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**„History. Civilization. Culture.”**

**DOCTORAL THESIS**  
**SUMMARY**

**A Cultural History of *ex-libris*.**  
**An Insight into the History of the Romanian *ex-libris***

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The doctoral thesis „**A Cultural History of Ex-Libris. An Insight into the History of the Romanian Ex-Libris**” approaches a less studied subject in Romanian historiography. We decided to study the beginnings of *ex-libris* in the Romanian space, given the fact that there was no work on this topic when we started our research. As in other minor artefacts, researchers did not perceive the artistic and cultural potential of *ex-libris*. Although in some brief articles the first Romanian *ex-libris* is presented or two-thirds of the rulers’ *ex-libris*, the old ones are described scarcely. If we take into account the vignette *ex-libris*, then there are only ten. In the case of Transylvanian *ex-libris*, the lack of knowledge is even higher. There is no work about the first Transylvanian *ex-libris*. It could be partially explained due to the specificity of the region. Most of the old *ex-libris* are part of the Austrian or Hungarian libraries or museums, being thus inaccessible to researchers. Their identification could be done only in a research internship at the National Library Széchényi in Budapest. These are the reasons this thesis is unique and a pioneer work, unprecedented in Romania and especially in the Transylvanian space.

The motif for this research theme is the desire to explore the diverse sources from a cultural perspective. In the western and Romanian historiographical horizon, cultural history imposed itself as an innovative method that approaches any historical topic through a hermeneutical grid, from a complex and interdisciplinary perspective, in the Braudelian *longue durée*. Cultural history takes into account the interdependencies of all aspects of the social life so that there is an intrinsic connection between culture and politics, economy, sciences, ideologies etc. *Ex-libris* appeared in the Romanian space as a habit adopted by bibliophiles who were in contact with intellectuals and collectors from big European cities. That is why the understanding of the phenomenon of *ex-libris* could be performed only in a comparative demarche, analysing the evolution of *ex-libris* in the neighbouring cultural spaces.

The transcultural method of study was adopted for our research.<sup>1</sup> The contact, interaction and relations between European cultures gave rise to cultural asymmetrical exchanges, flow of ideas and cultural, artistic products, among which *ex-libris*. A study of *ex-libris* requires a study of the European art and history, as well as global art.

The analysis of each important *ex-libris* employs the descriptive and hermeneutical method. It supposes, as Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out, a linguistic, ontological and

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<sup>1</sup> For details of the methodological premise of transcultural history see Madeleine Herren, Martin Rüesch, Christiane Sibille, *Transcultural History: Theories, Methods, Sources*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2012.

aesthetic demarche that has its starting point in the hypothesis of historic alienation in the humanist disciplines,<sup>2</sup> the lack of universe of symbols and theological, philosophical, historical and cultural significances present in the medieval art and beginnings of modernity. Gadamer also observed that the poverty of symbol determines the actual art: „It corresponds to incomprehensibility and growing lack of personality of the world we live in.”<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Renaissance man used to communicate through symbols, the contemporary man prefers direct communication. That is why the „horizon of the historian is limited and determined by the point of view given by the current history.”<sup>4</sup> Images from old *ex-libris* are characterized by a wealth of symbols that are not, at the first glance, transparent for the contemporary viewer. The understanding of significance of old *ex-libris* does not require only knowledge of heraldic symbols, but also the religious, artistic domains, as well as historical events considered important by the owner of *ex-libris* to mark in that way the ownership on the narrow space of the page. The hermeneutical activity of interpretation of *ex-libris* is a more or less successful attempt to „get in the owner’s shoes”, given the fact that we know little about them and sometimes little about the times they lived in. This demarche is possible only from the perspective of mentalities,<sup>5</sup> a cultural history, a history of representations.

The main sources of the thesis were found at the Central University Library „Lucian Blaga”, Cluj-Napoca, National Library Széchenyi, Budapest, Hungary, archives of the County Direction of National Archives in Cluj, Library of the Romanian Academy, Cluj branch, Cris Museum of Oradea, Country Library Astra in Sibiu, Library of the Brukenthal Museum in Sibiu, Teleki-Bolyai Library in Târgu Mureş, Albrecht Dürer Museum in Nürnberg, Germany.

