Ex-libris V. Molchanov. Plastic engraving, 1992, Source: personal collection



Figure 4: . Pugachevsky G. "Angel," Ex-libris B. Junod. Plastic engraving, 1992, Source: personal collection

Conclusions

The history of the ex-libris goes back about half a thousand years ago, when it originated in Germany in the 16th century. As far as Ukrainian ex-libris is concerned, its history is a little shorter. The bookplate existing in independent Ukraine, beyond the Soviet ex-libris, is still relatively young, only three decades old. Nevertheless, religious themes have always been relevant in any period since spirituality is the basis of their existence, the cornerstone of personality for a person, especially a creative person. This particular type of bookplate has become one of the most dynamically developing and rapidly reviving ones in the contemporary art of printmaking. It resumed its history in the late 1990s and has firmly established itself, gaining the attention of artists, collectors, and connoisseurs of graphic art.



Figure 5: . Pugachevsky G. Ex-libris G. Blum. Plastic engraving, 1994, Source: personal collection

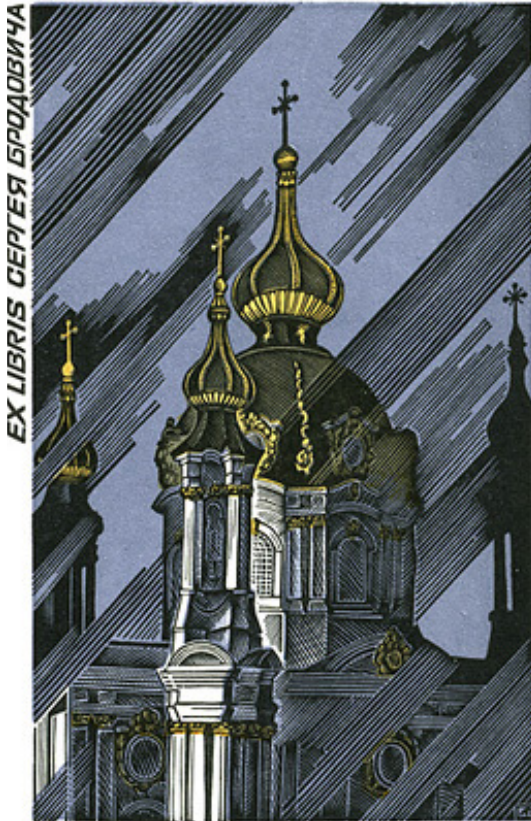


Figure 6: . Pugachevsky G. Ex-libris Ex-libris Sergey Brodovych, Plastic engraving, 2006, Source: personal collection

genre fade into oblivion, and it will always be relevant as a visualization of human spirituality in the graphic arts.

As soon as the age of spirituality has followed the age of disbelief, religious motives have replaced secular ones affected by ideological pressure, and the propagandist slogans have given way to spiritual content. In this case, it is impossible to change the paradigm entirely for different reasons. First, there is always a risk of going from one extreme to the other; therefore, art should always be distanced from politics. Secondly, it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that ex-libris is almost always custom-made. Consequently, an artist depends either on the state's ideological machine or the client's personality. Nevertheless, hardly will the religious

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