

Ex-libris in Slovene Primary Schools

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Abstract

The development of ex-libris prints as well as their functional and collective value have gradually left their mark on the primary school's educational programme.

Children's ex-libris is deeply rooted in Slovenia. Till 2011, more than ten exhibitions of these small prints were organized in Slovenia. The year 1993 represents a milestone; the exhibition held at the Komenda – Moste Primary School that year was the first independent one in Slovenia and the first one organized at an international level. The Žalec Primary School still organizes graphic biennales, and thus the tradition of creating graphic sheets within art education in Slovene schools is preserved. In the primary school curriculum, printmaking is present in all the grades, from grade 1 to grade 9, while ex-libris is introduced in the last grade. Ex-libris enables a child to express his idea of himself through the language of fine arts; the artistic motif of ex-libris is the child's personal mark, adjusted to the printmaking technique. The making of ex-libris requires a lot of specific knowledge that is passed down to the child by the art teacher, and the results depend on the endeavours of both – the pupil and his mentor.

Keywords: Ex-libris, Primary School, Art Education Classes, Exhibitions of Children's Ex-libris.

Introduction

This paper presents the bookplate bearing the owner's name as a printmaking form that has found its place in art education classes. It began spontaneously, in the time of the first curricular reform in the second half of the 20th century, when fine artists started teaching art classes in primary and secondary schools and educational academies. The development of graphic art in Slovenia, and ex-libris within it, goes back a long way; however, the interest for ex-libris increased considerably at the beginning of the 20th century. Many Slovene impressionists and expressionists, the beginners of Slovene Modernism, produced ex-libris prints. Božidar Jakac and Miha Maleš produced for their clients many ex-libris prints in various printmaking techniques. A completely different direction was given to ex-libris by the master Jože Plečnik in the period between the two World Wars. With his small drawings, Plečnik tried to return the modern ex-libris to the domain of a bookplate marking ownership, or of a seal. He created many small works of art, which distinguished themselves by an independent design, symmetrical lines, and discrete symbolism. His disciples continued his work, however, many other artists and amateurs dealt with ex-libris prints later on. In the period between 1967 and 2015, these were the members of the Exlibris Sloveniae Association from Ljubljana. Despite the increase of the electronic media and of virtual environments, the intimate link between man and printed book has remained.

239 □

1. The Beginnings of Ex-libris in Art Education Classes

In the wish to preserve the noble connection between man and book, and to transmit the love of books to as many young people as possible, Exlibris Sloveniae, the association of amateurs of small graphics, decided to extend the interest for ex-libris to the youngest population. They managed to persuade many art teachers into cooperation.

Teachers endeavour in various ways to pass down on young people the noble love of books, and ex-libris has become one of them.

The journal Pionir played an important role in the spreading of interest for ex-libris prints among young people. They launched several contests for school children. In the first such contest, launched in 1974, 52 schools participated with 800 ex-libris prints. 235 were selected and displayed at an exhibition in the Brest factory in Cerknica, which was the sponsor of the contest. The same year an exhibition was held at the International Ex-Libris congress in Bled. Ex-libris artists and collectors agreed that the prints made by children exceeded their expectations. In 1987 the movement

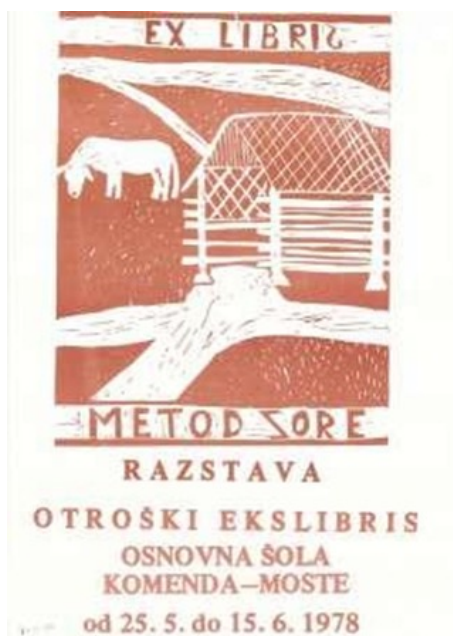


Image 1: Poster for exhibition of children's ex-libris prints. <http://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:IMG-QEPT7FCS>

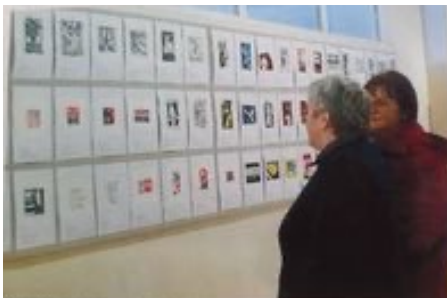


Image 2: International exhibition of children's ex-libris prints in Komenda in 2011. (https://www.komenda.si/si/aplenca/casopis_2011-02.pdf)

spread to the entire area of Yugoslavia. 61 participating schools sent in 1300 ex-libris prints; 370 of those were exhibited. The exhibition was held at the Komenda-Moste Primary School in Moste. The school enthusiastically took up the endeavours to make ex-libris popular among children and was the organizer of these exhibitions till a decade ago.

