Northwestern's new Maeda bookplate

Capturing continuity and change in an image for the 21st century

by Jeffrey Garrett

They come in various shapes and sizes, attest to a collector's humility or his ego, have lofty artistic aims—or none. But all bookplates share a common purpose: they establish ownership or they celebrate the gift of ownership. In appearance they range from the humble book-label, a simple pasted marker that may consist of no more than an individual's name, to the often extravagant ex libris, a miniature work of art that evokes a love of books, of knowledge—or of oneself—through an evocative image often combined with a densely meaningful motto. Great artists have labored over the centuries to create fine bookplates, from Lukas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer in the early days of print to Aubrey Beardsley and M. C. Escher in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Donor or dedicatory bookplates memorialize an event, a departed friend or loved one, or they state a noble purpose for which a gift is made to a library. They, too, can be works of fine typographic or calligraphic art or contain an image that evokes a place, a relationship to books, or a philosophy of learning.

Creating a new bookplate

Devising a donor bookplate for the 21st century was the charge given to a team of Northwestern librarians. The goal was to create a new design that would celebrate both the generosity and vision of major donors and the place of the library in an academic environment—an environment in which the library is less and less a place and where more and more of what libraries house are media and screen resources, rather than traditional books. In this endeavor, the bookplate team was advised by the head of library development, Harrie Hughes, and by two gifted graphic artists from Northwestern's Department of University Relations, Vickie Lata and Ken Pagni.

We began by looking at bookplates through history, from the ancient labels that brought down curses *(anathema)* upon thieves and the devotional *(ex voto)* bookplates of medieval and early modern times to the armorial bookplates of aristocratic collectors and the *ex libris* created by famous artists for wealthy bourgeois. We then turned to a review specifically of bookplates at Northwestern, itself a rich and varied tradition, still seamlessly documented on our library shelves.

Throughout 2002, guided by our artistic advisers, we met for brainstorming and planning sessions. We knew we wanted an artistic statement that would capture the essence of the scholarly process, its mixture of continuity and

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change, and do so without anachronism. We wanted to apply a visual language appropriate to our era—yet also be aesthetically stimulating, exciting, even provocative: a design that would itself teach as well as delight.

And we sought an artist who was up to the task.

Enter the artist

We found that artist in John Maeda, a 37-year-old Seattle native, professor of design and computation at MIT's renowned Media Lab, and recipient of numerous national and international awards, among them most recently the Muriel Cooper Prize of the Design Management Institute (2001), a National Design Award (2001), and Japan's Mainichi Design Prize (2002). In 1999, Maeda was included in *Esquire* magazine's list of the 21 most important people of the 21st century. He is, in the words of The New York Times, "a prize-winning graphic designer and kinetic artist with a fistful of engineering degrees."[1] Maeda sees his own mission as fostering the growth of what he calls "human technologists"—people who are capable of articulating future culture through an informed understanding of the technologies they use.[2] Maeda was the perfect artist for our project.

Northwestern University's new donor bookplate designed by artist John Maeda.

Yet how to win such an artist for a library bookplate project, someone who once created squares that change shape when a viewer shouts at them[3] and one of the famously outré bottles for Absolut Vodka?[4] Perhaps we underestimated Maeda's interest in seemingly "utilitarian" art forms or the persuasive powers of our own artist-communicator, Vickie Lata, but it turned out that Maeda was delighted to accept our commission and immediately set out to work.

After several months of intense back-and-forth between the Northwestern design team and the artist, "channeled" by Vicki Lata, we found ourselves at last on the same page. Among several design ideas that Maeda presented—each of them fascinating in their own way—we chose one that generated a typographic cascade based on user input. The interactivity that Maeda built into his design allowed the Northwestern team, in the finest tradition of bookplate creation and in reaction to ideas we saw in Maeda's art, to devise an appropriate motto: "Northwestern University Library: Imagination–Transformation–Synthesis." Maeda put this text through the gradual randomization program he had developed, and the product is what you see below.

