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Principles of Prints

Is your print worth pennies or is it priceless?

By N.J. Richardson

The print is one of the most democratic art forms: millions exist, offering opportunities for virtually every taste, enthusiasm and budget. Collecting them can satisfy the scholar or the decorator, the intellect or the emotions. You can get your kicks from the sensuous burr of a Rembrandt drypoint or the cool control of an Ellsworth Kelly silkscreen. Buy prints to decorate your house; buy them to stash away in boxes under your bed; pursue, if you will, every minute variation of every print in an artist's oeuvre or every print you can find with a poodle or pony in it. Print collecting is what you choose to make it. Nevertheless, some aspects of how to collect prints that are common to all styles, tastes and genres.

First, acquire thorough knowledge and a discriminating eye as quickly as possible. Learn the terminology; good basic glossaries, including descriptions of the various printmaking techniques, are available on the Web sites of the International Fine Print Dealers Association (www.ifpda.org) and the American Historical Print Collectors Society (www.ahpcs.org). If you are going to concentrate on one or a few artists, buy or get access to the catalogues raisonnés of their prints; if you plan to focus on a particular period or subject and anyone has done so before you, books will almost certainly be available about that, too.

Reading up on the subject is good, but even better is inspecting as many prints as possible—at galleries, auction previews, print fairs, local museums—and listening to the experts you meet. Poring over prints is itself a pleasure: Done with the brain engaged, it will painlessly instill the knowledge you need to enjoy your collection to the fullest.

Avoid ignorant sellers until you are no longer ignorant yourself, and make major purchases from reputable specialists and auctioneers who will stand behind their catalog descriptions. You might think that specialists would have higher prices, but this is by no means certain, and one costly error would, in any case, obliterate any advantage of going elsewhere. While there certainly are plenty of fakes—Chagall, Miró and Dalí prints demand special care—more mistakes stem from ignorance than from outright dishonesty, and you will avoid them by working with honest and knowledgeable dealers and auction houses committed to accurate cataloguing.

As for online auctions, while offering fine opportunities to collectors of lower-priced prints of specific subjects, for higher-priced prints they are best avoided unless you know the seller as reputable or are somehow able physically to inspect the print before bidding.

The price of a work of art, like it or not, is central to any discussion about collecting it. Overpaying can reduce the most saintly collector's joy in ownership, while the pleasure of a bargain is undeniable. What then determines a print's desirability and thus its price? Here are some of the most important factors, and to start off, one entirely unimportant one:

Age. You may harbor the notion that the older a work of art, the more valuable it is. This is false. As an auction cataloguer, I often ducked the brickbats hurled by outraged owners of 16th-century engravings when informed the prints were worthless. Most old prints are journeyman reproductions of paintings, produced in enormous quantities and worth no more than the photographic reproductions that have replaced them. If a print has no other reason to be valuable, age will not make it so.

Who made it? Identical prints created on the same day by Picasso and an unknown artist will not have the same value—an indictment of mankind's values, no doubt, but an opportunity, too.

Fashion Some prints are hot, and some are not, although acknowledged greats tend to remain fairly stable over long periods. Awareness of trends can provide opportunities to buy well and will reduce the likelihood of serious disappointment.

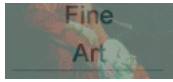
Chauvinism Markets prize local artists. American 1920–40's regionalist lithographs, for example, are widely collected in the United States, but spurned elsewhere.

Beauty The demographic profile of those who think a print is beautiful can make a big difference: When buying, you want them to be poor; when selling, you want them to be rich.



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Quality of the impression This means the extent to which the print exhibits the full potential of the plate, block or stone from which it was made.

Condition The condition's effect on value will depend on the availability of impressions in better shape, which tends to be a function of the print's age. Different condition problems have different financial effects, depending mostly on how reversible they are. Tears, holes, hard creases and faded or changed colors are particularly troublesome. Once you own a print, it is up to you to look after it. If it is damaged, you may wish to consult a conservator, either to reverse the damage or to stabilize it. Keep your prints in a clean, dry acid-free environment, and if you frame and hang them, do so in places where they do not receive direct sunlight.

Rarity Prints in editions of 25 will be worth more than equivalent ones in editions of 1,000. The greater the scholarly interest in an image, the more likely that working proofs and other unique impressions of it will be highly prized. A working proof of an important early Chagall etching will therefore be far more valuable than one for a late potboiler.

Signatures Impressions signed by the artist are nearly always more valuable, provided they were meant to be signed. No prints were ever signed by hand until toward the end of the 19th century. Arguments about signatures can get nasty: A virulent one erupted some years ago between an American dealer and a European auctioneer over the authenticity of the signature on an impression of Picasso's greatest print, "Minotauremachie," which the dealer had bought for more than \$1 million (false Picasso signatures being notoriously prevalent).

Previous price record Gordon's Print Prices Database lists records for all major and many minor print auctions around the world. Consistent records of successful sales indicate an artist's or individual print's prices and salability. They need careful interpretation, however: At a New York auction in the late 1980s a mediocre Chagall print was reputedly pushed to 10 times its previous record by bidders who thought they were bidding on a more valuable lot; this accidental price then became the established "value" of the print, with later buyers of other impressions, presumably oblivious to its lack of quality, following like sheep.

