From Print to Paint: Analyzing the Influence of Print Culture in Art Museums

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Museum Studies

Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Collections of printed images often make up the largest part of an art museum’s inventory of objects. These images are connected to a history of printing innovation that allowed images to be designed, printed, and sent between cities and countries. As a means of visual communication, print has had a profound impact on art and culture. However, their artistic influence is not often recognized. Prints are looked at as ‘copies,’ contrasted with the rare and unique objects that are celebrated in art museums. This thesis was inspired by the lack of scholarship focusing on the place and purpose of print collections. While there is significant scholarship focusing on prints in the history of art, little has been written about what happens when printed images are institutionalized in art museums. An analysis of print collections exposes much larger issues with curatorial practices and how culture is valued in museums, suggesting a reevaluation of modes of museum display.
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1. Interview Questions
Introduction

This thesis will explore the importance of print collections in art museums, examining how print has been understood in the context of changing social and cultural concepts of ‘art’, and what makes an object a ‘work of art’ in a museum. Aspects of early modern print production will be examined in comparison with public perceptions of printing in order to understand how they have been historically undervalued. It will be argued that these sentiments have caused the continued neglect of printed images, not only as valuable vessels for cultural information, but also as legitimate works of art. Any reference to a ‘museum’ in this discussion applies distinctly to large art museums in North America and Western Europe. The scope of these large collections examines a wide history of visual culture. Ideas about art will be analyzed as constructed concepts, where the meaning of ‘art’ has been developed both inside and outside of art museums. As art museums are places where historical and contemporary culture is preserved, they are also places where constructed concepts of ‘art’ are continually examined and questioned. A discussion of prints reveals the presence of historical hierarchical structures that continue to privilege certain objects associated with ‘high culture’ in art museums. The history of cultural value extends beyond the art museum’s own history and makes the privileging of certain objects less obvious. Consequently, lingering sentiments of nineteenth century cultural values continue to inform how art museums are structured, how art is curated, and presented to the public.
Modern technologies for reproducing images have transformed the ways we experience art and culture. Before travelling to an art museum, we have already become familiar with ‘masterpieces’ of art through reproductions of these works. The quality of these images allows us to familiarize ourselves with the minute details of a work before we ever see it in-person. However, before the advent of digital reproduction and photography, technologies for reproducing images were very different. Printed images were developed using different techniques, revolutionizing the way art could be experienced. Print was a technique for reproducing other art media and a medium for designing and creating original printed compositions. It changed the way art could be seen and opened up a new market for prospective buyers. Since multiple images could be developed in print, they could be purchased by a much larger part of society. Printmakers did not have to rely on the financial contributions of a patron, allowing artists to develop new popular imagery outside the conventional art market. Although printmakers exhibited innovation in their practice and work, print has long been criticized for lacking the originality and rarity of unique art objects. This unfortunate criticism has overshadowed many of the accomplishments of printmakers and the importance of print media in the history of art.

Commonly held ideas about art and culture have been constructed through a complex system of values. These values are the culmination of different social views, institutional perspectives, and academic critiques. Cumulative ideas about art and culture are put on display in art museums. Art museums are complex spaces of representation, where chaotic collections of objects are given a sense of order. They are perceived as authorities on art and are places where the public comes to learn about cultural history. In these institutions there are various systems at play dictating how culture should be
perceived. Some art museums even provide visitors with pamphlets, guiding them towards the works that should be seen to make the most out of their experience. Most of these works are promoted for their social and cultural fame as so-called ‘masterpieces’ of art history. The rarity and the unique presence of art often draws visitors to museums to witness crucial works in Western visual culture. However, some art museums continue to be informed by nineteenth century cultural perspectives, dividing and categorizing different media, and eliminating aspects of production from the analysis of objects. These institutions were often built on a ‘textbook’ style structure. Although these institutions have changed and evolved, this type of structure can be difficult to overcome.

Objects of ‘high culture’ were originally placed in art museums as a means of “influencing popular tastes, values, and behavior,” while cultivating a taste for ‘fine art’ (Bennett 1995, 31). Objects that have been historically considered part of ‘high art’ continue to carry this attribution, which contributes to hierarchies of value and the divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. Many founding collections were built from the collections of wealthy and upper class society. There is sometimes very little indication about where these works of art came from and why they were considered culturally important enough to be placed in a museum. The producers of these works (now called ‘artists’) are treated as revered geniuses, whose work was the product of a divinely inspired process. The story of art that is presented in museums is often very different from the reality of cultural production. Large museums typically continue to exhibit divisions of media, place, and schools of style. These divisions are often apparent in the permanent collection where visitors are guided through chronological representations of art history. However, permanent collection exhibitions are often composed of works that can be used in long-
term displays. Consequently, the division of different media is sometimes dictated by the environmental requirements of some works, preventing light-sensitive prints from becoming part of the art historical discourse in many permanent collection exhibitions. The separation of different media often presents one privileged collection that is given the central focus for defining the history of art in the museum. Although it is not always the case, collections of paintings frequently form the basis of the art museum’s central art historical narrative.

Printmaking broke down many of the divisions between regional styles. Prints could travel between places where they could be seen by hundreds of people. It did not take long for prints to begin influencing the work of other artists. Designs in print came to inspire the production of a variety of different media. Print inspired a complex network of styles and ideas that travelled across borders, even if their creators did not. The sharing of ideas and styles could extend beyond a particular medium, which differs from the way art is divided in museums. A sculpture could inspire a tapestry, just as a print could inspire a painting. The adaptation of different styles and motifs can be examined in the ways art changed after the invention of the printing press. The influence of print transcended artistic hierarchies. However, the prominence of certain media changed the way this influence was remembered and how it is now presented in museums. Persisting cultural hierarchies imply that ‘high’ culture is developed outside the boundaries of what is popular or common. In reality, popular printed imagery had a great influence on the production of ‘high’ art. However, the sharing of images, ideas, and archetypes is a natural part of all artistic production. An artist does not create autonomously, but works in a conscious or unconscious partnership with a variety of affecting influences and determinants.
Consequently, each work in a museum is the product of a variety of interplaying and influencing cultural factors that led to the development of that particular image.

Categorized exhibitions are a product of the Enlightenment interest in developing systematized classes for art (see discussion in Paul, 2003). Visitors to early museums recount an exhausting attempt to engage with crowded arrangements of art that were displayed without any methodical purpose. The crowded displays of art began to transform into divisions between schools and periods, with the intention that visitors could compare the formal elements of these works. Although these displays had a categorical division, visitors would not be able to naturally engage with the arrangements of works. Being able to articulate the differences between works required training to develop an artistic vocabulary. In many cases, books explaining the history of different objects in well-known collections facilitated this training. Readers would have a second-hand familiarity with many of these works from prints that illustrated and provided a visual guide for the writer’s descriptions. These guides and other art historical texts were illustrated by prints, giving meaning to the words written about the most famous paintings and sculptures, and allowing individuals to appreciate art outside of their own regions and countries.

Since the nineteenth century art museums have transformed and have become geared towards serving public interest, though many historical systems for displaying art persist within the museum. Although prints were an important utility for reproducing images and a medium for developing innovative artistic styles, they were not displayed alongside the paintings and sculptures that dominated many of these early collections. While art collectors may have amassed large albums of prints, they were not hung and displayed in the same manner as paintings. Albums lent themselves to close study, rather
than open display. Consequently, prints had to find a place in museums once practices of display had already been established. Practices of display that focused on the formal qualities or aesthetic presentation of a work were designed by curators to showcase paintings, rather than prints. The aesthetic practices for displaying art do not allow prints to exhibit the unique qualities of their artistry, medium, and profound influence on culture and artistic production. Today, curators are not only having to interpret culture, but also act as intermediaries between historical cultural concepts and the contemporary development of museums that are striving to engage visitors beyond the notion of the aesthetic.

Theoretical Approach: Understanding Cultural Theory and Practices of Display

This thesis analyzes the production of printed images, their social and cultural value, and how that value transforms when collections are institutionalized in museums. These concepts are examined, in part, using several key texts. Constructed ideas of ‘art’ are examined using Pierre Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and Paul Mattick Jr.’s *Art and Its Time: Theories and Practices of Modern Aesthetics* (2003). Bourdieu and Mattick provide important analyses of art production and how the art world determines the value of culture. Janet Wolff’s *The Social Production of Art* (1993) and Michael Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* (1988) address issues of artistic production and contextualize art practices. In both cases, clarifying the history of production provides an avenue for better understanding art. These texts identify many cultural issues that are at play in art museums and affect how art is valued.
Exploring modes of museum display associated with print collections proved to be a difficult task. Many curators write catalogues for exhibitions that focus only on the works themselves, rather than what assemblages of prints mean in an art museum. To supplement the lack of scholarship on practices of display that specifically deal with print, I conducted a small number of interviews to understand the practical implications of dealing with a print collection. Two interviews will be highlighted in this thesis. The most insightful interview was with Dr. Freyda Spira, the assistant curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met). During several other interviews I noted a lack of engagement from participants and a disinterest in questions about cultural hierarchies and curating print collections (Appendix 1). These problems forced me to question whether my theoretical ideas about print collections were in opposition to ‘real world’ curatorial practice.

However, it appeared that the subordinate treatment of prints often was left unchallenged because these issues would be difficult for one department to overcome when the problems often related to the overall structure of some art museums.

After my interview with Dr. Spira, my research began to focus on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Prints. The Met has a history of having ‘vocal’ print curators, who have documented their efforts since the Department of Print’s founding in 1916. Generations of curators have constantly reevaluated the meaning and purpose of their collection. In Chapter Three, the Met’s Department of Prints will be examined using the insight from past and present curatorial staff. As founding curator of the Met’s Department of Prints, William Ivins Jr.’s work examines art history and the role of print collections in art museums. Ivins’s successors in the department have continued to develop his work. Consequently, several curators from the Met will be referenced, as their work
presents an important context for examining curatorial practices. Issues with access and the exposure of the print collection are ongoing and have been actively dealt with for decades. Although the Met has addressed problems facing collections of prints, their efforts have not often extended past the curatorial scholarship. Consequently, exhibitions in other museums that have practically addressed these issues will be cited as examples. These exhibitions explore the potential for effectively using collections of prints and dispelling notions of cultural hierarchy in art museums. Additionally, these exhibitions were also selected because they challenged issues of ‘authenticity’ and ‘originality’ and questioned what importance these attributes have in meaning-making in art museums. I have had the opportunity to visit Transformation in Ovid’s Metamorphoses in-person, but relied on exhibition catalogues, brochures, and virtual exhibitions to understand how these issues were approached in other exhibitions that will be highlighted. I chose to select these particular exhibitions because of their unique approach to these issues and their connection to subjects covered in this thesis.

The theoretical approach for understanding the history of printed images will examine the work of printmakers and how consumers used and valued their art. Examining historical and contemporary art historical texts will develop this context. Historical texts provide insight for understanding how images were valued at the time print became a new, vibrant, and developing field. Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects recounts the history of artists working during the Italian Renaissance and is considered one of the first art historical texts. Stories of printmakers represented a significant addition in Vasari’s second edition, published in 1568. The Lives immortalized how many artists were remembered and introduced concepts of genius associated with
artistic production. In addition, Vasari’s commentary confirms several historical assumptions about the undervalued and misunderstood print medium.

Contemporary art historical texts reflect on past and present perceptions about art and print culture. Carl Goldstein’s study on Abraham Bosse in Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print (2012) provides a contemporary reflection on Bosse’s art and scholarship. Additionally, David Landau and Peter Parshall’s The Renaissance Print (1994) and Lisa Pon’s Raphael, Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance Print (2004), examine the production of print, their public reception, and issues of authorship. These texts, among the others referenced in this thesis, have been united in my research to survey essential studies on art and print culture to support my discussion and examine critically the history of printed images and their place in art museums today.

Case Study: The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Prints

Chapter Three will incorporate a case study of the Met’s Department of Prints to address some of the practical implications of working with a large collection of prints. The Department's history will be surveyed to understand its purpose and place within a traditionally structured ‘encyclopaedic’ art museum. The structure of the Met’s galleries presents a survey of art history that is primarily represented by the museum’s permanent collection of paintings. Within this structure, the Department of Prints was developed. The case study will examine the development of the Met’s Department of Prints through curatorial scholarship that examined the purpose and potential of the collection in relation to the rest of the museum. Although the Met was conceived as a public institution, it was
criticized for catering to the elite citizens who were part of the museum's board of trustees or donated significant collections to the museum (Duncan 1995, 59). However, the Department of Prints was established to serve the public. The scope of the print collection was developed to relate to other departments in the museum and looked to have an active place amongst these collections in the main gallery spaces.

The curators that will be examined wanted to find ways to use the print collection to connect the public to a wider scope of visual culture in the history of art. However, issues of conservation and the dominating ‘encyclopaedic’ structure of the institution have kept the print collection segregated to select galleries. Several issues highlighted in the Met case study represent problems facing print collections that are related to ideological theories about reproductive arts and practical issues associated with the delicate nature of works on paper. More recently, several print collections, including the Met, have focused on digitizing collections as a means of mitigating issues of public access. Consequently, a large part of the collection has become available through high-resolution images online. Although these contributions are important for the future of print collections, this thesis will not be exploring the use of online digital collections of prints. Although online digital collections allow prints to become more accessible to the public, I am interested in examining how visitors can be engaged with prints in the gallery space. Within the discussion of the Met and modes of display, I will examine how prints can have a physical presence in the gallery space in order to become part of the larger art historical discourse of the museum.
Defining ‘Print’

The common presence of print in everyday life makes it necessary to ask: what is a print and what will the term ‘print’ refer to in this thesis? The processes and materials for creating printed images are varied and have been used to develop diverse stylistic effects. However, in this thesis the term ‘print’ will be used to represent all printed images. As a point of reference, William Ivins Jr.’s definition of ‘print’ will be used to delineate the printed artwork discussed. Ivins, the founding curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department in Prints, described ‘print’ as: “an image made by a process that is capable of producing a number of exact duplicates. Such an image cannot be made directly by hand, for no copy is like the original from which it is copied, and no copies are alike” (Ivins 1943, 153). Marks made by the hand are only found in the designs for images that would later be transferred to the printing surface. The image would then be transcribed to create impressions on a wooden block or metal plate. However, the person responsible for developing the design would not always be responsible for carving the impression of the image onto the printing surface. Both aspects of the production of a print were equally important and required knowledge of developing a design that could be faithfully captured in a printed impression. Ivins’s statement that a print “cannot be made directly by hand” will be important for understanding how the production of printed images has impacted the manner in which they are valued.

The works that will be discussed come from the family of relief and intaglio prints. The two most significant types of relief prints are woodcut and metalcut. Woodcut is the oldest process and was first used in Europe in the early fifteenth century (Ivins 1943, 5). Creating a woodcut or metalcut block would involve removing all the negative space with
small knives and gouges (or punches and engraving tools for metalcut) to define the lines on the block that will create the printed image (Plate 1). The negative space describes the areas of the printing surface that are removed to reveal the subject of the image (Plate 2). Woodcuts were an inexpensive technique for reproducing images and were often used to print illustrations for books (Ivins 1943, 12). Intaglio printing processes have two prominent methods: etching, and engraving. Etching involves a process where lines are chemically eroded from a metal plate. The etching plate is coated with a wax ground and blackened with smoke. The plate design is made using an etching needle or sharp tool that makes an impression on the wax surface (Plate 3). The areas where the wax has been worn away will erode when the plate is placed in an acid bath. In contrast, designs for engraving are creating using a v-shaped tool (often called a ‘burin’) to remove metal from the plate (Plate 4). These processes were sometimes used in conjunction to create varied effects on a single plate. The selection of a specific type of printing process would be based on the number of impressions that were hoped to come from one image, the desired detail, and the financial cost of a project.

Chapter Overview

Chapter One presents an overview of print culture studies and relevant art historical texts that examine the history of printed images. An analysis of printed images opens up a discussion of many other concepts about visual culture and how they are exhibited in art museums. Constructed concepts about ‘art’ will be examined to explore how these ideas have developed and suggests that no definitive concept of ‘art’ exists. Not all prints are considered ‘works of art’ in a collection, but this raises the question of what ‘artful’ attributes are they lacking in comparison to other objects. Many works only became ‘art’
once they became part of a museum collection. *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and their Public*, an exhibition held at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. in 2005, will be briefly examined as an example that challenged anachronistic aesthetic values upheld by some art museums. The exhibition examined the functional history of printed images that were not created with the intention that they be valued as ‘works of art.’

The constructed concept of the ‘artist’ will be examined in Chapter Two, in relation to social perceptions that determine the value of cultural production. Abraham Bosse and Albrecht Dürer will be highlighted as artists that used their work to elevate public perceptions of printmaking and highlighted prejudices against reproductive media. While printmaking was thought of as a dirty and ‘mechanical’ practice, I argue that it was not vastly different from the production of painting. These stories provide a context for how the value of printmaking evolved before collections of prints became part of art museums. The social and cultural history of print will be examined up until the late nineteenth century to understand how prints were valued at the time art museums were becoming public institutions.

Chapter Three explores the practical implications of curating collections of prints in art museums. The so-called ‘aura’ of the unique art object will be examined as an ‘extra-aesthetic’ feature that is given particular importance in museums. The concept of ‘aura,’ theorized by Walter Benjamin, has its roots in nineteenth century ideas of originality and continues to be an important concept in the display of objects in art museums. The idea of ‘aura’ will be examined in relation to curatorial practices and the decontextualized gallery space. Practices of display often dictate the importance of an art object and indicate the
objects that are most valued by the institution. The Metropolitan Museum of Art will be closely examined as curators in the Department of Prints have consciously addressed prejudices against the printed medium and the environmental difficulties of displaying print collections. Although the Met has recognized many issues facing print collections, I will critically examine their inability, in the face of continuing institutional pressures, to resolve many of these issues beyond speculation in the scholarship of their curators. However, to supplement this shortcoming I will cite several exhibitions from institutions that are beginning to develop strategies that challenge the authority of ‘unique’ objects and mediating issues associated with traditional cultural hierarchies. The chapter will end by examining how art historical narratives could change through integrating exhibitions of different media, developing a coherent image of cultural production, and dismantling traditional ideas associated with ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.
Chapter One

Print and the Theory of ‘Art’

Historical printed images are most commonly encountered in art museums. Their presence in art museums implies that these pictures are important and have cultural value that should be preserved. The printing press introduced a mechanical means for duplicating text and images that had far-reaching social and cultural impacts. However, printed images have had an uneasy relationship with the concept of ‘art.’ In this chapter, I will begin by reviewing how previous studies in print culture and art history have neglected to acknowledge this impact. On the one hand, art history fails to recognize the cultural importance of the repeatable image; on the other, print culture studies have focused on examining the social consequences of printed text, rather than printed images. Both forms of study do not broaden their field to examine a wider scope of print culture. However, the field of visual studies has acknowledged the larger social and cultural implications of the printed medium as a vehicle for communication.