Maeda's bookplate works on many levels, not the least as a simple work of art. Depending upon the color in which it is rendered (and we chose three: green, blue, and Northwestern purple), a viewer's first impression might be of water trickling down a stony mountain face, of ivy or moss hanging from a wet wall or cliff, or—no need to deny it—of the dream or the nightmare of an overworked typesetter.

But the Maeda bookplate also draws each viewer in, even in the miniature form in which it has been realized. What is it saying? In what follows, I want to offer one viewer's interpretation—with the caveat, that like all fine works of art, Maeda's Northwestern bookplate admits of many different readings and many different points of view, none of them exclusively valid.

What it's saying

The design appears to cascade downward, clarifying as it does from an unintelligible jumble of letters and typographic forms into what at the end is a clearly articulated, clearly legible statement, almost as if this statement had gradually formed from an inchoate and preverbal idea. This seems in tune with the view of modern cognitive science, which tells us that at least 95 percent of all thought is unconscious, but that this 95

percent "shapes and structures all conscious thought."[5]

Where does the unconscious receive its inspiration? Surely one of the most important sites of inspiration is the dialogue with resources of the library, regardless if encountered in the physical form of books, journals, or visual media, or the virtual form of online. As one student put it recently in a poetic tribute, "my primary experience of libraries . . . begins in the predawn of thought, in the realm of the senses. . . . [E]ach book I pass announces a potential personal discovery, an unexpected inroad to an unexplored self."[6]

Knowledge, then, begins in the vague, amorphous world of sensual, preverbal experience, the domain we call imagination, where we experience an excitement—the excitement of learning and of original creation—that we are not yet able to articulate. This excitement, the "predawn of thought," is the state that Maeda renders at the top of this bookplate.

Bookplate artist John Maeda.

The struggle that then begins is to transform the basic inspirations which we feel to be good into conscious knowledge, knowledge which can also be conveyed intelligibly to others. This process of transformation takes years to learn and then also years to practice—indeed our entire lives. Learning it is without doubt at the heart of the educational enterprise. We find it embodied in the gradual formation of clear text as we proceed down the page of Maeda's design.

The final step in this process of inspiration and learning is the succinct, concise expression of an idea or a string of ideas using the formal tools of language. This ultimate step—we have called it synthesis—can be in the form of a published article, an undergraduate honors thesis, a poem, or even a single carefully crafted and articulated sentence. It is also where we arrive at the end of Maeda's artistic journey, when at last legible text is displayed: clear, regular, and bold. It is a journey that often begins in the library and ends in the creation of new knowledge, which in turn finds its way to the shelves (be they real or virtual) of the library. And with that the whole process begins anew.

The flow of Maeda's design captures in a concise and compelling image the process of education and of our vision for the library in the new millennium. It is also a statement worthy of Maeda's personal mission as an educator. "To me," he writes, "education is the highest form of intellectual philanthropy."[7]

We hope that the Northwestern community—uniting library users, library staff, and library donors—will join in welcoming our new donor bookplate by artist John Maeda.[8]

Notes

1. Claudia Dreifus, "A Conversation with John Maeda: When MIT Artist Shouts, His 'Painting' Listens," *New York Times* (July 27, 1999), "F" Section, p. 3.

2. From the citation for the 2001 Muriel Cooper Prize of the Design Management Institute, cf.www.dmi.org/dmi/html/aboutdmi/muriel/maeda_s.htm.

3. "The Reactive Square," 1994: www.maedastudio.com/rbooks2k/rsquare.html (Macs only).

4. "Absolut Maeda," 1999. Available online at absolutad.com/absolut_lists/ads/pictures/?id=1221&_s=ads.

5. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

6. Jamie Frederic Metzl, "Searching for the Catalog of Catalogs." *Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 125 (Fall 1996): 147–60.

7. Quoted on John Maeda's homepage at plw.media.mit.edu/people/maeda/. Accessed June 15, 2004.

8. Thanks go out to the members of the bookplate design committee: Russ Clement, Rochelle Elstein, Harrie Hughes, and Russell Maylone, and to our mentors in Northwestern's Department of University Relations, Vickie Lata and Ken Pagni. And, of course, thanks to John Maeda himself, for his contribution to the library of the 21st century. ■