

# Notes from the Oesper Collections

## The Art of the Bookplate

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An earlier installment of *Museum Notes* discussed the subject of old photographs that had been accidentally discovered tucked among the pages of several of the antique books found in the Oesper Collections (1). Many of these books were either donated to the collections by private individuals or were purchased from various used-book dealers and, as such, they also frequently contain the bookplates of their previous owners. Many of these bookplates are of intrinsic interest either because of the fame of the previous owner, or because of the manner in which their art work reflects the professional interests of that owner.

A case in point is shown in figure 1, which shows the personal bookplate of Arthur Solomon Loevenhart (1879-1929), and which was found inside his personal copy of the 1908 edition of F. Heinrich's *Neure theoretische Anschauungen auf dem Gebiete der organischen Chemie*. Since this was an advanced state-of-the-art German monograph on theoretical organic chemistry, one might infer that Loevenhardt held at least a graduate degree of some sort in chemistry, but

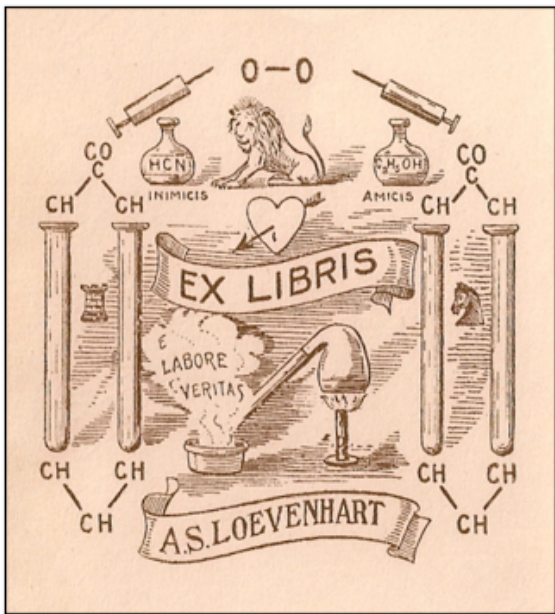


Figure 1. Bookplate of the pharmacologist, A. S. Loevenhart, as found inside his copy of the 1908 edition of F. Heinrich's *Neure theoretische Anschauungen auf dem Gebiete der organischen Chemie*.



Figure 2. Bookplate of the German-American chemist Wolf Kritchevsky as found inside his copy of the 1939 edition of J. Plotnikow's *Allgemeine Photochemie*.

in fact he had instead received a M.D. degree from Johns Hopkins in 1903 (2). Indeed, in 1908, the year in which the book in question was published, Loevenhart was appointed Professor of Pharmacology and Toxicology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the book itself was acquired from a used-book store in Madison back in 1995. Thus it is Loevenhart's area of medical specialization which accounts for the explicit chemical themes in the plate, as well as for its rather juvenile medical-school humor, such as the ostentatious display of Latin; the opposing flasks of cyanide and drinking alcohol; the hypodermic syringes; the references to love and chess; and the purely stylized, but incomplete, chemical formulas.

A second, more mature, example is shown in figure 2, which shows the bookplate of a chemist named Wolf Kritchevsky, of whom nothing is known. It was found inside his personal copy of the 1939 edition of J. Plotnikow's *Allgemeine Photochemie*, and was obviously drawn by a professional artist, as suggested not only by the high quality of the art work but by its choice of a pseudo-alchemical theme and the semi-imaginary rendition of the so-called chemical



Figure 3. Bookplate of the late Cincinnati chemist, John J. Alexander, as found inside his copy of the 1960 edition of R. Sanderson's *Chemical Periodicity*.

apparatus. Indeed, its *Art Nouveau* style strongly suggests that this plate was designed sometime in the late teens or the early 1920s, rather than around the 1939 publication date of the book.

Yet a third example of a chemist's bookplate – this time belonging to the author's colleague, the late John



Figure 4. Bookplate of the historian, George Sarton, as found inside his copy of the 1909 edition of M. M. Pattison Muir's *A History of Chemical Theories and Laws*.

J. Alexander (1940-2002) – is shown in figure 3 and was found inside his personal copy of the 1960 edition of R. Sanderson's *Chemical Periodicity* (3). This again was done by a professional artist and is based on a linoleum cut of a circa 1860 chemical laboratory in which considerable artistic license has been taken in depicting the apparatus. In all probability this was a commercially available bookplate which allowed for the option of having the purchaser's name printed in the blank box at the bottom.

Since books of interest to the Oesper Collections include those written not only by chemists, but also by historians and physicists, example bookplates reflecting these professional commitments are also to be found. Thus, for example, figure 4 shows the bookplate of the Belgian-American historian, George Sarton (1884-1956), of Harvard University, and was found inside his personal copy of the 1909 edition of M. M. Pattison Muir's *A History of Chemical Theories and Laws*. Originally trained as a chemist, Sarton is widely considered to be the founder of the academic discipline of history of science in the United States and was also the founder of two history of science journals – *Isis* and *Osiris* – name choices which, like the theme of his bookplate, reflect his interest in early Egyptian science (4).