The influence of theories of aesthetics on the art museum often mystifies the nature of art history and fails to recognize important traits of production, which are amongst the most integral aspects for understanding art as a product of culture. Following the literature review, this chapter will also examine concepts of cultural value and how cultural value is developed in art museums. Value is a contingent, rather than an inherent, concept in art. Consequently, no art object in a museum can be thought of as having an inherent and unchangeable value. Similarly, the concept of ‘art’ is also constructed and contingent on the qualities of ‘art’ ascribed to certain objects. Many objects in art museums were not created
with the specific intention of being a ‘work of art.’ However, in the context of the gallery space their meaning is transformed. I will argue that theories of aesthetics continue to impact what is or is not institutionally accepted as ‘art’ and to devalue collections of prints. *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and their Public* will be examined as an exhibition that highlighted the persisting connection between art history, aesthetics, and art museums.

**Literature Review: The Impact of the Printing Revolution and the Printed Image**

The development of printing technologies in the late fifteenth century had profound social and cultural impacts. The production of images and texts began to move from the workshop of a scribe or illuminator, to studios that were devoted to the production of print. In her foundational text, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Elizabeth Eisenstein explores the multifaceted significance of printing technologies. As technologies evolved, printing became a means of distributing information in large quantities to an even larger section of society. Eisenstein’s work did not look to expand on earlier published work about Gutenberg’s inventions, but addresses what happened once these technologies became a common medium for reproducing images and text (Eisenstein 2005, 4). The impact of Gutenberg’s inventions was understood to be significant, but little had been written about what the resulting effect was. Eisenstein examines the printing press, not as the agent of change, but as a technological development that has been historically underestimated (Eisenstein 2005, xviii). The development of ‘print culture’ is an important concept for understanding the far-reaching impact of print technologies in Europe and the effect that printed images have had on the history of art and culture. Roger Chartier’s
definition of ‘print culture’ refers to “the profound transformations that the discovery and then the extended use of the new technique for the reproduction of texts brought to all domains of life, public and private, spiritual and material” (Bourke and Chartier 2014, 1). Although Chartier only references the reproduction of texts in this definition, the reproduction of printed images had an equally affecting influence on everyday life.

One of the most important aspects to recognize when discussing the impact of print culture is that all images and texts were previously handmade. In European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, Ernst Robert Curtius recognized this, noting “the immense and revolutionary change which it [the invention of printing] brought about can be summarized in one sentence: Until that time every book was a manuscript” (Curtius 1953, 238). While this statement acknowledges the significance of technologies that allowed for the large-scale production of books and printed text, it can also be important for recognizing the impact of printed images. Before printing presses allowed print to become a facet of everyday life, images could not be reproduced on a large scale. Images were limited to unique objects and unavailable to individuals who could not afford to purchase a handcrafted picture. This is particularly true for devotional images that served an important function in everyday life. While religious icons and altarpieces could be found in places of worship, printing allowed devotional images to be easily reproduced and they became an essential part of everyday worship at home (Landau and Parshall 1994, 82).

An important distinction between the print culture of images and the print culture of text is that printed images had a very different relationship to paintings than manuscripts had with printed text. In his article “Prints and the Definitive Image,” Charles Talbot makes this distinction: “Since a print was a thing apart from any work of art painted
on panel or carved in stone or wood, it could never replace the other in the way that letterpress could place manuscript” (Talbot 1986, 191). Talbot argues that printed images were perceived much differently because there was a less recognizable relationship between printed images and paintings. Viewers of printed images would perceive them differently from paintings because they were created using different materials and bore less of a physical resemblance to paintings. However, printed text was much simpler in design than illuminated manuscripts. Talbot states, “The viewer would respond with certain preconceptions to an image according to whether it was a print, painting, or sculpture” (Talbot 1986, 191). I believe these ‘preconceptions’ were dictated by the cultural value associated with a print, painting, or sculpture. The relationship between printed images and painting was arguably different because painting was a glorified practice and the work of a scribe was not. The unique presence of a painting could not be replaced by a seemingly ‘mechanical’ means for reproducing images. This essential concept will be examined in Chapter Two in an analysis of print production and public perceptions of printed images.

The printing press provided printmakers with the ability to reproduce hundreds or thousands of the same pictures. These images could exist simultaneously, in multiple countries across the world, in ways the manuscript illuminators, painters, and sculptors were not capable of in their own medium (Spear 1989, 98). By the late sixteenth century, engravings could easily be issued in editions of thousands, while woodcuts resulted in an even greater number of impressions from a single block (Pon 2004, 5). Etching was the most fragile of the printing types and would yield the least number of impressions. Printed text would yield a similar number of copies to engraving. Eisenstein notes that an “average"
edition of a text ranged between two hundred and one thousand copies (Eisenstein 2005, 8). Many of these texts would have also included printed illustrations. In *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800*, Febvre and Martin also acknowledged the revolutionary impact from the number of copies that could be created from a single text:

> the printed book was something more than a triumph of technical ingenuity, but was also one of the most potent agents at the disposal of western civilization in bringing together the scattered ideas of representative thinkers... Fresh concepts crossed whole regions of the globe in the very shortest time, wherever language did not deny them access. (Febvre and Martin 1976, 10-11)

While *The Coming of the Book* mainly focuses on the history of printed books, Febvre and Martin include a section that illustrates the equally important history of printed images.

Febvre and Martin examine how printed illustrations changed in books and what their connection was to printed text. Early printed illustrations were developed “always to amplify the text and make it concretely real, not to produce a work of art” (Febvre and Martin 1976, 91). However, the authors recognize the importance of printed images as a form of visual communication. This relationship between printed images and communication is highlighted in Michèle Martin’s *Images at War: Illustrated Periodicals and Constructed Nations*. Martin’s account explores the history of the ‘illustrated press,’ which were nineteenth century newspapers that placed a particular importance on the printed images that illustrated current events. Unlike other studies of print culture, Martin’s analysis of the illustrated press considers the printed text as secondarily important to the images in these publications. These images ranged from “factual to sensational,” exploring a variety of different themes that were left unchallenged as these papers were the only major source of mass-distributed imagery (Martin 2006, 6). Consequently, these printed images played an important part in shaping public interest and how current events were
perceived. The illustrated press demonstrated the impact that images had on collective national memory using “the powerful visual representation of symbols and stereotypes to gain access to an illiterate public impossible to reach through the written press” (Martin 2006, 8). Although these images were intended for communicating current events, there was a considerable amount of artistry involved in making them informative, visually appealing, and compelling images. The visual appeal of these images was also an essential part of keeping these publications profitable.

Visual studies literature has placed a similar importance on images as a complex form of visual communication. In Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation, W.J.T. Mitchell understands pictures and texts as ‘mixed media,’ as “there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism” (Mitchell 1994, 5). The desire to analyze printed images and text separately prevents them from being understood and appreciated together. This is especially important for printed books, which often include text and images. The separation of text and image as two distinctive areas of scholarship has also been a flaw of many print culture studies. Additionally, images are not simply visual. The meaning of images is verbally expressed in speech and in writing. Mitchell’s account provides an important context for understanding the meaning of images when they infiltrate so much of present-day life. Images are sometimes personified, focusing on what we want them to tell us and often overlooking what these images want to tell us. This point is particularly important in art museums, where curatorial perspectives can mystify or misrepresent what an image is trying to communicate to viewers.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright have examined the importance of the repeatable image and its tenuous place in the history of art. Sturken and Cartwright suggest, “It is
nevertheless the case that a valuing of the original, uncopied work has dominated the history of images. The work of art has been regarded throughout history as a unique and original object, with its meaning and value tied to the importance of the place in which it resided” (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 190). Museums are an example of a space where representation and meaning are developed. The dominance of original, unique works of art will be discussed throughout this thesis. The preoccupation with the ‘original’ becomes problematic when dealing with prints, as there are no originals. Sturken and Cartwright note that the casting of a bronze sculpture has a similarly paradoxical relationship with the idea of ‘original’ (Sturken and Cartwright 2009, 190). Each bronze cast is an original because no unique form of the sculpture could exist. These sculptures are taken from a cast, which is the vehicle for developing the impression of the figure in bronze. Similarly, prints are impressions taken from a carved plate or block. The block cannot be the original as it is a material used to develop the printed image. Sturken and Cartwright recognize an important issue with printed images: unique originality has been an important factor in determining value in the history of art. However, this issue is impossible for printed images to overcome. The medium of print inherently lends itself to reproduction, which has allowed these images to have such a profound impact on artistic production.

The influence of iconography transcended national boundaries that were often defined by specific stylistic traits in their artistic production. Even as an arguably ‘minor’ art form, Febvre and Martin state that prints were a force for the “diffusion of iconographic themes” (1976, 94). The exchange of styles was noted early in Giorgio Vasari’s Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, initially published in 1550. In one instance, Vasari recalls a painting by Jacopo da Pontormo that included landscape “taken for the most part from an engraving by Albrecht Dürer” (Vasari 1996, 354). Vasari’s
commentary on the influence of prints in Italian painting also recognizes important issues in sixteenth century printmaking: the questions of authorship and intellectual property. The ‘adaptation’ of prints into paintings illustrates the culture of copying in Renaissance Italy and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. In *Raphael, Dürer and Marcantonio Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance Print*, Lisa Pon discusses aspects of the Renaissance culture of copying and the printmakers’ desire to have ownership of their images. Pon’s text brings together an art historical analysis of printmaking with an examination of the social issues and prejudices encountered by Renaissance artists working in print.

Febvre and Martin recognized many of the prejudices that were levied against printed images. Printed illustrations were often looked at as simplifications of stories for those who could not read. Febvre and Martin state: “the first humanists, especially those of the late 15th and 16th centuries, scholars before all else, showed as much disdain for illustrated books as the theologians of the Sorbonne. Wasn’t an illustration merely a simple way to instruct those who were too ignorant to read the text?” (1976, 98). In contrast to Eisenstein, Febvre and Martin make the prejudices against print obvious. Eisenstein alludes to them, but does not specifically tackle negative social perception towards early print culture. Particularly in the sixteenth century, which has been described as “an age of painters,” prints were often for less wealthy individuals who “kept copper engravings as their ‘poor man’s picture gallery’” (Febvre and Martin 1976, 100). Despite the impact of prints on the history of art and as communicator of visual culture, their common association with middle and lower class individuals allowed them to be frequently defined as a ‘minor art’.
The effect that early print culture had on various aspects of society is present in the material that remains from this period of time. While most scholars of print culture focus on the history and impact of printed text, the history of printed pictures presents an equally formidable saga that is now preserved in the collections of most art museums. Eisenstein recognized this issue, stating: “it is too often forgotten that images replicated on wood and metal were introduced at more or less the same time as Gutenberg’s invention” (Eisenstein 1997, 1061). Similarly, Ivins believed the ability to create “the exactly repeatable pictorial statement” was just as important as Gutenberg inventing moveable type (Ivins 1969, 2). The fact that new technologies for replicating text and images emerged concurrently is important for understanding the overall impact of print both intellectually and culturally. Ivins’s *Prints and Visual Communication* presents the history of print in art, but also presents the history of print as a form of communication. *Prints and Visual Communication* is an important text as Ivins’s museological perspective is infused in his scholarly examination of printed images.

**Constructing Concepts of ‘Art’**

There is no simple definition of art, there are only theories that have informed how it is categorized and valued. The idea of art is a socially and culturally constructed concept. Objects categorized as ‘works of art’ have been glorified in art museums. What is designated as ‘art’ is accompanied by a series of understandings, supported by social institutions and theories that uphold the idea of what ‘art’ is. Providing a definition of art would be haphazard as the works that have come to be associated with the idea of ‘art’ are so varied that it is impossible to unify them in one description. However, while art cannot
be defined, it can and has been theorized for hundreds of years. The development of the modern concept of art coincides with emerging theories of aesthetics, artistic autonomy, and creativity. These theories support and refute what can and cannot be judged as ‘art.’ Challenges to these concepts have been posed in art museums, where the question of whether or not an object belongs calls for a reevaluation of these theories. These theories have contributed to the divide between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and have historically devalued ‘mechanical’ art forms such as printing. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer illustrated this divide in their critique of the ‘culture industry.’ The ‘culture industry’ is characterized as the conversion of high culture into commoditized culture that is consumed by a large audience (see Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). Commoditized culture posed a threat to unique works of art and developed a negative association with reproductive arts as an equally legitimate medium for artistic innovation and invention.

**Cultural Value and the Art Museum**

As the concept of art evolved, it came to represent objects of many genres, styles, and media. For many museum visitors, an object is a work of art simply because it is housed in a building made to preserve and display ‘art.’ The act of displaying “historic or cultural objects literally or figuratively on a pedestal” exhibits the art museum’s authority in choosing to display something and presenting it to the public as ‘art’ (Newall 2012, 296). The authority that an art museum has in making these judgments comes from their connection to the ‘art world’ and other social institutions that conceptualize the meaning and value of ‘art.’ In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu states, “the art object... is an artifact whose foundation can only be found in an art world, this is, in a social universe that confers upon it the status of a candidate for aesthetic appreciation” (Bourdieu
1993, 254). This social universe (the art world) is an aspect of production separate from the physical making of the object. The art world includes social agents such as museums, galleries, academics, and art critics that "help to define and produce the value of the work of art" (Bourdieu 1993, 37). The art world produces the symbolic meaning of an object, or in the case of the museum, it produces meaning about why objects should be valued and preserved in such an institution. As part of the art world, museums preserve and exhibit artwork both materially and symbolically (Bourdieu 1993, 36).

‘Value’ is a term that is commonly used to define the importance of an art object. How is this concept of ‘value’ developed and how is one object considered more valuable than another? In art museums, there is a link between cultural value and public value that validates the presence of an object in a collection. The forces of the ‘art world’ develop meaning that translates to the display of objects in art museums and the value that an object has in an art collection. John Frow suggests, “the regimes that make up the domain of ‘high’ culture consist of sets of interlocking institutions framing particular kinds of practice and producing certain axiological regularities” (Frow 2001, 301). However, the ideas of cultural value that are at play in art museums are part of an extended history of social interactions with art objects.

Art museums become the epicenter where cultural value can be questioned in relation to concepts of public value. Consequently, what makes an object a ‘valuable’ work of art is much more dubious since the constructed concept of this value may have significant historical precedents. Frow explains, “no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and
mechanisms of signification” (Frow 2001, 301). Without any intrinsic value, objects in art museums cannot be understood as inherently valuable and the value of these objects should not be assumed simply because they have become part of an institutional collection. This concept of ‘value’ is changeable, as Frow suggests, but contingent on the institutions that give an object value. Although works in art museums have been recognized for having some kind of value, there is no reason why this value should not be constantly reconsidered.

The idea of ‘public value’ has become an important part of deciphering the significance of an art museum’s collection. Art museums no longer use collections as moralizing tools, but as access points for engagement and education (see Duncan, 1995). Consequently, the process of reassessing the value of an object also involves developing new interpretive strategies for engaging the public. However, Bennett suggests that art museums continue to struggle to illustrate the value of objects to the public. Bennett states,

[In art galleries, theory, understood as a particular set of explanatory and evaluative categories and principles of classification, mediates the relations between visitors and the art on display in such a way that, for some but not others, seeing the art exhibited serves as a means of seeing through artefacts to see an invisible order of significance that they have been arranged to represent” (Bennett 1995, 165)

Seeing ‘through’ objects involves a process of understanding the cultural importance that transform a certain object into a ‘work of art.’ If concepts of art and value are not being re-evaluated then existing cultural hierarchies are often maintained. Superficial features associated with ‘name-brand artists,’ as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, continue to be important determinants for how objects are interpreted and valued (Mitchell 1994, 209). Consequently, constructions of ‘value’ and ‘art’ are continuously at play. And, as Frow
reminds us “value is always value for, always tied to some valuing group” (Frow 2001, 299). A certain group always develops the value of a work of art through a process of social evaluation. Without any intrinsic value, there cannot be a concrete notion of a ‘masterpiece’ or even a ‘work of art.’ These terms are all value-based judgments, founded on institutional perspectives. The cultural value associated with these terms is ascribed to an object and transforms its meaning in the space of an art museum.

The ‘Autonomous’ Art Object

Printed images provide an interesting case study for debating what ‘art’ is and how it is valued in an art museum. Discourses about ‘art’ put print in an ambiguous category. While collections of prints can be found in most major art museums, they are not always treated as sacrosanct works of ‘art.’ Some of what is housed in these collections challenges ideas about what may or may not be institutionally accepted as art. At the Met, curator Janet S. Byrne explains that the choice to collect various prints was not based on whether or not they could be academically evaluated as ‘art,’ but ultimately selected for their usefulness “in illustration, documentation, or exhibition in an art museum” (Byrne 1989, 286). Before Byrne, William Ivins was criticized for making ‘unpopular’ purchases for the Department during his tenure as curator. He recalled being scolded by “gentleman of the older school” for purchasing “horrid rough woodcuts” by Dürer and Lucas Cranach when he could have bought wood engravings from individuals considered to be ‘masters’ (Ivins 1969, 114). Discussions concerning which objects do not belong in an art museum prompt questions about artistic intention and why some objects are identified as ‘art.’
The issue of intention and the idea of the 'work of art' become problematic when surveying a wide history of culture. This becomes particularly difficult in 'encyclopaedic art museums' that categorize and survey a wide scope of cultural artifacts from different periods of time and regions of the world. The intention to create a 'work of art,' in the sense that we know it today, would have been impossible for artists before the eighteenth or even the nineteenth centuries. The development of art theories elevated the meaning of 'art' from a human skill, to 'Art' signifying “the ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ arts” (Williams 1960, xiii). The traits of ‘imagination’ and ‘creation’ created a distinction between ‘artists’ and those who would be referred to as ‘artisans’, a “skilled manual worker, without intellectual or imagination or creative purposes” – a concept that was also popularized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Williams 1976, 41). Amongst the theories that contributed to the modern concept of art is Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which laid the foundation for modern aesthetic theory. Paul Mattick has argued that Kant believed that “Art is the product of the creative genius, for whom technical training and the imitation of the ancients serve to shape a soul that will spontaneously generate new forms” (Mattick 2003, 41). Kant’s ideas about aesthetics led to the conceptualization of art as “the autonomously meaningful object” (Mattick 2003, 24). The ‘autonomous’ object supports an aesthetic experience without any reference to its context.

