

# BACK to BASICS

A  
Guide  
to Buying  
Limited-Edition Art

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# THE NEXT STEP

The whos, whats,  
and whys of original graphics.

BY ALICIA FEDORCZAK

**A**s you've strolled through galleries looking for a new eye-catcher to add to your collection, chances are you've stumbled upon a stunner that was identified as an etching, a serigraph, or an original lithograph. Perhaps you purchased the piece. Perhaps you passed.

Either way, it's a decision you'll probably ponder again, as original graphics become one of the fastest-growing segments of the print market and a natural step up the art-collecting ladder

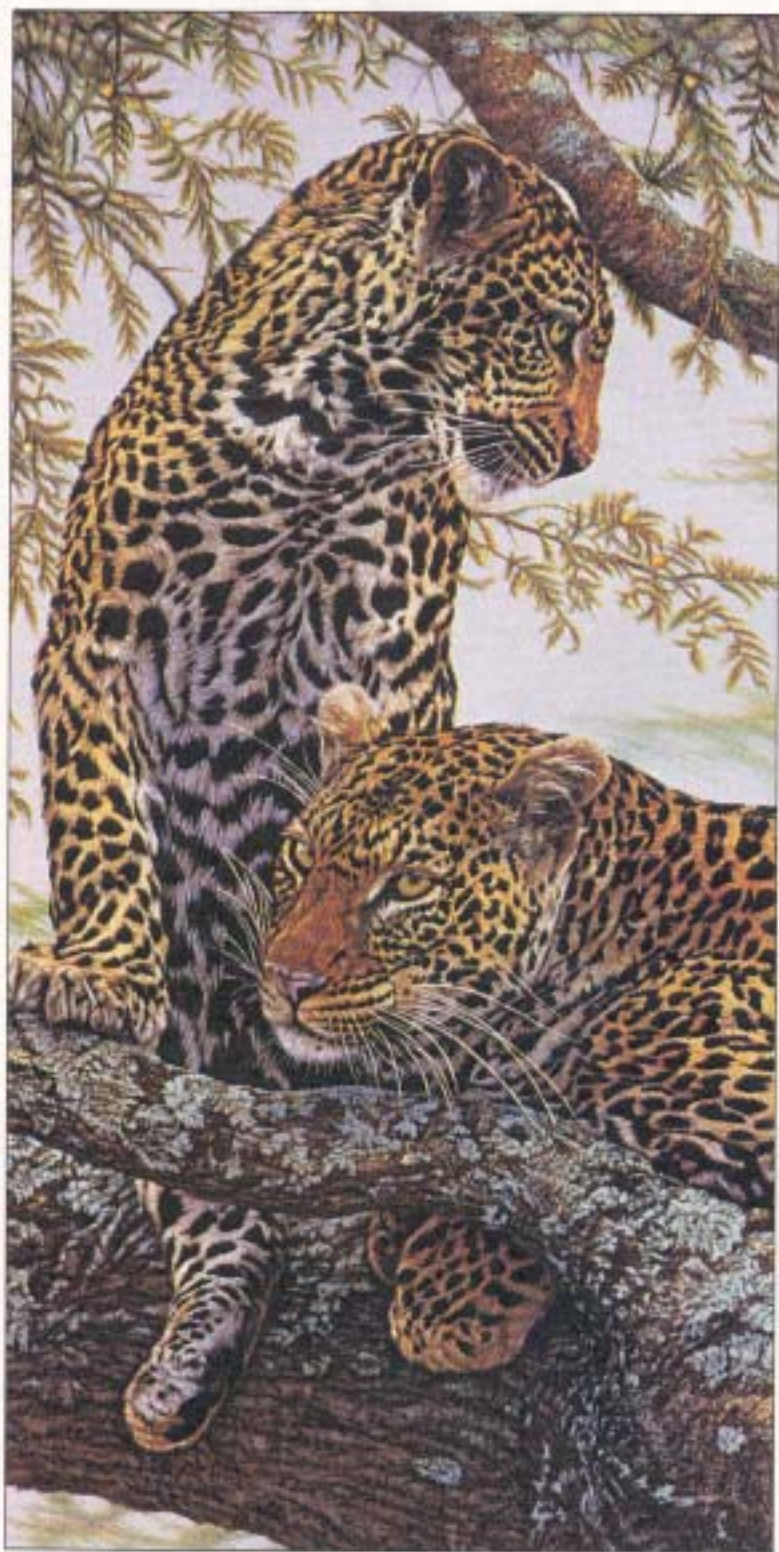
for buyers of offset reproductions and digital prints.

Inklings of the growth of original graphics in the traditional print market can be seen in Gregory Editions's ongoing agreement with

Somerset House Publishing to distribute original graphics of Somerset's most popular artists: Tom du Bois, J.D. Challenger, and Larry Dyke. The Texas-based company's original graphics have been so successful that two years ago Gregory added to its line hand-pulled prints for Washington Green Fine Art Publishing of England.

