

# What is a print a guide for collectors

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## What is a Print?

A print is a work of art made in multiple repetitions; it is created through a transfer process. There are many processes but the most common are:

- Etching
- Lithography
- Screen print
- Woodcut

**Etching:** Using an etching needle, an artist scratches an image onto a metal plate covered with wax. This plate is then submerged in acid, which eats into the metal exposed by the scratched lines. The longer the plate is left in the acid, the deeper and darker the line will be. The plate is cleaned, inked, and cleaned again, leaving only the incised lines filled with ink. Dampened paper and a protective cloth are placed over the plate, which is squeezed through an etching press — the pressure forcing the paper into the etched lines to pick up the ink. The image is printed in reverse, and an indentation, known as the 'plate mark', is left by the plate's edges. Etching has often been used to achieve extremely delicate black and white images, from the Old Master period through to modern times. Rembrandt famously used this technique to achieve atmospheric effects as did Lucian Freud the practice of this traditional technique continues.

**Lithography:** The artist draws onto stone using a grease-based medium — normally special lithographic crayons, or greasy ink known as tusche. The stone is then treated with a chemical solution that ensures the image will attract printing ink, and that blank areas repel ink and attract water. A solvent 'fixes' the image, and the surface is dampened with water. Oil-based ink is then applied to the stone with a roller, adhering only to the image. Finally, the stone is placed on a lithographic press and covered with damp paper and board — a pressure bar ensuring force is evenly applied across the image. The image is printed in reverse, with separate stones used for complex images of multiple colours.

The Lithograph print opened up printmaking to artists otherwise reluctant to learn the technical skills needed to create woodcuts or etchings, since many of the same tools, such as brushes and pencils, can be used. Lithography was first made famous by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in the 19th century, but has been embraced by many of the major artists of the Post-War period, including Picasso, Miró and Hockney.

**Screenprint:** An image is cut into a sheet of paper or plastic film, creating a stencil. This stencil is then placed in a frame, which has a layer of fine mesh stretched across it, forming a 'screen'. A sheet of paper is placed below the screen, and ink is pushed through the stencil from above, using a rubber blade or squeegee. Only cutout portions of the stencil print. In addition to stencils, a photographic image can be reproduced on the screen using light-sensitive gelatins. This was a hugely important innovation for Andy Warhol and other members of the Pop generation, who would appropriate commercial photographs and popular images in tandem with the technique.

**Woodcut:** An image is sketched on a block of wood before the surface is carved into with gouging tools. The resulting raised portions of the block are then coated in ink using a roller. A sheet of paper is placed on top and pressure is applied, leaving an impression of the block's raised areas in reverse. Woodcut is the oldest printmaking process. It was of particular interest to the German Expressionists including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and it continues to be relevant today.

# Is a Print more than just a copy of an original?

Yes a print is more than just a copy of an original, although printmaking involves reproducing an image. Fine art prints are something else entirely. A fine art print is the result of an image with a close collaboration between the artist and the printer. Printers are highly skilled technicians, and are often artists in their own right.

Prints are not made in large production runs intended solely for commercial sale. A limited number (known as an edition) are produced, with prescribed routes for initial sale — either through the artist, a commercial gallery or a publisher. As a result they are true works of art, and as important to the artist as drawings or other works on paper.

## Why do a Print?

Artists make prints for a variety of reasons. A Print offers a wider audience or customer base that can afford to purchase otherwise unaffordable original works of art. Artists might be drawn to the collaborative nature of the print studio, or the potential for innovation the medium offers, or for a print's potential to document each stage of a creative process. Prints can offer a completely different creative outlet to the artist's primary working method.

Some artists consistently make prints for their entire career. Albrecht Dürer, Pablo Picasso, Andy Warhol are famously prolific examples — while others come to printmaking in bursts of activity. Typically these periods can be aligned to working with a particular print workshop.

## Why do a Limited Edition or an Original?

An 'original' print is technically a unique work given it is generally produced as a limited number of impressions (collectively known as an edition), and each print is given an edition number, typically written as a fraction — for example, 24/50. The number to the right of the slash indicates the edition size (in this example, 50), while the figure to the left is the individual print's number.

