

HOW TO BUY DRAWINGS AND PRINTS

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DRAWINGS AND PRINTS

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People buy prints and drawings for the same reasons they buy any works of art: for love, for investment, for decoration, for showing off, for the pleasure of collecting something interesting. Original prints, and to a lesser extent drawings, allow one to collect works of many of the greatest artists of history, something no longer possible with paintings or sculpture. You cannot collect Rembrandt paintings today. You can collect Rembrandt drawings only if you are a multimillionaire. But you *can* collect Rembrandt etchings. They may not be dirt cheap and some may be quite expensive, but they are available. An amount in four figures will buy a good Rembrandt etching; five figures will buy a very fine one. Posthumous impressions are (and should be) a good deal cheaper. Similarly, you can also buy original Dürers, Altdorfers, Ostades, Castigliones, Bouchers, Goyas, Ruysdaels, Fragonards, Manets, Whistlers, Gericaults, Picassos and Pissarros among a host of others, something that would range from horrendously expensive to plainly impossible in paintings.

Original prints and drawings can be bought from a number of different sources: dealers and galleries, auction houses, antique dealers, decorators, estates, flea markets and so on. Assuming one has a developing interest, however, the problem is not only where to buy, but what and how. Following is a group of questions that some people have asked us but many more have asked themselves. They are, in any event, questions one *should* ask.

WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT PRINTS OR DRAWINGS?

Much as it may surprise some people, everyone is a beginner sometime. Most dealers are aware of this and are prepared to give of their time and knowledge to anyone who displays more than just an idle curiosity. *If you don't know, ask.* Ask us if you like, but ask somebody. No dealer will consider you stupid for asking. On the contrary, the dealer will probably admire your perspicacity in choosing him or her to answer your questions. Print fairs, for example, are more than just a lot of prints and drawings for sale; they are assemblages of knowledge and experience virtually on tap, and if you've paid your way in, you are foolish not to take advantage of what is available. Just be considerate; don't monopolize a busy dealer's time.

HOW DO I KNOW IT'S AUTHENTIC?

If you have the expertise, you know; if you do not have the expertise, you will want to consult and buy from someone who does. Reputable dealers will guarantee the authenticity of anything they sell. That is, they will refund your money and apologize if it can be shown that what they sold you is not what they said they sold you. Major auction houses will also guarantee authenticity within the limitations listed in detail in the disclaimers in their catalogues. In general, all guarantees are based on present scholarly opinion. Should that opinion change sometime in the future, the dealer or the auction house cannot be held responsible. Lesser auction houses will usually only guarantee the medium. If you buy a "Rembrandt etching" from one and it turns out not to be an etching, you get your money back; if it turns out to be an etching but not by Rembrandt, you don't. In buying from any other source, any guarantee of authenticity is something to be worked out between buyer and seller and, preferably, put in writing. You should always be clear on what degree of authenticity is being guaranteed. The authenticity of a print is usually a clear-cut matter, although a posthumous reprint does not have the value of an early impression. But a drawing by Tintoretto is not the same thing as a drawing "attributed to Tintoretto" or a drawing of the "circle of Tintoretto." The distinction is a matter of judgement, and since judgements, even on the same drawing, vary, you should be aware of which judgement you are buying.

HOW DO I KNOW THE PRICE IS RIGHT?

Apart from contemporary published editions, there is no "list price" for prints and certainly none for drawings. The right price, therefore, is simply one that is agreeable to both buyer and seller. A dealer usually sets a price based on what he thinks is fair market value. Different dealers may have different thoughts on the matter, although the variation is frequently less than you might think. Other factors, though, may come into play: the dealer's actual cost, whether he likes the print or not, whether he has two or more of them, whether he knows he has another customer for it, etc. Auction house estimates are based on prior sales, but may be pegged high or low as a psychological selling tool. Obviously, one wants to buy a print or drawing for the lowest possible price. Experienced collectors will tell you, however, that their only real regrets are the things they didn't buy because they thought the price was a bit too high.

CAN I TRY TO NEGOTIATE A BETTER PRICE?

You can try. Some dealers are open to it, some aren't. Some are amenable on some items but not on others. If you feel that negotiation is necessary (meaning that you want the item in question but would not buy it at the asking price), be quietly discrete about it. "Is there any way you would consider a lower price for it?" is better than "How much to me?" But be prepared to be ignored or shown the door if the dealer has an antipathy to such things. In an auction house, of course, you don't negotiate anything. You pay more than anyone else bidding is willing to pay or you go without.

IS IT A GOOD INVESTMENT?

People who try to sell you art as an investment are not in the art business but in the investment business. As such, their knowledge of the artistic quality of what they sell is liable to be limited and that in itself will probably make whatever it is a poor investment. Most dealers in prints and drawings, however, are at least aware (how could they not be?) of the investment factor of a work of art. No respectable dealer will offer a "hot tip" because if he or she really believed it, the item would be safely tucked away until the value went up (unlike common stocks, the supply of art is limited). But dealers will often give you their informed opinion as to whether the item in question is the sort of thing that tends to appreciate or not. There are very few fixed rules, but one might be that the best tends to do best.