Art museums that present objects independently, without any explanatory remarks, rely solely on their aesthetic qualities to make them meaningful objects. This creates a divide between the visible and invisible qualities that are represented by objects in an art museum. Tony Bennett writes, “the relations between the visible and invisible also plays a role in organizing a distinction between those... who can see only what is visibly on display
and those who are additionally able to see the invisible realities [of art]” (Bennett 1995, 164). The invisible qualities that make an object a ‘work of art’ are inaccessible to many museum visitors if they are presented without context. Bourdieu believes that an uninitiated perception through an analysis of the formal faculties of art will not allow individuals to understand these images, but places them in the “position identical to that of ethnologists who find themselves in a foreign society and present... at a ritual to which they do not hold the key” (Bourdieu 1993, 217). This practice of display disadvantages both the objects and the viewers by failing to present ‘works of art’ as cultural texts. All work found in art museums are remnants of a period of cultural history, regardless of the aesthetic qualities that they may or may not possess.

**Aesthetics and Early Modern Art**

Early modern artwork was often created for a functional purpose and in accordance with the demands of the patron. The advent of aesthetics marked a shift in the production of art for a functional purpose, to the production of art for purposes of enjoyment. These changes in the purpose for making art were “increasingly detached from their earlier functional contexts, and played a role in the definition of this practice as conceptually opposed to trade” (Mattick 2003, 39). Michael Baxandall illustrates the connection between money and the production of painting in fifteenth century Italy. The bespoke pictures produced by these artists (who would likely be seen as craftsmen in this period) were the product of a financial transaction. The artist executed their work based on the demands of the patron who specified the material used and set requirements for the outcome of the composition. He cites several examples of contracts from commissioned paintings. A letter from 1457
sent to Giovanni di Cosimo de’ Medici from Florentine painter Filippo Lippi, highlights the relationship between the patron and painter in their transaction:

I have done what you told me on the painting and applied myself scrupulously to each thing... Now, Giovanni, I am altogether your servant here, and shall be so in deed. I have fourteen florins from you, and I wrote to you that my expenses would come to thirty florins, and it comes to that much because the picture is rich in ornament. If you agree... to give me sixty florins to include materials, gold, gilding, and painting, with Bartolomeo acting as I suggest, I will for my part, so as to cause you less trouble, have the picture finished completely by 20 August, with Bartolomeo as my guarantor... And to keep you informed, I send a drawing of how the triptych is made of wood and with its height and breadth. (Baxandall 1988, 3-4)

Baxandall’s comment that “money is very important in the history of art” (Baxandall 1988, 1) accurately illustrates the economic history which has and will always be tied to cultural production. By sending de’ Medici a drawing of the work, Lippi was looking for approval from his patron. The exchange between an artist and a patron dictated the outcome of the work and framed the development of the composition.

Kant opposed constraints on artistic practice and believed the artist should be able to express the “free use of his cognitive powers” (Kant 1787, 186). Kant’s basic principle for artistic production is work that is created autonomously and freely. The idea of artistic autonomy creates an inaccurate vision of the social aspects involved in the production of art in any age. Although relationships between artists and the art buying public have changed since the early modern period, it has always been a determining factor in what kind of art is produced and how it is produced. In Lippi’s case, he was fulfilling requirements for devotional altarpieces in the Quattrocento. Displaying Lippi’s work as an aesthetic object in an art museum would not illuminate aspects of its features as they are connected to its production and devotional context. The brightness in the gold leaf and the
luminosity of the Ultramarine would have likely been specifications of a patron and special additions that a patron would have had to pay extra for. The purpose of work like the de’Medici altarpiece was to create an object that could be used for worship. The aesthetics of the triptych would not have had a leading role in the development of the work. The work may be considered beautiful, but the aesthetics of the object were not the end purpose of the commission.

Aesthetics and Early Modern Printed Images

The production of printed works is often at odds with modern concepts of art and aesthetics. The creation of multiple images is inherently linked to commercial practices for developing prints that often served a functional purpose. Aesthetic theories of art created a divide between ‘art’ and ‘craft,’ which included mechanical arts. Williams recognized that the eighteenth century definition of art and artist included a “special reference to the exclusion of engravers from the new Royal Academy,” as the work was often thought of as mechanical and inferior to the capabilities required of true artists (Williams 1976, 41). The effect of eighteenth and nineteenth century art theory and aesthetics has influenced art museums and often led to the treatment of prints as subordinate objects.

Keith Moxey has suggested, “early prints (especially woodcuts) have long been ignored, primarily because they do not measure up to the ‘anachronistic aesthetic values’ imposed by traditional art history” (Moxey 1989, 2). This subject was examined in the exhibition Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and their Public at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington D.C. (2005). David S. Areford believed the lasting impact of the exhibition “was the presentation of prints as objects that served functions far
beyond the aesthetic” (Areford 2010, 7). The exhibition brought together more than one hundred prints, including several works that had never been exhibited (Areford 2010, 7). The exhibition challenged traditional presentations of art, choosing to value the works for their functional histories, rather than their aesthetic qualities. Many of the prints were grouped together and presented in cases, instead of being hung individually on the wall. By using cases, the curators found a way to uniquely display the printed medium, without solely resorting to traditional hanging practices. Several of the prints included in cases had been pasted into early printed books. The works in the cases provided a context for the prints hanging on the wall by exhibiting how many of them were originally used. The exhibition focused on the functional context of these objects in an institutional setting that often preferences the aesthetic qualities of art. The National Gallery of Art is largely devoid of interpretative labels or panels to go beyond listing the basic specifications of an individual work. In some rooms, the labels are designed to virtually blend into the surrounding walls to prevent any disruption of the aesthetic experience (Plate 5). However, by reintroducing the social context of these works in this exhibition, the curators were able to present the ‘invisible’ significance of the objects, that would otherwise be lost if they were displayed as autonomously meaningful, aesthetic objects.

Critics acknowledged the challenge the exhibition posed to existing practices of display in art museums. Washington Post writer Blake Gopnik wrote, “It has taken a while, but here it is: a National Gallery exhibition full of ugly art” (Areford 2010, 7). Gopnik

1 Blake Gopnik is an accomplished art critic. He holds a PhD in Art History from the University of Oxford, with a focus in Renaissance painting. He has worked as an art critic for the Globe and Mail and the Washington Post.
recognized that the exhibition was challenging ideas about aesthetic beauty and the idea of art. In his review, Gopnik wrote “some people feel that for a show... to concentrate on such objects of non-art is a kind of betrayal of the mission of museums and art history” (Gopnik, 2005). His statement presents the problem of ‘art’ as something that can be ascribed to only certain cultural objects in art museums and the primary association of art history with aesthetics. Although Gopnik’s statement comes from the position of critic, it reveals an important popular perspective: the connection between aesthetics and art museums. Artistic production was an important concept in this exhibition, which is something that continues to be missing from the narratives of some art museums. Function was prominently featured in the analysis of prints in this exhibition. Curator Peter Parshall explains, “our exhibition concentrated on the reception of these objects, that is to say the many different ways in which they were deployed by those who acquired them” (Parshall 2009, 10). The exhibition used these prints as a vehicle for posing an important question: what is ‘art’ and how does this concept affect what is considered culturally important in large institutions like the National Gallery?

In contrast to the two-dimensional, monochromatic nature of prints, the celebrated aesthetic triumphs of painting and sculpture can make printed images appear to be physically subordinate objects. Ivins recognized the irony in the relationship between the aesthetic scholarship and views of prints as subordinate objects. Ivins writes, whenever we read a book on aesthetic theory “written prior to about the beginning of the first world war, it is well to ask ourselves to what extent the writer had both a dependable memory and a first hand acquaintance with the objects he referred to, to what extent he knew them through reproductions” (Ivins 1969, 90). In a remark made by Bernard Bosanquet in a
footnote from the *History of Aesthetic* (1892), he admits to writing about some works of art without seeing them in-person. If Bosanquet had never seen the original works, he would have needed to use reproductions (likely engravings) as a visual reference. Choosing to reveal this detail in a footnote may have been Bosanquet’s attempt to hide this from the reader. In turn, Ivins argues that Bosanquet’s remark logically “wrecked most of the biggest tanks in the armies of eighteenth and nineteenth century connoisseurship and aesthetics” (Ivins 1969, 90). How could theorists of aesthetics base their ambitious remarks on ‘fine art’ using images from a medium that they regarded as a lesser, mechanical, craft?

Ivins believed that the focus on the idea of prints as ‘works of art’ was counterintuitive. All cultural artifacts should be ascribed value based on how they represent cultural history. He claimed, “the principle function of the printed picture in western Europe and America has been obscured by the persistent habit of regarding prints as of interest and value only in so far as they can be regarded as works of art” (Ivins 1969, 1). Although Ivins spoke about prints, the same could be said of all cultural products and their relationship to the idea of a ‘work of art.’ They should be separated from “the accident of rarity or what for the moment we may regard as aesthetic merit” (Ivins 1969, 3), and be analyzed from the perspective that they are conveyors of information and we are receivers of their information. Continuing to value works of art for their aesthetic qualities or rarity prevents cultural history from being truly understood. By focusing on the formal qualities of a work, informational aspects of art are obscured by eliminating their history of production and allows constructed concept of ‘art’ to determine how value is attributed to culture in art museums.
Constructed concepts of ‘art’ have evolved and continually conceptualized what objects can or cannot be considered a ‘work of art.’ The idea that this concept is constructed and that value is always contingent is important for understanding the meaning of objects in art museums. No work of art can have an inherent value; consequently value can constantly evolve in the space of an art museum. However, this value can only be reconsidered if an art museum chooses to introduce new narratives to reevaluate the object’s meaning. The persisting connection between eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic theory and art museums devalues certain objects, including many prints. Examining art objects beyond their aesthetic features can reveal intriguing information about their production and social purpose. It can also reveal how the value of certain art media has been historically transformed and has impacted how these objects were valued at the time they became part of an art museum collection. In addition to constructed concepts of ‘art,’ the idea of an ‘artist’ has been equally conceptualized. The difference between the concept of ‘artist’ and ‘craftsman’ are importance distinctions associated with the cultural production of print and will be discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter Two

The Social and Cultural Production of Printmaking

The development of all cultural products involves a process of production. This production does not simply involve an artist, working alone in a studio, but involves a variety of interplaying factors which determine what is being made, how it is made, and who it is being made for. When these cultural products are put on display in a museum, they are not called ‘products’; they are called ‘art’. Calling these objects ‘art’ neglects many of the social and cultural processes of production that caused them to be made. The term ‘art’ serves as a unifying term that group objects of visual culture together, without distinguishing the qualities of their production. In The Social Production of Art, Janet Wolff demystifies the romantic notion of art as “transcending existence, society, and time” and argues that cultural production is tied to and influenced by many historical factors (Wolff 1993, 1). By recognizing works of art as cultural products, their creation and purpose can be historically situated and understood through analyzing aspects of production.

In this chapter, the history of print production will be examined to understand how prints came to be valued – or undervalued – in art museums today. An account of the connection between printmakers, cultural production, and the social perception of print is important for understanding how print has been valued. This chapter will also examine the work of Abraham Bosse and Albrecht Dürer, two artists that used the printed medium to showcase their artistic abilities and elevate the social status of print as a form of art. This
chapter ends by assessing how theories of ‘genius’ and a preference for ‘unique,’ ‘original’ works of art creating lasting impressions that impacted how the value of an object was determined during the development of art museums in the nineteenth century.

Understanding the Social History of Art

Social art historians like Michael Baxandall analyzed artwork through aspects of their production. Baxandall’s *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* introduces this concept by stating:

“A fifteenth century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On one side there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it... Both parties worked within institutions and conventions – commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social – that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made.” (Baxandall 1988, 1)

When a fifteenth century painting is placed in an art museum, the history of the social transaction that inspired the creation of the work is typically absent. However, Baxandall illustrates how analyzing aspects of a fifteenth century painting can not only tell you how the work came to be, but can also tell you about the society that painting once belonged to. Contracts that predetermined aspects of a composition demystify the idea of a divinely inspired artist, creating based on instinct. The process of creating an image was done in accordance with what was agreed upon in a financial transaction. Art during the Renaissance was deeply entrenched in the relationship between an artist (or art studio) and a patron. However, it was also during the Renaissance that the idea of the ‘genius’ artist began to develop. During this period, painting and sculpture were elevated to the status of the liberal arts. Carl Goldstein notes, in order to achieve the glorified status of a liberal art,
it “was necessary to distract attention from the ‘efforts of the body’ by means of which works of art were produced” (Goldstein 2012, 22). For some professions this was easier than others. Despite the physical requirements (and economic conditions) which were attached to early modern art production, painting was able to transcend these qualities to become a glorified, intellectual, and spiritual practice.

Art museums often ‘distract’ visitors from aspects of artistic production, as this feature of art history is not often illustrated with works on display. Whether or not this is intentionally done, the failure to highlight important features of cultural production continues to mystify art. Janet Wolff emphasizes the connection between social production and art and critiques the dominant concept of artists working in isolation from society (Wolff 1993, 11). Successful artists were often well connected in society to make their profession profitable. Additionally, the production of art was often a collective project, with individuals responsible for various parts of the process. Works that were developed by a number of artists and apprentices are often displayed with a ‘tombstone’ label, naming only one artist as the author of the work.\(^2\) Crediting one individual with the development of a work ‘distracts’ the museum visitor from the collaborative aspects of artistic production. Collaboration is a fundamental part of most artistic production. However, the concept of the isolated, individual artist has become a popular characterization (see Inge, 2001). How cultural production is perceived has historically impacted its value and hierarchy in the division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ arts. Wolff argues that “the division we generally make between ‘high’ arts and the ‘lesser’ or ‘decorative’ arts can be traced historically, and linked

\(^2\) A tombstone label feature the basic information about an object: artist, title, medium, without any interpretive context
to the emergence of the idea of the ‘artist as genius’” (Wolff 1993, 17). The modern glorification of the solitary, genius artist would place a higher value on a work credited to one individual, while a work credited to one individual and their workshop would be valued less. Thomas Inge suggests, “[o]n a practical level, recognizing that the concept of the solitary genius, or of the divinely inspired author, is a myth calls for no drastic change in the ways we teach and write... But there should be a change in attitude about how we discuss our literature and culture so that we do not constantly downgrade authors according to the extent to which they compromise with the pragmatic and economic forces of time and place.” (Inge 2001, 630). Although Inge’s analysis refers to literary collaboration, the same sentiment can be applied to an analysis of production in visual arts. He notes, “[i]f we allow more for a social and contextual concept of authorship, perhaps we can provide a more realistic and less romantic view of literary production” (Inge 2001, 630). Understanding that art is often collaborative (in a variety of different ways) is an important part of developing a more realistic – and, indeed, more accurate – understanding of culture.

Artists succeeding in practices with ‘higher’ media were called ‘geniuses’ with divinely bestowed talent, whereas those who achieved success with ‘lesser’ media were acknowledged for their learned skills as craftsmen. The divide between the ‘genius artist’ and ‘skilled craftsman’ has consistently been an issue for artists working with reproductive media. Wolff pays special attention to terms used to separate the artists from the artisans: “Replacing the vocabulary of ‘creation’, ‘artist’, and ‘work of art’ with that of ‘cultural or artistic production’... ‘cultural producer’... and ‘artistic product’ is no sacrilegious demotion of the aesthetic to the mundane” (Wolff 1993, 138). Using these terms would provide an
honest account of what ‘art’ really is by discussing the cultural constructions of ‘higher’ and ‘lesser’ arts using the same vocabulary, as opposed to distinguishing them using the superficial categories of ‘art’ or ‘craft,’ and ‘artist’ or ‘craftsman.’ Discussing art in terms of cultural production eliminates the terminology that idealizes art and supports “totally unrealistic notions about the nature of this sphere” (Wolff 1993, 138). An analysis of the social and cultural production of printed images will illuminate many factors that have caused them to be consistently undervalued. Many of these factors stem from the mystification of cultural production of other media and the idealization of the artistic ‘genius.’

Early Perceptions of Printmaking

The history of printmaking is explicitly tied to manual production. The act of creating and reproducing images could be an exhausting and dirty activity. The ‘utility’ of print is also a concept associated with the purpose of early modern print as a means for replicating images. Many of these early works were not considered ‘art.’ Prints were created in large quantities, often featuring devotional images that were designed “as practical and accessible objects” (Areford 2010, 1). Their presence in fifteenth and sixteenth century homes is preserved in many paintings. Pieter Brueghel’s Peasant Wedding (Plate 6) features prints fixed to a bench where several wedding guests are sitting for their meal. David S. Areford notes that these images help us to “rediscover early prints as objects that functioned in specific and meaningful ways, not all of which involved being hung on the wall and none of which involved being framed as ‘art’” (Areford 2010, 2). Many depictions of peasantry are not necessarily faithful reflections of everyday life or the behaviour of the lower class. However, in these images, prints have been included amongst other objects
that would have been generally expected to be present in peasant homes. The inclusion of prints in peasant scenes presents a connection between lower class society and the accessibility of inexpensive prints.

