

„Genius loci” in the Moldavian ex-libris

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Rezumat

„Genius loci” în ex-librisul moldovenesc

Prezentul articol este dedicat fenomenului *genius loci* în contextul semnului de carte, luând în considerare influența aspectelor istorice, culturale și mitologice privind formarea ex-librisului artistic. Este explorată tema interacțiunii dintre identitate, loc și artă, avându-se în vedere și semnificația spațiilor memoriale în procesul de conservare a patrimoniului cultural. Examinarea ex-librisului prin prisma *genius loci* permite stabilirea semnificației sale, iar relația dintre artă, personalitate și loc formează un strat cultural unic, care reflectă spiritul epocii și contribuie la conservarea identității locale.

Astăzi o sarcină importantă este de a atrage atenția asupra subiectului ex-librisului și a rolului său în istoria culturală a urbei. Acest lucru va face posibilă nu numai păstrarea tradițiilor graficii în miniatură, ci și integrarea lor în noi formate artistice și de cercetare. Pe exemplul Casei-Muzeu „A.S. Pușkin” din Chișinău se demonstrează cum spațiile comemorative devin centre de atracție pentru artiști ex-libriști, inspirându-i la crearea unor opere de valoare. Conceptul de *genius loci*, legat de locurile memoriei și de înțelegerea artistică a acestora, poate deveni baza unor proiecte interdisciplinare care vor uni arta, istoria, urbanismul și activitatea muzeală.

Cuvinte cheie: ex-libris, Republica Moldova, Chișinău, Casa Muzeu „A.S. Pușkin”, Grigore Bosenco, Muzeul ex-librisului, artiști moldoveni, ex-libris moldovenesc, carte, Basarabia, *genius loci*.

Summary

“Genius loci” in the Moldavian ex-libris

This article explores the phenomenon of *genius loci* in the context of bookplates, examining the influence of historical, cultural, and mythological aspects on the formation of artistic ex-libris. It investigates the interaction between identity, place, and art, as well as the significance of memorial spaces in preserving cultural heritage. Viewing ex-libris through the lens of *genius loci* helps to establish its importance, while the interconnection of art, personality, and place creates a unique cultural layer that reflects the spirit of the era and contributes to the preservation of local identity.

Today, an important task is to draw attention to the role of ex-libris in the cultural history of the city. This will not only help preserve the traditions of miniature graphics but also integrate them into new artistic and research formats. The example of the “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum in Chișinău demonstrates how memorial spaces serve as focal points for ex-libris artists, inspiring them to create valuable works. The concept of *genius loci*, associated with places of memory and their artistic interpretation, can serve as a foundation for interdisciplinary projects that unite art, history, urban studies, and museology.

Keywords: ex-libris, Republic of Moldova, Chișinău, “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum, Grigory Bosenco, Ex-Libris Museum, Moldovan artists, Moldovan ex-libris, book, Bessarabia, *genius loci*.

The aim of this article is to identify the role of the ex-libris as an artistic phenomenon reflecting the connection between a person and a particular place, as well as to analyze its influence on local culture. The novelty of the research lies in a comprehensive analysis of the ex-libris through the prism of the concept of *genius loci*. Using the example of the “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum in Chisinau, the article explores how memorial spaces become centers of attraction for ex-libris artists, inspiring them to create works that convey the spirit of the place.

Thus, the article reveals the ex-libris not only as a form of graphic art but also as an instrument of cultural memory, linking the past and present, tradition and innovation. In the era of digitalization and the development of virtual technologies, new opportunities for the revival of ex-libris are emerging. The goal of the article is to prove the relevance of the bookplate in the modern world as a full-fledged genre of graphic art.

The “Genius of Place”

Nullus enim locus sine genio est – For there is no place without a genius (Servius, commen-

tary on Virgil's Aeneid, V, 85). *Genius loci* is a term describing the special atmosphere or spirit of a place, its unique essence that shapes its character and influences the perception and behavior of people within that space. But what came first – the genius who glorified the place, or the place that inspired the genius? In ancient Roman tradition, it was believed that the genius (*Genius*) was a spirit that could belong not only to a person but also to a family, a city, or even a country.

Chișinău has many places with a special charm and atmosphere. These locations have long been an integral part of the city, carrying their own myths, legends, facts, heroes, and ordinary residents, geniuses, and villains. When it comes to ex-libris, the place of attraction is the “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum in Chisinau, which, in 1988, established a branch – the Ex-Libris Museum. The “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum was opened in 1948, but the history of this house began much earlier – on September 21, 1820, when the young exiled official Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin arrived in Chisinau, sent there by the displeasure of Tsar Alexander I due to his literary works.

