

INTRODUCING CLASSICAL LITERATURE TO TEENAGERS: THE *EL ÁRBOL DE LOS CLÁSICOS* PROJECT FROM THE VISUAL POINT OF VIEW

If the spark doesn't come, that's a pity; but we do not read the classics out of duty or respect, but only out of love.

Italo Calvino, Why Read the Classics?

Dear friends,

I am really pleased to be with you, here in Bratislava, once again and take part in this important discussion. I want to thank the organizers of the conference and especially Mrs. Timotea Vrablova, for always standing on the side of reading.

I believe no one doubts the importance of the early introduction of books to young readers and pre-readers. The first and most significant meeting between books and us certainly happens during our first months and years, within the family and it has a powerful impact over our childhood development.



But no matter the colorful photos of young parents and children, entertaining together through books, we all see on our Facebook timelines every day, there is still an undeniable reading crisis growing in our society. Despite their joyful early experience with literature, contemporary teenagers and young people tend to read less and less. This presumption accompanies the work of any professional in the field of education nowadays – a fact that seems scary. Together with the embarrassing statistics, psychologists' researches about the impact of the so-called "touch screen reading" on the human brain structure have been announced. According to them, nullifying of changes that the centuries of active reading have established as part of our DNA was observed in the last decade – one of the most interesting

presentations in our last conference's edition, lead by Mrs. Ludmila Hrdinakova, was dedicated to that topic. So the question for us now is how to stimulate teenagers to continue reading books and not whether it was worth doing it.

Today I would like to focus my presentation on the *El Árbol de los Clásicos* project of Oxford University Press, Madrid. *El Árbol de los Clásicos* (The Tree of the Classics) is a series of classical texts, adapted for the actual high school program in Spain.

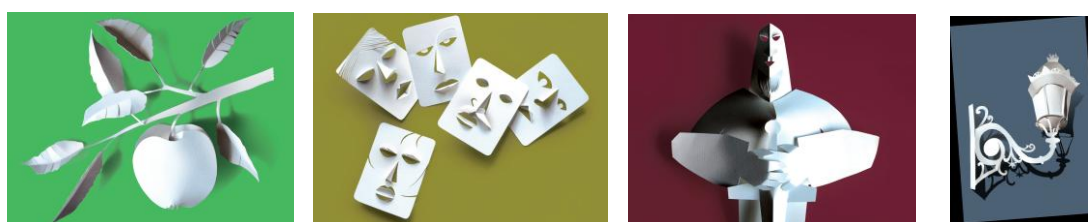


I have been a part of this project for the last three years, as an illustrator of the three-dimensional images for the book covers, so the problems and challenges in presentation of an adapted classical text to teenage audience are filtered through the prism of the visual.

The studying of the literary and cultural heritage of mankind is unthinkable, outside the context of the period within which it happens, and without taking into account the specificities of its addressee's perceptions. Therefore, the illustration and graphic design of the covers of the *El Árbol de los Clásicos* book series is an integral part of the overall conceptual strategy of a team, willing to introduce the masterpieces of Spanish and world classics to contemporary Spanish teenagers. Why do children start reading less approaching the teen age? According to the research of the Oxford editorial team, students between 12 and 16 declare they have very low interest for the books they must read, within their school program. If we try to summarize their explanations why, the answer would also sound like a question: *What does that have to do with my life, my reality, and me?* In other words: *Does it have a parallel with my real life context?*

If the spark doesn't come, that's a pity; but we do not read the classics out of duty or respect, but only out of love. These words belong to Italo Calvino and my Spanish colleagues found in them something to start with. They decided to do their best to link the classics to the reality of modern Spanish young people, knowing that we love what we understand and what we can relate to, compare with and recognize ourselves in.

