

How are prints made? F.A.Q.

1. What is a fine art original print?

Basically, it is a print made by using a press to transfer an image that was created initially on stone or metal plate to paper. Although the term can refer to commercially reproduced images - such as those on posters or in magazines - a fine art original lithograph is an image made by an artist who works closely with a professional printer.

2. What is the difference between a lithograph, an etching, serigraph, etc.?

Lithographs differ from etchings, engravings, serigraphs and woodcuts in materials and process. For example, etchings and engravings are printed from a metal plate with incised lines while a lithograph is made from a chemically treated, flat surface. A serigraph is a silkscreen print, and woodcuts are printed from blocks of wood carved in relief.

3. How is a lithograph made?

First an artist draws an image, in reverse, on a fine grained stone or aluminium plate. For a one-colour lithograph, this will be the only drawing. Each additional colour will generally require a separate stone or plate. Artists use the same kinds of tools they would for images on paper or canvas. However, since the basic principle of lithographic printing is the natural repulsion of grease and water, the crayons, pencils, and washes used in lithography have a high grease content.

Once the artist has finished drawing, the printer takes over and chemically treats the stones and/or plates to stabilise the image for printing. The printer first sprinkles resin on the surface to protect the drawing. Then he or she powders the surface with talc which helps the chemical etch lie more closely to the tiny grease dots which compose the drawing. A solution of gum arabic with acid (called an "etch") is applied to the stone and left for about an hour. Often a second etch is applied before the printing base, called asphaltum, is buffed in. This process causes the image area to accept the greasy printing ink, and at the same time, causes the stone's blank areas, when moistened with water, to reject the ink.

At the press, the printer sponges the stone or plate with water, rolls it with ink, and prints a series of trial proofs for the artist to see. The printer continues to make proofs with different colour and paper combinations until the artist is completely satisfied with the result. This final proof is signed by the artist as the bon à tirer ("good to pull"). With this as a standard, the printer is ready to pull the edition.

4. What do you mean by "Pull" and why do you refer to prints as "impressions"?

To pull a print simply means to print an impression, and impression refers to any one of a number of nearly identical images pulled from the same printing elements.

5. In a multicolour print, how does the printer get the colours in exactly the right places?

Generally the same piece of paper must pass through the press as many times as there are different colours. This process requires exact registration with each run through the press. Registration ensures that each colour or component of an image is printed in exactly the right area. The printer makes tiny pencil marks on each sheet of paper to be printed, and lines them up to correspond with marks on each stone or plate. This way, each impression in the edition is consistent.

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