

VIA PRINCETON ARCHITECTURAL PRESS

# A Brief History of Personalized Bookplates

An Effective Way to Keep Track of Your Books, or an Indulgent  
Affectation?

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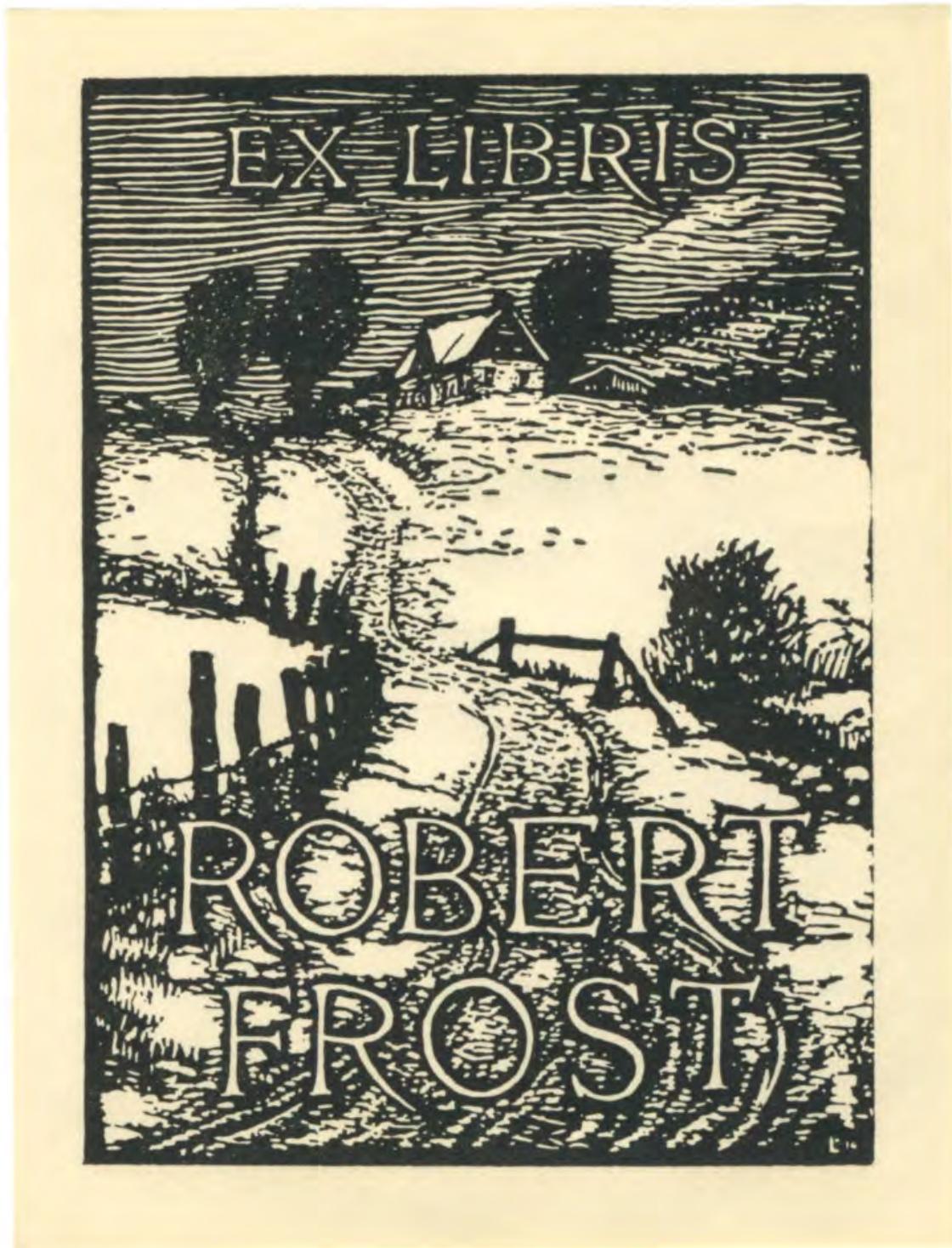
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Every book lover knows that books borrowed often become books lost. Perhaps you loaned a book to an excitable guest, knowing full well that she will never again grace your doorstep? Have you, out of politeness, let a precious tome slip from your grasp? Or worse, done the same to others by inadvertently failing to return books that now live comfortably among your more legitimately acquired volumes?

In the mid-15th century, Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany, a goldsmith by trade adapted existing screw press technology, extant since the 1st century, and added to it an original innovation: movable metal type. The result was the first machine capable of mass-producing literature, an unprecedented advance in the West. The printed book proliferated, and with it came the first bookplates: small, personalized artworks, usually printed, that were pasted into books as marks of ownership.