An artist may also produce a limited number of artist's proofs, often marked A/P, that are identical in nature to the standard edition. Here again, fractions may be used to indicate the total number of proofs, and the print number (e.g. A/P 1/4). Other proofs may be made at an earlier stage, as the artist and printer develop an image or test different compositions. These are known as state proofs, trial proofs or colour proofs. These can be unique, with differences in colour combinations, paper types or size. Andy Warhol started to sell his trial proofs as unique colour-combinations separate from the edition, and they're now some of the most coveted works in his print market. When the image is perfected, a proof is made and signed B.A.T. (an abbreviation of the French *bon à tirer*, or 'ready to print'). The rest of the edition is matched to this image, which is unique and traditionally kept by the printer.

Christie's defines an 'original print' as a limited-edition print by an artist that conforms to other prints in their catalogue raisonné, or matches other confirmed examples of the print by the artist. Christie's or other auction house entries will always explain how they have reached the conclusion that a print is an authentic original. They give the artist's name, the title of the work, what type of print it is (e.g. a lithograph, etching or screenprint), and the year it was made. Finally, they indicate how the work is numbered, and whether it is from the standard edition or a proof. They also list where applicable in the literature field the appropriate catalogue raisonné numbers for the piece.

## How important is the paper used in Printing?

A sign of a true print specialist is not only their interest in technique but also their obsession with paper. What type of paper it is printed on, or if a watermark if it's present will validate and prove provenance.

The choice of paper is an important part of the printmaking process because it can directly influence the nature of what the printed image looks like. Some artists use higher quality, heavier paper, while others like Warhol loved cheaper, thinner paper for his Soup Can prints from the 1960s to emphasise that they were meant to be enjoyed by the masses.

A condition report also notes whether an item is the full sheet or with full margins, which means that the paper has not been trimmed in some fashion, itself an issue that affects the value of the print. Hence never cut or glue prints as this will detrimentally affect their value.

## How important are the printers?

There are studios that have been historically important both for the technical development of printmaking and for the work that was produced there — Tyler Graphics is a famous example. As a result, many collectors follow a particular studio and collect many of the publications that have been produced there. These workshops can be huge production studios with large-scale equipment or small-scale operations with only a few employees. Some really famous names to pay attention to for Post-War and Contemporary prints are ULAE in West Islip, Long Island; Tyler Graphics in Mount Kisco; Gemini G.E.L. in L.A., and Paragon Press in London.

Some printers and publishers use a blind-stamp which is an embossed, inked or stamped mark in the paper to mark that an edition was printed at their studio.

## Are all prints signed?

Not necessarily. So what does it mean if I find a print without an artist's signature?

The majority of the prints are signed — though not all prints are issued with a signature. For example Warhol and Picasso both stamp-signed some of their prints, and some larger portfolio editions were only signed on the title page. Don't be alarmed if a print is only initialed. It doesn't mean that it is worth less; some artists only initial their prints.

## Collectable prints?

Up and coming artists are always worth a punt, they are usually affordable and in time inevitably go up in value, established artists are always worth collecting providing they are bought at the right price. Some have become more collectable in recent years including signed Lowry's.

The greatest printmakers in art history would include some of the most significant artists of the past 500 years from Albrecht Dürer to Rembrandt, Picasso, and Warhol. These artists were not only interested in using printmaking to create iconic images, but advanced the medium through innovation. Picasso invented totally new ways of printing; Warhol pushed the printers he worked with throughout his career.

As a result, the history of printmaking is also a timeline of technological change and reinvention from the emergence of basic engraving techniques in the 15th century to digital printing today.

# How to care for my collectable prints:

How you frame your print is the most important long-term decision you make when it comes to caring for and keeping the piece. Only use a reputable framer that is either a member of the Institute of Conservation (ICON) or the Fine Art Guild, and that they follow the ethical guidelines on conservation framing. It's worth paying for a print to be properly mounted using the right materials, and many are not as expensive as you might think.

Some key tips:

- If a print has bright colours, don't hang it in direct sunlight.
- Ensure a print is kept away from any source of moisture and maintain a Relative Humidity of 55c if possible
- Never trim the sheet to try to fit it in a smaller frame.
- Never glue a print down or fix to another board using any form of glue.
- Insitju Framing and Conservation Ltd are expert framers and are happy to discuss with you and offer advice— we're very used to being asked these questions.

We love sharing our knowledge and passion with others