

PRINTS v. REPRODUCTIONS

What's the difference?

Does it matter?

Michael Stuart Green

The noun **print** is often wrongly used to describe what is actually a **reproduction**. The fact that a reproduction is printed does not make it a print - **print** being a term which, in the world of fine art, should only be applied to an artwork that has been originated, developed and finally printed by the actual artist using accepted **printmaking** methods. Yet countless numbers of pictures described as “prints” are bought by people who assume they are acquiring something of intrinsic worth when, in fact, they are getting **reproductions** hardly worth any more than the paper on which they are printed.

What is printmaking?

Printmaking begins with the making of an artistic image *to which ink can be applied in some way* and which then acts as a matrix for printing, usually on to paper.

The matrix is made by the artist using one or more specific, established printmaking techniques. Methods vary according to the nature of the medium or material in/with which the matrix is made. These include wood blocks, metal plates, stone slabs, silk screens and, today, digital files on computers. The original of a print is not, therefore, another picture but a matrix of some kind contrived to print in a particular way. And though the resulting print is largely dependent on the matrix it does not, for various reasons, look that much like it: for it is often reversed; there are variations possible in inking and in printing procedures; and there has been a change in material, of course, from matrix to print.

What, then, is a print?

The term **print** should be reserved for the products of autographic printmaking processes executed personally by artists i.e. prints made by artists themselves from matrices that they themselves have made. Such work, having been conceived and executed entirely by the artist, has high intrinsic value. Any so-called print that is not



produced in this way is virtually worthless, irrespective of any name written in the corner. Sadly, for the uninitiated, there is a whole industry devoted to the manufacture of reproductions which are then passed off as prints, often with all manner of 'window dressing' intended to impress the incautious buyer. The essential differences are outlined on pages 5-7, but here are the bare essentials of the most widely employed, true printmaking methods:

Brief Descriptions of the Most Common Printmaking Methods

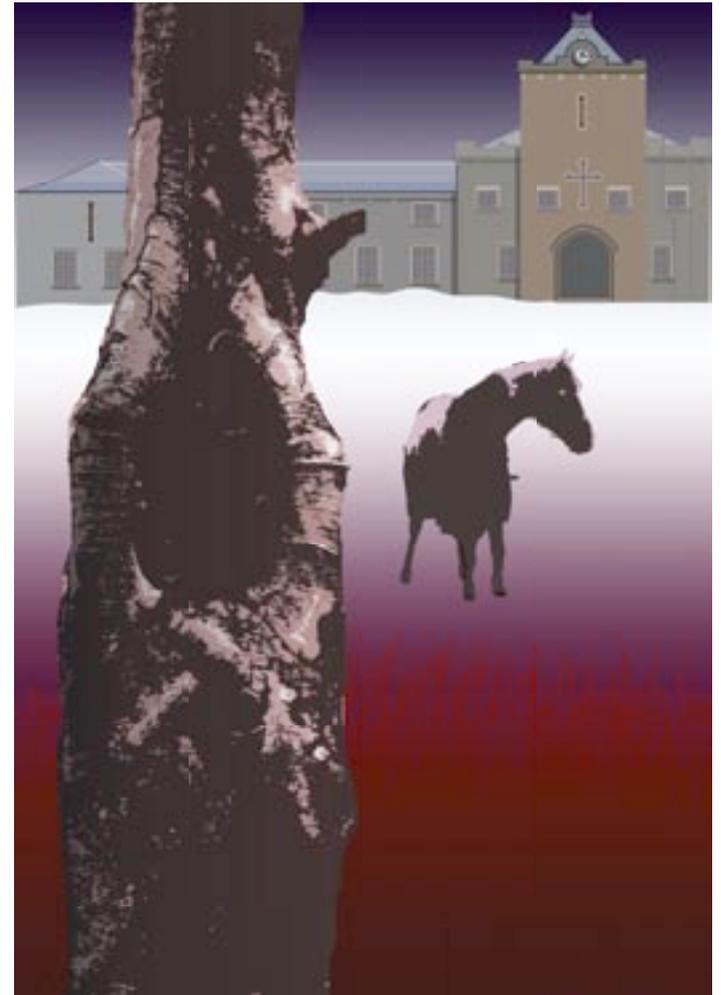
Printmaking methods are distinguished one from another by (1) the matrix used to carry the information (in whatever form) & from which prints can be taken and/or (2) the treatment given to that matrix.