Myths and Reality

“At the intersection of an artist's organic connection with the place of his life and creativity, a new, previously unknown reality emerges, which does not belong solely to the realm of art or geography” [1, p. 10]. “Upon arrival, A. Pushkin stayed at the inn of Ivan Nikolaevich Naumov, a member of the so-called housing commission responsible for accommodating Russian military personnel and officials arriving in Chișinău. The commission's task was to arrange housing primarily for officials and officers coming to Bessarabia” [2, p. 41]. It was in this very inn, on Antonovskaya Street, that the memorial museum was opened on February 10, 1948 (fig. 1-3). In its first year, 5,314 visitors came to the museum, while in 1979, the number had grown to 45,000. Over 40 years, more than 5 million people had visited the museum.

In 1983, the museum underwent major restoration, during which a new exhibition was created. This included not only the original inn building but also surrounding structures representing the “courtyard of merchant I. N. Naumov”. The goal was to recreate the historical setting of Pushkin's time in Bessarabia. As part of efforts to commemorate A.S. Pushkin in Chisinau, the House-Museum and its surrounding streets, covering an area of 44 hectares, were designated as the “Pushkin

Chișinău” protected zone in accordance with a decree by the Council of Ministers of the Moldavian SSR on February 10, 1983 [3].

Beyond memorial museums that preserve tangible evidence of the lives of remarkable individuals, there are also typological house-museums that aim to recreate the atmosphere of a specific era. In these spaces, the reconstructed environment becomes the primary value, conveying the spirit of the time. The “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum combines both approaches. According to Boris Trubetskoy's concept, the museum should not only preserve the memory of the poet but also recreate the cultural and historical context of his stay in Bessarabia, merging the functions of a memorial space and a cultural center (fig. 4).

Yet, when we speak of places that preserve the memory of great figures, many of them seemed to have emerged naturally, independent of official declarations or grand openings. These places existed long before they were recognized as memorial sites, living their own unique lives. They did not require decrees or regulations – their significance was intuitively felt, passed down from generation to generation, carefully safeguarded by contemporaries and descendants. Perhaps it is these people, these guardians of memory, who are the true “geniuses of place.” After all, a poet becomes a poet not at the moment of official recognition but much earlier—when his work gains popular acclaim, when his verses begin to live in people's hearts long before formal announcements and honors.

To support this hypothesis, we can examine the case of the first unofficial monument to Pushkin. Two months after graduating from the Lyceum, when the graduates had dispersed to their places of service, an important yet little-noticed event occurred. In mid-August 1817, five former lyceum students – A. Illichevsky, A. Delvig, V. Kuchelbecker, I. Matyushkin, and I. Pushkin – commissioned a marble slab inscribed with “genius loci” (to the “genius of the place”). The work was possibly done by the renowned stonemason Samson Sukhanov. The stone, adorned with a golden inscription, was secretly placed near the lyceum's annex among the birches [4].

Over time, the entire area in front of the Lyceum and the “sacrificial stone” became overgrown with moss. In 1844, the Lyceum was relocated from Tsarskoye Selo to Kamennostrovsky Prospect in St. Petersburg and renamed the Alexan-

der Lyceum. While the stone with the “genio loci” dedication was officially associated with Roman beliefs and seen as referring to a mystical protector of the local valleys, ponds, and parks, why not consider it the first monument to Pushkin? Perhaps his lyceum friends were ahead of their time in creating this unique tribute, long before the first official monuments appeared in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Today, there is a third approach to the formation of memorial museum spaces. This alternative method, proposed by the non-profit organization House Museum, involves integrating contemporary art, where artists are invited to reinterpret the physical and conceptual history of a place, thereby adding modern perspectives and new value to historical locations.

The Ex-libris Museum. The history of the “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum is associated with many remarkable events and biographies of famous people. One of these events was the establishment of the Ex-libris Museum in 1988 – the first ex-libris museum in the Soviet Union, which brought together a whole generation of young, talented artists...

The “A.S. Pushkin” House-Museum in Chișinău began serious work on collecting, studying, and researching bookplates. Although the number of ex-libris pieces in the new museum was relatively small at the time of its opening—around 10,000 compared to major world collections – the diversity of themes, techniques, and artistic genres immediately distinguished this museum as one of the most interesting and important in the country [5].