The rise of the popular print gave way to the ‘democratization’ of images and generated larger collective practices of production. The ability to reproduce images allowed them to be shared between artists and consumed by the public in large quantities. During the Renaissance, printmaking was regarded as a means for replicating images, not as a legitimate means for original artistic invention. The mechanized activity was a utility, but it was not considered to be a legitimate form of art (Goldstein 2008, 373). For developing inexpensive religious icons, print was a perfect medium for producing images that were viewed as “an integral part of the furnishing” in a home (Landau and Parshall 1994, 82). Early print shops answered a demand for images by employing several individuals who would each be responsible for one aspect of printing. There would often be an individual who would develop the primary design for the image. This individual may also be responsible for incising the image into the plate or woodblock. Then there would be individuals who would help prepare the paper and ink the plate for printing. A pressman would be responsible for turning the handle of the press to transfer the ink on the plate to the paper. This task required an enormous amount of strength, as sixteenth century printing presses were heavy. Goldstein observes that the division of labour in print shops is indicated on many prints:

The name of the designer is usually acknowledged with the Latin word invenit (did invent) or delineavit (did draw), that of the etcher-engraver with fecit (did make), sculpsit (did hollow out or carve) or incidit (did cut), and the publisher with permission to produce the prints, excudit (did issue) (Goldstein 2012, 16)
Acknowledging the role of the individuals who took part in the making of an image was unusual. In the making of most paintings, the contributions of other individuals (apprentices or assistants), was not acknowledged as a type of ‘authorship’ as it is in many early modern prints. Consequently, the way many prints were signed contributed to the perception of printing as a piecemeal process, which contrasted with seemingly bespoke practice for developing paintings.

Abraham Bosse: Picturing the Art of Printmaking

Although print had many utilitarian qualities, individuals working as printmakers began to try and distinguish themselves as artists. As painting and sculpture were elevated to the status of ‘higher’ arts, sixteenth and seventeenth century printmakers hoped to achieve similar recognition. Evidence of this can be found in images created by printmakers to immortalize their profession. Rembrandt was arguably the most celebrated printmaker of the seventeenth century. As a painter and a printmaker, he valued both aspects of his artistic profession equally. He devoted as much time to printmaking as he did to painting, reworking his plates and experimenting with different techniques to appeal to a wider market and audience. Rembrandt championed the art of etching and was particularly interested in the spontaneity that could be achieved in an etched image. Rembrandt developed his etchings as a means to access “the burgeoning market for drawings that reveal artistic process and personality” (Westermann 2002, 262). His reputation as an artist was developed through his prints and printed self-portraits that were widely circulated. Public recognition of Rembrandt's accomplishments helped to elevate the status of printmaking as his images exhibited the expressive possibilities of print. Although artists like Rembrandt helped to separate printmaking from simply being thought of as a
mechanical craft, there continued to be certain prejudices against print as a physical, rather than a creative art form. This can be examined in the images developed by Abraham Bosse, a lesser-known, undervalued figure in the history of art.

As a printmaker, Bosse’s work serves as an important account of the problems facing his profession. The issues that are highlighted in his images reflected problems that were also acknowledged by Rembrandt. Although Rembrandt promoted a spontaneous side of printmaking in his compositions, Bosse’s images have a unique impact because they depict the physical practice of printmaking from the contemporary viewpoint of a seventeenth century artist. The perspective offered in Bosse’s images presents both an idealized and honest account of practices in printmaking. His images of printmaking are separated into two views: the creative process of developing an image and the physical printing of an image on paper. Although he wanted to dispel many of the ideas that had undervalued print as a legitimate art form, he did not want to overshadow the important and essential physical aspects involved in printmaking.

Bosse’s images of printmakers in their studios looked to elevate the status of printmaking. In contrast to Rembrandt, Bosse’s approach to etching was to imitate the physical qualities of engravings, using the relative ease of the etching needle. However, he also believed that etching could be similar to drawing in the sense that the etcher could manipulate their needle like a pen in order to exhibit some of the spontaneity that Rembrandt had demonstrated in his prints (Westermann 2000, 262). These images depicted practices of printmaking as a creative process, which also required considerable technical skill and physical ability. In The Etcher and the Engraver (Plate 7), Bosse depicts two men sitting in their studio preparing plates for printing. The studio is tidy, furnished
finely, and is adorned with prints and paintings on the walls. Both of the men are dressed in
fine, gentlemanly clothes. The etcher (on the left) and the engraver (on the right) are
dressed in clothes that are similar to the nobleman visiting their studio. Both artists are
also immortalized in portraits hanging in the studio, implying that they are well regarded
for their artistic accomplishments. This image contrasts sharply with accounts of unruly
behaviour in early modern print shops, characterized by Robert Darnton:

Real print shops are dirty, loud, unruly – and so were real printers. The presses
creaked and groaned. The ink balls filled with wool soaked in urine, gave off a fierce
stench. And the men waded about in filthy paper, swilling wine, banging their
composing stick against type cases for the sheer joy of making noise, bellowing, and
brawling as opportunities arose, and tormenting the apprentices with practical
jokes” (Darnton 1979, 242-243)

Darnton developed this account using manuals that described what a printer should not be
doing in a workshop, indicating some elements of disorder that would have warranted
these rules. The conditions of these printing shops would have affected how the
printmaking profession was perceived. Focusing on the conditions of production neglects
the inventive images that were made in these workshops. The work of printmakers should
not be valued less because the conditions of production have been unfavourably
highlighted in a few accounts. The way cultural production is immortalized dictates how a
profession is perceived and how the resulting works are valued. Ideas about an artist’s
production techniques are also constructed similarly to concepts of ‘art.’ Canonical art
history has a selective memory for remembering and idealizing artistic professions, which
subsequently privileges certain media in art museums.

The high esteem of painting had set a comparative standard for printmaking.
Although the media used to produce each form of art is different, in reality, the dirty,
industrial conditions of print studios were not unlike that of a painting studio. However, the painting profession was immortalized in a specific way that eliminated many of these unsavoury factors. The public’s idea of a painting studio may have been influenced by images of refined studios and the social perceptions of painting as an intellectual, not a physical practice. Johannes Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting* (Plate 8) is an example of these idealized images. This image provides a context for understanding the developing concept of the isolated, genius artist and the idealized image of artistic production. Vermeer’s artist works alone in a refined studio. The artist is wearing clothes that would be suited for a member of the gentry. These elements glorify painting as a sophisticated activity.

It has been speculated that Vermeer used a camera obscura to conceive his compositions (see Steadman, 2002). A camera obscura is a device consisting of a dark box, with a convex lens used to project the outside scene onto a mirror inside the box (Plate 9). The exterior scene could then be traced from the reflection. This idea has been controversial as the device would have allowed Vermeer to copy the proportion of his subjects. Painters frequently used optical devices to help with various parts of their process. Besides the camera obscura, drawing machines would allow an artist to examine their subject through a peephole, while drawing their proportions on a screen with a grid. Dürer depicted the earliest images of drawing machines in his prints (Plate 10). Developing the technical ability to draw subjects in geometrical and mathematical proportion was one tenet of Renaissance art theory, outlined in Leon Battista Alberti’s *De Pictura* (1435). Using an optical device to trace the image of a subject would have made it easier to capture perspective or develop the spatial arrangement of a composition. Vermeer’s supposed use
of a camera obscura has been contentious because it challenges the artist’s technical ability and ‘genius.’

Since Vermeer never sold The Art of Painting, it has been considered a possible self-portrait, or at least a record of his practice as a painter. The connection between “the painter in the picture with Vermeer himself was meant to be self-evident,” regardless of the unknown painter’s true identity (Liedtke et al. 2001, 396). The Art of Painting is a constructed, idealized, image of an artist at work. If Vermeer used a camera obscura, he would omit it from an image of his practice so his technical ability would not be questioned. The use of drawing machines or optical devices was looked down upon as a way to mechanically ‘cheat’ an important part of ‘high’ art practices. In an art museum, the idealized image of a lone painter at work becomes part of the standardized account of painting production, regardless of the help received from apprentices or optical devices. These constructed images omit any of the factors that might have sullied the perception of artistic production and concepts of ‘genius.’

Seventeenth century accounts describe a clear division of labour in painting studios. Peter Paul Rubens – a contemporary of Bosse – had a large painting workshop in Antwerp.

In 1611, Otto Sperling, a Danish court physician, described Rubens’s studio:

A good number of young painters each occupied on a different work, for which Mr. Rubens had provided chalk drawings with touches of colour added here and there. The young men had to work these up fully in paint, until finally Mr. Rubens would add the last touches with the brush and colours. All this is considered as Rubens’s work; thus he has gained a large fortune (quoted in Belkin 1998, 127)

Although the production of painting could involve the work of several individuals, the perception of painting is socially immortalized through images like Vermeer’s The Art of
One important difference between the division of labour in painting and the division of labour in printmaking is how this production is acknowledged. As it was noted earlier in this chapter, those responsible for most parts of the printing process were acknowledged as *invenit* (did invent) or *fecit* (did make). The same division of labour is not acknowledged in paintings produced in workshops like Rubens’s. Despite the involvement of other people in his studio, Rubens is given sole authorship of the work even if his effort in executing the final painting was minimal. In reality, Rubens’s role in creating these works was very similar to artists who worked as designers for printed images. Rubens serves as a designer for an image, while other individuals would execute the work to his liking.

The public perception and immortalization of the ‘high art’ of painting may have prompted artists like Bosse to desire a similar legitimacy for printmaking. In 1645, Bosse penned a treatise on etching and engraving, *De la maniere de graver a l’eauforte et au burin, et de la gravure in maniere noire*. The treatise made many of the technical ‘secrets’ of printmaking available to the public for the first time. In this treatise, Bosse treats printmaking as equal to the practices of drawing and painting (Goldstein 2008, 373). Bosse’s treatise continues to promote the dignity of the printmaking process, regardless of its physical or ‘mechanical’ requirements. A second image, *The Intaglio Printers* (Plate 11), is a work Bosse created to depict the physical act of printing an image. This image serves as a visual counterpart to the process of designing the image and incising it into the metal plate, shown in *The Etcher and the Engraver*. While his art and writing looked to elevate the status of the printmaker, Bosse does not create any illusions about the physical requirements for making a printed image. Bosse’s images present two aspects involved in
all artistic professions: the design of a work and the physical making of an image. There is no reason why the physical effort involved in developing an impression would prevent a printmaker from exhibiting creativity and invention in their works.

Bosse’s works also criticized the idealized imagery used to depict the work of painters. The commercial appeal of printmaking often inspired the idea that creativity and invention were absent from the development of printed images. All artists had financial obligations and the desire to find reliable patronage to make their profession profitable. In *The Noble Painter* (Plate 12), Bosse depicts an artist receiving a guest in his richly adorned studio. The painter’s apprentice holds a print by Nicolas Viennot made after Andries Both’s painting *The Poor Painter in his Studio* (Plate 13). The print depicts a poor artist painting in his studio, with his two children observing his work. In the background, the artist’s wife is grinding pigments for paint. The poor artist is painting to support his family and livelihood, while *The Noble Painter* appears to be painting to achieve recognition and greatness in his art. However, the apprentice gestures towards the second pallet reminding the artist that like the poor painter he also relies on painting to survive. Although his clothes are similar to the gentleman who is visiting his studio, the painter is not a member of nobility and his clothes are a façade.

The apprentice or ‘lackey’ has the last word in the narrative of this image and several of Bosse’s other prints. Goldstein argues that Bosse’s lackey is offering Viennot’s engraving in order to mock the pretensions of the ‘noble’ painter (Goldstein 2011, 24). The role of the lackey became an archetype in several of Bosse’s works, including *The Spanish Captain and his Lackey* (Plate 14) and *The Frenchman and his Lackey* (Plate 15). The Spanish Captain’s lackey doubts his claims of greatness in the engraving’s inscription. While the
Captain argues that his talents and virtues are God-given, the young lackey warns against his master's claims, implying that the viewer is being deceived. *The Frenchman's* lackey questions his master's nobility, declaring his face was like that of a peasant, even though his clothes were noble. The role of the lackey offsets what might appear to be a simple image, showing the audience that all is not what it appears to be.

During the seventeenth century “to claim that a 'manual' worker (painter) might rise to such an exalted position in society was at the very least controversial” (Goldstein 2011, 24). Although *The Noble Painter* may be presented in an idealized setting and wearing the clothes of a nobleman, the practice of painting was a difficult and exhausting profession, with little financial stability. The presence of King Louis XIII's portrait on the easel is unusual since portrait painting was not prominent on the artistic hierarchy of subjects (history painting being the most prominent). However, painting portraits was a profitable business, but not in keeping with the practices of 'high' art (Goldstein 2011, 22). Bosse’s choice to include the portrait on the easel implies that the painter’s work is deeply connected to his financial well-being.

Bosse’s prints offer a layered analysis of artistic production and the practice of printmaking. However, his treatise offers a clear argument for the dignity of the printing profession. Bosse succeeds in his argument for printmaking when he connects printmaking to painting through achievement in drawing. In his treatise, Bosse notes that any accomplished printmaker would have had to have considerable talent in drawing. Vasari believed that drawing or *disegno* was the foundation for any medium of art and for any work of art (Stoltz 2012, 12). The idea of *disegno* embodied both the design and the invention of images. Goldstein believes that Bosse’s intention to link painting to
printmaking would allow him to annex “the aura surrounding the intellectual activity of drawing” (Goldstein 2008, 382). This would allow Bosse to use his treatise to separate the age-old connection of printmaking and unskilled, mechanical labour. Bosse’s work provides a tangible connection between the practices of painting and printmaking, revealing that the production of both media was not vastly different.

The Printmaker as Artist & the Culture of Copying

Bosse was not alone in his ambitions to distinguish individuals working in print. The first formal indication that printmakers wanted to be recognized for their accomplishments came with artists who chose to sign their prints. One of the first known printmakers to sign their work was Israhel van Meckenem in the late fifteenth century (Landau and Parshall 1994, x). As a commercially successful printmaker, Meckenem would include an engraved signature on his plate because he wanted his name and his work to be known. He was not an anonymous craftsman, but an artist who wanted full recognition for his invention and ability. Printmakers began to distinguish themselves as artists and as inventors of images as early as the fifteenth century. An artist’s ownership of their images and ownership of their intellectual property posed interesting challenges to Renaissance artistic practices. Lisa Pon (2004) notes that the Renaissance fostered a ‘culture of copying.’ The culture of copying represented the sharing and adaptation of images and artistic styles. This sometimes involved the subtle adaptation of certain aspects of a work, but could also include the exact copying of an image. As multiples, prints were an easily accessible source for other artists to adapt and copy. The adaptation of printed images became one of the main reasons why printmakers have had such an impact on the history of art. However, the
way these images were adapted also reflected the problems associated with a printmaker’s ownership of their images when they are printed in large numbers.

Albrecht Dürer eventually decided to take action against those who copied his work after he complained that artists “imitate my work in churches and wherever they can get hold of it” (quoted in Pon 2004, 39). This complaint came after several copies had been made of a series of prints that he had distributed for sale in Italy. The most notable case arose when Italian printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi copied Dürer’s *Life of the Virgin* series (Plate 16, 17). Not only did Raimondi copy Dürer’s composition, he also copied the monogram ‘AD’ that Dürer used to sign his prints. Raimondi meticulously copied Dürer’s works by hand, using prints that he had purchased as a visual guide. Vasari recounts that Raimondi chose to copy Dürer’s prints after considering “what honour and profit might be acquired by one who should apply himself to that art in Italy” (Vasari 1996, 78). Dürer, like other artists, used their signature to symbolize their presence in their works. Unlike the brush strokes of paintings, prints do not have evidence of the artist’s hand present on the surface of a work. The impressions made in a print are created by the block and the press used to transfer the image - not from direct contact by the hand of the creator. However, the signature serves as a mark that acknowledges the work of the artist and infuses their presence into the scenes they invented (Fehl 1991, 6). Instead of placing his signature in an inconspicuous place in his composition, Dürer often added his monogram to key elements of his narrative, claiming ownership of his images. In the *Deposition of Christ* (Plate 18), Dürer’s monogram is seen on the side of the tomb, prominently featured in the focal point of the scene. *Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple* (Plate 19) incorporates Dürer’s monogram into the scene’s chaos. The monogram is askew as if it had been
knocked-over with the furniture when Christ pushed through the temple. These monograms became playful and symbolically important additions to Dürer’s work. Similar to Meckenem, Dürer did not want his images to be anonymous; he wanted to take full credit for his work.

Although Dürer was well known in Venice for his painting *Feast of the Rose Garlands*, he was able to develop his reputation across Italy using prints. The growing popularity of works by Dürer may have compelled Raimondi to copy his monogram and to sell them as if they were prints made by Dürer himself. After hearing about forgeries being sold, Dürer allegedly filed a complaint to the Venetian senate, which determined Raimondi could not use Dürer’s monogram in the prints he produced. Although there is no historical confirmation that Dürer specifically named Raimondi in his complaint, there are records from the Nuremberg Council in 1512 that outlined a dispute that was likely between the two artists:

The foreigner who sold prints before the town hall, some with Albrecht Dürer’s monogram [hanndzaichen] that were fraudulently copied from him, shall be bound by oath to remove all said monograms and sell none of them here; and if he refuses, all his said prints shall be confiscated as counterfeit [ain falsch], and taken into the hands of the council (quoted in Koerner 1993, 209).

The outcome of the dispute, both in Nuremberg and in Venice, was that Raimondi could continue to produce case works in the likeness of Dürer’s prints, as long as they did not include his monogram. This instance marks one of the first legal cases related to copyright and intellectual property rights. The primary issue in this case pertained to Dürer’s right to retain control over the images he invented, a right that he ultimately lost. However, the inability for would-be forgers to include his monogram acted as a deterrent as these works
would sell more readily with his signature than without (Feulner 2013, 238). Andrea Bubenik recognized that this case highlighted a very important issue for printmakers and the ownership of their images: “reproducibility, it was realized, could also lead to duplicity” (Bubenik 2013, 90). The lack of respect for an artist’s authority over their images was not only part of the Renaissance culture of copying; it was also connected to the printed medium as a multiple. The lack of unique originality in printed objects made them common targets for other artists to adapt or replicate in other work.

