

An Introduction to Graphical Art (in relation to Nico Bulder's work)

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Ex Libris

Bookplates or 'ex libris' were first used in the sixteenth century, as a spin-off of "emblemata". The meaning of the Latin word 'ex libris' is 'from the books (of)'. Its purpose is to show that the book is 'my' property. Some people prefer to use 'ex bibliotheca' from the Greek word bibliothéké (a place where books are kept) or an English translation such as 'from the library of'. In English, an ex libris is most commonly referred to as a 'bookplate'.

As an indication of ownership, there is no difference between a child that writes its name on the flyleaf of a book and an ex libris applied to the flyleaf of a book by a bibliophile. Apart from the owner's name, an ex libris often features an image that expresses an emblematic relationship with the owner. Early bookplates often contain a spell imploring the lender to return the book; or a curse if he or she fails to do so. One wonders whether books were frequently stolen, or whether people simply forgot to return them? My guess is that the latter was the most common.

Bookplates can have a wide variety of themes, ranging from heraldic, initials, monograms, musical symbols, architectural images, flowers, plants, trees, ships, landscapes, books in various shapes and sizes, and human figures (often female). Portraits of famous people or ancestors are also popular. As are phrases and mottoes in Latin or in the national language, references to fairy tales, attributes of a profession or hobby, and traditional attributes, such as an owl for wisdom, or a cockerel for pride. The signs of the zodiac are also often included.

In the twentieth century, references to the owner's profession, such as doctor, pharmacist, architect or professor, were widely used. Special libraries (or sections of libraries) often have their own ex libris. Examples of many of these categories can be found on this site.

Occasional and free graphics

Another example of small graphical art is occasional graphics, such as personal cards, season's greetings, menus, birth and christening cards, wedding cards and address changes. Generally, such cards are pre-printed cards that are mass-produced, but sometimes they are unique pieces of printed art made in a small edition. With such items, the relationship between the person and the occasion for which they were made is much closer. But, in terms of use, there is no difference between a simple, uniform card sent to announce the birth of a child or a move to a new home and a unique print used for the same purpose.

With a growing appreciation for small prints as works of art of equal artistic value as large prints, and the fact that these items – due to their size - can be easily handled and collected, people started to collect ex libris and other occasional graphics. Ex libris were no longer created only to be stuck in books, but also to be collected and traded with other collectors. Many examples of occasional graphics can also be found on this site.

Printmaking techniques

Artists use a variety of graphical techniques for the production of prints, ranging from calligraphy, relief printing, intaglio printing, flat surface printing, photomechanical reproduction or typography, and these days computer-aided design (CAD). This is why the final product is generally referred to as a 'print'. Original prints are often signed in pencil by the artist. Strictly speaking, a pencil drawing is also a form of graphic art.

Intaglio printing

Engraving, steel engraving, copper engraving.

A mirror image is scratched or cut into a surface. With etching, a mirror image is scratched in a layer of wax that has been applied to a plate of zinc or copper. The plate is then placed in an acid bath. The acid bites into the metal where the plate is not covered in wax. Once the wax has been removed, ragged lines are visible in the plate. Ink is then applied to the lines in the plate and the image is printed on dampened paper. During printing, the paper is pressed into the lines that contain the ink. The result is a raised image on the paper. The paper also has a dent that shows the edge of the steel or copper plate. With all forms of intaglio printing – etching, drypoint and copper engraving – the image can be felt as raised lines on the paper.

Relief printing

Wood engraving, woodcut, linocut, and cardboard print.

With wood engraving, the image is cut in hard end-grain (palm or pear) wood using a burin. All areas that will be white on the printed image are cut away. All that remains is the mirror image. Any errors while engraving cannot be corrected. Woodcuts are cut in long-grain wood. The process is quicker and the image has less detail. Also, the wood grain is visible in the print, which adds to the colour shading of the printed image. Ink is applied to the raised areas of the wood block and the image is pressed onto the paper. The imprint of the wood block can be seen on the reverse of the paper.

Lithography

Lithography was invented by Aloys Senefelder (Prague, 1771 – Munich, 1798). Senefelder was a member of a traveling theatre group. He experimented with ways to print posters for the group. He discovered that an image drawn in greasy ink on a special type of stone and then etched, could be printed. The stone used for this is Solenhof stone, a type of chalkstone, which comes in three grades, from hard to soft: dark-blue, light-blue and yellow. A mirror image is applied to the stone, either directly or indirectly. The stone is then prepared with nitric acid and *gum arabic* to preserve the image before printing. For a multi-colour image, multiple stones must be used: one stone for each colour. Registration marks are applied to the stone to make sure each colour is positioned correctly during printing. In the past, lithography was used for printing advertisements and posters, but even whole paintings could be transferred to lithographic stones and printed. Famous examples of lithographic posters are the posters by the French artist *Toulouse Lautrec*. Lithography was also used for free prints and book illustrations, for which the Dutch artist *Theo van Hoytema* is famous.