There were only a small number of thematic “Pushkin” ex-libris. These bookplates include the ex-libris of Pushkin scholars – scientists and collectors – as well as their libraries. Additionally, they encompass book graphic miniatures dedicated to Pushkin himself or his works. Furthermore, this category includes bookplates related to the Pushkin era that belonged to his contemporaries.

It is therefore not surprising that the theme of the first international ex-libris competition, organized by the House-Museum and its new branch, was Pushkiniana in Ex Libris. The competition was dedicated to the 190th anniversary of the poet’s birth. Held in 1989, it was intended not only to commemorate this milestone but also to expand the collection of thematic bookplates (Fig. 5).

The results of the competition were impressive: more than 200 ex libris were created, professional-

ly executed by both young and experienced artists. Moreover, the competition’s geographical reach expanded, as artists from Latvia, Romania, and Bulgaria participated for the first time. The competition included several categories, but they were not the main goal of participation in this exhibition. The primary objective was to mark the emergence of a new museum and to declare that Moldovan ex libris not only existed but was also ready to compete with major artistic centers that had long been promoting book graphics (Figs. 6-8).

Today, even those artists who were just beginning their journey in art at the time have long since become true professionals. Alongside their senior colleagues, they have earned their rightful place in the history of contemporary ex-libris. And, of course, in the history of ex libris in the MSSR and the Republic of Moldova.

Here are just a few names of graphic artists who participated in the competition:

Ovidiu Petca (born 1958, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) – Member of the Romanian Association of Plastic Artists [6];

Leonid Kuris (born 1944, Kyiv, Ukraine) – Soviet, Ukrainian, and Israeli graphic artist, and collector of ex-libris [7];

Alexander Grigorievich Kharuk and Sergey Grigorievich Kharuk (1960, Kiev) – Ukrainian artists, twin brothers. They work in several types of art: design of coins, banknotes, postage stamps; medallic art; ex-libris, book illustration, graphite art; easel drawing, painting [8];

Boris Brînzei (1930–1993, Chișinău) – Honored Cultural Worker of the Moldavian SSR. His work in ex libris began in 1967 [9];

Gheorghe Vrabie (1939–2016, Chișinău) – One of the most prominent Moldovan graphic artists, a master of ex libris, book, and monumental graphics. He was the author of the new state coat of arms of the Republic of Moldova. In 2010, he was awarded the “Order of the Republic” [10];

Alexei Colîbneac (born 1943, Chișinău) – Illustrator and graphic artist specializing in book graphics and etching. He heads the Fine Arts Department at the Academy of Music, Theatre, and Fine Arts in Chișinău [11];

Isai Cîrmu (1940–2015, Chișinău) – Chief artist of several publishing houses, he illustrated over 200 books. Laureate of the National Prize of the Republic of Moldova [12];

Filimon Hămuraru (1932–2006, Chișinău) – Illustrator, theater artist, sculptor, and educator [13];

Petru Vlah (1945–2020, Chișinău) – Artist who created around one hundred bookplates dedicated to the folklore and modern culture of the Gagauz people. He was also one of the co-creators of the first Gagauz flag (Bayrak) [14].

Grigory Bosenko: Life and Work

Grigory Bosenko (1947–2013) played a key role in organizing and conducting the international ex libris competition in Chișinău. He was the first and only director of the short-lived museum. Bosenko was an outstanding Moldovan graphic artist, architect, educator, designer, and collector. A significant part of his career was dedicated to the development of ex libris art and small-scale graphics, making a substantial impact on the formation and evolution of the Moldovan bookplate tradition (Fig. 9).

Born in Kiliya (Ukraine), he graduated from the Architecture Department of the Chișinău Polytechnic Institute. Since 1971, he participated in exhibitions and competitions, and in 1975, he joined the Union of Architects of the USSR, leading the small graphics section at the Moldavian Society of Book Lovers. In 1980, he became a member of the Union of Artists, and in 1987, he joined the Union of Designers of the USSR.

His works were exhibited in Europe and America, and he became a laureate of numerous art competitions (Figs. 10–11). In 1988, Grigory Bosenko founded the first Ex Libris Museum in the Soviet Union, based in Chișinău. Its core collection consisted of his personal archive, which included around 2,000 bookplates.