Issues of authorship and ownership were not particular to printed images. Music composers had similar issues protecting their work from being reproduced or adapted without their permission. Similar to the culture of copying in the Renaissance, sharing or using parts of another composer’s work was generally accepted and was a common practice in the eighteenth century (Goehr 1994, 181). Music scores, like printed images, could easily be reproduced, as the performance of the work was not fundamentally tied to a specific composer or group of musicians. Consequently, another composer’s score could be performed or adapted without their knowledge. This type of plagiarism is defended, in part, because it had been a common practice amongst visual artists for hundreds of years. Given the relatively easy reproducibility of scores, there was no way to prevent music from being plagiarized. Lydia Goehr suggests, “musicians did not see works as much as they saw individual performances themselves to be the direct outcome of their compositional activity” (Goehr 1994, 186). By copying Dürer’s work, Raimondi was ‘re-performing’ these images using his own technical abilities. Consequently, Raimondi was allowed to copy his work, as long as he did not forge Dürer’s monogram.
Since the courts would only protect Dürer’s images if they were reproduced with his signature, he issued a statement to future would-be forgers in his 1511 edition of *The Life of the Virgin*. In order to protect his images, he sought out privileges from Maximilian I, the Holy Roman Emperor:

>Beware, you envious thieves of the work and invention of others, keep your thoughtless hands from these works of ours. We have received a privilege from the famous Emperor of Rome, Maximilian, that no one shall dare to print these works in spurious forms, nor sell such prints within the boundaries of the Empire...Printed in Nuremberg, by Albrecht Dürer, painter (quoted in Pon 2004, 39)

Pon believes that in seeking out a privilege from the Emperor, Dürer was looking to construct “an artistic identity based on a sense of legal possession of his artistic output,” countering, “an older system of producing printed texts and images that often did not value the originating author or artist” (Pon 1998, 42). Privileges were granted by governing bodies that would provide permanent or temporary monopolies over products or processes. Privileges also had an important symbolic value, showing the support of the government, as they were often granted to profitable enterprises (Pon 1998, 43). Print publishers who did not want other publishing houses to reproduce and sell the same images, typically sought out privileges. Publishing houses were quick to obtain privileges for popular images to maintain financial control over the market for certain subjects. In this case, Dürer’s motivation for seeking privileges was because he felt “his inborn personal talent was at stake, not merely his manual labour and financial outlay” (Pon 1998, 42). A curious aspect of Dürer’s warning is his choice to sign his name ‘Albrecht Dürer – painter’, rather than ‘Albrecht Dürer – printmaker’, despite the forgery of his prints being the issue at hand. This decision prompts questions about what the authority of ‘painter’ had as an inventor of images. It appears that printmakers had less respect for their creations and had
difficulty maintaining authority over their images. Although Dürer’s case presents early issues regarding the differences between the role of the painter and the role of the printmaker, it serves as evidence for how these two professions evolved socially and culturally.

Dürer’s choice to characterize himself as a painter presents him with the authority and esteem of an artistic profession more commonly associated with ‘genius’ and the invention of images. The rise of the ‘genius’ artist began in the sixteenth century and came to define the divide between art and craft. A printmaker was not often considered an artist – they were considered craftsman. The ‘artist’ was associated with creativity and invention, whereas the ‘craftsman’ performed mechanical, repetitive activities. Dürer’s decision to sign his prints was an attempt to distinguish himself as an artist, rather than as an anonymous craftsman. The difference between these two terms is symbolic and presents the idealized cultural construction of what does and does not constitute an ‘artist.’

Giorgio Vasari, Michelangelo, and the Rise of the Artistic ‘Genius’

Giorgio Vasari is best known for the Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, his biography of Italian artists. The first edition of the Lives was published in 1550, presenting an immense biographical account of Italian artists. Although the factuality of many of Vasari’s stories has been disputed, the Lives represents one of the first art historical texts. Sharon Gregory notes that many of Vasari’s descriptions of artwork would have been aided by reproductive prints, as it is unlikely that Vasari would have been able to see all of the works he discusses (Gregory 2012, 1). Several puzzling descriptions of architectural monuments have been attributed to Vasari’s reliance on prints as accurate
depictions of places he had never seen. Even though Vasari relied on print for much of his information about sixteenth century visual culture, he was not aware of how important printed images were until he began revising the *Lives* for a second edition. The first edition of the *Lives* did not pay any attention to the work of printmakers, but printmaking became part of Vasari’s narrative in the ‘Life of Marcantonio Raimondi and other Engravers of Prints’, included in the edition released in 1568. The chapter is considered the first art historical account of printmaking (Gregory 2012, 2). His choice to include the stories of printmakers also represents how print technologies allowed artists to penetrate the Renaissance art world between 1550 and 1568, warranting a revision of Vasari’s narrative. The *Lives* provides an interesting perspective on early modern views about the concept of the artist and art practices in Renaissance Italy. Vasari’s account elucidates the early development of the artistic ‘genius’ and social divides separating various art practices.

Ideas of invention and genius were important terms used to describe Michelangelo Buonarroti in his biography. In the “Life of Michelangelo”, Vasari discusses his abilities, using several characteristics that came to define the modern concept of artistic ‘genius’, describing him as:

A spirit with universal ability in every art and every profession, who might be able, working by himself alone, to show what matter of thing is the perfection of the art of design in executing the lines, contours, shadows, and highlights, so as to give relief to works of painting. (Vasari 1996, 642)

Vasari’s description of Michelangelo’s birth describes it as “something celestial and divine beyond the use of the mortals” (Vasari 1996, 643). Every aspect of his development as an artist suggests Michelangelo’s exalted abilities, beyond what would have been expected for a pupil going through standard training and apprenticeship. Vasari’s description treats
Michelangelo's abilities as divinely bestowed and not something that could have only been learned through conventional artistic training. Vasari writes,

> By reason of the judgment bestowed upon him by Heaven, for these, in truth, were as marvellous as could have been looked for in the workmanship of a craftsman who had laboured for many years. And this was because all the power and knowledge of the gracious gifts of his nature were exercised by study and by the practice of art, wherefore these gifts produced every day fruits more divine in Michelangelo (Vasari 1996, 645 – 646)

This was a new manner for describing an artist's work. Arnold Hauser describes Vasari's story of Michelangelo's life as “the first example of the modern, lonely, demonically impelled artist... who feels a deep sense of responsibility towards his gifts and sees a higher and superhuman power in his own artistic genius” (Hauser 1999, 23). Hauser traces how attributes of genius became associated with artistic production in the Renaissance, but did not come to define an artist as an ‘original genius’ until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hauser states that the reason that this did not emerge sooner was because the Renaissance art market continued to be determined by relationships between patrons and artists (Hauser 1999, 24). Once the taste for individually crafted commissions became less common, artists were forced to fight for their worthiness in the public market.

Vasari began to highlight certain attributes that he believed were common amongst ‘genius’ artists. Vasari argued that isolation was important for art’s meditative practice and that it was necessary “that he who takes up the study of art should flee the company of men” (Wittkower 1963, 64). In addition to attributes of genius, Vasari also emphasized Michelangelo’s isolation in his biography. Vasari stated, “No one should think it strange that Michelagnolo delighted in solitude, he having been one who was enamoured with his art, which claims a man with all his thoughts for itself alone” (Vasari 1996, 652). Vasari's
commentary and description of Michelangelo’s life created a lasting impact on perceptions of art production and how art history privileges ideas of artistic ‘genius.’ Marco Ruffini criticized Vasari’s description of Michelangelo’s artistic practices and his “ostensible disdain for artistic collaboration” (Ruffini 2011, 13). Ruffini emphasizes that the stories about Michelangelo’s isolated life are untrue. Vasari propagated these myths in stories about Michelangelo dismissing artists who came to assist him with the decorative details of the Sistine Chapel (Ruffini 2011, 13). In reality, Michelangelo operated a sizable workshop of artists and apprentices to complete large-scale projects “with entrepreneurial drive” (Ruffini 2011, 13). Vasari’s treatment of genius and isolated artistic production defined characteristics that separated the attributes of an artist from the attributes of a craftsman. Most significantly, Vasari’s treatment of artistic practices mystified and obscured the historical and economic realities of early modern art production. Although Vasari emphasized Michelangelo’s God-given abilities, his practices were not unlike other artists who managed large commissions with the help of many assistants.

The ‘Genius’ Artist in the Modern Era

The modern concept of the ‘genius’ artist developed concurrently with the Romantic era. Romanticism emerged as an intellectual movement, countering the Industrial Revolution. The characteristics of Romantic art favoured spontaneity, genius, and originality. Unlike the Renaissance culture of copying, Romanticism rejected adaptation, but valued innovation through developing original compositions. Mechanical reproduction of images did not embody Romanticism’s artistic values as reproduction was linked to the commodity culture that emerged from the Industrial Revolution. What was unoriginal was considered
‘inauthentic’ and similar to something produced by a machine. Ideas about art and genius rejected cultural production that was linked to economic gain. The division of labour often involved in print production was connected to the growing demand for accessible works of art. The dismissal of “the dogmas of method in art” became a tenet in Romantic art theory and called for physical aspects of production to be disguised (Williams 1960, 43). Instead, they favoured the doctrine of ‘the genius,’ which signified an autonomous creative artist who values inspiration and conceals the physical work and effort involved in the production of art. It was believed that the genius artist was not an ordinary mortal. They had abilities that allowed them to reveal higher truth through their work. However, the idea of ‘genius’ was not just about their abilities, it also described their social characteristics and temperament as a person. Wolff characterizes the genius as someone who “necessarily work[s] alone, detached from social life and interaction and often in opposition to social values and practices” (Wolff 1993, 11).

In *Culture and Society 1780 – 1850*, Williams defines the romanticized idea of artistic production using a quotation from Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759). The quotation expresses the sentiment associated with Romanticism and art, while placing particular importance on original compositions:

> An Original may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made; Imitations are often a sort of manufacture, wrought up by those mechanics, art and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own (quoted in Williams 1960, 37)

Young’s statement represents the bias towards original and naturally inspired creation, which directly opposes public perceptions of printmaking practices. In contrast to original work, an imitation is “laboured over, refashioned from ‘pre-existent’ materials”, and
therefore does not belong to the individual artist” (MacFarlane 2007, 19). These concepts seem to forget the history of adaptation and copying that became common practices in artistic production during the preceding centuries. These sentiments played a part in how artists were perceived and how their professions were valued and placed in a hierarchy of importance. The ideals of Romanticism developed a cult of original artwork, putting reproductive arts at a disadvantage. Moreover, the idea of the ‘original’ became associated with ‘singularity’, in addition to concepts of innovation (Gilmour 2008, 37). Pat Gilmore believes that the complexity of the concept of the ‘original’ became unclear when dealing with art that was multipliable (Gilmore 2008, 37). It became confusing to think of a printed image as an original image, when multiple copies of that image could exist. The theories of Romanticism could not reconcile ‘originality’ with multiplicity. However, many prominent Romantic artists used printmaking as a medium to explore new images that would have been too controversial for painting. Honoré Daumier’s political caricatures provide scathing critiques of corrupt government officials and the darker social issues of the nineteenth century. In art museums, these images provide an alternative account of social and politics issues in the nineteenth century.

After the dissolution of the guilds and the patron-artist relationship, artists were thrust into an uncertain economic market. Arguably, the print profession operated with relative autonomy long before painters were afforded the same freedom. As a less expensive and less time-consuming form of art, prints “were made for an open market, already at the moment of their invention breaching the established habits of patronage that had governed the production of images” (Parshall 1994, 19-20). Printmakers could design and print images quickly, without having to first secure buyers. The open market for
printmaking allowed them to enjoy experimenting with new archetypes, images, and styles because they were not financially obligated to a patron. Consequently, printmakers demonstrated ‘originality’ in the work they produced much earlier and more consistently than most painters. Both in the pictures they created and the techniques they used, printmakers like Martin Schongauer developed new, exciting imagery that allowed them to become successful. Schongauer cultivated a technique that would allow stronger impressions to be taken from a single plate, maximizing the commercial possibility of his work. His unique interpretations of old biblical stories, such as *Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons* (Plate 20), helped to develop a market for new types of images. Contrary to Romantic stereotypes, the close ties between print production and the art market would not allow printmakers to live isolated, disconnected lives. Their livelihood relied on understanding the social demand for printed images. The enterprise of printmaking proved that artists did not have to give up their creative license to appease the open market. Painters now had to prove their worth once the era of guilds and patron-artist relationship dissolved, while printmakers had been doing this since the fifteenth century. 

The nineteenth century was no different for printmakers. They would continue to demonstrate the ability of survive outside of the art market that was influenced by the Royal Academy of Art (R.A.) that was established in 1768. The R.A. excluded printmakers as they continued to argue that their work was produced through a mechanical, not an intellectual, activity. Those who were accepted to the R.A. had their work displayed in the Academy’s exhibitions, which were frequently visited by a wealthy, art-buying audience. The separation between ‘low’ and ‘high’ arts had a connection to the division between social classes. Gilmore states,
Class prejudice caused the Royal Academy, during the nineteenth century’s second
decade, to reject the idea that the engraver’s art was akin to poetry translation. This
led to their exclusion from the first rank of membership, on the grounds that
Painting, Sculpture and Architecture had ‘intellectual qualities of invention and
composition... of which engraving is wholly devoid’” (Gilmore 2008, 37)

The translation of a poem from one language to another was supposed to preserve the
intention of the verse from the original language. The negative perception towards
reproductive prints viewed the transition from paint to print as a mechanical activity,
without the finesse to creatively ‘translate’ an image into a new medium. In the nineteenth
century, there was still a strong connection between printmaking and trades work. Print
had perceived associations with trade work because of its physical requirements, but also
because its practice developed from the goldsmith trade. Predominant printmakers
Albrecht Dürer and Martin Schongauer had both been trained as goldsmiths before
applying their training to creating printed images (Talbot 1986, 194). The physical labour
and learned skills involved in trades work connected the printmaker to the lower class
workers toiling in industrial factories.

The negative perception towards printmaking concealed its historical influence on
the production of other art media. William Ivins testament that print was “a most powerful
method of communication” is best demonstrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries when print production flourished and consistently became a source of visual
information and inspiration for artists (Ivins 1969, 158). A notable case that attempted to
cover up this influence is the controversy over Nathanial Hone’s The Pictorial Conjuror
(Plate 21). Hone became embroiled in a scandal after he painted R.A. president Joshua
Reynolds as a magician, transforming a group of prints into an oil painting. A young girl
sitting next to the ‘Conjuror’ was allegedly meant to represent Reynold’s mistress Angelica
Kauffmann (depicted in this image as a child). The painting was submitted to the R.A.’s annual exhibition in 1775 and rejected because it was offensive to Kauffman, who was also an R.A. member. However, Gordon Fyfe believes that the real reason the painting was rejected was because of the way Reynolds was portrayed as an artist. By depicting Reynolds transforming other artists’ prints into paintings, people may think that Reynolds was liable for plagiarism (Fyfe 2000, 35-36). Hone wrote, “it is probable the rejection was in fact occasioned by the painting’s barely concealed attack on Reynolds as a plagiarist of Old Masters” (quoted in Munby 1947, 84). While Reynold’s Academy excluded engravers on the grounds that it “would not be commensurate with the dignity of the Royal Academy and the nature of art” (Fyfe 2000, 111), he was happy to use the inventions of these printmakers in his own work. The exclusion of printmakers from conventional terms of ‘genius’ and ‘originality’ demonstrates the contradictory terms of the art world.

Reproductive Printmaking in the Nineteenth Century

The division between the ‘genius’ artist and the skilled craftsmen represented two very different aspects of artistic production in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, printed images became more closely associated with commercial production. Technologies for reproducing images allowed for more impressions to be created and proved a profitable avenue for artists to pursue. The nineteenth century art market went through an intense transformation, which was largely driven by the market for prints and fuelled by the demands of a new art buying public. Nineteenth century artist F.G. Stephens once said, “where the picture cannot go, the engravings penetrate” (quoted in Verhoogt 2007, 256). Stephens’s statement exemplified the spirit of the nineteenth century
print market. Prints were a democratic form of art, allowing works to be available for a much larger public than ever before. Hence, the prints produced during this time contrast with the Romantic ideas of bespoke artistic production by the isolated artist. With the boom in the market for prints, an evaluation of the social and cultural production of prints during this period is an essential element in the study of the history of printmaking. It is also significant because the development of the art museum in the nineteenth century would soon raise the question of whether or not prints should become part of institutional collections.

The burgeoning art market of the nineteenth century presented many interesting business opportunities for painters. While the idea of the independent, artistic genius may have seemed like a noble trait for some artists, it was very rarely a profitable one. Having engraved reproductions made of their original works provided artists with an avenue for selling their work to a much larger market. Few individuals could actually afford to purchase an original oil painting. Consequently, many looked to acquire the next best thing - engraved reproductions of paintings (Tedeschi 2005, 10). The middle-class audience, who had previously had very little influence on the art market, was now an important determinate for the popularity of an artist's work. Artists responded to the demands of the market and now saw that it was profitable to select certain unique painted works to be reproduced as engravings. Martha Tedeschi suggests that the popularity of an artist's prints would sometimes be more important than their individual paintings as it “had a significant impact on an artist's future bargaining powers with dealers” (Tedeschi 2005, 10).
The critical reaction towards the mass production of engraved reproductions was largely negative. Larger, more industrially organized forms of print production were criticized publicly for having deplorable conditions. Art critic John Ruskin was particularly vocal in his dislike and moral abhorrence towards reproductive printmaking. Ruskin was a proponent of Romanticism’s lofty artistic values, believing that the purpose of art was to reveal aspects of universal beauty and truth (Williams 1960, 146). He denounced artists who did not strive to achieve these values in their work. Ruskin also believed artists who catered to popular styles and archetypes became too preoccupied with commercialism, and less concerned with the purpose of so-called ‘high-art’. Ruskin stated:

You try to attract attention by singularities, novelties, and gaudiness, to make every design an advertisement, and pilfer every idea of a successful neighbour’s, that you may insidiously imitate, or pompously eclipse – no good design will ever be possible to you or perceived by you. (quoted in Williams 1960, 155)

Imitation was not a virtue of Romantic art. Ruskin particularly chastised individuals for purchasing popular prints and promoting an industry that he denounced:

Consider what you have done when you have bought a reproduction picture... you have paid a man... to sit at a dirty table, in a dirty room, inhaling the fumes of nitric acid, stooping over a steel plate, on which by help of magnifying glass, he is one by one, laboriously cutting out certain notches and scratches, of which the effect is to be a copy of another man’s work (quoted in Fyfe 2000 17-18)

Ruskin presents an image that is similar to the sixteenth century printing shop, described earlier by Robert Darnton. Descriptions of the deplorable conditions in print shops illustrated an image that was similar to the industrial factories of the nineteenth centuries. Gordon Fyfe believes that Ruskin’s preoccupation with the conditions where art is made is related to the idea that “beauty cannot be detached from the conditions of art’s making”
(Fyfe 2000, 19). Consequently, the undesirable conditions of an industrial printing shop were not conducive to creating great works of art.

