

WHAT IS A BOOKPLATE?



A Bookplate is a label with a printed design intended to indicate ownership. This was traditionally pasted inside the front cover of a book. However, many contemporary Bookplates/ Ex-libris are no longer made to serve this practical function and have become personalised miniature prints, made primarily for exhibition purposes and for exchange between collectors.

The Bookplate probably originated in Germany where the earliest known example, dated about the middle of the 15th century, was found. The earliest extant dated bookplate is also German, from 1516. (The earliest bookplate in England is dated 1574.)

Common themes were armorial – shield, helmet, crest and scrolls. Pictorial bookplates included landscapes and portraits, (there is one by Albrecht Dürer engraved in 1524) or showed piles of books or views of libraries.

Allegorical bookplates were in favour in France during the reign of Louis XV and in England by the mid-18th century. On these appeared personifications of the Christian cardinal virtues and other abstract ideas, such as truth, justice, wisdom, hope and faith.

Also introduced were symbols of the interests and occupations of the books' owner such as the scales of justice, naval and military trophies, artist's brushes and palette. Towards the end of the 19th century, German designers began to use nude figures as a major motif of bookplate design and this fashion was followed in Europe and the United States. Figures were treated naturalistically, sometimes with erotic intent, a tradition that continues.

Whilst the *commercially reproduced copies* of the original engraved or etched designs may be regarded as ephemera and sold to collectors at prices under £5, the *original* works are in no way inferior to small scale prints that are without texts or dedications. Most major public collections such as the Department of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum hold examples of historical and contemporary bookplates.

**Adapted from the text in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th Edition 1993,
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