



Knud Wassermann

Collectors' Passion for Print

Let no one say that print is not worth anything. Even today, rare stamps fetch top prices, and limited edition books are an attractive investment. I went on a search to find out what printed matter is collected. Not everything, but a great deal.

My grandfather was an avid stamp collector, and as a young boy I got carried away by his passion for collecting. At some point, I began to wonder how stamps were made. And that was my first point of contact with the printing industry, which – as has since become apparent – had a lasting influence on my professional career.

Until the mid-1980s, it was generally assumed – including by my grandfather – that the nominal price of stamps would rise over the years and that they were a safe investment. In the 1960s, there were even „stamp value packs“ in Germany, which were not designed as collector's items but as financial investments and were traded at bank counters. So to speak, the share for „the little woman or the little man“. At that time, various German banks even recommended the value packs as a supplement to asset accumulation.

Absolute rarities are in demand

The illusion was then abruptly shattered in the following years. The postal companies flooded the market with a plethora of new issues and enormous print runs, and so prices fell below the nominal price. It's actually a sensational business model: customers pay for a service they don't use. At the same time, fewer and fewer young people could be inspired to collect stamps. This is probably also because the pick-up line „May I show you my stamp collection?“ already didn't work in the past, and certainly not in an increasingly digital world.

True rarities, however, are still collected and sold at auctions to the highest bidders. The most valuable stamp is not, as is generally assumed, the „Blue Mauritius,“ but the „British Guiana One-Cent Magenta.“ A unique piece, it was auctioned off at Sotheby’s in New York in 2014 for 9.5 million U.S. dollars. I would also settle for a „Blue Mauritius“ – a very well-preserved example changed hands for 1.35 million U.S. dollars.

The Queen is said to own about several and not only that – she has one of the largest and most valuable collections in the world. Among the prominent collectors is also the French ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy. During his time in office, he set up a collectors’ club at the Élysée Palace. In the course of his time in office, he is said to have expanded his collection with numerous guest gifts.

The most expensive book in the world

The wheat is also separated from the chaff when it comes to used books. The largest antiquarian bookstore is said to be [The Strand Bookstore](#) with the slogan „18 Miles of Books“ on New York’s Broadway, where one or the other already out-of-print book can certainly be found. Real rarities can be found in the renowned auction houses. The list of the most expensive books is a colorful mix of different genres. Prices are based on historical value, rarity and artistry.

For example, the list includes „The Tales of Beedle the Bard“ by J.K. Rowling, the Gutenberg Bible, Shakespeare’s Folio and the Magna Carta. The prices vary from 4.6 million for the work of J. K. Rowling to almost 30 million euros for what is currently the most expensive book in the world – the „Codex Leicester“ by Leonardo da Vinci. It is a 72-page collection of handwritten notes by the master with inventions, theories and ideas that are still astounding today and show Leonardo’s genius. The book was bought at auction by Microsoft founder Bill Gates in 1994 for 29 million euros.

Facsimile for art lovers and collectors

Facsimile prints are not quite as expensive as the originals listed above. However, due to the technical and craftsmanship involved, collectors are willing to pay quite a bit of money for them. This can be in the order of magnitude of an upper middle class car. The treasures otherwise kept in national libraries and museums thus become exclusively accessible to art lovers and collectors in limited form. Color tones, gold and silver finishes, as well as signs of age or irregularities are faithfully reproduced in the facsimile as well.

Each page of the manuscript is reproduced with absolute precision using special scanners. On this basis, initial proofs are made. These are compared and corrected with the original as long and as often as necessary until the colors match exactly. Facsimiles are usually limited editions of a few hundred copies. The effort involved also justifies the price – in return, one acquires the unrestricted insight once enjoyed only by kings, princes, bishops and abbots.

Two companies that specialize in this niche are [Faksimile Verlag](#) and Verlag Müller & Schindler (www.muellerundsindler.com), which are now run jointly by publisher Charlotte Kramer. Basically, the subject of facsimile printing is very much in the German language area – in Graz, the [Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt](#) has been dedicated to the subject for over 70 years.

Objects of desire

Anyone who thinks of books as an investment only in terms of facsimiles has done the math without Benedikt Taschen. For his books have experienced an increase in value that some stocks can only dream of. There are enough examples of this. The legendary book „Helmut

Newton's Picture Gallery" in SUMO format has long been sold out, and in the meantime you have to put around 15,000 euros on the table for it, which corresponds to an increase in value of 1500 percent since its publication in 1999.

„The Godfather Family Album“ from 2008 once went for 700 euros over the counter. Today it is offered at the antiquarian bookshop [Abebooks](#) currently for 10,800 euros. A thoroughly worthwhile investment, as the examples make clear. „Taschenbooks are already designed as collectors' items. They usually increase in value almost immediately,“ assures one at Abebooks.

The world of comics collectors

But comics are also coveted collectibles. In the USA, astronomical sums are sometimes paid. „Superman 1“ from 1938 in first-class condition was sold in 2017 for an incredible 600,000 US dollars. In 1938, the selling price was just 10 cents, representing a 6 million percent increase in value. And there would be many more printed objects, not even discussed here, that arouse the collector's passion – historic postcards, coasters, banknotes, scrapbooks such as those from Panini, posters, sheet music, stocks and much more.

If you look around on the relevant collector platforms on the Internet, you will realize that collecting is deeply rooted in the human psyche and that „collector's happiness“ can only be manifested with print.

Yours

Knud Wassermann,
Editor-in-Chief of „Graphische Revue“