

Beaux Arts

The Fine Art Print

A Print is in essence a pictorial image produced by a process that allows it to be multiplied. Engravings, etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and offset lithos can all be considered prints. Of importance here is to distinguish offset lithos, also known as photomechanical prints, from what have become known as “original” prints, or the term of our preference, “fine art” prints.

Since Gutenberg first invented the moveable type printing press in the 1400’s, man has strived to improve the means used to illustrate printed materials. Today’s photomechanical printing processes have made obsolete all previous methods for creating multiple image prints. The prints derived from these old methods are what Beaux Arts and others consider fine art prints.

Of further interest is to understand why these prints came about. It is almost impossible for Americans today to fully understand how limited the market was for printed books in the 16th through 19th centuries. There was almost no middle class anywhere in the world until the 19th century. Wealth and literacy was confined to the royal families, the nobility and the few scientists and chosen intellectuals. It was of little consequence to printers anyway since an illustrated book edition of as few as 200 copies was a gargantuan effort. (One large copperplate engraved illustration could take two or three months for an artisan to complete.)

Illustrated books were usually confined to the arts and sciences. These included natural history (birds, animals, fish, botany, etc.), travel and archaeology, architecture, medicine and art. The text was printed as one endeavor with lavish illustrations produced separately, then both were bound together in book form. The buyers were men of learning, wealthy patrons, royalty and nobility, government institutions and museums.

Because this era occurred when it did, virtually all of the great illustrated books were produced in the wealthy nations of Europe. One fabulous exception was America’s own “Birds of North America” by John James Audubon though even this book was eventually taken from the American printers and shipped to England for the completion of most of the plates.

Today, modern technology has given us advanced photomechanical techniques that are used for virtually all printed and illustrated materials. Even if craftsmen could be gathered together to create engraved, etched or lithographed illustrations, the cost would be astronomical. These gorgeous old prints that have miraculously survived the centuries are truly rare!