AM I GETTING A BARGAIN?

Bargains occur when the buyer and seller have drastically different ideas of the value of an item. The identical scenario also produces disastrous purchases. Beware of people you have never met before offering you bargains. Why you? Beware of any situation in which your idea of the value of an object is far greater than the seller's. You *may* know something he does not. On the other hand, he's lived with it and is liable to know something *you* don't. Bargains sometimes come as the result of blind luck but much more often as the result of knowledge. The best bargain getters are connoisseurs who can recognize quality without regard to names, fashion or price histories. For anyone less well equipped, the best bargain, more often than not, is the right print or drawing at the going price.

SHOULDN'T I BUY ONLY FAMOUS PRINTS?

In theory you'll have a better investment potential if you do, but you're going to miss a lot of fun (of discovery, for example) and you probably also will miss the *best* investments — which come from the revaluation upward of a print or artist not much noticed before. The difficulty is that one generation's famous prints are not necessarily another generation's famous prints. Rembrandts and Dürers go on and on (though the comparative valuation of particular prints may change), but the mezzotint portraits that brought fabulous prices in 1900 are largely ignored today, and some prints and drawings selling today at high prices — though obviously by minor figures — are well calculated to be forgotten as the fad wears off. The test is to be able to distinguish importance from fashion, not always as easy to do as it sounds. Besides, if it's *your* collection, shouldn't it contain prints that mean something to *you* rather than to someone else?

SUPPOSE I'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF THE ARTIST?

Unless you are a walking encyclopedia there will always be artists you have never heard of who nevertheless may have produced good or even great prints or drawings. Consider that ubiquitous artist Anonymous. Virtually every museum in the world has at least one masterpiece by him (or her). The single most important thing about a print or drawing is whether or not it says something meaningful to you. It is ultimately more satisfying to buy a picture because it appeals to you than to purchase a Picasso or a Manet without knowing whether you like it or not. If you continue to buy, your tastes will develop and you will be able to take or leave Manet or Picasso for sensible reasons and to make the necessary distinctions among their works. The *worst* thing you can do is to buy bad pictures by name artists.

WHAT ABOUT STOLEN GOODS?

No one in his right mind wants to buy stolen goods, not least because in American law title never changes hands; the object still legally belongs to the person or institution from whom it was stolen (in Europe, if the item is sold at a public sale or otherwise offered publicly, title *may* go to the purchaser). Nevertheless, stolen items do find their way onto the market, sometimes through the hands of respectable dealers who have no way of knowing the item was stolen. Should you be unlucky enough to buy such a thing it must be returned to its rightful owner through the dealer, who will refund your money and will frequently take on the financial loss. Reputable auction houses will act similarly. If you are the type who buys art on dark corners from anonymous sellers, you already know what to expect.

HOW MANY OF THEM WERE MADE?

This is a vital question to ask about twentieth-century prints, a reasonable one to ask about nineteenth-century prints, and a generally unanswerable and meaningless one to ask about anything earlier. With rare exceptions, artists only began to keep track of the number of impressions printed in the nineteenth century. Before that, the edition was limited naturally by the deterioration of the matrix from which it was printed, so the first and last impressions off the plate look very different indeed. A more useful question about earlier prints might be, "How many of them are still around?", but you shouldn't be terribly surprised if you can't always get an answer to that question either. The really important question to ask about earlier prints (and many nineteenth-century ones too) is "How good is the quality?"

HOW GOOD IS THE QUALITY?

Quality, first, refers to the image itself. Is it one of the artist's better works or one of his poorer ones? Is it really well done (or is it really weak), no matter who did it? In prints, quality also refers to the fineness of the impression and the physical condition of the paper, really a way of estimating how close the particular impression comes to the way the artist wanted it to look, or at least the best the artist was able to make it look. In older prints, the earlier the impression, the better the condition of the plate, hence, all other things being equal, the better the impression quality. Condition is virtually self-explanatory; an undamaged print is better than a damaged one; a small damage is acceptable (particularly on old prints) whereas a large damage generally is not.

WHAT SHOULD I COLLECT?

Collect what interests you and pleases you and is within your means. Only you know what you like and any dealer can advise you as to what it's likely to cost. If you find yourself fascinated by a particular kind of print or drawing, specialize. If not, then don't. Nothing is served by building an extensive collection of something that bores you. A generalized collection may make less sense to an outsider than a specialized one, but it will make sense to you and it will give you pleasure for years to come.

If you have found these remarks sensible, you may want to visit us in person (or in the near future, on the web) and view some of our very extensive collection of prints and drawings. Please make an appointment because our physical quarters are small and we can usually help only one or two clients at a time. There is no obligation to buy. Should you have questions about a print or drawing you already own, bring it with you and we shall do our best to supply the information you want. We are open by appointment five days a week from 10 to 6, Saturdays by special arrangement.