

# Exlibris in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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Full Length Paper  
Accepted 25 June 2015

## Abstract

In present research the aim is to clarify modern exlibris, which has turned into a commodity of mechanical reproduction in particular as an effect of modernization processes and the problematic that concerns the way exlibris got modernized. While studying the issue, Marshall Berman's perspectives on the idea of being modern, the concept of modernization and the processes of modernization in addition to Jean Jacques Rousseau's metropolis experiences illustrated in his romantic novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* and Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* which narrates the collapse of autonomous artistic works of the nineteenth century due to the impact of nascent culture and communication technologies having developed in the twentieth century shall also be investigated.

**Keywords:** Modernization, modern art, modern exlibris, modernization processes.

*“...A blanket can be a commodity of museum of fine arts, pulp fiction can become a subject of education, street cacophony can now be a piece of concert in symphony halls, buildings are packaged, plastic surgery operations on satellite TVs can be valued as an artistic performance ...”*  
*Larry Shiner, Invention of Art, (İstanbul: Ayrıntı Publishing House, 2004), 35.*

## **Introduction**

Based on the Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction section in the The Arcades Project of Walter Benjamin, renowned as a transferor of modernity experiences and a meta-reader, the problems concerning the reproducibility of exlibris as a modern product of art have been the focal point of this study. Prior to analyzing the problem case of present research it would be conducive to shed light on the concept of exlibris constituting the main subject of the problem case.

In its simplest term exlibris, derived from Latin origin, is the indication of ownership-possession mostly endorsed in the inner page of book cover or in the very first pages. What gains an artistic quality to this indication bearing the name of the book owner is that it is mostly a small-size graphic work that can be created via a range of artistic production techniques (Pektaş, 1996: 11). Concerning this explanation it is now feasible to raise this question: Why would any book require a sign of its ownership?

Exlibris plays a role in verifying the identity of its owner in the event of book loss or theft. Most probably, the reason why Exlibris is quite a recent phenomenon for us –Turkey and Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus– and some other countries and societies is that it is indeed theft itself that urged the rise of this new artistic domain! It is most likely that we can presently talk about Exlibris, produce, discuss, exhibit and exchange this art form as a gift thanks to this very act of theft. In fact all hypotheses that can be argued-noted on the reasons that gave birth to Exlibris have triggered its emergence as a new artistic domain, popularization in the entire globe, and performing on its behalf in the exhibitions, biennials, museums and catalogues.

A common rule encountered in relevant literary studies necessitated the urge to revise the available information and discussions on Exlibris-Art: “It is an internationally valid rule that of the Exlibrises which are designed on the basis of assumption that their original size would be printed on the book, the long side should be maximum 13 cm” (Erdem, 2010: 10). At this stage, discussing whether Exlibris’ long side has to be maximum 13 cm or 5555 cm simply means that the individual is forced to remain distant from comprehending, producing and discussing the art itself. If it is a requisite to be unique and creative for any given commodity to be acknowledged as a work of design limiting the creativity with any unit of measure would lead one to question its character as a design product. No wonder why people feel

like they are dealing with a complicated, difficult and abstruse notion when we say Art. Nonetheless when there is such a complicated and equivocal concept at issue, it could be surprisingly easy to restrict an art work with a set of numeric measures. Despite the complexity and obscurity in providing a definite explanation of art there are still various definitions on hand. Yet it is objectionable to apply the size limitation that Şafak Erdem claims into the academic literature of modern age (2010). Considering the limited means of printing techniques in the past it was comprehensible to put limits on book sizes but presently books can be printed in any size with no limitations. Hence such a size restriction on Exlibris is just another outdated practice passed from old-fashioned printing techniques.

In history, the very first Exlibris work coincides with the date 1400 B.C. on a tile pertaining to Egyptian III. Amenophis' library (Pektaş, 1996: 15). With the emergence of Gutenberg Publishing and pro-Gutenberg Publishing Houses that spread in the blink of an eye all through Christian Europe, books, as the only application field of Exlibris, started to be repeatedly reproduced via mechanical production techniques which in effect indicated that not only the books but Exlibrises would also be modernized. We currently have very limited knowledge and resources on the traditional format of Exlibris and all available sources basically date back to the production during pro-Gutenberg Publishing Houses. Once Christian European societies started to get further familiar with books, they started to pay more attention to Exlibrises. Then here comes the second question: What might be the explanation and motivation in the modernization of Exlibris?