A problem inherent with the popularity of reproductive printmaking in the nineteenth century is that the artist developing the print was not often considered the author of the image. The commerciality of the nineteenth century print created an overall negative perception towards printmaking. The overriding issue was that engravers were measured by what they lacked, which was the production of unique, individual art objects (Fyfe 2000, 17). Printmakers who made a living from creating reproductive prints of paintings were not often praised for the quality of the images they produced. These printmakers were often commended for their ability to disguise the stylistic qualities of prints in these reproductions. A critic writing in 1847 for the Art Union Journal, praised reproductive prints where, “[the printmaker] aims to show the painter rather than himself; and the productions of his burin are always singularly true to the originals he copies” (quoted in Tedeschi 2005, 16). Nineteenth century art critics did not appreciate the work required to transform a painting into a print. Critics seemed to be preoccupied with the desire to have an exact reproduction that is mechanically copied by the printmaker. The individual responsible for making careful incisions into the copper plate would have been unacknowledged in the authorship of the print.

In some cases, reproductive prints were signed by the creator of the original painting or design and bore no signature from the printmaker who developed the engraved image. An engraved copy of Ary Scheffer’s *Lenore* was made by Louise Girard, but signed by Scheffer – not by Girard. Robert Verhoogt believes the act of signing the reproductive prints “dissolved the difference between the original and reproduction: a reproduction authorized
by the painter and signed by the painter appears to become the new ‘original’” (Verhoogt 2007, 355-356). However, in dissolving the difference between the original painting and the engraved reproduction, any claims of authorship by the printmaker are lost. The sixteenth century ideas of *invent* and *fecit* as a form of collaborative authorship had been forgotten by the nineteenth century. The painter’s signature on the reproduced image creates a false sense of legitimacy and originality. In order to bestow a sense of rarity on prints, artists were beginning to issue prints in numbered editions. Similar practices continue in photography, ascribing aspects of rarity to inherently reproducible objects by developing images in small editions or placing higher value on artist proofs. Antony Griffiths argues that by issuing reproductions in editions “artificial rarity has been created... to sell prints, but at the cost of attracting attention to irrelevancies and pandering to the speculator or autograph collector” (Griffiths 1996, 11). The attempt to develop a sense of rarity indulges the art market’s desire for ‘unique’ and ‘rare’ works of art and undervalues the importance of print as a reproductive medium.

Reproductive engravers saw their practice as a translation of an image from one medium to another. The term ‘reproductive’ is problematic because it leaves the impression that these printmakers were simply copyists and not inventors of new images or interpreters of existing images. Regardless of the R.A.’s opinion of reproductive printing, translating the technique of painting into a two-dimensional, printed image was a complicated task. Reproductive printmakers were able to translate images from a different

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3 An ‘artist’s proof’ is an impression taken by the artist, that is not part of an edition. In theory, these images are for the artist’s personal record and should not be sold. However, artist’s proofs are sometimes sold for a higher price because they are not numbered editions.
medium into monochromatic prints, while primarily relying on their use of line and shadow to replicate works that were often colourful or sculptural. Pon recognized the contention regarding the term 'reproductive' noting, “although it usefully highlights their ties to other pictures, it also insists through the biographical metaphor of parent and offspring that this relationship is a simple filial one” (Pon 2004, 5). The artist would use the original work as a benchmark for their project, but reimagined it in terms of the virtues and limitation of a black and white engraved image. Instead of looking at what the image was lacking through being reinterpreted as a print, these printmakers would use their technical abilities to give an image new life in a reproductive medium. Fyfe suggests that reproductive printmakers infused their own originality and invention into these images as they “might enhance, even improve on, the original” (Fyfe 2000, 35). However, the surge in popularity of the prints in the nineteenth century catered to a market that was not interested in the creativity and invention of the printmaker. This public wanted a replication of a unique painting that was created using printmaking techniques as a utility to achieve the reproduction. The act of reproducing and printing the images appears to be perceived as an unfortunate, but necessary means for achieving the reproduction. The value of printmaking, in many ways, had reverted back to its sixteenth century utilitarian worth as a means of replicating original, painted works of art. The nineteenth century presents a loss of artistic recognition that printmakers had been pushing for over hundreds of years. Printmakers developing reproductive prints, once again, became anonymous craftsman as painters monopolized their art form.
Revisiting Traditional Art History

These stories of artistic ‘genius’ created lasting romantic illusions about the production of art and became canonized in art history. Consequently, revisionary art history, emphasizing the examination of production and the social construction of ‘art’ and the ‘artist,’ have become important for deconstructing these myths and presenting a more honest account of cultural history. Particularly, the history of printmaking has been disenfranchised and treated as a lesser art form. Art museums are beginning to reevaluate how artists have been mystified and how the cultural production of ‘art’ has been socially decontextualized in these institutions. It is important to understand how social perceptions about art influenced art history and have impacted how art has been valued in museums. This chapter has reflected on the history of printmaking as a socially undervalued art form. However, while print may have been regarded as a ‘lesser’ art form, it has had a powerful influence on cultural history. Despite its impact, as the nineteenth century ushered in the birth of many major art museums, the print collections that became part of these institutions were not always valued for their artistic importance. Consequently, the history of print has been regarded as ‘minor’ in comparison to the original, unique works of art in museums. Discarding the discourse of traditional art history allows the value of printed visual cultural to be revisited, better understood, and appreciated. However, museums have shaped how art history is exhibited. Although art history has begun to revise its traditional discourse, art museums will also need to reflect these changing values, in a more thoroughgoing and convincing manner.
Chapter Three

Prints in Art Museums: Examining Modes of Display and their Meaning

Analyzing visual arts in terms of its cultural production demystifies many of the differences that have historically separated art into distinctive hierarchies of value. The history of production associated with painting and printmaking was not vastly different. However, the ways they are presented as ‘works of art’ – or not – reveals significant discursive and curatorial differences. The ‘unique’ aspect of painting is highlighted by the way in which paintings are displayed and celebrated as aesthetic objects, often characterized as ‘masterpieces.’ Prints do not often experience the same celebration of their aesthetic and artistic qualities and can fade into the background in art museums. However, a print is not a painting, nor should it pretend to be. Multiplicity is what has allowed prints to be important communicators of visual culture and more easily collectable by art museums. As it was discussed in the previous chapter, printmakers eagerly developed new, bold styles that impacted artistic production as impressions of images were circulated. However, the ‘informational’ quality of print frequently causes them to be used to footnote the history of other art media, rather than being valued for their distinct artistic qualities as prints.

Ivins’s description of print as “the exactly repeatable pictorial statement,” is the quality that allowed them to permeate the art world in such a profound way (Ivins 1969, 3). Their ‘repeatability’ has a difficult relationship with institutions that celebrate the rarity
of other objects. Consequently, the concept of ‘print’ often makes them appear as ‘copies,’ in contrast to painted ‘originals.’ This chapter will examine the quality of ‘aura’ associated with original art objects and the art museum’s celebration of ‘auratic’ qualities in art. Although art museums are shifting towards more interpretive means of presenting culture, what is rare and unique continues to be privileged. Consequently, the communicative qualities of all works of art are underestimated. Each artistic medium can be appreciated for its individual characteristics, rather than what it comparatively lacks in contrast to another art form. Statements about ‘aura’ will be examined and refuted through an analysis of collections of prints in art museums, coupled with an assessment of how print culture can be valued. Finally, this chapter will examine how the spurious notion of ‘unoriginality’ in print culture might be reconciled in art museums. Museums have changed since the nineteenth century, but some institutions are still limited by the old ‘encyclopaedic’ structures that divide objects of different media.

The critique of traditional aesthetic practices of display and methods for using collections of prints will be examined in an analysis of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Prints. As one of the largest collections in North America, the Met’s print collection is comprised of over 1.5 million prints and is the largest collection in the museum. Curators that have worked in the Department have written extensively on the importance and purpose of their collection in the museum. Their ideas were not framed to specifically focus on the Met and can also be used to engage with problems that may be experienced with print collections in other art museums. Additionally, these curators have acknowledged many of the prejudices against printed images that have been highlighted in Chapter Two. Although these issues are examined in their scholarship, I will critically
examine the Department’s success in mitigating these problems in curatorial practice. To supplement areas where the Department has been less successful, I will draw on examples from other institutions (some being similar-sized museums) that have found more effective ways to use print collections.

Walter Benjamin & Mechanical Reproduction

In almost every art historical analysis of printmaking, Walter Benjamin’s foundational essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* is mentioned. This essay provides a critique of mechanical reproduction and serves as an account of social perceptions regarding reproductive arts in the early twentieth century. However, many of these perceptions continue to impact the way certain works of art are privileged in museums. Benjamin elucidated many of the qualities that printmaking lacked as an art form. David S. Areford explains that the advent of printmaking in the fifteenth century presented a revolutionary change that no longer required individual images to be made by hand. Prints did not have the ‘aura’ and ‘authenticity’ that “emanates from the ‘unique’ handicraft artwork” (Areford 2010, 10). Benjamin believed that the reproduction of artwork lacked “its presence in time and space” and that the presence of the original is “the prerequisite of the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 1936, 218), arguing that original, unique, works of art have an ‘aura’ that reproductions do not. Benjamin claimed, “The technique of reproduction detached the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (Benjamin 1936, 219). He goes on to argue: “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art” (Benjamin 1936, 219). Benjamin's essay has become canonized in art theory and criticism. The idea of ‘aura’ is an essential facet that
must be analyzed to understand what the display of culture means in museums and what such display says about how certain aspects of visual culture are privileged.

Benjamin’s critique of mechanical reproduction focuses on photography. In many ways, his critique of photography can be compared to practices for making prints. Both photographs and prints have no ‘original’ in any editions created. The ‘original’ might be seen as the printing plate or negative. However, Anthony Griffiths points out that the plate (or any other vehicle for printing an image) cannot be the original. Any finished print is the “end product of the creating process” (Griffiths 1996, 10). The printing plate or negative would not be considered the original since it is part of the material used during the process of creating an image. The intention of the artist is not to make the plate or negative, but to make the image that results from its printing. Griffiths acknowledges the critique of mechanical reproduction in the early twentieth century, at a time when technologies for duplicating images were changing, and further devalued printed images as legitimate art objects (Griffiths 1996, 12). The preoccupation with the notion of the ‘original’ neglects the fact that there is no ‘original’ in any printed work as they are all multiples. Each printed work represents the final stage of artistic production. No singularly, unique object used in the process for creating prints can be designated as the original.

The so-called ‘aura’ of the original art object is revered and praised in art museums. Visitors travel from all over the world to witness artworks in-person. Some art museums perpetuate the ‘aura’ of the original art object by enticing visitors with the chance to see the ‘real thing.’ Some works of art are treated like celebrities, with visitors lining up outside of museums to have a glimpse of famous works of art. In contrast, the same prints can be found in different collections all over the world. Prints lack the rarity and individuality of
unique artworks and therefore, lack the idea of ‘aura’ that Benjamin discusses. Benjamin presents photography as a reproducible media that has diminished the aura of original artwork. However, nineteenth century reproductive prints and photography have helped to develop the fame of original works of art. The ability to reproduce images of unique works of art created a “bogus religiosity” which has subsequently increased their market value and has created even more demand for museum visitors to go see the original of a reproduction (Berger 1972, 23).

John Berger believes that an original artwork often derives it meaning from its uniqueness and rarity, rather than what the image represents in the history of art (Berger 1972, 21). The hordes of visitors that line up to see Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa illustrates Berger’s point. Despite crowds of visitors that come to see the ‘real-life’ Mona Lisa, the average visitor glances at the work, without enough time to notice anything remarkable that may not be reproduced in a photograph. In many cases, the way visitors view these celebrated works is through their cameras as they create their own reproduction, despite being in front of the ‘real thing.’ The work is not valued as a cultural artefact, but celebrated for its rarity. The celebration of the ‘original’ has been perpetuated through media that reproduces these works. Ian Knizek distrusts Benjamin’s critique of mechanical reproduction, because the aura “refers to something which is not in the work of art; it is, indeed, an extra-aesthetic feature” (Knizek 1993, 358). Consequently, the cultural or historical features that contributed to a work’s place in an art museum are often overlooked. Visitors flock to see ‘famed’ works of art and are mysteriously given no explanation for why they are there or why visitors travel to see them. The idea of ‘aura’ continues to perpetuate eighteenth and nineteenth century values of originality and
uniqueness. This is presented and privileged through the aesthetic display of art in museums, which still, despite slowly changing practices in some institutions, often fails to interpret culture beyond its so-called ‘aura.’

**Presenting the ‘Aura’: Privileging Aesthetic Display in the Museum**

Modern conventions for displaying works of art often represent a system for privileging the notion of aura. Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube* examines the aesthetics of display and how meaning is made through the ways artwork is presented in decontextualized gallery and museum spaces. Serge Guilbaut presents a similar argument and claims “[m]odern museums (despite some rare exceptions) have not changed their mode of thinking. Meanings carried by works of art are evacuated as soon as they enter the great white castrating cubic space of the gallery” (quoted in Barber et al. 1996, 192). For O’Doherty, the museum becomes a space that brings together “some of the sanctity of the church, the mystique of the experimental laboratory,” which adds “chic design to promote a unique chamber of esthetics (O’Doherty 1986, 14). In a gallery, “things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them” (O’Doherty 1986, 14).

There is an important aspect of selection involved in presenting a collection to the public because the museum space permits only a small part of an institution’s overall collection. Art museums typically display five percent of their permanent collection (Lord and Piacente 2014, 123). As a result, the choice of which works are displayed can be representative of their importance in the collection. Works of art are presented as ‘tokens’ of individual periods of time, despite being dramatically decontextualized from their social and cultural history. The ‘qualitative’ exhibition of art objects transforms these works from
meaningful, cultural artefacts, to aesthetic, decontextualized objects. This mode of representation is “a return to the expository attitudes of the early twentieth century, perhaps even a return to the classical hierarchy of “masterpieces” (Celant 1996, 385).

Storing and Displaying Collections of Prints

The radical disconnect between the study of art history and practical museum work fails to recognize the significance of modes for presenting culture. This issue is highlighted by David Carrier who explains, “Just as a painter needs to know the history of art, so an art historian needs to know the history of art history. The history of the art museum does not, as yet, have an analogous status” (Carrier 2011, 183). The history of displaying collections of prints is underdeveloped and rarely associated with the art history of printed works. Collections of prints have been exempt from many conventional practices of exhibition because they do not fit the aesthetic requirements of display. Prints are often small in size and monochromatic. Their attributes allowed them to be comparatively thin and more portable than other works of art, permitting print to be useful for transporting visual culture. Historically, prints were not made to be framed or hung on a wall like a painting. Their history of display has largely been dictated by environmental requirements for conserving paper works.

Prints are typically mounted on acid-free mats for support and hinged (often with Japanese paper) from the top part of a work to the mat board. This allows the paper to expand and contract in changing environmental conditions (Holben Ellis 1995, 120). The support is attached to another mat with a window cut to fit the size of the work. This overlaying mat provides a space for separating a work from the glass or plexiglass in a
frame. It also provides a space between works stacked together in a storage box to prevent any contact with the surface of a work. Before the eighteenth century, it was unusual for prints to be framed and hung like paintings. Prints had previously been kept in albums for an individual’s personal study. Beginning in the sixteenth century, prints were sold in organized sets to be collected and put into an album (Parshall 1994, 12). However, by the time they became initiated into museum collections, there was no precedent for framing; prints “were often framed in the manner of paintings – both visually, with heavy gilt molding and deep linen mats” (Holben Ellis 1995, 128). Margaret Holben Ellis explains that these practices for framing prints like paintings continues, treating prints as “little paintings” (1995, 128). Displaying and treating prints like ‘little paintings’ is problematic because this aesthetic also presents them as ‘lesser’ paintings.

Prints are rarely displayed in the same places where paintings are exhibited. The main areas of exhibition often present a general encyclopaedic history of art and are composed of works from the institution’s permanent collection. Prints are often kept separate in galleries that can accommodate their specific humidity and light requirements. However, the separation of different media presents their histories as independent and distinct. As a result, the connection between prints and paintings and the influence of prints on visual culture is not part of the museum’s art historical narrative. By displaying both prints and paintings as aesthetic objects, there is no integrated history of visual culture. As a result, visitors are presented with an inaccurate history of social and cultural artistic production. The aesthetic modes of presentation have implications about the value of certain objects. Although prints are not integrated amongst other works in the museum because of their delicate material, their lack of presence is more likely interpreted to
connote their insignificance. The so-called ‘aura’ emanates from the aesthetic presentation of paintings, while prints are kept in low-light corners and isolated spaces as a form of preventative conservation. O’Doherty claims, “The way pictures are hung makes assumptions about what is offered. Hanging editorializes on matters of interpretation and value” (O’Doherty 1986, 24). These techniques manifest subliminal cues that influence how viewers interpret art by the way it is hung. Curators of paper collections struggle to present printed material in institutions that use aesthetics as the main point of engagement (Anonymous, 2014). Trying to compete with the aesthetic presence of painting begins a negative cycle of comparison between the both media. The art museum presents information from a place of authority. Consequently, the value that is visually ascribed to the presentation of objects is significant to the public’s understanding of what is culturally important.

While prints may be exhibited in a manner that preserves their material condition, the aesthetic interpretation of their display implies they are unimportant, or at least, less important than the unique works of art hanging in other galleries. One notable example is the Esther and Arthur Gelber Treasury gallery that is adjacent to the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Art Gallery of Ontario (Plate 22). The gallery is used to display rotating exhibitions of a small number of works on paper. However, it is offset from the rest of the galleries and often dimly lit to accommodate the environmental requirements of paper works. Consequently, it becomes an easy space for a visitor to bypass. Despite the intriguing assortments of prints that may be on display in the Treasury, the public cannot

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4 Passages that are attributed to ‘Anonymous’ come from an interview conducted with a curator of a large paper collection in September 2014
engage with these works if the aesthetics of their display causes them to be overlooked or simply appear like lesser objects. By relying on the aesthetic presentation of objects, art museums disingenuously neglect the history of their cultural production and further historical hierarchies and assumptions about different art media. These methods of presentation do not often focus on what the printed medium represents, and why it became important enough to exhibit in the museum. If art museums want to present prints as meaningful art objects, they must find a way to reintegrate them into the larger art historical discourse of the permanent collection, rid them of the stigma of unoriginality, and reject the aesthetic preference of the ‘aura.’

