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The University of Arizona Museum of Art is pleased to present Livres d’artistes: Selections from the Ritter Collection, an exhibition focusing on the special form of artistic production, and one that may be unfamiliar to many. The livre d’artiste is a specific, yet variable genre, so much so as to nearly defy definition. Scholars, curators and critics continue to debate its fundamental characteristics, agreeing most often (and vehemently) on what the livre d’artiste is not, yet remaining unable to firmly pin it down. From the term, livre d’artiste, complicates matters: a literal translation from the French, as “artists’ book,” is misleading by implication, bringing to mind distinctly different aesthetic and material interests by artists into the very notion of Book-ness, and the frequent substitution of “artists’ illustrated books,” while accurate in a linear sense, shrouds the largely broad and conceptual intent. In other words, the livre d’artiste is a curatorial, an example of artistic work about which the critical fine hairs rise, as one can outrightly say, while “every livre d’artiste is a book’s book […] not every artist’s book is a livre d’artiste.”5 Perhaps such confusion is both inevitable and just: the livre d’artiste not only represents a collision of complex interests – social, political, economic and cultural – but also the establishment of a print tradition of collaborative commissions between visual artists and poets (an inherently mutable and unpredictable process) toward the creation of unique volumes.

A distinctive product of modernist modernity, the livre d’artiste came into being at the end of the 19th century and matured through the 20th. The genre was simultaneously eccentric in form, and nascent – relatively mature as far one could call it – rapidly propagated across the European continent, and developed as an amalgamation of a plethora of skills, trade and production details: in this case, the volume is number 80 of a limited edition of 150; it was published by Marie Foubert and Pierre Baudouin on a handmade paper, Moulin d’Aumur; and the text was set in Gutenberg, a particularly popular type choice for livre d’artistes.6 The package in its entirety brings to mind the hyper-specific nature of each individual elements functioning in concert; unique yet recognizably of the species, it is a mystery, and reveals itself only through a process of careful consideration. While Braque and Apollinaire were closely associated as leading contributors to the great formal revolution of Cubism, the production of Si je mourais là-bas dates to some forty years after the poet’s death. The volume includes a dedication, penned by Braque, that reads, “This book commemorates the eightieth birthday of the artist, the poet’s centennial in the reference to the World War I service (albeit in different capacities and at different times) of both men.” In terms of its content and the circumstances of its production, the book resonates on multiple levels: as remembrance on a particularly tumultuous period, marked both by the catastrophic events of the first and second world wars, so to speak, lost along the way; and as testament to the artist’s enduring commitment through time, for the linear and crisp precision of his images are rendered very much in the present tense.

W.J. Strachan, who was possessed of a life-long passion for the livre d’artiste, reported to David H. Brodsky that he would illustrate Apollinaire’s Poèmes à Louvenir he conceived with enthusiasm… and, in Strachan’s view, Braque “pulled out all the stops” to realize the project. Writing in 1969, Strachan assessed it as “one of the best books of the present decade” and was so moved by the volume as to write: “Looking through it and at the generous use of color to spell Braque’s designs and his subtle evocations of the poetry calls to mind de Stael’s observation apropos illustration: ‘breathe… breathe… never think of the definite apart from the ephemeral…”7 It may be that the livre d’artiste, as a genre, so confounds expectations because it exists in a poetic space where the “definite” and the “ephemeral” meet. Each book with its often upgranged covers, does present a series of encounters; looking becomes an act of meandering, rather than of reading in the more linear sense. This holds true equally for the contemporary examples presented in the exhibition, which expand the livre d’artiste tradition in new and surprising ways. In every case, the experience of looking, first intended for the collector/connoisseur’s eye, shifts again through exhibition, as volumes produced for private pleasure literally open up to public view. While Livres d’artistes: Selections from the Ritter Collection demonstrates the originality and diversity of a lesser-known mode of creative collaborations, it is also a testament to the important and enduring relationship between museums and private collections. Mel and Robert Ritter, for example, are guided by their passionate interest in livre d’artistes to ensure that rare objects remain safe and intact for posterity. It is only through their generosity that the University of Arizona Museum of Art has this opportunity to present such an exceptional selection.

Dr. Lisa Fischman Chief Curator March 2016