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 EX LIBRIS BY ALEXEJ  
 KRAVTSCHENKO

WE must constitute the fact that the interest in Ex libris is continually growing. This spread of the Ex libris is conditioned by its artistic development. The group of prominent graphic artists which calls itself "Mir Iskustva" has helped the Russian Ex libris to attain an extraordinarily high degree of culture. The graphic Ex libris are undoubtedly of especial interest. In the history of contemporary graphic art, Russian art takes a first place and is able to keep pace with the best achievements of western graphic art. Of all territories of contemporary art, it is graphic art which best fulfils our present-day demands. The fundamental demand made upon the Ex libris is that it should have an organic connection with the book, and which may best be achieved through the medium of the wood-cut. All A. Kravtschenko's Ex libris are wood-cuts. A. Kravtschenko is one of the most important representatives of the modern Russian wood-cut. He approaches graphic art by way of painting. He makes use of all technical means. Kravtschenko is most strongly interested in the wood-cut, if only on account of the possibilities of manifold reproduction and the strong contrasts of black and white. Of his 48 Ex libris, 37 are wood-cuts. Even in his first wood-cuts, which appeared in Saratov in 1918, Kravtschenko overcame the difficulties of this technique with astonishing ease. The first attempts show three miniature projects for Ex libris. Even here we find the surprising delicacy which is his especial characteristic, and which also informs his later work. The coarser technique of the linoleum cut is of less interest to the artist.

In 1921 Kravtschenko created a whole series of Ex libris woodcuts, quite spontaneously. In 1922 the delightful book appeared which is entitled "Ex libris, wood-cuts by Alexej Kravtschenko." It was these Ex libris which first made the artist known. Even if these first Ex libris do not quite fulfil all practical demands, even if they are not quite laconic enough, yet they nevertheless fully fulfil their purpose. They are possessed by the one idea of giving expression to the enthusiasm of the bibliophile. In later Ex libris, for example, those designed for the Russian National Book Archives, the problem set has been solved more emblematically and more concretely. The latest work of this artist bears witness to his lively endeavours to create a synthetic connection between the Ex libris and the individual preferences of the bibliophile, as for instance in the Ex libris for Anisimoff; the owner of this is engaged in lively research in the domain of ancient Russian and Byzantine art. The two Ex libris of Bruni and the artist himself represent something absolutely new. Here the artist has consciously become symbolic and concentrated. For Kravtschenko, symbolism represents in the first place a means to formal speech. Beauty of composition, extraordinary harmony of all the parts and masterly drawing—these qualities unite to set the seal of the unusual upon the work of Kravtschenko.

Translated by E. T. Scheffauer