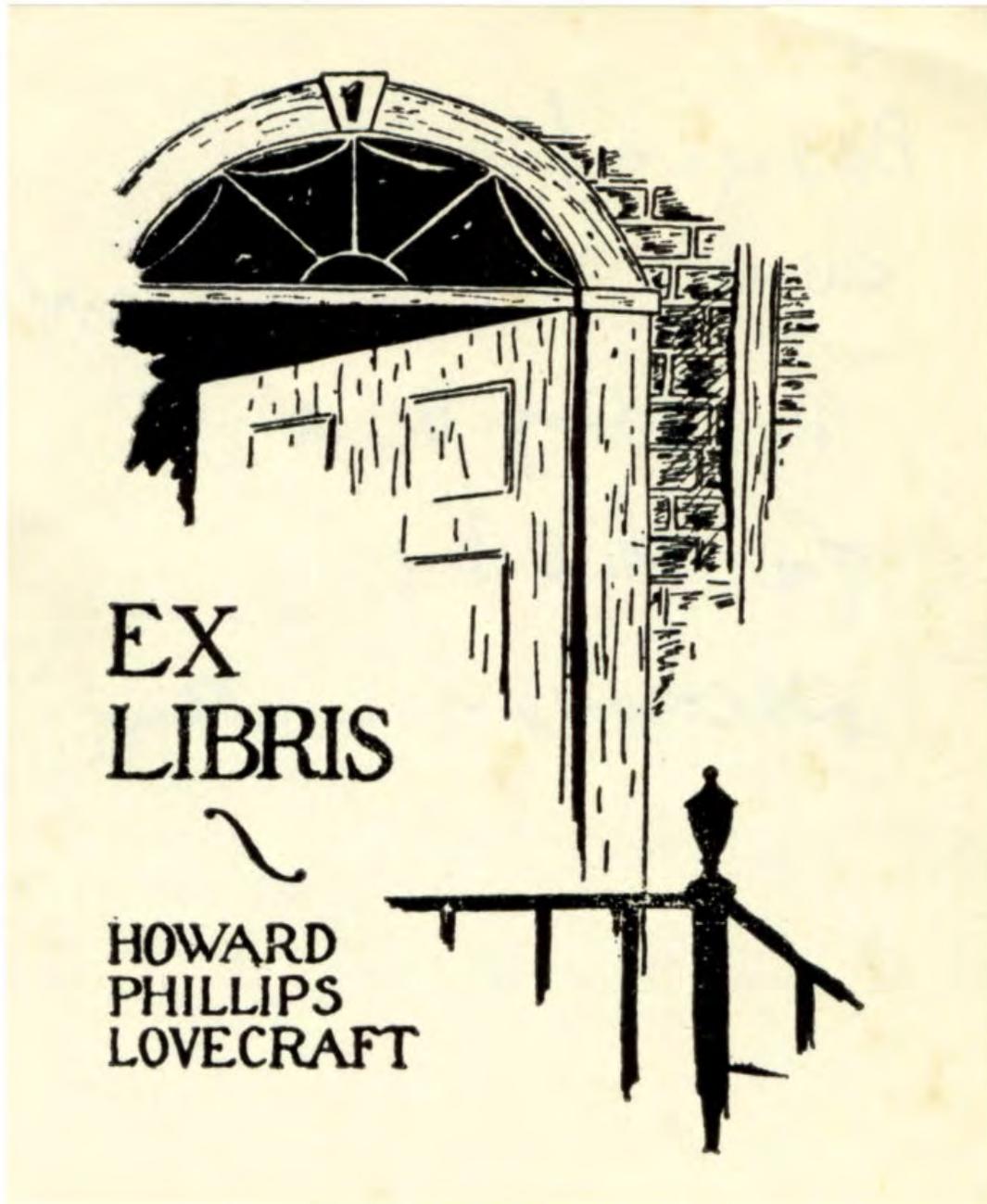
A bookplate is sometimes called an *ex libris* in reference to the Latin inscription meaning “from the books of” found on most examples. The earliest known bookplate, dated to 1480, is that of Hilprand Brandenburg, a Carthusian monk.





At first, most bookplates were designed to safeguard the chattel of barons and nobles; as such, they were adorned with coats of arms and other indicators of inherited prestige. This was the case through the 18th century, though styles changed with prevailing trends. In his 1880 publication on bookplate collecting, John Byrne Leicester

Warren, third Baron de Tabley, recognized four distinct styles in early British bookplate design: early armorial, Jacobean (including Restoration, Queen Anne, and early Georgian), Chippendale (rococo), and wreath and ribbon.



The 19th century saw the rise of the middle class. Scholars, professionals, and other educated individuals became interested in bookplates and commissioned works in a pictorial vein. These drew from classical and symbolist iconography, eschewing

hereditary marks. The works in this journal, selected by the editors at Princeton Architectural Press from the collection of Lewis Jaffe, are largely examples of the pictorial style, works that recall a range of 19th and 20th century Western art movements, including Arts and Crafts, Orientalism, art deco, cubism, and neoclassicism.



You can learn more or commission a bookplate of your own by investigating the numerous clubs and societies dedicated to the art form. Though the golden age of bookplate collecting came to a close after the 1920s, *ex libris* are still popular in circles where book lovers may be found. As long as readers take pride in their libraries, the impulse to personalize their contents will prevail.

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