

The Truth About Color

by Joe McAlhany, Old World Auctions

On one level, color is simple for the map collector. It's one of the first things you notice about a map, before the specifics of geography or engraving style become apparent. Your reaction to it is instantaneous, subconscious—you have an opinion on the palette of the map before you can even articulate it. But for the serious collector there is more to consider beyond the immediate response to the map's color scheme. Understanding a bit of the history of color on maps, the difference between original and later color, and the relationship between color and value will help you to build the best collection possible. There are ambiguities involved, but knowledge, experience, and assistance from trusted sellers can demystify the subject of hand coloring on antique maps.



Prior to the adoption of printed color in the late nineteenth century, almost all maps were printed in black ink, with no color. With a few exceptions, almost all the color that appears on early maps was applied sometime after printing. Starting in the 16th century, publishers would offer atlases made-to-order and sans color, providing affluent or important clientele with options to upgrade their copies. Nobles, clergyman, and royalty could choose from a variety of bindings, color options, and other details to customize their purchase. Choices in color ranged from simple outline

color, which means that only the borderlines were highlighted, to elaborate full color examples that only the wealthiest could afford, complete with lavish additions such as gilt highlights or a layer of gum arabic, which amplified the luminosity of the painted area.

If color was added soon after the map was printed, before it was bound into an atlas or otherwise around the time of its publication, it is referred to as *original* or *contemporary color*. Maps that feature original color are a big draw for collectors, especially when the color is well-preserved. *Later color* (also called *modern* or *recent color*) was applied well after the map's publication. It's a broad term; later color could have been applied yesterday in a startling replica of the old style or hundreds of years ago in a sloppy, anachronistic hand. Because it tends to increase the value of the map, dealers and auction houses will typically point out when they believe an example is in original color. If a map isn't advertised as being in original color, it is likely later color, or it is too difficult to say for sure whether or not the color is original.



When it comes to detecting original color, there is little absolute certainty, especially now that there are expert colorists who can replicate it down to the flaws it causes in the paper. Fortunately, most map sellers have enough experience to be able to separate the old from the new. After years of seeing maps in original color, a dealer can spot when a map's color scheme is slightly off, but there are techniques that even an amateur can use to determine the age of a map's color. One of the main tells that a map is in original color is the evidence of oxidation on the verso. Oxidation refers to the chemical reaction that occurs when certain substances are exposed to oxygen.

Verdegris, the green pigment on early maps, oxidizes over many years to varying degrees. At its most mild, the oxidation will manifest itself as the green pigment seeping through to the verso; in other words, you will be able to see the places where the map is green very clearly on the back of the sheet. As time goes on, this may worsen and the paper will brown, grow brittle, and even begin to disintegrate. In such instances, poorly preserved original color will decrease the value of the map.

However, if the green was sparingly applied, or the map was printed on a thick sheet, the traces of oxidation may not show through, making it more challenging to date the color. Some experts swear by ultraviolet lights, which react to different pigments used on early maps with varying fluorescent colors. Those without a UV lamp can look for increased intensity in the color along the centerfold or around damage such as small tears in the paper. These contrasts in intensity are usually indicators of later color. Alas, these techniques are helpful, but not foolproof. Ultimately, it is best to find dealers and auction houses whose expertise you trust, since figuring out whether or not the color is original can be quite tricky.

Original color does increase the appeal and value of a map, given that the color is well-executed and the condition is good, but there is no exact formula for how later color affects value. There are a lot of variables in play, the most important (and volatile) of which is the collector's individual taste. Still, certain trends do prevail. Given the choice, many collectors will take an example in attractive modern color over a black-and-white example in similar condition. Yet there is a subset of "purist" collectors that would rather have a map in its original black-and-white than in later color.

There are also some maps that are actually devalued by additional color. An example of this would be Sylvanus' rare cordiform world map of 1511, which O.W.A. recently had in auction. The map was printed in only two colors—black and red—an innovation at the time and part of what makes the map so special. Were some misguided individual to color it, it would be defaced and its worth would plummet.



The final issue when discussing color on antique maps is the collector's personal taste. There are connoisseurs out there hunting down maps in original color exclusively, but there are also many collectors who are less concerned with the age of the color than what it looks like. Colorists today are doing terrific work, whether they are reproducing the map's original palette with stunning accuracy or aiming for a lush and decorative final product with an ahistorical color scheme. Collectors should know techniques to spot original color, and where color and value intersect, so that they can be informed about what they are buying. But they should also trust in their own taste—after all, who wants to spend the money to purchase and frame an eyesore? As the Latin saying goes, "De gustibus et coloribus non est disputandum" (*In matters of taste and color, there can be no disputes...* well, unless you're sending your Sylvanus off to the colorist).