Intaglio group

- etching* a metal plate is bitten with acid so as to create areas that hold the ink which is then used to print. Fundamentally linear.
- engraving* here, lines cut physically into a metal plate are used to hold the printing ink.
- drypoint* a metal plate is scratched so as to form an ink-retaining burr; marks are mainly linear.
- aquatint* a form of etching that permits the printing of non-linear, tonal areas.
- mezzotint* akin to drypoint; extensive, non-linear areas of raised burr that can print very densely.

Block/Relief printing group

- woodcut* on side-grain planks unwanted (negative) areas are cut away with knives & gouges; what remains is inked & printed.
- wood engraving* the reverse of woodcut: areas cut into an end-grain woodblock are the 'figure' & the remaining surface then prints as a dark 'ground' to leave a white line image.
- lino cut* Slabs of linoleum are cut & printed either as for a woodcut or an engraving.



Surface printing group

lithograph drawings are made directly on to metal plates or stone slabs using a greasy medium which, after further treatment, is the only part of the matrix that holds the printing ink.

silk screen a taut silk screen is treated in any number of ways so as to permit the passage and transfer of ink in some areas and not in others; sophisticated stencilling!

Digital here the matrix is a string of code generated on a computer in various ways for ultimate output to an inkjet or laser printer. This is a rapidly developing and exciting print-making medium.

Monotype the most painterly of the printmaking methods & least controllable. A single direct print is taken by blotting from an image made in a relatively fluid medium on a hard surface. The very act of printing therefor destroys the matrix.

These are the best-known printmaking methods explained as simply as possible; but all are capable of further complexity and sophistication. As printmaking is very much driven by a fascination for the processes involved, there are always printmakers eager to expand the boundaries of the subject by the use of new technologies and materials, often adapting seemingly alien processes. If it holds the promise of permitting new ways for artist-printmakers to express themselves, you can sure that someone will be experimenting with it! Digital printmaking was once avant garde - now it is almost conventional!



*Print or **Reproduction?***

Spot the difference.

PRINTS i.e. artists' original prints

Pictures conceived as prints, developed and refined by the artist through the medium of print-making until the artist is satisfied, at which point an edition is printed by the artist himself (usually) using the same print-making method(s).

A true print cannot exist in any other pictorial form.

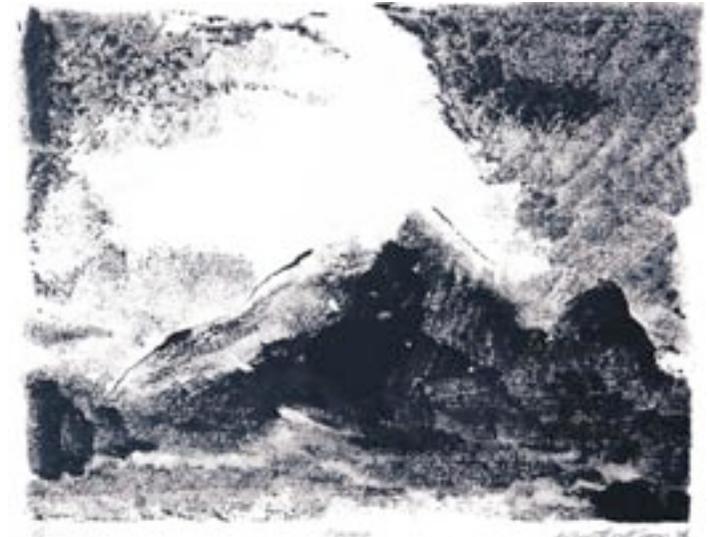
Why do artists make prints? Print-making has always been seen as a way of making original works of art available more cheaply to a wider public while still being the authentic product of the artist's own hand. Print-making also extends the range of expression available to the artist.

