

Condition Demystified

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Evaluating the condition of a map requires a combination of objective and subjective judgment. On the one hand, describing the flaws and positive attributes of a map is primarily an objective task. Either the map has foxing, toning, tears, etc. or it doesn't. On the other hand, one must determine whether the defects outweigh the positives, and whether the defects and positives are unusual or to be expected for a specific type of material. Here are three common examples when subjective judgment must be used in evaluating condition:

A Tear Is a Tear Is a Tear - Or Is It?

For instance, a binding tear on a late 19th century folding map is not considered nearly as serious as a tear on a 16th or 17th century folio atlas map, since 19th century paper is typically much thinner and weaker, and binding tears with folding maps are quite common. It is important to consider the type of paper and the way a map was issued (atlas, folding, wall, etc.) in determining the significance of a defect. With some maps, finding an example in B+ condition may be the best one could hope to find, while other maps are readily available in A or A+ condition.

Perfect...Almost

In another situation, you might have a map that is on a full sheet of sturdy paper, with a strong impression and original color, but there are a few small spots of foxing or some worm holes. The map may still be considered near fine if the defects are not noticeable and are minor in comparison with all of the positive attributes. One must evaluate the severity of the flaws both on their own and in relation to the other characteristics of the map to decide whether the flaws truly detract from the appearance.

Band-Aids

Another consideration with condition relates to repairs to flaws. Some repair work, if done professionally, can almost negate a defect. If the defect is no longer noticeable and the map is properly conserved to protect it for the future, the condition of the map might increase from a B to a B+ or even to an A. In our opinion, one exception to this can occur with facsimile work. If significant facsimile work was required to fully repair a tear or hole, the map will no longer be considered in A condition, even if all the repair work was seamless and the map looks excellent. In contrast, poor repairs can decrease the value further by causing additional blemishes or making the original defect even more noticeable. For example, using non-archival tape on a map will create a stain on the paper.

In Scientia Veritas, in Arte Honestas (In science, truth; in art, honor)

At the end of the day, evaluating condition is part art and part science. The condition description is typically science, simply describing the map as it is. The condition grade, however, is mostly art, and is largely driven by the subjective

circumstances described above. At Old World Auctions, every item listed in our auctions is carefully inspected by two people in order to ensure that all defects are properly described. The item is then assessed a condition grade, which is essentially our expert opinion on the overall appearance of the map and how it compares with other examples. Although most elements of the science of evaluating condition can be readily observed, it is the art of evaluating condition that requires both experience and comparative review.