Now, Gregory is getting some competition. Hadley Companies of Bloomington, Minnesota, recently announced that it will publish a line of original graphics under a new division called Hadley Editions. Although the division will launch with digital prints, collectors can expect serigraphs, original lithographs, and other original graphics before the end of the calendar year. There will probably be some from favorite artists such as Steve Hanks and some from unknown artists that Hadley

**Original graphics are a natural step up the art-collecting ladder for buyers of offset reproductions and digital prints.**



"Nature's Patterns," an original lithograph by Dennis Curry.

## Points to Ponder

*The questions you should ask your gallery before you purchase original graphics.*

**B**efore signing on the dotted line for your first original graphics purchase, be sure to ask your gallery a few questions.

First, find out whether the image was created by an artist or reproduced by a studio. Etcher George Raab says one way to do this is to look for an embossed logo of a master printer in the corner of the print. If you find one, ask about other editions (such as an offset reproduction) so you know the total number of images on the market.

As usual, you should also take note of the edition number and size, but you should realize these numbers have more importance in the world of original graphics, where the prints in an edition are not an identical set. Because ink plates actually wear as they are inked, wiped, and printed, the earliest prints tend to be the brightest and richest.

Finally, if you opt for original graphics, don't skimp on framing. Ask for conservation framing materials that will protect your investment.

All of this is not to say you can't fall in love with the last image in the edition. Or that you shouldn't buy a serigraph that was produced by a master printer. As with any other limited-edition print, you should buy what you like, but you should also ask enough questions to make an informed decision.

—A.F.

hopes to turn into household names.

No one is suggesting that original graphics replace limited-edition prints produced by other

means. Instead, it seems collectors will be getting more and more options. Since options come with decisions, we're giving you a guide to original graphics.

**S**o, what exactly is an original graphic? It's a piece of art that is made using one of several age-old, hands-on printing processes, including lithography, serigraphy, and intaglio.

**"The original printmaker is a combination of artist, craftsman, and chemist."** —etcher George Raab

Unlike offset reproductions, though, original graphics are not created through the use of photography. Instead, an image is created directly on a block, plate, stone, screen, or other printing surface and transferred to paper. Because every print in the edition is created separately and may vary slightly from the other prints in the edition, each one is an original. Here's how the three most common techniques work:

To create an original lithograph, individual drawings for each of the colors in the final composition must be made on chemically sensitized stones, metal plates, or sheets of Mylar. Then, each stone, plate, or sheet is pulled through a printing press, one at a time, and inked. The ink sticks to the design areas and is repelled by the non-design areas.

"Lithography is a planographic printing process that works on the basis of chemical changes in the plates," explains Dennis

color. In this case, though, a series of stencils are created on finely woven screens made of silk or polyester. Ink is then pressed through the screens one at a time to create the final image.

Last, there's intaglio, a term that refers to any technique in which an image is carved into the surface of a plate, then inked, and transferred to paper using a press. The most common types of intaglio printing are engraving and etching. In the former, lines are cut into a plate using a sharp tool. In the latter, a drawing is scratched on a plate cov-

### What's the difference between a limited-edition print and a poster?

**Price, for one.** Limited-edition prints are routinely priced five to ten times more than posters. Lest you get sticker shock,



you should know that there's good reason for the added digits. Limited editions are printed on finer, heavier papers than posters and often with better quality, longer-lasting inks. They are usually hand signed-and-numbered by the artist and don't have the promotional verbiage that accompanies posters. And because their quantity is limited, they offer the buyer added value.

Rembrandt, Pablo Picasso, and Andy Warhol. Today, artists like Curry still use printmaking in this tradition.

However, nowadays, these printing techniques have also been adapted for the purposes of reproducing existing paintings in small editions. In some cases, the artist is very involved in the process. And in some cases, the artist turns over his or her original canvas to an atelier, where other printmakers do the work.

Some traditional printmakers believe this is puzzling, and maybe even misleading, for collectors. "When an artist takes a piece of work into an atelier or workshop and it's copied using the techniques of printmaking, I really don't consider that a true original print," Curry says. "It's really just a hand-done reproduction."

Canadian etcher George Raab agrees. "The original printmaker is a combination of artist, craftsman, and chemist, and there's something about original prints that is different," he says. "You have the breadth of the artist right in the print because his hand has touched the plate and the ink he touched is on the paper...I also think the printmaking medium itself has a lot to say, and I don't think it's being used in its purist form of expression when it's being used to



"Something in the Woods," an etching by George Raab.

Curry, a wildlife artist and original lithographer in Cambria, California. "The open area of the plate accepts water, but the image is ink-loving and rejects water...I like it because there's wonderful versatility in working with color."

A second form of original graphics is serigraphy, which is also known as silk-screening. Like lithography, this process requires a separate step for each individual

ered in acid-resistant coating, which is then dipped into an acid bath. The acid eats away at the parts of the plate that have been exposed by the etching tool, and the resulting image can be inked.

Traditionally, these printing techniques were used to create original art. Like sculpture or painting, printmaking was considered its own art form, and, over the years, it attracted such artists as Albrecht Dürer,

reproduce another painting. I think the medium should be used for its own sake."