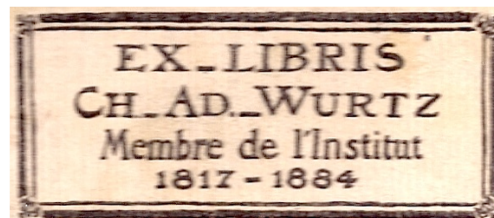


Figure 5. Bookplate for the French chemist, Charles Adolphe Wurtz, as found inside his copy of the 1864 edition of the four-volume set, *Oeuvres de Lavoisier*.

All of the above examples possess artistic as well as historical interest, and thus it comes as something of a disappointment that the bookplates of some of the most famous former book owners in the Oesper Collections are purely functional and devoid of any artistic interest. This is the case with the bookplate for the famous French chemist, Charles Adolphe Wurtz (1817-1884), shown in figure 5, which was found inside our four-volume set of the 1864 edition of the *Oeuvres de Lavoisier* (5). Since the plate lists Wurtz's birth and death date, it obviously cannot be his personal plate, but rather was added to his books by the Institut de France after they were posthumously donated to their library collections.

A similar basic functionality is shown by the book-



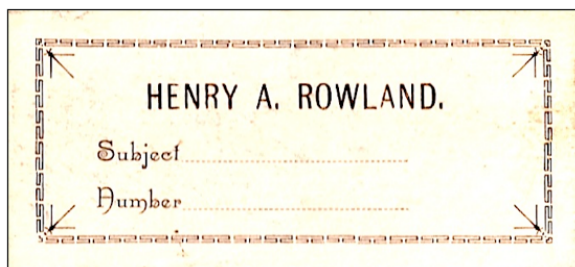


Figure 6. Functional bookplate of the American physicist Henry A. Rowland as found inside his copy of the 1869 edition of Adolphe Wurtz's *A History of Chemical Theory From the Age of Lavoisier to the Present Time*.

plate in figure 6 for the famous 19th-century American physicist, Henry Augustus Rowland (1849-1901), who spent his career at Johns Hopkins, and which was found inside his personal copy of the 1869 edition of Adolphe Wurtz's *A History of Chemical Theory From the Age of Lavoisier to the Present Time*.

In closing, the author should perhaps present a copy of his own bookplate (figure 7), though it reflects neither his professional calling as a chemist nor as an historian, but rather the depressing truth that he has slowly come to understand over the years concerning the innate foolishness, irrelevance, and indeed downright dishonesty of much that passes for academic wisdom. In the center is an image of the "Owl of Athena," the conventional symbol for wisdom, wearing a dunce hat. To the left is an inflated pig's bladder on a stick, normally carried by a court jester or fool, and to the right is a sprig of fool's bane. It has been adapted from a vignette found in a modern edition of the writings of H. L. Mencken's ancestor, the 17th-century scholar, Johann Burkhard Mencken, who came to much the same conclusion concerning his fellow academics more than three centuries ago (6).

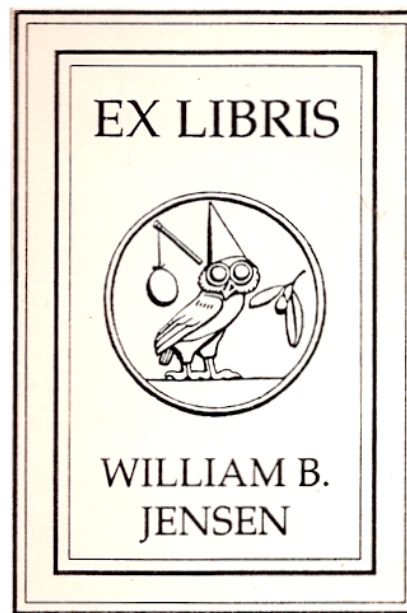


Figure 7. The author's personal bookplate.

## References and Notes

1. W. B. Jensen, "Found Tucked in a Book," *Museum Notes*, **2010**, *1* (October), Oesper Website. Reprinted in reference 3, pp. 152-153.
2. "Loevenhart, Arthur Solomon" in *Dictionary of Wisconsin History*, Wisconsin Historical Society Website.
3. W. B. Jensen, *Cincinnati Chemists: Assorted Papers on the History of the Cincinnati Chemical Community*, Oesper Collections: Cincinnati, OH, 2012, pp. 81-83.
4. D. Stimson, Ed., *Sarton on the History of Science*, Harvard: Cambridge, 1962.
5. A. J. Rocke, *Nationalizing Science: Adolphe Wurtz and the Battle for French Chemistry*, MIT Press: Cambridge, 2001.
6. Reprinted as J. B. Mencken, *The Charlatanry of the Learned*, Knopf: New York, NY, 1937.