

## Original vs. Reproduction



Distinguishing between a print, a reproduction, and an original work on paper can be tricky. Many terms like print, replica, facsimile and reproduction are sometimes used interchangeably, making identification even more confusing. The following information is intended to explain and provide some basic guidelines for better understanding what you have among your family treasures, art collections, and documents.

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## What is a Photomechanical Reproduction?

A photomechanical reproduction (or reproduction) is a reproduced photographic image that is printed in ink, usually on paper. These can look like artist prints on paper, photographic images, pictures in magazines, or 'fine art' images of famous paintings.

This process became popular in the 1890s to mass produce images for book illustrations, and to fulfill a need for inexpensive 'fine art' reproductions

of paintings for the growing middle class. Photomechanical reproductions can be black and white or color. The process is capable of making a near-



exact replica of the original, which is why identification can be difficult. It is first helpful to understand the differences between a mechanical reproduction, a print, and an original work of art.

**Photomechanical Reproduction:** It is not unique, nor is it handmade. There may be many exact copies of this image. These are printed in ink, historically by a printing press. Reproductions are never considered original works of art and the artist is not involved in the production process.

**Print:** It is a unique object, manually

printed from an artist's original plate. Although they can be produced in editions of 250 or more, prints are produced directly by or under the direction of the artist. Prints often include a signature. Variables like pressure and inking assure that even in a large edition, each print has unique (if slight) differences.

**Original Work of Art:** It is an original work if it is directly made by an artist, and bears hand-applied media. Original works are one of a kind and often, but not always, include artist signatures. Examples include graphite drawings, or watercolors on paper.

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## Why Does it Matter?

Identifying what you own can provide important clues about value, age, rarity, and provenance. Even for family documents and pieces that have little to no monetary value, there is value in gaining a better understanding of what we own. This information can also be important when choosing the best preservation option for the

piece. For instance, if a damaged object passed down through the family is determined to be a reproduction rather than an artist's print, the owner may decide to simply frame and display it instead of paying for expensive conservation treatment to improve the object's longevity.

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## How to Tell the Difference

It is possible to wrongly identify images made using photomechanical reproduction for any printing technique. However, there are a couple of ways you may be able to tell at home, using household items to closely ex-

amine a piece.

The telltale indication that an image is a photomechanical reproduction is a repeated pattern of tiny dots, which can usually be seen using a magnifying glass. If you are not sure, examine a pic-

ture in a magazine or newspaper and compare it for the same pattern of dots. Sometimes photomechanical reproductions appear slightly out of focus. You will need a magnifying glass and should examine multiple locations on the image. If lines appear fuzzy it may be a reproduction.

Still, it can be tricky to tell in some cases. If you are unsure about the printing process of a specific piece, consult a conservator for further information.



The Caldwell Gallery image:  
[http://www.caldwellgallery.com/  
original\\_copies.html](http://www.caldwellgallery.com/original_copies.html)

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## Additional Resources

Mustalish, Rachel A., (1997). The Development of Photomechanical Printing Processes in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. *Topics in Photographic Preservation*. Volume 7. Pages 73-87. Retrieved from [http://resources.conservation-us.org/pmgtopics/1997-volume-seven/07\\_10\\_Mustalish.pdf](http://resources.conservation-us.org/pmgtopics/1997-volume-seven/07_10_Mustalish.pdf)

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## Conservation Suppliers

### Conservation Resources International

5532 Port Royal Road  
Springfield, VA 22151  
Toll free: (800) 634-6932  
[www.conservationresources.com](http://www.conservationresources.com)  
*Archival housing/storage supplies, photographic supplies, general*

### Gaylord Archival

P. O. Box 4901  
Syracuse, NY 13221-4901  
Toll Free: (800) 448-6160  
[www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com)  
*General conservation supplies, housing supplies*

### Hollinger Metal Edge, Inc.

6340 Bandini Blvd  
Commerce, CA 90040  
Toll Free: (800)-862-2228  
[www.hollingermetaledge.com](http://www.hollingermetaledge.com)  
*Archival housing/storage supplies*

### Light Impressions

100 Carlson Road  
Rochester, NY 14610  
Toll Free: (800) 975-6429  
[www.lightimpressionsdirect.com](http://www.lightimpressionsdirect.com)  
*Photographic supplies, housing, matting and framing supplies*

### University Products

517 Main Street  
P. O. Box 101  
Holyoke, MA 01041  
Toll Free: (800) 628-1912  
[www.universityproducts.com](http://www.universityproducts.com)  
*General conservation supplies, housing and matting supplies*

### Talas

330 Morgan Ave  
Brooklyn, NY 11211  
Telephone: (212) 219-0770  
[www.talasonline.com](http://www.talasonline.com)  
*Conservation supplies, photographic supplies, general*

## Gerald R. Ford Conservation Center

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Omaha, NE 68105  
402-595-1180  
[nshs.grfcc@nebraska.gov](mailto:nshs.grfcc@nebraska.gov)



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Nebraska since 1878.