In the 1985 contest there was the condition that the pupils should produce ex-libris prints for their school library or some other library. This way, many schools got their ex-libris prints that found their place in school books, and this helped raise the awareness of the connection between the book and this small print. The initial enthusiasm of art teachers contributed a lot to the establishing of children's ex-libris, for ex-libris has been included in the art education curriculum since the 1980s. It has remained part of the curriculum also after the curriculum reform was carried out in 2011.

2. Characteristics of Children's Ex-libris

In comparison with ex-libris prints by adult artists, those made by children are an artistic game, adjusted to the child's psychical and artistic development. Utility and functionality are secondary in a child's artwork and serve only as an initial encouragement for the child's play with artistic elements. Artworks by children need to be original and creative and need to display the child's artistic expression and the originality of his individuality.

Ex-libris prints can be introduced already in the lower classes of primary school, however, we need to remain within the frame of the curriculum contents for the field of printmaking and take into consideration the characteristics of the child's artistic expression at his level of development. An art teacher needs to guide the child's creativity and sensibility in an appropriate way, to encourage the child and enable him to acquire knowledge on this kind of artistic activity.

The functionality and the purpose of ex-libris are clear: ex-libris originates from the need to mark ownership and from respect of books. In the past, its decorative element was often more valued than the mere mark of ownership. The child learns about these facts but does not need to take them fully into account, that is why the purpose and functionality are oftentimes blurred. The child's intimate expression and spontaneous artistic creation are more valued as components of this pleasant and humorous work of art. Thus, the child does not think much about the actual functionality of the small print; for him, it represents only a new approach to an independent arrangement of artistic elements on a limited surface.



Image 3: Inital, female aged 14



Image 4: Ex-libris, female aged 13



Image 5: Ex-libris, male aged 12

The motif is the child's creative artistic expression; what needs to be added is the ex-libris sign and the owner's name and surname. Younger children have no difficulty choosing a motif if we advise them properly and present them the artistic problem, as well as clearly explain to them the artistic goals (such as the use of contrast, simplification of shapes, composition, appropriate technical solution). Older children choose as motifs objects that they can present in a realistic way as well as in a clear way in terms of artistic expression. If the task consists of arranging signs, letters, and words in such a way that the small format is used as best as possible, this does not only engage the children's creativity, but it also represents an assignment from the domain of (graphic) design.

In regular art classes, classic graphic techniques and procedures are mostly cultivated, despite the availability of modern technologies and various computer programmes. The most common graphic technique in the ex-libris prints by children is linocut, produced in relief printing. Owing to the small format of the matrix, we cannot pay attention to showing details in the cutting procedure. What is more important is the search of equilibrium between high (uncut) and cut (indented) planes. In the printing process itself, precision is important to avoid the print being displaced or unclear, as well as the correct signing of prints according to the rules valid among printmaking artists across the world.

In the following, we will present a few examples of ex-libris prints made by children, which show original solutions as regards the composition or the motif and do not reproduce something already seen elsewhere.

The ex-libris on image 3 represents the initial letter of the author, that is J (for Jasmina). In the vertical composition the motif of the Chinese dragon prevails, for the pupil is interested in the culture and the cuisine of the Far East. The body of the dragon forms the letter J, covered by a net of black lines against a white background and of white lines against a black background. The background of the print is white and entirely carved, so that the motif of the letter is emphasised.

Image 4 is an example of a "talking" ex-libris, for the motif of the cat suggests the author's surname (Maček, which is the Slovene word for cat). The cat sitting on the stairs is presented in a genuine children's language. The head and the eyes are almost completely round, the snout resembles a nose, and the mouth resembles human lips. The whiskers resemble a fan or a bow tie as part of a man's suit. The legs and the thin neck are interesting as well. The pupil worked the sheet of linoleum in such a way that it represents the texture of the hairs that cover the cat's body. The letters are visible though discrete. It is a very lively work of art.



Image 6: Ex-libris, male aged 14

The male pupil (image 5) presented through an interesting narrative the motif of countryside: houses, domestic animals, farm produce. The central part of ex-libris consists of the big white apple. In the upper part of the apple there are roots that symbolize a tree – an apple tree. The lower part represents a hen; its feathers are partly visible; however, the biggest part of the hen’s body is not covered by feathers but by the letters of the name of the author. In the central part of the composition is a big sign that connects the elements in the apple. The background is dark, with the exception of thin white lines that form the silhouettes of the village houses. Besides the elaborate black and white graphic contrast, the author also showed the contrast of organic and inorganic forms.