I

Atilâ Türk (Assoc. Prof., Near East University Faculty of Communication) commences his History of Civilization and Culture course with this quote: "civilization is a malicious invention whilst barbarism is its very counterpart". Civilization that mankind created on the essence of professionalism and division of labor with an instinct desire to reach a better life and the consequential city and city life accompanied with industrialization has presently come to be known as modern/postmodern lifestyle. Marshall Berman argues that although today it has become a necessity for the mankind, "being modern is in reality being forced to lead a life imbued with paradoxes and conflicts" (Berman, 2013: 24). Being Modern entails in itself a notion that fills men with power and enthusiasm and gives promises to transform themselves and the world, but it is at the same time a concept that threatens to destruct ourselves as well as all that we possess. It perpetually drives us to the edge of a complex web of devastation, renovation, obscurity and agony. Being modern is, as once put forth by Karl Marx, being a part of the universe in which all that is solid vaporizes into the air (Berman, 2013: 27). Berman lists some of the reasons lying on the soil of modern-life whirlpool:

Great inventions witnessed in physical sciences, industrialization that

created new monopolist authorities and forms of class-struggle, rapid and very frequently the jerky urbanization; mass communication systems encompassing and connecting totally dissimilar people and communities, nation-states that gain increasing momentum; mass social movements that react against political and economic hegemonies and a capitalist world market (Berman, 2013: 28)...

In *La Nouvelle Heloise*, Jean Jacques Rousseau's protagonist Saint-Preux narrates his very early encounters with metropolis life after migrating from village to the city in a letter sent to the beloved one in his home village: "Always and at all times fighting groups and sects, constantly springing and rebirthing misconceptions and clashing opinions... People are, all the times, fighting with themselves" and "all the things are absurd but none are surprising because everyone seems to have accepted abnormality as normal" (Berman, 2013: 31). Having gained even more experiences in metropolis Saint-Preux he shares his new views in his letters to the lover: "I feel like I am drunk in the presence of this turbulent and equally exciting lifestyle. It makes me dizzy to watch so many things passing right before my eyes. But despite the presence of so many things that mesmerize me there is not one single thing that holds dear to my heart."

"Every morning I woke up not knowing to whom I would love the next day..."(Berman, 2013: 31).

Modern life is surrounded with colossal dilemmas, head-spinning changes and great excitements that present us no hints at all about whom to love the next day ... It is certainly not the objective of present research to clarify or discuss modernity concept. Still, in order to grasp the modernization of Exlibris, I deem it useful to give place for the comments of Marshall Berman who provided meaningful insights on modernism, modernization and modernity concepts and to mention Jean Jacques Rousseau's metropolis experiences sharing novel penned in a romantic style. Going back to Atilâ Türk's quote hereinabove, based on Marshall Berman's comments and Jean Jacques Rousseau's metropolis experiences, we can hardly argue that modernity which can reasonably be defined as a more rational and mechanical form of civilization provides us any positive aspects. In that case, just as claimed by Atilâ Türk, it would be a more rational choice to favor barbarism in lieu of modernism.

In our study the way how modernism, modernity process or in a better saying, capitalist modernization processes transformed artworks –Exlibris specifically– shall be elaborated in Frankfurt School scholar Walter Benjamin's Artwork in an age of Mechanical Reproduction section from his complete work titled as *The Arcades Project*. The main problematic is grounded on the character of modern Exlibris which was affected by modernization processes and was transformed into a work of mechanical

reproduction in particular and the way Exlibris was modernized. As regards Benjamin's method related to this scope -in the next part- the exhibition value that Exlibris, which is essentially dependent on the book –gains after being affected by modernization processes and moving distant from the book; losing its exquisite atmosphere as Exlibris the artwork, losing its unique nature and all the changes that Exlibris experienced shall be briefly compared with cinematography as a form of modern art.

## II

Benjamin, in his passage on Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, deals with the collapse of autonomous artworks in the nineteenth century due to the new culture and communication technologies that advanced in the twentieth century. Benjamin argues that art, by surrendering its divine character, now receives orders from political bodies and is treated as a way of liberating the masses (Özbek, 2000: 126). Reproducibility of artwork and its reproducibility via mechanical-technical means despite being an already-existing object is not an old phenomenon. Bronze sculptures and coins were also exquisite artworks which were mass-produced by Greeks. Except these two, other works were not reproduced via mechanical means since they were one-time products. Lithography technique applied as drawing the image on stone surface enabled the graphic products to be presented to the market for the first time via mass and new formats (Benjamin, 2002: 52). Hence with the modernization processes in production techniques new artistic domains sprang and traditional artworks started to modernize and even digitalize which was one step further: Just like the replacement of human hand in the image with the eye in photograph... Presently thanks to the cameras which can be integrated into mobile phones and digital tablets we are able to snap the moment anytime anywhere. Within seconds we can share our photos on social sharing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. If only we could raise one moment our heads from our phones and tablets to sneak into streets, we could still spot pencil drawing artists on the crowded streets and street corners. This clearly is a victory of the human intervention and handwork against the process of digitalization which has thoroughly leaked into all daily life practices! Digitalization of photographs moved us away from photograph albums which used to be one of the most well-known communication tools betwixt all generations. Presently, we store our photographs in digital environments or social sharing platforms in which each new sharing puts a blanket over the previous photo. If only we could, as we used to have in the past, store our non-digital and tangible photo albums and keep our memories fresh at all times! It is of common knowledge that in photos, eye perception takes less time than hand drawing but in all the stages of reproduction, artwork sheds some of its uniqueness (Benjamin, 2002: 53).