It is the fact that the artist is intimately involved with all stages of their conception, development and printing that makes original prints valuable and collectable. Major purchasing galleries and serious art collectors buy artists' original prints.

How can I recognise an original print?

How can I know a genuine print?

Study the subject: it's a serious business. There is no substitute for informed practice. Get to know printmakers and see how they produce their work. Frequent the galleries attached to printmaking workshops. Learn to recognise the differences between the various print-making methods (see brief descriptions on pages 2 and 3).



Unless what you are buying (a) can be truthfully described as one of the above and (b) does not exist in any other pictorial form: it cannot be categorised as an original print. Only buy from knowledgeable galleries, specialist dealers or direct from the artist.

Original prints: an affordable way to collect original art.

Original prints are recognised as authentic vehicles for artistic expression. Because of the artist's direct and complete involvement in their making they embody considerable intrinsic worth. They are valuable.



REPRODUCTIONS - often wrongly called 'prints'

...in which an existing picture (e.g. watercolour or oil painting) is photo-mechanically copied and reproduced, most often by commercial publishers.

A reproduction will always have existed previously in some other pictorial form.

Reproductions are made purely for commercial gain. The artists are not directly involved. They have merely allowed (presumably and if still alive) their work to be photographed and then reproduced in large numbers by industrial means in which they are not involved.

As reproductions are not conceived or developed originally as true prints and there is no active involvement of the artist, they are no more valuable than the paper upon which they are printed. Consequently, they are not collectable : you won't find them in national art galleries - except perhaps in the shop on the way out.

Reproductions are frequently marketed as "prints". This may be done to impute value where none exists or may stem from ignorance or cynical manipulation of the gullible .

How can I recognise a reproduction that is misrepresented?

Here are some grounds (though not conclusive) for suspicion:

- Signature &/or date appears within the area of the image itself.
- The signature &/or date also appears in the margins of the image.
- A signature, date, edition number and title are written on the mount rather than the reproduction.
- No indication is given as to what kind of "print" it is - e.g. whether it is, say, an etching or woodcut, etc.



- A high edition size - authentic artists' prints are rarely produced in editions larger than 150 (usually far less).*
- No edition size given at all.
- Called 'giclée' - which only tells you how the image was printed and nothing about how the image itself was originated.
- Described as:
 - 'unlimited' or 'open edition';
 - 'a print of a drawing/painting';
 - 'easel-tested' (meaningless);
 - 'poster';
 - 'art print'/'museum art print'/'fine art print';
 - 'touched up by an expert team of highlighters'.
- Comes in alternative sizes/formats or buyer may specify.
- Available on alternative materials, often with fanciful/vague names e.g. 'gallery-stretched canvas' or 'acrylic'.
- Title and other information actually typeset in the bottom margin.
- Available 'either limited edition or numbered' (possibly the ultimate cynicism).
- Comes with an 'authentication certificate'.
- Is being sold as a newspaper promotion or by or through an interior decoration company and ...
- beware of on-line art warehouses (though some are good sources of cheap, undisguised reproductions!)

While widespread dissemination of reproduced images may increase public familiarity with an artist's work, the reproductions themselves have no intrinsic worth and should be regarded as no more valuable than large postcards.

* Not foolproof though: I've seen a reproduction touted as one of an edition of just 8 & being marketed at over £400!
Caveat emptor, as always.



The following original prints have been reproduced here

Page 1 Self-portrait (1972). Woodcut.

Page 2 Sad Horse, Balladrum (2009). Original digital print, collagraph and linocut.

Page 3 Old Jetty, Loch Moidart (2007). Original Digital Print.

Page 4 Marsco (2005). Monotype.

Page 5 Red Cuillin (2008). Woodcut & Original Digital Print.

Page 6 The Artist's Holiday (2010). Original Digital Print & Collage.

Page 7 Sheep & Thistles, Belladrum (2009). Woodcut & Original Digital Print