The thesis is structured in seven chapters dedicated to distinct issues. Thus, Chapter 1, entitled **The concept of *ex-libris***, delineates the field of the concept. The works dedicated to *ex-libris* and dictionaries do not offer a unitary vision on the topic. For some, *ex-libris* is any mark of ownership in the book; signatures or any mentions, stamps and inscriptions on the book binding are included here. For other authors, *ex-libris* is only a label applied on the cover or the cover page of the book. Our conclusion after reading all the opinions is that

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, *Actualitatea frumosului*, Iaşi: Polirom, 2000, p. 201.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> See details about the used methods in the studies of Simona Nicoară, Toader Nicoară, *Mentalități colective și imaginar social. Istoria și noile paradigme ale cunoașterii*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, Mesagerul, 1996.

*ex-libris* is a sign of ownership performed to point out the affective relationship between the owner and the book. *Ex-libris* appeared due to the owners' desire to complete the book with something of a personal character, establishing thus a relation between them and this object of affection. *Ex-libris* is thus a sign of book appreciation and a sentimental value.

Then we analysed the elements of *ex-libris*: the owner's name, expression of possession, motto, textual components, graphic elements and other components (year of publication, signature of the graphic artist, number of the book's catalogue etc.) We also mentioned the criteria of classification of *ex-libris* and their functions: identification, aesthetic and communication function. *Ex-libris* contain messages for other readers – opinions or cultural attitudes of the owner. Some of them mirror the owner's personality. We focused on the *ex-libris* vignette, mentioning the other forms of books' ownership. This is also the attitude of the most foreign researchers who wrote books about *ex-libris*. The analysis of the marks of ownership (signatures, stamps etc.) is performed in countries where the number of *ex-libris* vignette is reduced or they are absent in the period when *ex-libris* became a permanent reality in western libraries.

Chapter 2 – **Historical landmarks of *ex-libris*: comparative demarche** – presents some landmarks in the evolution of *ex-libris* in several countries. *Ex-libris* appeared in Germany for the first time, where several great artists<sup>6</sup> transformed this ownership mark into a form of art. Later it was adopted by the book lovers of other countries: France, Great Britain, Spain, Italy and then it reached the American continent. Eastern Europe did not keep up with the *ex-libris* tendency, as it is a rare phenomenon till the 17th century. In the 15th-17th centuries, the book was extremely expensive and the book owners were only very wealthy people, part of the aristocracy and high clergy. That is why the majority of *ex-libris* of the beginning period were reduced to the owner's coat of arms, the main symbol of identification. The personal relationship of an owner of *ex-libris* with the books from his library determines the most owners to re-evaluate their relation with their coat of arms. The books from a library were away from the public sphere and heraldic symbols in *ex-libris* were not an object of public scrutiny or an element of the owner's social position or rank. That is why the owners felt the need to intervene creatively and to modify the personal marks, adding quotes, artistic embellishments or symbols of their passions and preoccupations. The coldness of heraldic symbols is toned down by artistic elements or symbols of philosophical ideas or aesthetical reflections. The heraldic shield is modified in many cases and framed in luxuriant

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<sup>6</sup> We mention Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach cel Bătrân, Hans Holbein, Jost Amman și Virgil Solis.

or baroque elements. Examining these metamorphoses allows us to make an inventory of tastes and aesthetic preferences of the era. Passing from heraldic *ex-libris* to the figurative one marks the transformation from a simple symbol of identity to a piece of art. The sources concerning the history of *ex-libris* are scarce and incomplete so that for the elaboration of this chapter a critical and reciprocal activity of completion of books dedicated to *ex-libris* from different countries was necessary. In some cases corrections had to be made after studying the cultural and artistic history of a given period.

Chapter 3, ***Ex-libris and the heraldic perspective***, is dedicated to the relationship between *ex-libris* and heraldry and analysis of knowledge from heraldry required to identify and understand the significance of some *ex-libris* from the beginning period. We also described the historical tendencies and artistic styles that contributed to engravings of *ex-libris* with heraldic theme. The main difficulty we encountered was represented by the fact that heraldry is a discipline of the past and contemporary works neglected the approach of some important aspects regarding the heraldic symbolism in the coat of arms from the end of the Middle Ages, only describing briefly the heraldic rules from the contemporary period. Therefore, the study of some old heraldic works was necessary. Although this discipline is entitled heraldry, the rules of forming a crest are not unitary in European countries. In some cases they were modified, which makes the interpretation of heraldic symbols from *ex-libris* difficult and doubtful. We could observe that especially in the Eastern Europe owners of crests did not respect the heraldic rules, forming coats of arms that have no equivalent in the west.