The transformation of human hand in the image is echoed in Exlibris as well. Presently we are even able to produce three-dimensional Exlibrises as a part of experimental Exlibris works. It is undoubtedly something that can enrich

the aesthetic value and meaning of artwork but reproducing it via mechanical means simply moves it away from uniqueness. The original character of authentic artwork is the symbol of its autonomy. Autonomy is a concept way beyond reproduction that is created via mechanical means and a factual (authentic) artwork is the one that still claims some sort of authority over reproduction. One explanation is that reproduction via mechanical means is, compared to manual production, much freer in the face of authentic works. Second explanation is that reproduction via mechanical means can carry the artwork to different positions and unite it with larger numbers of viewers/audiences; even mass groups (Benjamin, 2002: 54). Still it means that in such reproduction environment, artwork relinquishes its exquisite atmosphere. Reproduction of exlibris via mechanical means and exhibiting it, as a result of the loss of its unitary with the essence of its existence; the book itself, in glamorous halls on its own makes it a stranger to its very own existence. Tearing apart an integral part of the book and presenting it singly to the mass viewers is very much like separating identical twins from one another for good. In reality, Exlibris is something embedded into the book as the possession of the book owner. Reproduction technique simply cuts the reproduced object from its traditional roots and activates its mass existence via duplication (Benjamin, 2002: 55). There are common factors between the unicity of art and its position within the context of tradition. An antique Venus sculpture signified completely different meanings for the Greeks and for the men of religion in the middle ages (Benjamin, 2002: 57). At that point both Greeks and middle age reverends were able to relate to the uniqueness of the artwork (Benjamin, 2002: 57-58). Antique artworks were designed to serve hoodoo ceremonies first and religious ceremonies next. While authentic artwork embraced its uniqueness in sacred ceremonies, reproducing the artwork via mechanical means put an end to being a component of sacred events (Benjamin, 2002: 58).

Benjamin claims that reproduction via mechanical means is the outcome of montage which is the product of illusionist character of film. In film studios, the tool that can reflect the reality in an artificial space is the studio itself (Benjamin, 2002: 68). The immediate question that arises in our mind if we make a comparison is: If that is the case, what is the reciprocal position of cameraman and painter-designer? While the painter or designer puts a distance from the phenomenon in the artwork, the cameraman goes into the deeper layers of the texture of phenomenon. Although the painter-designer holds a holistic visual image the cameraman holds a fragmented visual picture (Benjamin, 2002: 69). Other samples of visual artworks without Exlibris or any element of action bear a distinguished position that is open to the sight of only very few people. But when, in the nineteenth century, its exhibition value took a further stage, art of painting in particular entered into a session of early crisis driven by the demands of masses. That is because painting and exlibris are the kind of art forms not conducive to be subject matters of simultaneous reception (Benjamin, 2002: 70). With

all its possibilities cinematography, by answering the emergency call of modern man entrapped in the modern components of modern world, moves the viewers into a journey through the larger remains of modern world (Benjamin, 2002: 72).

## Conclusion

The pivotal consequence of the effect of modernization process on Exlibris is its separation from the book which actually is the very essence of its existence. As mentioned above, Walter Benjamin deems this consequence as losing the artwork's unique character. In present research the main focus has been the position of Exlibris in the age of mechanical reproduction. However there is also detailed information on the changes that photography and cinematography experienced in the age of mechanical reproduction as comprehensively illustrated in the section titled as Artwork in the age of Mechanical Reproduction in Walter Benjamin's work *The Arcades Project*. As seen in the mentioned work not only Exlibris but all the samples of artwork received their share from modernization process and profoundly lost their exquisite atmosphere and unicity and as stated in present research they were mired in a problematic status. Undoubtedly to say, today we simply cannot stand in firm opposition to the mechanical reproduction of artworks. All in all it is this process itself that can unite larger numbers of artworks with larger numbers of viewers and masses. Still, as mentioned earlier, our streets are still crowded with pencil portrait drawing artists which can reasonable be construed as the resistance of artwork against mechanical reproduction to preserve its unicity and exquisite atmosphere.

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