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# THE ART OF THE BOOKPLATE

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A TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION

DECEMBER 2, 2005–FEBRUARY 4, 2006

printworks



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### INTRODUCTION BY JAMES YOOD

**D**espite the fervent privileging of the avant-garde, artists remember. It might be the influence of the art museum, that shrine of the past where early glories are on daily view, it might be the forms and materials of artmaking itself, many literally unchanged for centuries, it might be the academic training most artists experience. Whatever it is, Janus-like, artists look backward every bit as assiduously as they look forward, their practice tied to a continuum, to their position as heirs to a grand tradition. Invited to design a bookplate (according to *Webster's*, "a book owner's identification label that is usually pasted to the inside front cover of a book") for some figure, real or imaginary, contemporary or historical, etc., seventy-two artists gazed all over the place for their subjects, finding some right around them, but mostly culling them back through the mists of time.

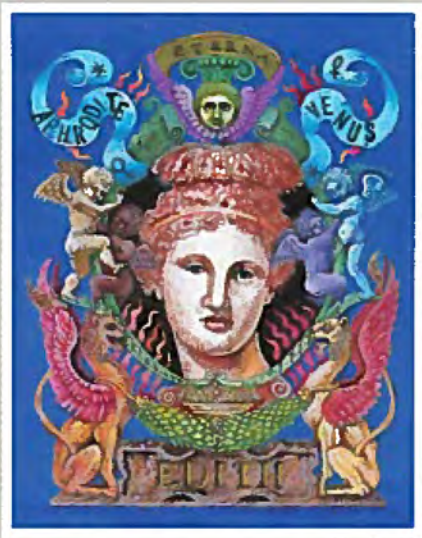
Bookplates, after all, are a bit of an anachronism themselves. While occasionally in use, they're now something usually found at specialty stationery shops, rarely encountered in books. (May I admit that on first hearing of this project I momentarily mistook bookplates as commemorative dishware decorated, say, with scenes from the novels of Dickens?) They seem to breathe another time, when you had leisure to cut the pages of a book, when people had jars of paste lying about, and when the activity of marking your ownership by a little celebratory and personalized document seemed apt and appropriate. Acquired books were and are, after all, usually intended to be companions for life, and the activity of inserting yourself, your experience of possession, into their midst signified a kind of communion with that text.

These artists, however, were not asked to design bookplates for themselves. Rather, they were challenged to design a bookplate for someone else, to play out a kind of intimate intellectual commingling, to use their visual skills to create an image that would somehow – with the results, of course, varying greatly – bridge the artistic vision and style of the maker with some gesture toward the being of the subject. While not always an act of homage, it usually resulted in an act of engagement, a kind of imaginative 'what if' encounter that could reveal something about both artist and subject.

Not surprisingly, authors and poets came in for a fair degree of attention, as did many visual artists and musicians, and a nice sprinkling of athletes, historical figure, scientists, philosophers, etc. Are we to make anything of the fact that, working independently, three artists chose Julia Child as a subject, and two each picked Charles Darwin and Franz Kafka, these the only multiple recipients? We find Adam and Moses, Melville and Conrad, Ruskin and Sontag, Kollwitz and Beckmann, and many more interesting and unexpected selections. In all, this seemed the best kind of occasional and ephemeral project, a chance for artists to pursue a direction a little oblique from their usual work, to pick a companion from the outer realms and work it out.

We live at a time when the book itself has been called into question, with some future-think specialists opining that the traditional book format is a technological dinosaur unsuited for a digital and image-driven age. This current project seems a poignant gesture against that, a candle lit in the face of the specter some day to come when books as we know them might become redundant. In this even symbolic embrace of the implied nostalgia of the bookplate these artists engage in a call to memory, in an assertive gesture of humanism, maintaining the clearest linkage of past to present to future.

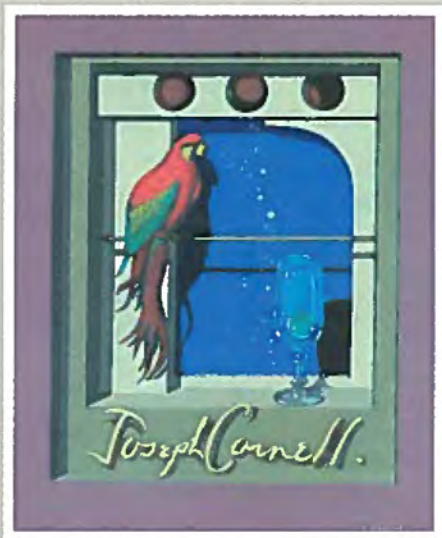




**JAMES MESPLÉ**  
Edith Hamilton



**AUDREY NIFFENEGGER**  
Aubrey Beardsley



**ROBERT MIDDAGH**  
Joseph Cornell



**PATRICIA NIFFENEGGER**  
Julia Child



**DAN MILLS**  
Öyvind Fahlström



**GLADYS NILSSON**  
Hal Sutton