

## Buying Prints

Should you decide to buy an original work of art, your purchase will depend on your pocket as well as your taste. If oils or watercolours are beyond your means, you can always go for the more affordable originals known as 'prints'. But beware: you are entering a minefield. This is because the word 'print' is a blanket term covering pictures produced in a variety of media, and there is no doubt that some unscrupulous dealers, aided by slick copywriters, are trading on purchasers' ignorance by off-loading reproductions at inflated prices. The good news is that learning to spot the genuine article becomes easier once you understand a few basic principles and follow some simple guidelines.

First, learn the difference between a print and an *original* print. What is an 'original print'? The easiest way to understand this is to think of the humble potato print you made at nursery school. You took your half-potato, carved out your image, covered the raised part in paint and printed it onto paper. An artist making an original print works on exactly the same principle, even though the actual execution is infinitely more skilled and sophisticated. He will create his image on stone, copper, wood, leather, lino etc. Only when that image, the 'master,' is transferred to high quality paper or sometimes to fabric like silk or linen, is the artistic process complete.

Sometimes the task of printing the image is entrusted to highly skilled printmakers, but the artist will often supervise the process. Numerous prints may be made from the same master, just as you made repeats of your potato cut, but each one will be individually created, subtly different, and therefore, unique. Sometimes, to preserve exclusivity, only a few prints are made; or printing might continue until the master becomes worn and the quality of print threatens to deteriorate. At this point, the 'print run' stops and only those prints that reach the required standard will be marketed. After close inspection, the artist signs each print and adds a series of numbers such as 14/30 or 12/50. The second number indicates the total number of prints in the run; the first tells us this particular print's position in the print run. Thus 3/25 means third in a print run of 25. A low-numbered print in a short print run is highly desirable. Even more prized is any print marked AP. This stands for Artist's Proof or Artist's Pull. Before the commercial numbering starts, the artist usually does half a dozen or so to establish quality. These are the freshest images and are highly sought after. They are usually numbered in Roman numerals.

Once the print run is complete, the 'master' has served its purpose and is defaced or destroyed, just as you threw away your squishy potato and took your precious prints home. With the master destroyed, no more, possibly inferior, prints can be made. Thus, the print run can truly be called a 'a limited edition original print, signed by the artist'. Sometimes, particularly if the artist is famous, the masters will not be destroyed and further editions may be printed. These are known as 're-strikes'. A

reputable dealer will always make this clear, and the price should be much lower than that asked for a print from the first print run.

Now, what about the lesser-quality prints that are marketed? These are simply reproductions of an *already completed* work of art, an oil painting or a watercolour, say, which is not, of course, destroyed after the print run is finished. These prints are made by a separate, offset litho or some other reprographic process and are not the final stage in an artistic process. Confusingly, these reproductions are also called prints. You can buy them framed and unframed, for a few pounds in art shops, public galleries etc. where they are sold as honest reproductions.

Some museums, like the NMM, offer 'prints' from their collections. These too are honest reproductions, and are not too expensive. However, if you want a print of a picture that they do not hold as part of their standard merchandise, they will sometimes arrange for a professional photograph to be taken of the image. This is expensive, often more than £100, but will not have much resale value, but professional skills and individual service have to be paid for. It is only worth doing if the picture has a meaning for you beyond the commercial – if it's of an ancestor, say.

The danger arises when unscrupulous dealers get the artist to sign reproductions, which are cheap to produce, sometimes with a numbered 'print-run', put them in a fancy frame and charge an exorbitant price. The number in this print run, of course, is an arbitrary choice - shall we limit it to a hundred? a thousand? - rather than a considered decision made by the artist in order to maintain quality as well as exclusivity. All these prints are identical with none of the subtle variations of colour, tone and shading in original prints that make each one unique. However 'limited' the edition, however great its decorative value to you, it is nothing more than a copy and its monetary value is almost nil. Most prints of this type cost about £70 per hundred to produce. Ignore the flowery language that usually accompanies these promotions. The current buzzword when selling prints is 'giclée'. This is from the French verb 'to squirt' or 'to spray'. It is quite simply just a form of inkjet printing. True, the colour reproduction is usually very accurate, but giclée prints cost £3 maximum to produce. Remember that when you see them marketed at a much higher price. Promotions I have seen recently in supposedly 'upmarket' national newspapers are even more scandalous. In some cases, the artist is dead and cannot supply a signature, so purchasers are provided with a 'certificate of endorsement' from the artist's estate, meaning, presumably, that they approve the copies, which cost almost £300 each!

So, when you go to buy your print, run through this simple checklist:

- Make sure it is described as a "limited edition *original* print signed by the artist".
- Avoid anything described simply as a 'limited edition print signed by the artist.' It is probably a reproduction.
- Ask the dealer what kind of print it is - etching, lithograph, woodcut, silkscreen etc. If it's a 'giclée', or offset-litho, it's a reproduction.

- A reproduction may well be described as being 'a limited edition print from an original oil painting/watercolour by....'. In this case you will probably see two signatures, one on the original work and the new one on the border of the paper onto which it is reproduced.
- Look at the print through a magnifying glass. Reproductions are made up of minute, closely-packed dots and this will show up under a magnifying glass.

Owning an original brings its own particular pleasure; nevertheless, a reproduction has its place. It can be a pleasant reminder of a great painting you know and love. But be aware of what you are buying and never pay more than a few pounds for it, preferably unframed and get it framed yourself. There are one or two exceptions to this rule. I have seen offset-litho prints of World War Two Spitfire aircraft, signed not only by the artist but also by a number of the Battle of Britain fighter pilots who flew them, change hands for hundreds of pounds. The attraction here, of course, is those signatures rather than the print itself. In general, though, beware of any highly-priced giclée or offset litho print.