The Ex-libris on image 6 is open, for it is not limited by the margins of the format. It represents a bird that gives the impression that it is about to hop away from our view. The pupil presented the animal in a very vivid way; the form of the head conveys realistic details. The body is covered with various raster patterns that remind us of the pattern of feathers. On the one side the letters embrace the tail, and on the other they stick out from the belly. The leg of the bird divides the composition into two parts, which are well balanced.

242 □

3. Ex-libris in School Curriculum

In Slovenia, Art education as a subject is included in all the grades of primary schools, from the grade 1 to grade 9 (ages 6 to 14). Within the subject, various art fields are covered, which are divided into two groups: creating on a surface and creating in a three-dimensional space. There are 70 hours of Art education per year in grades 1 to 5, and 35 hours per year in grades 6 to 9.

Ex-libris prints are made within classes dedicated to printmaking. Printmaking (alongside drawing and painting) is part of creating on a surface and gets approx. 6 hours per year in an individual grade. The objectives of art education are set according to the three three-year cycles, which means that the teacher has a certain autonomy within each three-year cycle as regards individual fields and goals, although the latter need to be achieved at the end of a three-year cycle. The table below shows operative goals within the field of printmaking according to three three-year cycles.

Table 1: Operative goals within the field of printmaking (source: curriculum for art education – primary school http://www2.arnes.si/~soppnova/Glavni_okvir/UN_likovna_vzgoja_OS_23-marec-2011.pdf)

<p>Printmaking 1st cycle – operative goals</p> <p>Pupils learn the concepts connected to printmaking by viewing reproductions of artistic printmaking works and art works by other pupils, as well as through their own experience of printmaking; they make a matrix using different materials and transfer it manually onto a surface; They carry out simple printmaking techniques (stamping printmaking, monotyping, stencil printing, printing using various objects and natural materials);</p> <p>They gain experience in making prints;</p> <p>They arrange shapes in printmaking;</p> <p>Through the use of various printmaking techniques, they get acquainted with the characteristics of different materials and tools in printmaking;</p> <p>They get acquainted with the artistic design on a surface that enables several prints;</p> <p>They use various materials and tools for printmaking.</p>
<p>Printmaking 2nd cycle – operative goals</p> <p>Pupils make a matrix from various materials and produce prints; they compare characteristics of various printmaking techniques; they understand the process of the production of graphic sheets; they develop a sense of balance on a plane; they visit a graphic designer in his studio; they get acquainted with the techniques of relief printing (cardboard printmaking, collagraphy and linocut).</p>
<p>Printmaking 3rd cycle – operative goals</p> <p>The pupils distinguish between industrial and artistic printmaking; they get acquainted with and try out various printmaking techniques; they make a print in a combined technique; they get acquainted with the technique of relief printmaking (dry point) and small printmaking (ex-libris).</p>

As shown in the table, pupils get acquainted with ex-libris prints in grade 9. However, since the teacher has a certain degree of autonomy in choosing topics, he can introduce ex-libris prints earlier, in lower grades.

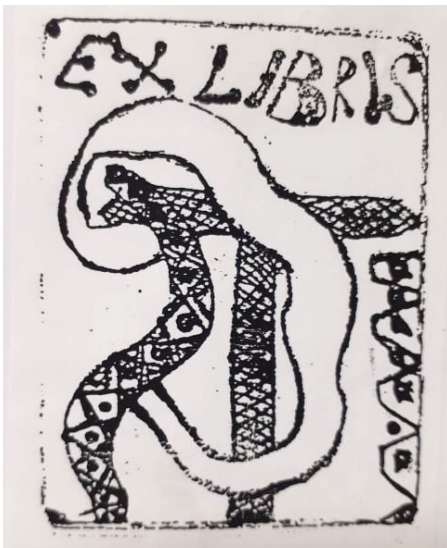


Image 7: Female pupil (aged 13): Initials, dry point 8 x 12 cm

Ex-libris prints can be introduced already in grade 1; for instance, the pupil can mark his book using a colour print of an object. The next step is to carve into a potato or another material. Until the last grade, pupils get gradually acquainted with more demanding printmaking techniques. For a printmaking task to be successful, the role of the art education teacher, his teaching approach, his direct contact with the pupil, and his understanding of the pupil's wishes are of crucial importance. The results of work in art classes are visible and comparable at various exhibitions. The pupil who presents a theme in the form of an ex-libris print establishes a contact with the cultural space in the broadest sense. For instance, he learns about the value and ownership of a book and the lifestyle of his surroundings; additionally, he becomes aware of himself, his needs, desires, interests, and last but not least, of the beauty of graphic design and of technical and design problems of small printmaking formats.