Condition, signatures, past values, rarity, beauty—all of these and more contribute to the market value of a print. But only you, the individual collector, can decide what weight to attach to them. Make your own decisions, buy the things that you think are beautiful, and, while maintaining a healthy awareness of fair prices, always remember that the print itself, and the collection as a whole, are the most important things. Do not constantly fret over every penny of the price, because if you do, you will find that while you went out to get the best, you invariably settled for less.

For More Information

Books have been written on every minute area of printmaking, and you will soon enough find your way to whatever is closely relevant to your chosen collecting field. The short list below includes some excellent general surveys to get you started (and for continued reference throughout your print-collecting life) and guidance on how to care for your prints once you have bought them.

How to Identify Prints: A Complete Guide to Manual and Mechanical Processes From Woodcut to Ink-Jet by Bamber Gascoigne (Thames and Hudson, New York, 2004).

Prints and Printmaking: An Introduction to the History and Techniques by Antony Griffiths, (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1996).

How to Care for Works of Art on Paper by Francis W. Dolloff and Roy L. Perkinson (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1985).

The Care of Prints and Drawings by Margaret Holben Ellis (AASLH Press, with the assistance of the J. Paul Getty Trust, Nashville, 1987).

Secrets of Buying Art: Original Prints and Reproductions by Mary A. Wenniger and Mace Wenniger (Betterway Publications, Cincinnati, 1990).

A Guide to the Collecting and Care of Original Prints by Carl Zigrosser and Christa M. Gaehde (Crown for the Print Council of America, New York, 1966).

More extensive bibliographies, links to other useful sites and basic glossaries of print terminology can be found at these two Web sites:

[International Fine Print Dealers Association](#)
[American Historical Print Collectors Society](#)

The most complete index of catalogues raisonnés of individual artists' works is available from: [The Print Council of America](#)

Dealers

Original Prints

While the IFPDA does not have a lock on honest and knowledgeable dealers, it doesn't accept members who aren't both of those things. If you are interested in collecting original prints, its Web site contains links to all of its members' Web sites, plus their contact information. Depending on your own area of specialization, any one of them would be an excellent place to start. For collectors of historical, topographical and botanical prints, Currier & Ives, etc., dealers are listed on the American Historical Print Collectors Society site, but this does not constitute a recommendation.



Here is a short list of print dealers:

[Barbara Krakow Gallery](#), Boston. (617) 262-4490.

[David Tunick Inc.](#), New York. (212) 570-0090.

[Donald A. Heald](#), New York. (212) 744-3505.

[Hirschl & Adler Galleries](#), New York. (212) 535-8810.

[O'Hara Gallery](#), New York. (212) 355-3330.

[Pace Prints](#), New York. (212) 421-3237. www.paceprints.com.

[The Old Print Shop](#), New York. (212) 683-3950.

[The Philadelphia Print Shop](#), Philadelphia. (215) 242-4750.

Auctions

[Christie's](#) and [Sotheby's](#) hold regular sales of prints in both New York and London. American historical prints are normally sold in their American Furniture sales. Other auctioneers of prints with reliable cataloguing in the United States are:

[Bonhams & Butterfields](#), San Francisco. (415) 861-7500. . Benefiting from its distance from New York, Butterfields generally puts together, twice a year, the most valuable print sales of any U.S. auction house aside from the big two. Cataloguing is on par with theirs, too.

[Doyle New York](#), New York. (212) 427-2730. This general auctioneer maintains a full-time print department and holds two well-catalogued sales of original prints a year, mainly of moderately priced material (\$200–\$2,000), but always with a handful of high-fliers. American historical prints are sold in American Furniture and Decorations sales.

[Swann Auction Galleries](#), New York. (212) 254-4710. An auctioneer of books and works on paper, Swann has grown its print department dramatically over the past few years. Among other achievements, the director of its print department, Todd Weyman, ably juggling scholarship with entrepreneurship, has carved out an impressive market niche as a second-tier (in the best possible sense) auctioneer of old master prints.

Print Fairs

Print fairs are an excellent way to see a large number of prints at once. They also can be visually chaotic, so beware of overload.

The **IFPDA Print Fair**, New York. Held every year in November, this fair, open only to IFPDA members, is the largest of its kind in the country. You will see everything from the most exquisite old masters to prints made earlier in the same year. Well worth a special visit. Wear comfortable shoes. Also sponsored by the IFPDA and open only to their members are:

[The Los Angeles Print Fair](#).

[Prints San Francisco](#), (415) 472-7021.

[The Seattle Print Fair](#).

[The Chicago Fine Print Fair](#), (312) 664-9312.

Smaller and more digestible, these fairs take place between the beginning of the year and the end of April.

Other fairs of interest are:

[The New England Print Fair](#), Boston. Oct. 28–30.

[The Washington International Print Fair](#), Arlington, Va.

[Works on Paper](#), New York, a major fair held in the spring. (212) 673-1800. March 1–5.

New York-based writer N.J. Richardson is a former private art dealer specializing in original prints and drawings, who also worked in Doyle New York's print department.

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