To understand how museum curators have acknowledged practical issues of preservation and the exhibition of prints, the history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Prints will be examined. The museum is divided into series of ‘encyclopaedic’ displays and is an example of an institution that categorically separates art into permanent exhibitions of various periods, styles, and geographic regions. The Department of Prints was not developed when the museum opened at its present location in New York City in 1880. When the Department was founded in 1916 the collections of prints had to find a way to work within the art historical discourses that had been developed in the rest of the museum. The problems addressed by generations of curators reflect on curatorial issues that relate to the purpose of print collections and their exposure to the public.
The Virtues of the Museum Print Collection: Perspectives from the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Museum collections of prints were developed for a variety of reasons. Following the First World War, the market for purchasing paintings was sparse, leading many institutions to shift towards collecting works on paper that were more readily available and at a lower cost (Ross 1996, 140). More art institutions were able to develop extensive collections because prints are multiples. In many cases, these prints complete a collection’s history of art if they do not have other media to represent a particular period or if unique artworks are out of an institution’s financial means. Consequently, many large art institutions have compiled sizable collections, with a diverse variety of printed works. Dr. Freyda Spira, Assistant Curator of Prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), views the breadth of a print collection as a virtue. When discussing the scope of the Met’s large print collection, Spira emphasizes, “the Print Department is incredibly important because we have such a diversity of materials. We are connected to the Modern department, we are connected to the American department, and we are connected to Photography. We also have typography. We have a foot in everything” (Spira, 2014). As a resource, prints can illustrate a history of art as a unified collection, whereas other departments are separated in terms of what their content represents. In the Print Department, a sixteenth century European engraving can encounter a twentieth century American lithograph in the same setting.

The curatorial practices of the Met’s Department of Prints have impacted art historical scholarship and treatment of prints in museum collections. Beginning with William Ivins in 1916, the department’s curators have found ways to face issues of authenticity and originality, while focusing on the virtues, rather than the limitations, of a
Ivins reflected on these issues and determined, "it has become obvious that what makes a medium artistically important is not any quality of the medium itself but the qualities of mind and hand that its users bring to it" (Ivins 1969, 114). Ivins did not base the value of his collection on what these works were as prints, but on what they were as works of art. As founding curator of the Met’s Department of Prints, his vision for the collection has framed the basis of the department’s current practices, as well as the practices of other art museums. However, Ivins shortcoming as a curator came from most of his ideas being voiced through his writing, rather than in his practical museum work. Spira noted that many of the issues he highlights in his writing continue to be problems acknowledged by the Department of Prints almost one hundred years after he began his tenure as curator (Spira 2014).

Ivins was a prolific writer. His career, forming and curating the Met's print collection, is outlined in his various writings. In his first publication in the Met Bulletin, Ivins addresses his goals with the new department. Ivins suggests that prints “touch life intimately at so many points and in so many ways that often it is difficult to say that a print, which should have an undoubted and honourable position in any well-rounded collection, has a distinct artistic value” (Ivins 1917, 23). There is a strong connection between prints and people. The multiplicity of printed images allowed them to be consumed by a much larger percentage of the population than unique works of art. Ivins continues, “this very humanness has been one of the chief reasons of the poor esteem in which they have been held at various times and places” (Ivins 1917, 25). The accessibility of print and the presence of printed images in everyday life “often kept people from recognizing them as anything other than utilitarian documents or sentimental decoration” (Ivins 1917, 25).
Ivins was concerned with making the print department accessible to the public. He believed the breadth of the collection allowed it to have “a broader purview of life and thought than any other department of a museum” (Ivins 1946, 227 – 228). Ivins’s reference to ‘humanness’ can be related to the historical status of print as a common object, in contrast to the attributes of rarity and uniqueness that are celebrated by many museums. Curators who are presently working with paper collections have echoed Ivins’s sentiments. As part of my research, during an interview with a curator who chose to remain anonymous, the curator suggested that people have difficulty seeing value in “works that are more ephemeral and actually inexpensive [than other objects]” (Anonymous 2014). The idea of rarity and monetary value has become so important in determining the importance of an object. However, print provides an intriguing perspective on historical culture, as these works “were more accessible and seen by a wider audience than those [unique works] which were only seen by a select group of people” (Anonymous, 2014). More so than any other art medium, print would be the most familiar to museum visitors from their everyday lives. Consequently, one of the challenges that curators face is getting the public to look at print differently, as it continues to be so common in everyday life (Anonymous, 2014). Despite the educational possibility of prints, many collections only have a small space for exhibiting works. Consequently, print study rooms have become an important part of making the Met’s collection and other print collections accessible to the public.
The Function of the Print Department

Study Rooms

Ivins took pride in the fact that the print collection was “the only form of pictorial art with which the greater public ever comes into intimate contact” (Ivins 1917, 25). The study room allowed visitors to request to see works that were not on display in the museum. This is a practice that continues at the Met and at many other print collections in larger art institutions. In addition to the Met, print and drawing study rooms are located in several large art museums in North America and Western Europe, such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the British Museum. The study room at the Met is located adjacent to the main print and drawing gallery on the second floor of the museum. Although the Met’s study room can make the print collection more accessible, the door to the room is virtually hidden in gallery, indicated only by a small sign, making it difficult to find (based on the author’s personal experience). Study rooms are not exhibition spaces; they are spaces where individuals can make an appointment and request to see a specific work that is not on display. Consequently, most individuals who visit study rooms have some familiarity with prints and know what they are looking for. However, this type of environment is likely to alienate a museum visitor who may not know what they are looking for. When an individual encounters a work they have requested, they are given no interpretation, though they can usually take advantage of small libraries that are found in most study rooms.

In comparison to other parts of the museum, visitors are allowed to get much closer to works of art in the study room. In many ways, study rooms recreate the context in which
prints were originally experienced. Instead of being hung on a wall, they would be individually studied in albums in a quiet, intimate setting. The presence of the study room allows prints to have an active place in the museum to help reconcile their limited presence in the main exhibition areas. However, the idea of a study room implies that prints have an informational quality that other art objects are missing. Ivins thought of a print collection as a “dictionary of a wonderfully rich pictorial literature” (Ivins 1946, 231). In equating collections of prints to a collection of literature, he mentions that like literature, a printed image “cannot be understood without a knowledge of its words” (Ivins 1946, 231).

The ‘ informational’ aspect of a print collection can be attributed to the larger numbers of works housed and to the fact that these collections are usually comprised of some works featuring less ‘artful’ subjects. As materials for making prints were cheaper and production times were faster, printmakers would often depict subjects that were deemed minor, unusual, or too unimportant for a painting (Talbot, 1986 191). These subjects included humorous peasant scenes, controversial political images, or even common scenes from everyday life. Consequently, some prints can be used to provide a social and cultural context to understand where other works of art came from. However, this becomes problematic when the department is interpreted as a resource for understanding or footnoting the history of other art media in exhibitions. In addition, it is challenging when the department is often used as an internal resource for other curators to develop the context of their own collections, rather than using prints to develop this context in the exhibition spaces of the museum (Ivins 1946, 228).

Although the study room serves as an area for visitors to access and have a close experience with art, visitors are not given the ‘words’ to understand the iconographic
features of the images. Without any contextual accompaniment, the prints in the study room are also viewed through the lens of aesthetics. Believing the ‘close experience’ with prints will illuminate information about these works is no different than claiming that paintings can ‘speak for themselves’ in the decontextualized gallery space. As Guilbaut suggests, “paintings don’t talk. They don’t tell us anything. They give us clues which have to be connected with history in order to make some kind of sense, to be interpreted” (Barber et al 1996, 192). The experience of the study room can help the Print Department to break down the museum barrier between people and art, but it does not provide an avenue for the average museum visitor to easily engage with prints. The exhibition and interpretation of the collection is likely better established in the space of a gallery where the right context can be developed and where prints should not be expected to ‘talk.’

Exhibition Spaces

Today, the Met’s Print Department has a much larger exhibition space than it did during Ivins’s tenure. Located adjacent to the study room, the Robert Wood Johnson Jr. gallery can display approximately forty works at a time. This gallery presents exhibitions in three-month rotations. These exhibitions, often titled ‘Selections,’ explore various themes within the permanent collection including portraiture, caricature, devotion, and a variety of other subjects within the Met’s vast collection. With a large space and the requirement to frequently change the gallery, Spira interprets the conservation requirements for works on paper as a virtue. Spira notes that the frequency and the limited time these exhibitions are hung, is a “great way for curators to have fun with ideas, show prints in the collection that are not seen because it [the period of exhibiting prints] is so fast. We get to dip into these hidden treasures and bring them out to play” (Spira, 2014). As the largest collection at the
Met, there are endless possibilities for themes to be exhibited and explored in print. The necessity to limit the amount of exposure for each group of prints pushes curators to continuously find new themes for exhibitions. They are arguably the least stagnant collections in an art museum. Spira believes this forces curators to constantly reengage with objects and, therefore, find new ways to engage the audience (Spira, 2014). However, Spira notes that while some print collections can be used to actively exhibit and communicate ideas, others lie stagnant because some institutions are afraid of their deterioration or do not see their exhibitionary value (Spira, 2014). The burial of an object in a collection can be an unfortunate side effect of preservation and the concern that the exhibition of such objects will ultimately lead to their deterioration.

If other departments go to the study room when they are trying to better understand objects in their own collections, then why are those informational qualities not shared in the galleries? Ivins’ successor, A. Hyatt Mayor, wanted to share printed images that would provide insight into the rest of the museum’s collection and a much larger history of culture. Firstly, he decided to change the way that the prints were displayed in the galleries. Mayor decided to address the historical problem of framing prints by replacing the ornate frames with plain frames that would not distract the viewer from the print itself. He also installed a series of slanted desks with plexiglass covers. The orientation and size of these desks was designed so that the prints could be viewed without a frame and positioned to be similar to a book that you would hold in your hand. By doing this, Mayor looked to incorporate the intimacy of the study room into the exhibition space, which allowed curators to interpret and contextualize the objects for the public.
Mayor recalled his exhibitions as “idea shows” that were “visual, but not aesthetic” (Mayor 1983, 174). Similar to Ivins, Mayor also saw the strong connection between people and prints as a medium that has historically had a presence in everyday life. In his 1971 publication, *Prints and People: a Social History of Printed Pictures*, Mayor prefaces his book with a series of questions about how prints were made, by whom they were used, and how printmakers discovered new ways of seeing. Mayor writes, “the questions themselves help art history to astonish by making it part and parcel of human history” (Mayor 1971, i). While there can be no definitive answer, posing these questions is an important part of demystifying art history and establishing a human connection with historical culture. In the galleries, Mayor had planned to infuse prints into exhibitions of other media to allow the ‘human history’ of print to illuminate a context for understanding art. His proposed idea of ‘print invasions’ would place prints in galleries throughout the museum (Spira 2014). As the print collection contained material that applied to almost every other department in the museum, visual history could be shared and dispersed among objects that they were connected to. However, Spira notes that Mayor’s plan was not enacted because of the natural light that is found in most of the Met’s galleries. Again, the difficulty in reconciling exhibition and preservation became an issue for integrating the history of print into the visual culture of the rest of the museum.

Spira expressed an interest in trying to restart the project and find a way to work around the environmental conditions. However, Mayor’s plans to enact the ‘print invasion’ last happened during his tenure as curator between 1946 and 1966. Almost fifty-years later, the Met continues to be interested in implementing this initiative, but has not found a way to work around the museum’s environmental conditions. Although the Met’s
department recognizes many critical issues facing print collections, these problems are often acknowledged in the scholarship of the curators, rather than in their practical work. Spira alluded to this in her interview after stating that the Department had not yet figured out a way to enact Mayor's 'print invasions,' though it was a project she had great interest in (Spira 2014). Facsimiles could be used as an alternative to exposing works in the collection to natural light in the main exhibition spaces. In other museums facsimiles have been displayed to prevent environmental damage and incorporate paper collections into the main exhibition spaces.

Challenging the Authority of the ‘Original’: Infusing Galleries with Reproductions

How can prints be exhibited when their preservation forces collections to be buried in storerooms or limited to short term display in galleries that can accommodate their environmental conditions? Museums have begun to exhibit reproductions as a way to use the interpretive or educational qualities of certain works, without compromising their condition. However, is the materiality of the printed artefact more important than what the image represents? Could the modern reproduction of prints once again cause them – with no small irony, given the very nature of a multiple form – to be passed over in favour of the ‘real-thing’?

Before the twentieth century, there was no dilemma regarding the presence of reproductions in art museums. During this period, museums were filled with cast sculptures and various other reproductions. Many of these reproductions were casts of classical sculptures. These works provided museums with a much broader purview of art
history. For many years, the Met displayed reproductions in the museum’s galleries. This came to a halt when artistic tastes changed and began to think of reproductions as the “pianola of the arts,” or an illusion of creative enterprise (Wallach 1998, 52). Alan Wallach suggests, “the battle of the casts, thus carried implications that went far beyond the question of the relative value of original and copies. Would the museum be devoted to education or to aesthetic pleasure?” (Wallach 1998, 53). Museums that featured reproductions could use their casts to represent a much wider history of art than they would otherwise be able to do with originals. Much of the obsession with original art would focus on the “irreproducible character of artistic genius” (Wallach 1998, 55).

If facsimiles of prints could be used to ‘invade’ galleries as Hyatt Mayor hoped, then an integrated art history could be represented without compromising the preservation of the print collection. However, this would not mean that the print collections would be permanently replaced by these reproductions. The reproduction would eliminate many of the reasons why prints cannot be displayed amongst other objects. Print galleries could continue to exhibit collections of works on a rotating-basis. The history presented in these galleries would then spill out into the museum and eliminate much of the segregation that works on paper can experience. The ‘invasion’ of prints would provide an opportunity to connect stories of a number of different media to develop narratives about cultural production. Histories of artistic production would no longer need to be medium-specific, but could present a more accurate interpretation about how visual culture was an interdisciplinary and collective process.

Some exhibitions at other museums have been forced to use reproductions as a result of preservation issues. *A Good Type: Tourism and Science in Early Japanese*
Photographs at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnography, was forced to choose between exhibiting reproductions or cancelling the exhibition. The Peabody Museum is a natural history museum, not an art museum. Although ‘authenticity’ may also be important in natural history museums, these institutions appear to have a much different relationship with reproductions. Reproductions are often incorporated in displays of dinosaur skeletons or used to replace objects that are too delicate to display. If the curators of A Good Type had decided against displaying reproductions, then the exhibition would have been cancelled and the photographs would have remained in a storeroom, rather than being seen by the public. When choosing to display reproductions, curator David Odo wanted the digitally replicated images to include “the appearance of the photographs in their current state of preservation, which inevitably carried the material marks of their biography over time” (Odo 2014, 173). Odo believed that these scratches or alterations on the works “[gave] the audience a realistic sense of what the objects looked like in their current incarnation as museum objects” (Odo 2014, 173). Facsimiles of prints would not alter or remove anomalies, but be faithful replications of objects in the collection.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, the presentation of Peter Paul Ruben’s Massacre of the Innocents is accompanied by several of Rubens’s anatomical sketches. The sketches provide a context for understanding how Rubens developed the movement of the bodies in the Massacre. The sketches were exhibited for a short period before being replaced by facsimiles. The facsimiles are faithful reproductions, replicating their present appearance, including the feathered and worn edges of the original drawings (Plate 23). The only indication that these sketches are facsimiles comes from their label, which explains that the
drawings were removed to protect them from light exposure (Plate 24). Rubens employed sculptors to develop life-like figures that would be used to develop anatomy and dynamic movement in his paintings. The presence of the facsimiles in this display represents their importance in illustrating Rubens's process and the development of the Massacre of the Innocents.

To argue that displaying a reproduction of a print would be ‘inauthentic,’ is falling victim to the allure of the ‘aura’ and the attitudes that have undervalued prints as works of art. If art museums are concerned with using collections for educational purposes, then displaying a reproduction for the sake of providing a more complete and contextualized history of art would be in keeping with their mandate. The originality or authenticity of an object is not a requirement for creating a meaningful experience with visual culture in a museum. On the contrary, the Rubens facsimile drawings are an important part of meaning making in the display of the Massacre of the Innocents. The choice to develop facsimiles of these works allows their display to continue, without compromising their preservation. Both the original drawings and the facsimiles serve the same purpose and are unhindered by concepts of ‘original’ and ‘reproduction’ in the exhibition space.

The ‘authenticity’ of an object plays a superficial role in how meaning is made in an exhibition. This has been recently examined in Made in China at the Dulwich Picture Gallery (2015). The exhibition replaced a painting in the permanent gallery with a modern reproduction and challenged visitors to figure out which work was a copy. Almost three thousand visitors voted, but only twelve percent correctly guessed that Jean-Honoré Fragonard Young Woman was the reproduction (Plate 25). The rest of the voters had guessed other works, which were ‘authentic’ paintings in the gallery. There was no
identifiable ‘aura’ that distinguished a ‘copy’ from an ‘original.’ Furthermore, the Dulwich owns a number of other historical reproductions created by artists with well-known names. The gallery has a reproduction of Jacob van Ruisdael’s *Landscape with Windmills near Haarlem*, originally painted in 1650-52 and reproduced by John Constable in 1830 (Plate 26). The exhibition notes their presence in the gallery and questions whether these reproductions are similar to the Chinese-made Fragonard. Are these copies exempt from the category of ‘reproduction’ because their originators are established artists in the canon of art history? Although these ‘copies’ were created under different circumstances, this is an important question for understanding the conflicts of value in art museums.