Chapter 4 - **Techniques in elaborating *ex-libris*** – analyses the techniques and procedures used in creating *ex-libris* marks. Most of them were done through engraving in wood or metals. Lithography or linography began to be used as well. Various techniques present a different artistic potential that consists in the possibility to reproduce more details and to offer a more lifespan for the matrix. This section presents and analyses the procedures from different eras and the motives for their adoption.

The history of *ex-libris* corresponds to the history of the book and printing press. *Ex-libris* vignette are reproduced engravings through printing that appeared together with the multiplied book through typography. That is why we considered necessary to offer an insight into the history of the printing press. This is the reason for the Chapter 5 title – ***Ex-libris in the typographic perspective***. It describes the activity of the first typographies in Europe and analyzes the activity of the first typographies in Romanian territories, with a special focus on



the Transylvanian ones. The emergence of printing press in the Romanian countries is linked to the spiritual preoccupations of the nobles and clerical faces. In Transylvania, the printing press served as a weapon in confronting the religious cults that sought to impose in this area. At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century there are books dedicated to lay culture. In Transylvania, printing a book in Romanian language was essential for preserving the national culture and the identity of the Romanian population. Therefore, the Romanian intellectuals made efforts to print books in Romanian and to standardize the grammar norms. These strivings resulted in the printing of the first Romanian book with Latin letters in Sibiu – *Romanian Catechism* – on the 16th of July 1544. Unfortunately, the historical sources concerning the activity of the first typographies in Transylvania are scarce and have plenty of errors. In the case of many works with no mention of the printing press or the place, there are different opinions and debates over their origins. We mentioned them when we considered it appropriate, but in other cases we just presented the source considered plausible by most researchers. Presenting all these debates would have taken considerable space of our thesis and it would have displaced the focus from *ex-libris*. However, it is remarkable that despite the difficult conditions and the lack of funds, typographies in Transylvania managed to print an impressive number of books, comparable to that of the books printed in other Romanian countries.

Chapter 6, entitled **The Romanian *ex-libris***, describes the history of the Romanian *ex-libris*. As we already mentioned, we preferred to approach the first stages of the development of *ex-libris* for two reasons. Firstly, we consider that the lack of books dedicated to this topic required to fill this void and to reduce the uncertainty regarding the first *ex-libris* on the Romanian territory. In the case of Transylvanian *ex-libris* we conducted an ample field research, studying the most important collection of *ex-libris* of Transylvanian libraries and museums. We also conducted a research internship in Hungary, at the National Library Széchényi of Budapest, where we studied the Transylvanian *ex-libris*. Secondly, we did not approach recent *ex-libris* on purpose, given their great number (it was used by many people who owned a library). Books dedicated to *ex-libris* stop at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup>-beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the interest toward *ex-libris* was low. Museums and libraries are not interested in the new *ex-libris* that have no historical value and that is why the existing collections do not reflect fully this phenomenon. A study regarding contemporary *ex-libris* is extremely difficult to conduct, given that there are no specialized journals, while the websites describe contemporary *ex-libris* only partially.

The chapter describes the first *ex-libris* of Wallachia and Moldova and then focuses on those from Transylvania. The latter category was grouped according to the owner's status and occupation in the following categories: *ex-libris* of monarchs or princes, of clergy, of nobles and of men of culture. We presented an analysis of symbols of *ex-libris* and some important biographical elements of *ex-libris* owners.

Chapter 7 - **Art, spirituality and sensibility in the history of *ex-libris*** – is dedicated mostly to the analysis of female *ex-libris*. In the past, men were usually the owners of a family's patrimony. Women had no right over valuable things without the husband's consent and up until the 20th century it was considered that they should not have cultural preoccupations. Most of the universities accepted women as their students only in the first decades of the 20th century. Therefore, *ex-libris* of women-owners are very rare. Some women were true bibliophiles and were against the customs of society; they became collectors and book owners. In many cases, their passion for books was secret and it was shared by other women. This chapter analyzes the evolution of mentalities that contributed to women's cultural discrimination. Another concern of the chapter is bringing examples of female *ex-libris*, identifying some creators of *ex-libris* who became well-known against any odds.

