Bookplates in the Golden Age of Collecting: A Student Curator's Perspective



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“Constructing a Pictorial Identity: Bookplates in the Golden Age of Collecting,” a new exhibit in the Sterling Memorial Library Exhibits Corridor, explores the early twentieth century phenomenon of collecting and exchanging bookplates. Curator Olivia Armandroff (Berkeley College ‘17) focuses her research on the career and artistic output of William Fowler Hopson (1849-1935), a New Haven-based bookplate designer.

By the late nineteenth century, improvements in printing technology allowed books to become more affordable and accessible to members of the rising middle class. This new accessibility encouraged individuals to establish personal libraries, and customized bookplates quickly became a popular way to celebrate collections. Eventually, commissioning and collecting bookplates became a means of self-expression. Tucked inside privately-owned volumes, bookplates captured everything from treasured memories to favorite fictional scenes. New Haven-based artist William Fowler Hopson became a prominent bookplate designer in the late nineteenth century, and his business remained active until his death in 1935.

“Constructing a Pictorial Identity” developed from Armandroff’s senior thesis. Given the highly visual aspect of her research topic, selecting which images to display became one of the most daunting aspects of her project. Out of the over two hundred designs by William Fowler Hopson available through Yale Library, Armandroff could only include a small number. She wanted to demonstrate trends by displaying similar designs, but she also wanted to represent the breadth of Hopson’s artistry. Deciding which examples were most important and determining how they should be organized and displayed impacted how Armandroff approached her written thesis.

Throughout her research process, Armandroff made extensive use of sub-collections contained within the Yale Bookplate Collection, an archive containing over one million bookplates. Molly Dotson, Special Collections Librarian, guided her as she navigated this considerable resource. Many collections within the Yale Bookplate Collection do not have finding aids on the library website, and Dotson helped her understand how the diverse collections are organized.

In addition to the visual materials by Hopson included in the Yale Bookplate Collection, the William Fowler Hopson Papers, held by Manuscripts and Archives, also became an essential resource. This collection includes Hopson’s

business correspondence, account books, and other personal files. Bill Landis, Head of Public Services in Manuscripts and Archives, provided Armandroff with valuable support as she explored and analyzed these materials. The Hopson Papers gave her insight into Hopson's artistic processes, interactions with customers, and day-to-day business operations.

As a double major in both the History and History of Art departments, Armandroff received guidance from two faculty advisors, Jean-Christophe Agnew (Professor of American Studies and History) and Edward Cook (Charles F. Montgomery Professor in the History of Art and Professor of American Studies). They encouraged her to consider her potential audience members and tailor her research so that both her exhibit and thesis could appeal to a wider scope of individuals.

Kerri Sancomb, the Exhibits Production Coordinator for Yale University Library, advised Armandroff as she developed her thesis into a visually compelling exhibit. Sancomb also served as chair of the committee that selected her as this year's student curator. "When we interviewed her in the fall," says Sancomb, "Olivia showed a strong understanding of her subject matter, articulated a clear vision for her project, and asked the right questions." The project gave her the unique opportunity to participate all aspects of the exhibit from start to finish and make major decisions.

Over the past three years, exceptional students like Olivia Armandroff have received opportunities to curate exhibits within Sterling Memorial Library. Selected students gain curatorial experience and work closely with faculty members, librarians, and conservators. This spring, Stephen Stack '67 committed to endow a fund that will support student exhibits at Yale Library in perpetuity. Next year, Armandroff will move to Washington D.C. and serve as a John Wilmerding Fellow at the National Gallery, and she hopes to pursue a career in curatorial work. The opportunity to design and create an exhibit at Yale Library has provided her with valuable and unique experience.

The exhibit is on view until October 6.

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