Although the Dulwich Picture Gallery is founded on a traditional collection of ‘great master’ works, this structure does not prevent curators from engaging with new concepts in a seemingly traditional space. The use of facsimiles and the questions posed by exhibitions like *Made in China* have clearly demonstrated that the ‘original’ is not needed to develop an ‘authentic’ experience. If museum visitors thought that ‘original’ works in the gallery could have been reproductions, then their experience was not altered by the presence of the ‘fake’ Fragonard. The results of this exhibition dispel many nineteenth century concepts that assume the essential importance of the ‘original art object.’

Incorporating reproductions not only infuses the debate over ‘authenticity’ into the gallery space, but it also provides an opportunity to re-examine how culture is valued in art museums and the lingering presence of nineteenth century sentiments that perpetuate artistic hierarchies. The authenticity of the objects is not the problem; it is the way they are valued in the museum environment. This issue addresses the way objects are appreciated
in museums, but also the general attitude towards curating and exhibiting that is in need of change.

**Addressing Hierarchies of Culture in the Gallery Space**

The examples of incorporating facsimiles and reproductions into the art gallery space reveal that qualities of ‘unique originality’ are not an integral element for meaning-making and engaging art museum audiences. The use of facsimiles could allow the Met’s Department of Prints to realize Hyatt Mayor’s ‘print invasions.’ However, the museum would have to address whether they are more interested in displaying ‘authentic’ works of art or developing narratives about cultural production. The importance of ‘authenticity’ is a question that many art museums will soon need to address. In order for art museums to embrace the stories of art and culture that can be illustrated through works in a collection, aspects of cultural tokenism and the extra-aesthetic quality of ‘aura’ need to be discarded. Developing exhibitions that integrate different art media would eliminate the segregation of printed images by infusing different art historical discourses into permanent collection spaces. These art works can become meaningful beyond what they represent as autonomous objects, being valued for what they represent as an assemblage of cultural artefacts. Prints (whether it is an ‘original’ artefact or a facsimile displayed) can exhibit their individual importance in a cultural narrative without being undervalued for their ‘unoriginality’ or presented in contrast with unique art works.

Museums can facilitate these experiences by using a collection of objects to visually and textually guide a narrative. Through doing this, museum visitors can carve out their own ‘habitus.’ Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus stems from the idea of accumulated
skills or “a sort of total cultural baggage,” that influences how art is individually understood and interpreted (Zolberg 2003, 56). Developing narratives can allow visitors to engage and negotiate with these stories, regardless of an individual’s cultural competence or confidence in understanding visual arts. Contextualized narratives of integrated media create an opportunity for engagement, which would be inaccessible through the aesthetic display of art objects. Vera Zolberg has found that galleries that are willing to engage visitor’s individual habitus are more likely to combine displays of “high art” paintings with “homelier” objects, “thereby contextualizing rather than fetishizing art” (Zolberg 2003, 58).

An integration of objects facilitates the development of narratives to embrace different stories that can result from grouping artefacts together. However, notwithstanding Zolberg’s stated intentions, addressing certain objects as ‘homelier’ perpetuates historical hierarchies of value. The term ‘homelier’ suggests that these objects are visually unappealing in comparison to ‘high art’ paintings and places particular importance on their aesthetic qualities, rather than what the object culturally represents. Zolberg’s comment also implies that these ‘homelier’ objects are given the privilege to be displayed next to ‘high art.’ Although these practices could be used to transcend the hierarchical divisions, objects will never be fully integrated or privileged for their narrative value if they continue to be individually perceived as ‘high art’ and ‘homelier.’

Objects that are traditionally outside the category of ‘high art’ cannot simply be included in exhibitions as decorative facets in the way that sculptures are often integrated without any specific context. Sculptures often break up medium-specific displays to fill the ‘negative space’ in an exhibition room. A notable critique of this is seen in Honoré Daumier’s Salon of 1857, Sad Expression of Sculpture (Plate 27). Daumier’s lithograph
features a sculpture in the French Salon that is crying out to be noticed in a room full of spectators who are focused on paintings. The sculpture is used as a point of congregation for viewers, functioning similarly to a couch in the middle of an exhibition space.

Hierarchical divisions between objects have become socially ingrained and present larger issues with the value of different media in the history of art. Ideas about art and what types of art are important extend beyond the realm of the museum. These issues were examined in the previous chapters, which surveyed the socially and culturally constructed concepts of art and the artist in relation to the history of printed images. These constructed concepts established a negative perception of print before modern museums were developed. Although some art museums have maintained many historical ideas about art, they are not the spaces where these ideas originated. However, art museums are now places where culture is displayed and where value is ascribed to certain media. They can also be places where historical cultural concepts can be challenged and revised. Integrated exhibitions of objects need to transcend concepts of ‘high’ and ‘low’ art before their cultural and narrative value can determine their importance in a gallery. Additionally, the divide between a ‘multiple medium’ or ‘reproduction’ and a ‘unique’ object becomes less important when objects are not valued for their rarity, but for their ability to contextualize art history.

These stories are beginning to find their way into the narratives of art museums. *Transformation in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (2014) at the National Gallery of Art examined the impact of printed images on artistic interpretations of the story. In this exhibition, the influence of printed images is illustrated through several different visual incarnations of the Metamorphoses. One notable example is the connection between three works focusing on *The Abduction of Europa*: an engraving by Sébastien Le Clerc and François Chaveau
(Plate 28), a painting by Jean François de Troy (Plate 29), and a pendant by Alfred Andre (Plate 30). While the engraving and the pendant were displayed together, the painting was located in the permanent galleries, preventing visitors from examining all three works at the same time. Furthermore, the connection between the two images was one-sided. While the label with the engraving mentions its connection to the painting (and where the painting could be found), there was no mention of this with de Troy’s work in the permanent gallery. De Troy's painting was displayed as an autonomous, aesthetic object in the gallery, despite the presence of other objects in the museum that would contextualize the history and development of its imagery. If these objects were brought together, they would highlight an important aspect of cultural production: the adaptation and evolution of visual imagery.

*Transformation* displayed works from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, exhibiting the enduring popularity of the *Metamorphoses*. Each work had some visual correlation, despite being produced in different times and places. The supplementary brochure for the exhibition attributes this to the invention of the printing press and the development of print technologies in the sixteenth century. Printing presses allowed copies of the *Metamorphoses* to reach a large audience of artists and patrons who were influenced by the printed illustrations in these books (Schell 2013, 3). The exploration of these themes clearly recognizes the impact of print. However, the exhibition fails to present a coherent visual connection by not bringing paintings together with the prints that likely influenced the painter’s composition. Museums that focus on collections of objects that are more commonly associated with material culture (unhindered by concepts of ‘high art’), tend to be less opposed to bringing together exhibitions of different media. At the Gardiner
Museum, the permanent collection of European ceramics prominently features the influence of print in ceramic design. An eighteenth-century plate, featuring a biblical proverb is displayed next to the engraved illustration from Monsieur Lemaître de Sacy's *L'histoire du vieux et du nouveau testament* (Plate 31). The engraving features the image that the plate’s design was directly copied from. The Gardiner Museum’s simple display presents a coherent connection between the two works and the common practice of copying and adapting images.

Exhibitions that have similarly explored the influence of print culture have avoided the divisions of media experienced in *Transformation*. The Frick Collection’s recent exhibition *Coypel’s Don Quixote Tapestries: Illustrating a Spanish Novel in Eighteenth-Century France* (2015) examined the influence of Cervantes’s Don Quixote on visual art. Charles Coypel developed many well-known images of Don Quixote after he was commissioned to create a series of paintings that was transformed into a series of tapestries. However, their international and widespread popularity only came after they were reproduced in engravings and books. Curator, Charlotte Vignon, notes that engravings were the most common way people encountered visual images of Don Quixote’s story, “while tapestries were luxury items, accessible to only a few wealthy patrons” (Vignon, 2015). Thousands of these engravings were printed and sold as individual images or as a set in a folio. The prints were then reduced in size and included as illustrations in French, Dutch, and English editions of Don Quixote (Vignon, 2015). The exhibition brought together a series of printed books, single-sheet prints, tapestries, and paintings. These media were encountered in the same space and allowed audiences to examine and compare each work (Plate 32). The opportunity to develop a cohesive narrative in the exhibition space
established a clear connection between the works on display and how visual culture was shared and adapted. The exhibition was intended to bring the influence of these images full-circle. Although the space was overwhelmed with large tapestries and paintings, the majority of the works in the exhibition were individual printed images and books. Each work was equally valued for its individual contribution in illustrating and developing visual representations of Don Quixote. The narrative that addressed the history and significance of each work did not distinguish any object as ‘high art’ or ‘homelier.’ Each work was equally important in contextualizing the development and production of images associated with the story of Don Quixote.

**Going Beyond the ‘Aesthetic Experience’**

What is holding museums back from developing contextual experiences and incorporating different artistic media? It is the reverence towards the sanctity or religiosity of painting, which indicates that the basic aesthetic mode of display needs to be abandoned. The aesthetics of ‘allowing art to speak for itself,’ divides and privileges unique art media in the museum – but, as Guilbaut suggests, paintings don’t talk. The persisting reverence towards the aesthetic presentation of unique artwork prevents current practices of display from incorporating other media and narratives of cultural production. These narratives demystify the religiosity of art and allow objects realized their full cultural value.

Collections are unique assemblages of objects, regardless of the unique existence of the works themselves. Although paintings have been valued for their unique qualities and historical prominence, their cultural importance has also been hidden behind a façade of aesthetics. All art can be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, but also for its cultural,
artistic, and informational value. Print has an important place in visual culture. Its influence has been undervalued and neglected, despite the intriguing histories that can be revealed through exhibitions of prints in museums. Until aesthetic displays are discarded from curatorial and museum practices, hierarchies of privilege will continue to visibly divide artistic media and undervalue all collections of art.
Conclusion: Reassessing Culture in Art Museums

This thesis has explored the importance of collections of prints in art museums, using these collections to reveal historical cultural prejudices that allowed constructed concepts of ‘art’ and ‘artist’ to determine the value of objects in art museums. Although printed images have had a profound impact on the history of art, their contribution has yet to completely emerge from the storerooms and corners in many art museums. In order to shift away from the dominant aesthetic representation of art, historical cultural values must be re-examined. However, a dramatic reevaluation of culture would call for a revision of hundreds of years of theory associated with aesthetics and practices for displaying works of art. Unfortunately, an immediate and total revision of this kind is unlikely. However, art museums have begun to develop new interpretations that are starting to alter hierarchies that have privileged unique objects and undervalued reproductive arts. Although prints have been the focus in this discussion, the lack of context provided for all art is an important issue in large art institutions that continue to be dominated by aesthetic practices of display.

The exploration of these issues will continue as art museums reconsider aesthetic values. Several of the exhibitions highlighted in this thesis used prints as a vehicle to explore these issues. The use of prints to facilitate these discussions indicates positive changes that are beginning to disrupt the hierarchies in art museums and recognize the importance of the printed medium. A future study examining how the inclusion of prints can affect audience reception would help to practically analyze whether these modes of display can positively benefit the educational mandate of art museums. Additionally, these
findings could be assessed in relation to the reception of traditional modes of museum presentation. Many art museums have prioritized digitizing objects as a means of exposing their collections online. Digitizing prints has allowed the public to become more aware of the scope of a collection and to access images outside the space of an art museum. My future research will continue to question the importance of ‘authenticity’ in art museums and the historically revered ‘aura’ of the unique art object, in relation to the development of online digital collections. The ongoing process of digitization is an important factor in the conversation of ‘authenticity.’ Unique art objects in collections are also part of ongoing digitization projects, disrupting their ‘unique’ status. I am interested in examining how digital collections change ideas about the value of ‘unique’ or ‘reproducible’ objects in art museums.

Particular cultural theories have informed which objects become glorified in museums and categorized as ‘art.’ Although each of these objects comes from a different place and period in time, they are often displayed in the same aesthetic format that further decontextualizes works from their histories. Print collections challenge many traditional values about what defines a ‘work of art.’ This challenge was discussed in Chapter One with the attributes that divided concepts of ‘art’ and ‘craft.’ These concepts were defined using theories of aesthetics and furthered by the intermediating forces of the ‘art world.’ The concept of ‘art’ allowed objects to take on abstract or ‘invisible’ qualities that separated them from economic determinants and physical aspects of production. Many print collections contain objects that were not created with the specific intention of becoming a ‘work of art.’ Most prints made before the nineteenth century were not created with the intention that they ever hang on a wall, let alone a wall in a museum. However, many other
objects only became art when they were placed in a museum and were separated from
their original purpose and context. These concepts of ‘art’ are social constructions and
should not be statically accepted. As authorities on various fields of culture, curators
should recognize that the theories that have defined values about art can be transformed.
Cultural value will always be ‘value for’ and contingent on institutions that ascribe value to
an object. Concepts of ‘art’ will continue to change and evolve if curators use their place of
authority to question and reconsider these values.

Chapter Two surveyed the social and cultural perception of printed images from the
fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The ‘mechanical’ processes of production prevented
printmakers from being recognized as artists. Their work was undervalued as it was seen
as a utility for reproducing images, rather than a medium for invention and creation.
However, print became a medium for innovation and experimentation that profoundly
influenced the work of other artists. Abraham Bosse and Albrecht Dürer were surveyed as
artists who used their prints to elevate the status of printmakers and dispel the myths
associating print with ‘mechanical’ production. The ‘mechanical’ and labour intensive
aspects of print production were not very different from most early modern painting
practices. However, the way these two professions were immortalized created lasting
impressions that printmaking was a lesser practice. Painting became associated with
artistic ‘genius.’ Idealized artistic practices eliminated important ties between art, money,
and physical production – all of which were significant determinates for what objects were
made. Most early modern painting production was dictated by the desires of a patron.
Printmakers had relative freedom in developing their images as their work was sold to an
open market, rather than a specific buyer. Consequently, printmakers who developed new,
popular imagery had a profound impact on the art market and the production of other media. However, printmaking has been historically characterized as a 'minor' medium despite its profound impact. Without consistently and convincingly demystifying practices of making and situating art in a historical context, art museums will continue to uphold the idealization of art.

Chapter Three examined the dominance of the original art object in museums. The current preference for the aesthetic and 'auratic' presentation of art often causes prints to fade into the background. The assumption that works of art will 'talk' disregards the complexity of art images. This continues to be a common assumption associated with the aesthetic presentation of art and the lack of interpretive text found in many museums. In order to understand the practical implications of curating collections of prints, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Department of Print was examined. Prints are often limited in the amount of time they can be displayed and the places where they can be exhibited. The physical limitations for exhibiting print add to the reasons why they are not showcased alongside the aesthetic ‘masterpieces’ in museums. Issues of conservation often segregate prints to small spaces where they can be protected from light and environmental exposure. These exhibition tactics may be for conservation purposes, but aesthetically suggest that these objects are unimportant. Despite the willingness to engage with ideas to overcome many issues facing print collections, the Met curators have been unable to develop practical solutions. However, the scholarship of the Met curators examined important issues that are indicative of the problems being faced by other large print collections.

Collections of prints represent an important history of artistic production and invention. Through finding ways to integrate prints among the stories of an art museum’s
permanent collection, a more complete and detailed history of cultural production can be illustrated. By presenting separate and distinct histories of different media, art museums often fail to show the social processes of art production. Infusing new narratives can also help paintings to transcend their aesthetic façade and reveal themselves as meaningful art objects. Each object in an exhibition space is representative of a period of art history. Their decontextualized representation forces each work to characterize something autonomously. Rather than having each work represent something individually, each display should be interpreted for what they represent as a collection of cultural artefacts. There should a purpose for displaying each work and a meaning associated with the placement of one object next to another. These reasons should not simply be aesthetic or decorative and should be made apparent to the public.

Examining the cultural history and institutional use of print collections reveals an overall issue with the way art is interpreted and valued in museums. Traditional modes for exhibiting art should be reevaluated and altered to dismantle cultural hierarchies. ‘High’ culture needs to be taken off its pedestal and demystified to allow visitors to connect with real art history, not the idealized art history that often strips cultural artefacts of their context and meaning. From the fifteenth century to the present day, print has been the way most people have come in contact with art. Whether it was with a devotional woodcut or a digital reproduction, the accessibility of print has contributed to its lack of recognition as a meaningful and important artistic medium. Art does not have to be inaccessible or incomprehensible to seem important. Breaking down cultural hierarchies and the division between different media can infuse art museums with relatable and accessible narratives about culture. As art museums are in the process of becoming more accessible to the public,
there is a prime opportunity to reevaluate their collections and find ways to break free from traditional aesthetic values and modes of display.
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Plate 1: The method for cutting a wood block from Jean-Michel Papillon's *Traité historique et pratique de la gravure en bois*, 1766. Multiple cuts were often required to completely remove the negative space around the printing surface.
Plate 3: The manner for holding and using an etching needle, from Abraham Bosse’s De la maniere de graver a l’eauforte et au burin, et de la gravure in maniere noire, 1758.
Plate 4: The manner for holding the burin (engraving tool) and cutting into the copper plate from Abraham Bosse’s *De la maniere de graver a l’eauforte et au burin, et de la gravure in maniere noire*, 1758.
Plate 5: A wooden label for Emmanuel de Witte’s *The Interior of Oude Kerk, Amsterdam* at the National Gallery of Art, Washington.
Plate 19: Albrecht Dürer, Christ Driving the Moneychangers from the Temple. c. 1508-09. Woodcut. St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis.
Plate 25: Jean-Honoré Fragonard *Young Woman* (left) and a reproduction made in China (right), Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.
Plate 26: Jacob van Ruisdale's Landscape with Windmills near Haarlem (above), John Constable's Landscape with Windmills near Haarlem (below), Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.
Plate 32: Two views of *Coypel's Don Quixote Tapestries: Illustrating a Spanish Novel in Eighteenth-Century France* at the Frick Collection, New York.
Appendices

1 Interview Guide

1. Describe your educational background, professional experience, and current position.

2. What role do you believe your collection has in the museum?

3. How are print and drawing collections important in museums?

4. What are your department’s main objectives for displaying its collection?

5. Is your collection displayed in media-specific gallery or integrated with other media within the museum?

6. What future projects do you or does your department hope to pursue?

7. Are the objectives of your department ever hindered? If so, how is your department limited?

8. Do you think that print collections are able to contextualize culture in museums?

9. What are some problems facing paper collections in museums?

10. Do you believe traditional hierarchies of high and low art continue to play an important role in what is displayed in museums?