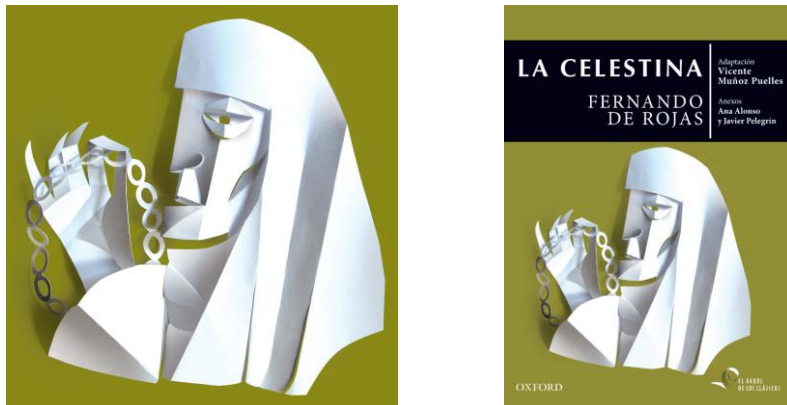
El Árbol de los Clásicos thinks differently about the heritage of the classical authors. It aims achieving accessibility, keeping the value; provokes curiosity and desire for knowledge by introducing the reader to the literature content, but also to its historical and social context, comparing it to their own present. Through analyzes, footnotes and an appendix with visual and textual historical data into the body of the book, but also through digital workshops, activities in social networks and even augmented reality, It represents the eternal classics like never before. This is also the viewpoint of our graphic concept for which a leading part has the designer Emil Markov, who is the art director of the project and the author of the collection's logo.



We believe the visual technique used for creating the images on the book covers best matches our goals. The white tactile objects contrast with the bright backgrounds, provoke and attract the reader, offering something curious and to some extent untraditional – alternative sensitivity in the contemporary digital world. Besides like that, the collection easily stands out among other classics collections for its recognizable and emotionally appealing book covers vision. The images don't count on illustrative specificity – they are meant to offer a kind of a visual summary of the author's message (often through an image that has already become a visual symbol of the literature work) and to help the reader associate with the period when the text was written.

The visual summarizing of each publication went differently through the first stage of our work in 2015 when the leading 10 titles were prepared. Some of my suggestions, such as the ones for Shakespeare's "Hamlet", King Arthur's tales or the works of Homer and Virgil were instantly recognized by the members of the editorial team as corresponding. For others I had to create more than one paper sculptures and prepare a series of variations.

The emotional attachment of the members of the editorial team to the Spanish classics provokes their desire to pay special attention to the layers and aspects of some of the titles. That was the reason why the visualization of literary works like "The Trickster of Seville" by Tirso de Molina and "La Celestina" by Fernando de Rojas challenged us more. A kind of record was achieved while we worked on "Lazarillo from Tormes" – this publication's book cover received the largest number of variations, before we finally reached agreement around one of my first suggestions.



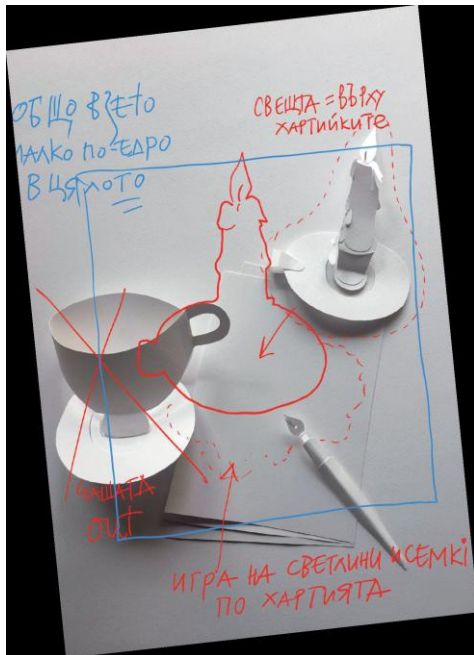
Today our working archive keeps a small gallery of unrealized book covers from which we all learned something.

During the second stage of the development of the project that took part in 2017 5 new books were prepared for publication.



In them we wished to keep the vision of the series, adding new images and meaning to it. Of course, it also added some new images to the mentioned above visual archive.

Within my own working process the chosen real life object is being adapted, just like the textual content. I observe it, get acquainted to it through drawing, and then interpret it in paper. Photo sessions of the paper sculpture in different visual angles and with different lightening follow, and then I fix the final composition.



The visual support of the background is extremely important for the final view of the book cover. But in *El Árbol de los Clásicos* the background color has also a semantic value. Therefore it is also a subject that is being discussed by all the team members.

Thanks to Emil Markov's efforts in 2016 the portrait of Miguel de Cervantes I created for the book cover of "Exemplary Novels" appeared on a street wall in Alcala de Henares, Madrid, where the great writer was born. The existence of this mural is a realization of a leading purpose of our project – to turn the classics into a natural part of the everyday life of contemporary young people. It strengthens our hope that the collection *El Árbol de los Clásicos* will find its place into modern teenagers reality, leading also a life of its own.