

# Collecting with Confidence Works on Paper



For the novice collector, Fine Art represents one of the most complex areas of the collectables market to approach with confidence. This need not be the case, however, as works on paper offer an avenue that can be explored at relatively low cost. Prints, drawings, watercolours and photography, or works on paper as they are sometimes collectively referred to, provide a wealth of high quality material without the high price tags commonly connected with the Fine Arts.

The fascination for collecting is not new. Earliest instances date back to the Middle Ages when the great ecclesiastic collections were formed. As a secular phenomenon, drawings, in particular, began to be appreciated and collected by the Italian Humanists of the late 16th century, when the increased social standing and the personae of artists became a factor encouraging the collection of their work. Prints and engravings from paintings in private collections were circulated widely in the 17th century and from that date have been collected for their own sake.

Many of today's established artists produce works on paper. Contrary to some perceptions, these should not be considered inferior to those created on canvas. Producing a work on paper, especially in the case of drawings and paintings, is often the first expression of the creative idea. The medium thus lends itself to the opportunity for an immediacy of expression to be captured, the potency of which is sometimes lost in a highly reworked painting. Indeed, some artists have achieved their best work on paper. Artists such as Joy Hester, Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, Donald Friend, John Olsen, Peter Booth and Brett Whiteley have all produced oeuvres in which works on paper have enjoyed prominence. For the new collector, acquiring a drawing or painting on paper by any one of these artists would be a relatively low cost entrance into the Fine Art market as witnessed by the trade in their paintings.

Watercolours, for instance, present a different opportunity and attraction for the new collector. As a medium, watercolour has attracted artists of renown as well as many highly competent members of amateur art societies. The nature of watercolour allows for the production of works of great delicacy and lyricism and because of its relative ease of use, working in watercolour has allowed many artists to sketch subjects in situ, no matter where they may be. Many of Australia's art societies of the twenties through to the forties engendered works on paper which have captured the changing face of our modernising cities.

In Sydney, the foreshores and harbour were popular subjects, as was the city centre, its dynamism perfectly suiting those artists keen to engage the ideas of European Modernism in their work. Depictions of the Harbour Bridge and city constructions, in particular, most widely known through the work of Cossington Smith and Jessie Traill, reflect this growing fascination.

Because of the number of artists working with watercolour, and the ease with which a work could be completed, there are many works available to tempt the curiosity of a first-time collector. Collecting such works in a thematic manner is one way of acquiring a coherent body of work without incurring great expense.



Factors to be wary of in this enterprise are the same as with other collecting areas: authenticity—often established by the provenance of history of ownership of the work; whether the work is signed and/or dated; what condition the work is in (is it torn or stuck down); how indicative of the artist's style the work is; which period from the artist's oeuvre the work is from (later and established, early and formative for example).

Prints and photography pose different problems and attractions for the prospective collector. The most obvious difference is that these works are produced in multiples. In a French

Salon review of 1859, Baudelaire denounced photography as "the mortal enemy of art". Less than three years later, however, a decision was announced by a French court in which photography was declared to be an art. The fact that prints and photography are produced in multiples, of concern to the art market and critics in the 19th century, is what makes them attractive to collect today, as works generally tend to be less expensive than drawings.

Photographs, like prints, offer an enormous array of aesthetic choices: from the portrait and documentary image, including fashion stills, to pictorial landscapes; and a tradition in art pho-

tography that dates to the early part of the century when photography was an integral player in the movements of Dada and Surrealism. The highly detailed quality of etchings and engravings, in contrast, lend a wonderful formality to a collection, while woodblocks and linocuts often present a more dramatic image. Strong design rather than subject matter takes precedence and bold line and form dominate the picture plane.

When assessing the collectability of a modern print, one of the factors to consider is what state, or part of an edition the work was pro-

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duced from, if at all. If a work comes from a limited edition, for example, then it is generally a more attractive option than a work that does not. Limited edition series can and do vary in size, however, so some wariness on the part of the buyer is required. As all methods of reproducing prints in quantity will cause wear to the original plate, block or other material from which the image is taken (just as a photographic negative can get scratched over time), it makes sense to collect from a small edition. Just how large an edition can be without disturbing the integrity of the image will depend on the print method as some plates are more durable than others (many modern printing methods add steel to the face of the plate to increase its durability). In general, woodblocks are more durable than intaglio prints as the copper plates eventually suffer from the extremely heavy pressure to which they are submitted during printing. Drypoint plates are particularly fragile, as the burr, which gives the drypoint its distinctive velvety appearance, wears down very quickly.

A 'proof' is an impression taken by an engraver from their plate or block in order to see how the work is proceeding and decide whether there are corrections to be made. A state is a particular stage in the development of a work, before or after changes have been made to a plate or block. When different states are compared they often provide an enlightening history of the development of the artistic idea and methods of working. The term 'artist's proof' should mean a proof taken by the artist, outside a numbered edition and reserved for their own reference, but the phrase is sometimes misused. With photographs, works marked as artist's proofs, or 'A/p's, should reflect the printing quality, including cropping, that a photographer may wish to use as reference for the continued printing of a particular work, whether it be editioned or not. In some cases, however, the term 'A/p' can be used rather freely to ascribe to any work an artist wants to sell outside of an edition.

An important factor to consider before buying a print or photograph is rarity. The rarer the object, the more collectable or highly prized it will be. Many prints and photographs are rare without being part of an edition. Guidelines about editions also apply to photographs but in many instances, especially with works produced over twenty years ago, photographers rarely engaged in the practice. A more valu-





Frank Weitzel (1902 -1932) 'The Mask' c.1930 Linocut

able guideline in this case then, is whether or not the photographic print is vintage or modern. The former being defined by a period of five years from the date of the negative. If a photographic print of a work from the thirties or forties is vintage, for example, it will generally realise a higher price than a modern or later reprint. There are other factors which do influence the collectability of a certain image. Highly published images that have attained a certain status in the public's imagination can bring high prices, even if the print is not rare or vintage, for example.

Technical tips are a useful guide in helping choose between the works within an artist's oeuvre but a far more vexing decision is how

to make the initial choice between one artist and another. This is actually one of the most

exciting aspects of approaching collecting for the novice. Visit public exhibitions, read reviews and study publications, visit dealers and retailers, trade fairs and the local antique and nic-nac shops. All of these places will provide useful information, comparisons and, if you are lucky, the odd bargain. Buying art can be a good investment but it is always a more profitable experience to buy what you like. Nobody but the very determined should buy something that they would not want to see hanging on their walls. For the first-time collector who requires more guidance, it is sensible to establish a relationship with a dealer who offers a broad range of material rather than just a stable of popular, top of the market artists. Many dealers stock works by artists whose potential has yet to be tested on the market. The other venue for discovering a continuously changing array of works on offer is, of course, the auction room. Here, you not only enjoy the benefit of choice, and educating your eye, but also the thrill of the event as you witness or partake in the drama of collectors and dealers vying for the same works.

Works on paper including photography are very affordable. In many cases, especially in the areas of prints by women such as those by Dorrit Black, Vera Blackburn, Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston and Margaret Mahood, to name a few; and documentary photography in general, remain undervalued. Major collecting institutions and academics often lead the charge for acclaiming the significance of artists through researching then acquiring their works. Why wait? Many private collectors throughout history have taken the lead in encouraging the collection of works by certain artists and have in so doing created a thriving market for their work.

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