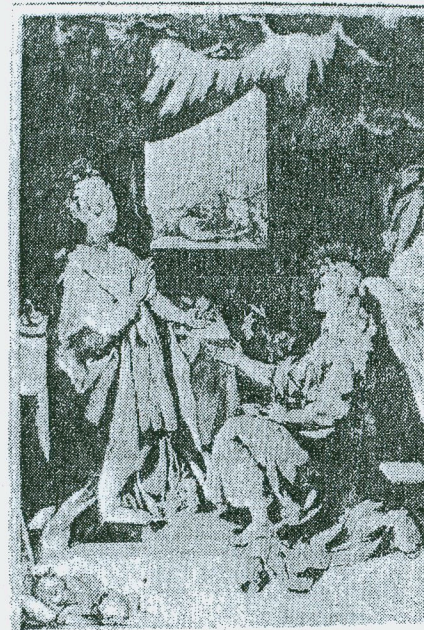


Detroit Institute of Arts

Can you tell the difference between an original etching of "The Annunciation" (left) by Baroccio, worth \$3,500, and this restrike (right) valued at only \$50?



Print predicament: What is original?

By **SHELLEY EICHENHORN**
News Staff Writer

It was called the Official Renoir Lithograph Collection and advertised as "one of the most important art events of the last half-century."

That was until Chicago art dealer Jean-Paul Loup, who sponsored the mail-order offering, was accused of fraud last year.

According to the U.S. district attorney's office, Loup was selling near worthless photographic reproductions of Renoir paintings as "authentic Renoir lithographs personally authorized by Paul Renoir." The price ranged up to \$450 apiece and \$2,500 for a set of six.

At the urging of the U.S. attorney, Loup retired voluntarily and agreed to settle the case by offering full refunds.

Outright fraud appears to be relatively rare in the art world today, but high-pressure sales pitches and deliberately ambiguous descriptions of offerings remain a problem with mail-order firms as print collecting grows in

popularity.

Several hundred thousand novice art fanciers have been attracted to print buying by more than a dozen mail-order clubs which have sprung up in the last 10 years.

They include such well-known organizations as the Book of the Month Club (which has a print-oriented subsidiary, Fine Arts 260), and they advertise in such prestigious publications as the New York Times Sunday Magazine, Vogue, Acquire, the New Yorker and House Beautiful.

Some advertisements imply that prints offered for sale may be excellent investments, in addition to whatever merit they may have as attractive decor pieces.

But a number of art experts interviewed by The Sunday News warned novices to be skeptical of the investment aspect of print collecting, especially through mail-order houses, and urged neophyte collectors to educate themselves about prints before getting involved in the hobby.

Printmaking is an art form which includes etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and engravings.

The relatively low cost of prints enables many persons of moderate means to own genuine works of art, as many original impressions can be made from a single plate created by an artist.

However, the study of prints is far from a simple field. Even experts sometimes have difficulty distinguishing among:

- Valuable original prints — impressions made from a matrix designed by an artist, produced in a limited quantity and (for prints made after about 1930) signed and numbered by him.
- "Restrikes," usually unsigned, unnumbered impressions made from an artist's original plate after his death, often reproduced in large numbers without authorization.
- Reproductions, images copied photographically or not made from the original

plate according to Print Council of America standards.

The issue of originality was raised last month in a suit brought by Detroit attorney Richard A. Solomon against Park West Galleries, Inc., of Southfield.

The suit, filed in Oakland County Circuit Court, asks \$50,000 damages in the auction purchase of two prints — one by Cezanne and the other by Renoir — costing Solomon \$225. Each was guaranteed by the gallery to be an authentic "original etching." Solomon maintains they are restrikes worth only \$125.

Albert Scaglione, director of the gallery, explained that he considers restrikes to be original art:

"Our certificate of authenticity means the original plate was cut by the artist," he said. "We did not claim the printing was done by the artist."

Many experts agree that the already-complicated world of print collecting is made even more risky by

mail-order clubs, which may carry offerings which do not rank very high either esthetically or monetarily even if they qualify as originals.

"The level of most art offered by mail is relatively pedestrian," said Sylvan Cole Jr., a prominent New York art dealer. "A number of galleries sell stuff that is suspect enough. Most mail-order clubs are absolutely the pits."

One reason mail-order prints are usually low quality is because better prints find their way into galleries, according to Andrew Robison, president of the Print Council of America and print curator at the Washington's National Gallery of Art.

"Whatever the print's originality, the quality isn't up to snuff no matter what technical criteria it meets," he said recently. "It may be as original as all get-out, but it may have no artistic value and be worthless."

"Mail-order print clubs get hold of copper plate by a major artist like Dali, Renoir or Goya, and there are a

number of plates available. The clubs create confusion by flooding the market with hundreds of unauthorized, unlimited restrike impressions."

One large, well-known club, Collector's Guild, offers "framed, signed and numbered original lithographs four times a year at just \$29.95 (plus shipping and handling)."

In 1968 Collector's Guild attempted to donate lithographs to the Detroit Institute of Arts, apparently to tout this additional fact in advertisements.

But the offering was not accepted, institute records show, primarily because the offerings were judged by curators to be "from unlimited editions practically worthless — decorative and appealing, but not artistically valuable."

Collector's Guild president Robert Ostrow concedes the club uses a different definition of originality from that espoused by the art institute or the Print Council of America.

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The club's 135,000 members apparently either don't mind or don't know the difference. "We give a certificate of originality because to us restrikes are originals," Ostrow said.

"We use the term interchangeably. There are some esthete snobs living in a rarified atmosphere, and they can afford to make statements that our art is pedestrian.

"Our success in popular marketing irks the people who would like to think ownership of art is exclusive to them," he continued. "Mail-order art has brought ownership of original art to the little man and taken away the artificial art mystery."

Other mail-order clubs maintain they are just as good as most galleries, if not better, and offer people who don't live in major art centers a chance to buy high-quality prints usually found only in New York, Paris or London.

"We offer accessibility to quality with a guarantee they can't make a mistake," said Bruce Whyte, president of the 5,000-member Original Print Collectors Group, Ltd., one of the few clubs which periodically offer expensive prints in the \$1,000-and-up range.

"Our members never lose," he said. "We attempt to sell 20 percent under retail and give free delivery. Most people don't know a lot about prints. We can help educate them."

SEVERAL MUSEUM CURATORS, however, said educating yourself is the best way to avoid being taken — and broaden your horizons.

"Print clubs are for lazy collectors not interested in art as a rarity or as something special because they found the print themselves," said Ellen Sharp, print curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

"The way to get more personal reward is to study prints and build up a collection by reading about graphic arts, looking at prints and joining a drawing and print club such as the institute's."

As yet, there are no specific federal or state laws controlling the sale of art or standardizing definitions of originality. Art dealers are not required to provide a warranty of authenticity.

BUT IF A WARRANTY is given, it is legally recognized as part of the selling agreement and gives the buyer a stronger legal stand when suing for fraud, according to Stanley Steinborn, chief assistant state attorney general.

Those who shop by mail or through a gallery are entitled to the things a reputable, professional art dealer would give his clients.

Buyers should receive a bill of sale and a certificate of authenticity fully guaranteeing the size of the edition, the authenticity of the work and the artist's signature.

This information is available for prints made after 1890 and is important because the value is based on the artist's reputation and the rarity of the edition.

Thus a Picasso print in an edition of 50 would be more valuable than a comparable Picasso print in an edition of 200.