In primary school, ex-libris prints can be produced in various printmaking techniques, however, the child's psychophysical development needs to be taken into consideration, particularly his ability for artistic anticipation and his artistic skills.

Below are a few examples of ex-libris prints in various printmaking techniques made by pupils aged between 11 and 14.

The ex-libris print on image 7 was made in dry point technique and shows the initials. Plexiglass plates and a metal awl were used in this technique. In order not to damage the prints or the printing paper, the edges of the plates were smoothed (facets were made); the prints were made on a humid graphic sheet applying a lot of pressure to the graphic press. The pupil carved onto the plate her initials (P. T.), imitating the initials of medieval manuscripts, which were enriched with motifs of animals, plants or geometric shapes. The initials in this ex-libris print have thus become intertwined snake-like bodies.



Image 8: Male pupil (aged 14): Ex-libris, print using cardboard, 18 x 22 cm

The pupil (image 8) cut the motif and the text out of cardboard and arranged them in the desired composition, then pasted everything onto a cardboard base. In order to facilitate the technical procedure, the matrixes in this particular technique are of a larger format, yet still within the frame of small printmaking format, up to A4. Cardboard covers of notebooks were used for the base surface and the motif, while the shapes were pasted onto the surface using a synthetic glue (UHU). In this ex-libris print, the pupil decomposed the motif and thus created a rhythm that gives liveliness to the otherwise rigid and static composition.



Image 9 and 10: Female pupil (aged 11): Ex-libris, print using fruits and vegetables
 7 x 4 cm

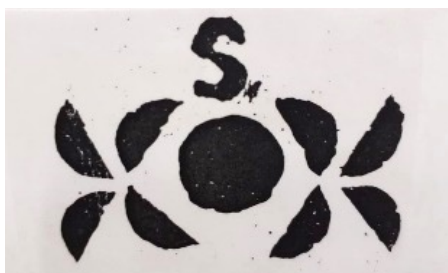


Image 11: Male pupil (age: 13): Ex-libris – bird, linocut 8 x 12 cm

The pupil carved various shapes and letters out of potatoes and carrots, colored them using a thick tempera paint, and created a typographic ex-libris print (image 9) and an ex-libris print that resembles an ornament (image 10).

Linocut is the most common printmaking technique used in primary school, for a linoleum plate does not need to be worked beforehand (in contrast to wood engraving). The classic linocut from the past has nowadays been replaced by plastic masses that are worked using linocut knives. All these materials are part of the standard toolkit for art education classes and are available in any store selling stationary material.

The ex-libris print in the linocut technique (image 11) is an interesting example where a child's mistake in the mirroring of letters is not seen as a flaw but as an enrichment to the composition. The pupil takes care of a bird in his free time, which he expressed in an interesting artistic way. By using lines and dots he cleverly avoided empty spaces which would considerably impoverish the motif.

4. Conclusion

Ex-libris—the bookplate indicating ownership as part of artistic printmaking—has had a long tradition in Slovenia. It became increasingly popular at the beginning of the 20th century and has remained popular over the decades. Since the second half of the 20th century, the Ex Libris Sloveniae Association has had the merit for preserving its popularity; it has popularized it also among art education teachers and has thus enabled its inclusion into the art education curriculum.

For many years, until 2011, the Komenda Moste Primary School hosted international exhibitions of children's ex-libris prints. Nowadays, the tradition of expositions of children's printmaking works (not only of ex-libris prints) is maintained by the Primary School Žalec, which organises biennials of children's graphic arts.

In art education classes, pupils get acquainted with printmaking procedures and techniques already in the first three-year cycle. In the last grade (grade 9) they get acquainted also with the making of ex-libris prints. Linocut is the most commonly used graphic technique, for it enables work on small as well as large formats.

When a pupil presents a theme in an ex-libris print, he comes into contact with a broad cultural area: with the value and protection of books, with the beauty of graphic design, with the themes from his immediate surroundings, with the way of life, with himself, with his needs, interests,

desires, with the presentation of himself, as well as with technical and design problems of small prints.

The essence of ex-libris, which is the marking of the ownership of a book, is not of primary importance in children's artistic creativity, although its functional value can also be included, for the children can paste their ex-libris prints onto a book, a notebook etc. This way they learn to understand the connection between the book and the created small print. Despite social changes and the development of new technologies, new book media (e-books) and computer programmes for graphic design, art education in schools is still "analogic", with classic art techniques used and the physical experience of crating enabled, however, it can be enriched by the new media offered by the technological development.

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More Images

The children's products on images 3 -11 are from the author's private archives.