The Art of the Lithograph

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions about Process, Originality, & Conservation
The Art of the Lithograph

This booklet is designed to answer basic questions about fine art lithographs as they are made at Tamarind. Standards may vary at different workshops. Our goal here is to introduce the concepts involved with original fine art lithographs and the methods used to make and care for them.

1. WHAT IS A LITHOGRAPH?

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—at Tamarind, a lithograph is an image made by an artist who works closely with an artisan printer.

2. HOW DOES A LITHOGRAPH DIFFER FROM OTHER FINE ART PRINTS?

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.

In each case, what distinguishes the print as original is that the artist participated directly in the creation of the image and approves all impressions.

3. HOW IS A LITHOGRAPH MADE AT TAMARIND?

Artists-in-residence work with highly skilled printers who have been trained in the technical and collaborative aspects of printing for artists. Although some artists do print their own lithographs, many have neither the time nor inclina-
tion to learn about the complex chemistry of the medium. Artists who work at Tamarind are free to concentrate on creating their images while collaborating printers attend to the technical requirements. Often, artists rely on the printers’ expertise to achieve their aesthetic goals.

First an artist draws an image, in reverse, on a fine-grained limestone or aluminum plate. For a one-color lithograph, this will be the only drawing. Each additional color 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 the hand lithographic printing is the natural repulsion of grease and water, the crayons, pencils, and liquid washes used in lithography have a high grease content.

Once the artist has finished drawing with the greasy black pigments, an artisan printer takes over and chemically treats the stones and/or plates to stabilize the image for printing.

The printer first sprinkles rosin on the surface to protect the drawing, then powders the surface with talc, which helps the chemical etch lie more closely to the tiny grease dots that compose the drawing.

A solution of gum arabic and nitric acid (called an “etch”) is applied and left for about an hour to combine with the greasy particles and the calcium carbonate of the stone. Often a second application of gum arabic is applied before

the original drawing materials are removed with a solvent and asphaltum is rubbed in.

This process causes the image area, now barely visible on the stone, to accept the printing inks, and, at the same time, causes the stone’s blank areas, when moistened with water, to reject the inks.

At the press, the printer sponges the stone or plate with water, uses a roller to apply ink, and prints a series of trial proofs for the artist to consider. The printer continues to make proofs with different color 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”). Using this as a standard, the printer can print the edition, comprised of a limited number of individual impressions.
4. In a multicolor print, how does the printer get the colors in exactly the right places?

Generally the same piece of paper must pass through the press as many times as there are different colors. This process requires exact registration for each run, or pass, through the press.

Registration ensures that each color or component of an image is printed in the proper place. 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.

5. What is an “edition” of prints?

Edition refers to all impressions of a particular image that are printed after the artist has given an approval to a print. At Tamarind, the edition includes all numbered prints, the artist’s proofs, the bon à tirer, which belongs to the printer, and three impressions for the Tamarind archives, which is housed at the University of New Mexico Art Museum. All impressions, including the trial proofs, color trial proofs, and artist’s proofs, are documented.

6. What are “artist’s proofs” and how many are there?

Artist’s proofs (sometimes designated A.P.) are impressions just like those in the numbered edition. They are set aside for the artist’s personal use. Tamarind limits the number of artist’s proofs to a maximum of five, or up to ten percent of the number of signed and numbered impressions.

7. Who determines the quantity of numbered impressions?

Generally the artist and a print shop representative decide together before the edition is printed. At Tamarind, the number is rarely more than twenty-five numbered impressions and is often smaller.
8. **If all the prints in the edition are sold, do you print more?**

Never! After the artist signs and numbers each impression in the edition, all stones and plates are effaced. Stones are then resurfaced for future use.

9. **What do the signatures and numbers on the prints mean?**

The artist signs and numbers each impression to indicate his or her approval. Signatures and numbers usually appear on the front, but occasionally the artist chooses to sign on the back. Usually there are two numbers separated by a slanted line—for example, 5/20. The bottom number tells you how many impressions there are in the numbered edition; the top number is the designation for that impression and is unrelated to the order in which it was printed.

10. **Are some prints in the edition more valuable or better than others?**

No. In contemporary print editions, an impression with a lower number is no more valuable or better than an impression with a higher number. This popular misconception stems from the time when very large editions were pulled even after the printing element began to wear out, resulting in impressions that were not as "crisp" as the first few printed.

At Tamarind, uniformity among impressions is assured because the curator checks each impression against the bon à tirer. Only those impressions meeting Tamarind's high standards are embossed with the identifying symbols, called chops, of the workshop and the printer; any flawed impressions are destroyed.

11. **If I'm buying a print, should I make sure it has chops?**

"Chops" are identifying symbols of the print studio and/or the printer that are often embossed in the paper (or they may be stamped in ink on the back of the sheet). They are important identifying marks, but not all original, limited-edition prints will have them. Artists who print their own work may not use them.