The hypothesis when we started to study the beginnings of Transylvanian *ex-libris* was that in the Romanian territories similar cultural manifestations to the western ones took place, but at a smaller scale. Our field research, in libraries and museums were largely disappointing. The historical reality, the struggle to survive at the border of three great empires – Ottoman, Austrian and Russian – as well as permanent internal unrest contributed to the scarce resources for cultural matters. Thus, the interest for reading and culture was secondary. In the 15th-18th centuries, books and *ex-libris* phenomenon was extremely rare. Few typographies had little activity and were limited to printing a reduced number of books, sometimes only ten and then they would be closed. Typographies had a nomadic lifestyle and mentioned their name at the end of the book so that in many cases their name got lost. *Ex-libris* of this period belong to nobles or clergy. Rarely we could find a wealthy intellectual, usually a member of the bureaucratic apparatus who ordered an *ex-libris*. In most cases it was impossible to establish the printing press where the *ex-libris* were produced or the name of the printer or graphic artist.

The emergence and spread of printing houses in Romanian countries is closely connected to the spiritual and religious activity. Unlike western countries where the print

appeared as a result of commercial activity, in Romanian countries the print is brought by rulers and princes eager to spread the scriptures or religious sermons to the masses. Transylvania is a particular case. Typographies appeared and thrived in the context of the effort of various cults to conduct proselytism and to refute the competing cults. Religious texts are completed by polemic studies and efforts to discredit the opponents. Princes imposed forcefully the cult they were belonging to and they usually forbade the publication of books of other religious cults. In that context, books that belong to the Orthodox Romanian population appeared. Their publication was allowed by princes who sought for an ally in their religious war or wanted to make a benevolent gesture to ensure good relations with Romanians from the neighboring territories.

*Ex-libris* from that period reveal the book owners and sometimes allow us to identify the books from their libraries. In some cases, such as the high steward Constantin Cantacuzino or the Count Teleki Sámuel, *ex-libris* were discovered on books, allowing to reconstitute the libraries of these personalities and their cultural preoccupations. In most cases however, old *ex-libris* are in library or museum collections, as well as collections of private people.

*Ex-libris* from Romanian countries and Transylvania are mostly heraldic. Only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *ex-libris* became figurative. Unlike those from the European space, they contain less ornamental elements and are limited to heraldic symbols framed elegantly. The coat of arms is not completed by other elements so that we may conclude that *ex-libris* in the Romanian territory had more of a utilitarian purpose than an artistic one. The state of the heraldic science from the Eastern Europe was at its beginning. There were no heraldic colleges and the rulers did not grant official crests. Thus, the crests that we encounter here are the work of their owners. In most cases, the owners of heraldic *ex-libris* from Wallachia of Moldova were rulers or their relatives who reproduced the marks of the personal seal or the country's seal on *ex-libris*.

The Transylvanian situation is different, as it was a multi-cultural society and it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, there are *ex-libris* of Hungarian, German and Romanian people. Various imperial Austrian and other nationalities officials were present among the locals. The identification of the owner's ethnicity was sometimes difficult, given the fact that some Romanians altered their names to sound Hungarian or German, while some Hungarians modified their names to sound German. There are also cases when *ex-libris* owners used several names – the Hungarian, German or Latin versions – that did not

correspond, as they were not translations, but nicknames by which they went in their communities. Facing such situations, we tried to identify *ex-libris* of the local people, neglecting the people that were only passing through the area or came from other areas of the empire without impacting the area politically or culturally. As we already mentioned, most *ex-libris* used in Transylvania belong to nobles or clergy. Nevertheless, we could identify some *ex-libris* of persons of modest origins who had an ample cultural activity – teachers, writers and scientists who had access to books and could have a personal library.

Despite the fact that the premise of our thesis – equivalence of the European and Romanian *ex-libris* – did not confirm, we consider that the aim of the thesis was achieved. We brought to light *ex-libris* that were in dusty corners of libraries and museums, reconstituting a cultural Romanian reality that is modest but not inexistent.

The proposed doctoral research has no pretensions of completeness, but it touched upon significant themes related to *ex-libris*, an exceptional cultural phenomenon.

**Keywords:** *ex-libris*, history of books, printing, engraving, culture, historical figures, history of art.

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