In 2013, Grigory Bosenko passed away, leaving behind a significant cultural legacy. His contributions to the development of ex libris, small-scale graphics, and design remain an important part of the artistic heritage of Moldova and the entire post-Soviet space [15]. On February 7, 2013, shortly before his death, Bosenko published an open letter titled *The Ex-Libris Museum: 25 Years of Oblivion*, in which he recounted the story of the museum's creation— a story that never truly unfolded. The museum's history remained unfinished, tied only to a single major event—the international ex libris competition of 1989.

We have lost and continue to lose our cultural environment. We no longer organize ex libris exhibitions and competitions where young artists could showcase their talents. There is no opportunity to study original bookplates, to see how they are created and printed. By consigning the legacy

of the past to oblivion, we break the connection between times without which progress is impossible [15].

The presence of artistic ex-libris is one of the indicators of a nation's cultural development... [15].

Interest in ex-libris art has fluctuated over time. In the early 20th century, it gradually declined, only to be revived in the 1950s, but by the end of the century, it began to wane again. Books and libraries lost their status as symbols not only of wealth and power but also of education. However, this does not mean that interest in books, literature, and art has disappeared—on the contrary, new opportunities have emerged. These opportunities still need to be understood and explored, so that by drawing on past experience, we can once again create something new.

Modern Moldovan ex-libris is alive, evolving, and attracting new artists who have yet to make their unique and significant contributions to this genre – G. Bosenko [16]. Grigory Bosenko spoke these words in 1981, and they remain relevant to this day. We hope that the time will come not only to remember history but also to create it—new names, new technologies, new forms of exhibition, and new opportunities to realize the dream of restoring the Ex-Libris Museum in Chișinău.

And perhaps, there are still undiscovered corners of the city that can forever be captured in artistic and graphic forms. Despite certain limitations of graphic art within the framework of bookplates, ex-libris has demonstrated a remarkable diversity of ideas and forms throughout its history. Thanks to the talent of outstanding artists, it has evolved from a simple library label into a true masterpiece of painting and decorative art. Rightfully, it has long been recognized as an independent form of visual art.

Bosenko believed that a city is beautiful because of its cultural and historical layers. The great capitals of the world are distinguished not by exquisite architecture or luxury shops, but by historical continuity. Even if just a tiny part of the city retains its character through the centuries, it makes all the difference [17].

The connection between a person and their place of residence is both mysterious and undeniable. Or rather: indisputable, yet enigmatic. It is governed by the ancient spirit known as *genius loci*, the 'spirit of place,' which binds intellectual, spiritual, and emotional phenomena to their ma-

terial environment. For modern individuals, cities are the primary arenas where cultural forces manifest and take shape. Their appearance is defined by the genius loci, and our perception of this is deeply subjective [1, p. 9].

Chișinău is a city rich in historical and cultural heritage, where many places are tied to remarkable figures and events. The Ex-Libris Museum was one such unique place, unjustly consigned to oblivion. Reviving this museum would not only honor its creators but also serve as an important step toward preserving Chișinău's local cultural identity.

The *genius loci* – the spirit of place – continues to exist where memory is preserved and enriched, where art becomes a bridge between eras (fig. 12).

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Fig. 1. Boris Trubetskoy, First director of the "A.S. Pushkin" House-Museum in Chișinău.



Fig. 2. "A.S. Pushkin" House-Museum (Merchant N. Naumov's Inn). Architectural sketches by architect F.P. Naumov, 1946.



Fig. 3. "A.S. Pushkin" House-Museum (Merchant N. Naumov's Inn). Architectural sketches by architect F.P. Naumov, 1946.



Fig. 4. "A.S. Pushkin" House-Museum after the 1983 reconstruction.



Fig. 5. Catalogue of the Interrepublican Ex-Libris Competition dedicated to the 190th anniversary of A.S. Pushkin's birth. Organizer – A.S. Pushkin House-Museum in Chișinău, 1989.



Fig. 6. Ex-libris by artist B.I. Brynzei. Booklet, 1983.



Fig. 7. Cover of the catalogue *Modern Moldovan Ex-Libris*. Author of the introduction and design – G. Bosenko. Chișinău, Timpul, 1981.



Fig. 8. Ex-libris from the 1989 catalogue. Artist: O. Petca.



Fig. 9. Grigory Bosenko. First and only director of the Ex-Libris Museum in Chișinău.



Fig. 10. Cover of the catalogue for G. Bosenko's personal exhibition.



Fig. 11. Artistic ex-libris. Artist: G. Bosenko.



Fig. 12. "A.S. Pushkin" House-Museum in Chișinău, 2025.