12. **What kind of documentation should I ask for?**

Most reputable print shops have a documentation paper for each print that provides a complete description of the print and the steps involved in its making. These documentation papers are available to anyone who asks; in fact, some states have laws that require the seller to provide specific information related to the edition.

13. **Do documentation papers guarantee a print's originality?**

Not necessarily. Unfortunately, documentation papers can be misleading. Read the papers carefully and ask questions about anything that is unclear. If you are in doubt about a print's value, it's best to check with a reputable dealer (such as...
one belonging to the International Fine Print Dealers Association) or a museum print department.

14. HOW DO YOU DEFINE ORIGINALITY?

Originality is difficult to define; it is a complex concept and has become almost meaningless with respect to prints because it has come into such broad and general use. The term is often used in order to imply that the print is more valuable than it may actually be. An important consideration is the degree to which the artist has participated in the concept and execution of the image.

15. ARE PRINTS THAT ARE PHOTO-MECHANICALLY PRODUCED “FAKES”?

Not necessarily. The important distinction here is between the words produced and reproduced. If an artist and a printer agree to use photographic means to print an image originally conceived for that particular print, which is both limited and documented, then it falls within Tamarind’s concept of an original print. However, a print that exactly reproduces an existing image made in another medium (such as a painting), would not normally be considered an “original work of art.”

16. SUPPOSE I DO BUY A FINE ART PRINT. WHERE DO I GO TO GET IT PROPERLY FRAMED?

Ask for references from knowledgeable friends, print dealers, or museums. Since improper framing can permanently damage your print, it’s important to find a professional framer who uses archival materials.

17. WHAT DOES “ARCHIVAL” MATERIALS MEAN?

Everything that comes in contact with the print should be pH neutral, or acid-free. This ensures that the framing materials will not alter or destroy the paper or inks of the lithograph.

18. HOW COULD NON-ACID-FREE MATERIALS HARM MY PRINT?

Matboard, that is not chemically inert and free of acid transfers its acidity to the paper, and over time will cause it to turn brown (known as mat burn), become brittle, and, perhaps, to disintegrate when removed from the mat. Museums recommend that mats be made from 100-percent cotton rag matboard, at least two-ply thickness. A less expensive alternative is “conservamat,” or conservation board, which is made from highly purified pH neutral wood pulp. Some natural fabrics, like linen, cotton, and silk, are also safe to use.

19. IS IT NECESSARY TO HAVE A MAT AROUND MY PRINT?

No. A window mat is a matter of personal taste. Often a print with a border is simply hinged to a backing—this is called “floating” the print—and requires a spacer, hidden by the edges of the frame, to keep the print from touching the glass in the same way that a window mat does. A window mat may cover the edges of the paper if you prefer (although the edges are considered to be an integral part of the print) or the print may float within the window.

20. YOU MENTIONED HINGES: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Prints are never glued or taped directly to a backing with pressure-sensitive tapes; hinges made of linen or fine Japanese paper hold the print to the backing with non-acidic, non-staining, reversible adhesives.
21. Why shouldn’t my print touch the glass?
Both glass and acrylic sheeting (plexiglass) condense moisture from the air; if your print touches either, it may actually stick to the surface and be ruined.

22. Which is better—glass or plexiglass?
Both will protect your print and filter some of the harmful rays of light. Glass is less expensive, but it breaks easily. Ultraviolet filtering glass and plexiglass are available at a higher cost. Since glass is heavier than plastic, it may be impractical for very large prints. Plexiglass, although lighter, is more expensive than ordinary glass, scratches easily, and carries an electrostatic charge that causes it to attract dust. Sometimes this charge can even cause drawing materials such as charcoal and pastels to crumble.

23. How can light hurt my print?
Bright daylight, and even bright artificial light, can cause colors to fade and papers to discolor and become brittle. Too much light is harmful even when ultraviolet rays are filtered out, so make sure your print is exposed only to moderate light for limited hours at a time. You might also consider rotating your prints from time to time.

24. What if I want to store my prints?
When handling unframed prints, make sure you work with gloves or very clean hands. Finer smudges, dirt, or dents and tears caused by carelessness will affect the value of your print. If you must handle your print, lift it by diagonally opposite corners to avoid creasing.

Prints should be stored flat, either in or out of archival mats, layered between sheets of non-acidic interleaving tissue. Never store your prints against surfaces such as corrugated board or wood; not only are the materials acidic, they also have textures that can imprint themselves on your artwork.

Needless to say, your storage area should be clean, dry, and protected from insects and vermin. Roaches, silverfish, and mice are common despoilers of paper. Simple, relatively inexpensive non-acidic boxes will protect your prints from environmental damage; they are available from art and preservation suppliers.

25. How can I keep up with the current value of my print?
Tamarind does not deal with the secondary market. We are happy to provide a letter stating the value of our prints for insurance or donation purposes, but our records do not always reflect an accurate current price if we no longer have impressions for sale. Galleries, art appraisers, and large auction houses that handle prints may be of assistance.
The following resources may help to further inform you about lithography and prints in general.