Others argue that traditional printmaking is fair game for creating high-quality editions that are the next best thing to an original painting. "Original graphics are much closer to the original that the artist intended," says Gregory Editions president Beth Blankenship. "With a four-color printing process [such as offset lithography], colors mix and meld and you get some resemblance to the original but not exactly. With original graphics, the artist can paint with the understanding that every color he puts into the original will be reproduced in the color he intended."

Those on both sides of the argument can agree that there are many advantages to original graphics. The edition sizes are

usually smaller than their offset counterparts. And the final images are often stunning.

"Original graphics are unique," says Peter Lampros, owner of Frame Craft/Lampros Gallery in The Woodlands, a community outside of Houston, Texas. "Offset lithography is very flat and two-

dimensional, but the layering used to create original graphics adds more dimension and a wide range of colors...Original graphics also lend themselves more to artistic enhancements, which add an air of originality to a piece."

"I enjoy the rich textures and wonderful tonal qualities and the way the ink sits up on the paper," Raab adds. "Plus, it takes a tremendous amount of pressure to pull the ink from plate to paper, so there's a vibrancy to original graphics. And each one really is a little different. One might be wiped more or less than another or have more or less hand coloring than another."

Of course, all of the advantages of original graphics come at a price. Original graphics can be two or three times the price of their offset cousins. Yet, artists and publishers say these high-end prints are really a bargain when compared to original paintings.

"We believe this is a step that many will take," says Lisa Laliberte Belak, director of art publishing at Hadley Companies. "You shouldn't be talked into it before you're ready, but collectors need to ask themselves if they're ready to move on and up in their art collecting."

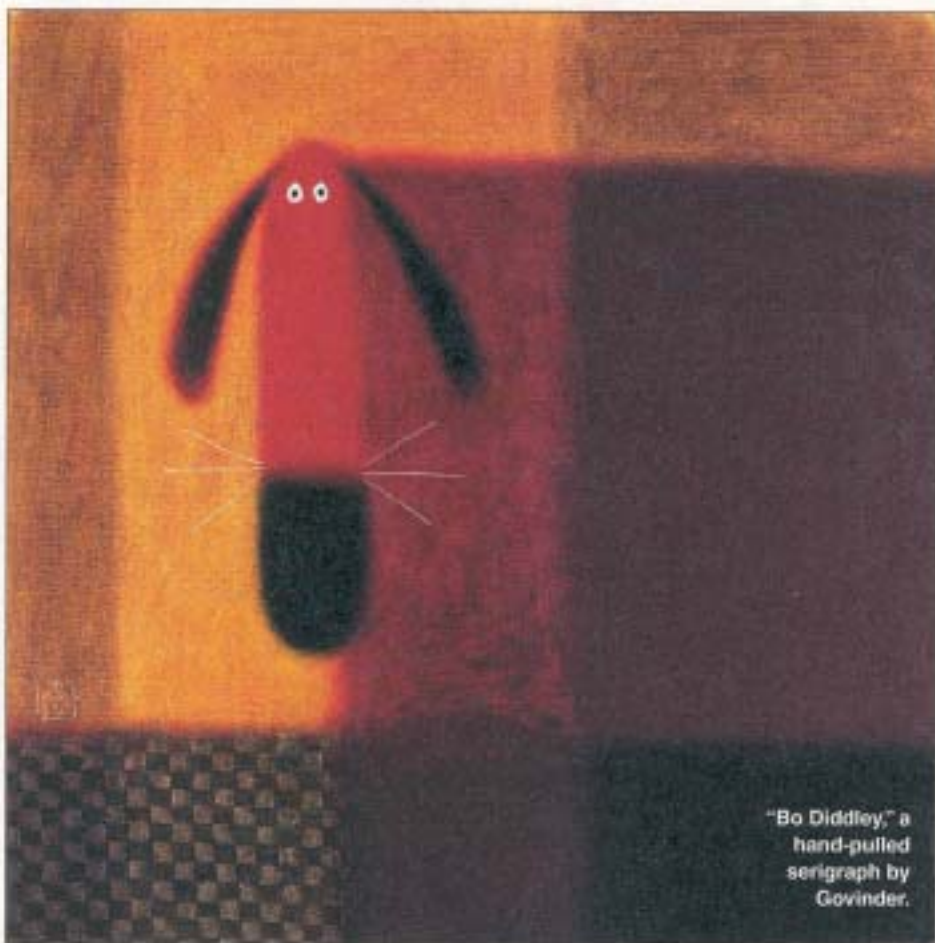
"Just like you start out with a starter house, a collector probably doesn't start out with original graphics," Blankenship adds. "But as our income grows and our tastes become refined, we take a step up. Original graphics are probably the product that suits most of us." •

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### Are lower numbered prints a better value?



Not in offset lithography, where the first print should be identical to the last. In fact, there's good reason to believe that the print the artist assigns as number one isn't actually the first print off the presses; when he or she starts the signing process it's from the top of a stack of prints, and often those are the last prints off the press. In original printmaking, though, the plates wear as they are inked, wiped, and printed, so the earliest prints tend to be the sharpest.



"Bo Diddley," a hand-pulled serigraph by Govinder.