

About Paper

The term art on paper is used to describe drawings, watercolors, and all types of printing that use paper as the support, just as canvas or panels are the support for paintings. The quality of the paper used has a direct effect on the life and condition of what is created on it.

Paper may be made from a variety of fibers. In China, where paper was invented in the 2nd century AD, silk strips were soaked in water, beaten to form a pulp and thinly spread in an even layer on a woven screen. The water was allowed to drain away and the dried fibers formed a sheet of paper. In the 7th century, Japan perfected the art of papermaking using raw plant fibers. Japanese manufacturing of hand papermaking continues today as a thriving industry. These high quality papers are often improperly named “rice paper”, when in fact paper is not be made from rice.

A pulp is carefully prepared by continuously beating the plant fibers. Then are combined with water to make a slurry. The papermaker then dips a mold or screen into the mixture. The screen is vigorously shaken to promote even distribution of the fibers over the surface of the mold. Dipping may be done many times, depending on the type of fiber and the desired thickness of the paper. The resulting sheet is dried slightly and released onto a stack, to be thoroughly dried later. The experience of the craftsman plays a vital role in the finished product.

Paper was made in the 12th century Spain, and in the 13th century, paper manufacturing began in Fabriano Italy, where it continues today. Cotton and linen rags were the early papermaker’s choice. Water soaked rags were beaten in much the same way as the raw plant fibers had been, mixed with water and poured into a mold. Instead of the woven oriental screens, European papermakers constructed wood frames with wire mesh screens. A removable wood frame or deckle was placed inside the outer frame to determine the paper size, which resulted in the “deckled”, or uneven edge still seen in art papers today. Sometimes designs or names were fashioned in the wire mesh to identify the craftsman or the place of the paper’s manufacture; we recognize these as watermarks.

Pressing and sizing were the last steps in the process and determine the surface characteristics of the paper. Papers were dried under pressure; the more pressure exerted, the harder the surface. Sizing determines the absorbency of the sheet. Without sizing, all paper would be as absorbent as a blotter. As the demand for paper grew, paper mills were established throughout the western world. Soon available cotton and linen rag supplies dwindled, and materials from potatoes to asbestos were tried as substitutes. In the 18th century, wood pulp was found to be suitable and large quantities of wood pulp papers appeared. The raw material was plentiful, but the composition of wood itself as well as the chemical additives used in the mechanization manufacture of the pulping process produced papers that suffered significant deterioration with age. Cotton and linen rags were still used for expensive, high quality fine art papers and boards.

Wood pulp papers and cardboards had a limited life depending on their handling and environment. As an example you have most likely observed the yellowing that occurs in a newspaper after only a few days exposure to sunlight. Art done on these types of wood pulp papers will tend to darken and deteriorate at a greater rate than the same art applied to a quality rag paper.

In the last 10 years, methods of purification have been developed increasing the life of wood pulp papers and boards. Papers generally called "acid-free", "archival" or "pH Neutral" and may be made of 100% cotton rags or purified wood pulp. The term pH refers to the balance of acid and alkaline in a substance. Originally art on paper was drawings, drafts, layouts, or designs used by the artist to proportion and layout their work. Art done on paper was only kept as records and information. Since paper is a fragile material and can be easily damaged it was most often kept in a folder.

It was not until the development of sheet glass that framing art on paper was practical, although there are some records of paper art being framed with a panel or door, which had to be opened to view the art.

For many years the value of art on paper such as watercolors did not compare to the value of paintings. That was thought of as only preliminary works for a painting, although this did not diminish their artistic value.

The first records of the duplication of design or printing were done in Egypt and China, designs were carved in blocks of wood, ink or dyes was then applied to the carved design and pressed on to paper and fabrics. It was not until the 15th century that printing as we think of it was done in Europe as wood blocks and then engravings. Engravings were done on a flattened piece of copper known as a plate. Lines were incised in to the metal, ink was then rubbed over the plate, the plate with a sheet of paper over it was then put into a press the pressure transferred the ink to the paper and a print was pulled.

The early printing methods all required the use of pressure, this caused the plates to flatten or wear the lines became less distinct as more prints were pulled and only small editions were possible. It became a practice to number these prints. The numbering listed the order in which the print was pulled as well as the total number of prints made. Collectors always looked for the first prints pulled the lower numbering assured them that the print was pulled while the plate was still in good condition, clean sharp lines. Prints done this way are referred to as limited editions. Most often these limited editions were small 10 to 50. As printing methods and materials improved larger editions were possible. Today with our improved technology plates can be made that withstand the printing of far larger editions and lose virtually none of their original clarity.

It was originally the artist that actually printed their work, but as printing became more advanced the artist would have their work printed by a master printer. This brought about the prints marked AP or artists proof. This was a print pulled by the printer for the artist approval. These AP's were considered to never be more than 10% of the total number of the addition.

The AP's usually were kept by the artist to do with as they pleased and not considered in the total number of the addition.

In France a small number of prints would be marked HC or hors comer, these were unsigned prints used as sales pieces or salesman's samples and most generally not for sale. Today with the modern printing techniques and methods of photographic reproduction it is possible to create prints from all types of art. There is how ever a distinction between original prints and reproduction prints.

Original prints are defined as prints done for a printing media; the original of this art is created on the plate, wood block or other material that is used to make the print. Reproduction prints are prints created by the photographic process. This type of print can be made from most any type of artistic media including oil paintings, watercolors, acrylics, etc. The designation of limited means only that only the specified number of prints has been done. Be sure when acquiring limited prints that you ask about how the addition is limited and have that information provided in writing. The question of authenticity of paper art is difficult at best and has been for years, because of the great variety of types both in printing and in art. Expertise in usually limited to a classification such as antique prints, posters, book prints, etc.

Establishing the value of art on paper as much the same as it is for any other type of art. Most recognized source for establishing value is auction records, what the item will sell for in a open sale. These auction records a many times found at your library, may be checking before you buy.

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