HOW COLLECTORS MADE THEIR MARKS

Works on paper dealer Stephen Ongpin shares what we can learn from the fascinating practice of collectors' marks on drawings

BY SARAH BOCHICCHIO

A set of initials, a cockerel standing on a turtle, a star, a coat of arms—collectors' marks vary in appearance, but since the 17th century, their function has remained largely the same. Applied to drawings, these generally small badges (though, in some cases, they can be almost obtrusive in size) are stamped in ink, embossed, or even drawn in pencil to designate the collection to which they belong. Yet beyond their initial practical usage, collectors' marks tell a story. "There's this complete history of whose hands the drawings have passed through," says art dealer Stephen Ongpin, owner and director of Stephen Ongpin Fine Art in London.

Ongpin has been working with drawings for almost four decades, studying and surveying the medium from the 16th century to the present. "I love the fact that there is the sense that you're looking over the artist's shoulder as they're working," he shares. In working with drawings, especially Old Master drawings, one bears witness to a distinct, often private creative process. They were not intended for public display; they were produced as preparatory studies or for the use of assistants. Paul Gauguin, for example, famously declined a buyer's offer for his drawings saying his drawings were his "secrets."

By way of collectors' marks, one can also observe how those processes influenced succeeding generations of artists and collectors who owned them. Collectors' marks first came into practice in the 17th century, but gained ground in the 18th, roughly the same time that the first public museums opened. The collectors' mark is thus tied to the history of recording, cataloging, and organizing knowledge, as well as the desire to memorialize individual genius.

The first collectors of drawings were artists, explains Ongpin, because they understood the importance of the practice. "Artists would try and acquire drawings by their predecessors," he says, "as an insight into how these people worked." But these artists did not always identify their own ownership. Ongpin gives the example of the 18th-century English artist Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), who had been a devoted collector of Old Master drawings and prints. His executors decided to mark his collection before it was sold. "It is basically a square with the initials SRIR, but it was the executors who decided where to put them," shares Ongpin. "They put them on the front of the drawings they designated the most important and on the back of the drawings they thought were less important. And many times, they got it wrong." Drawings became a medium of fellowship between artists—and we can trace their exchanges and influences through the information left from collectors' marks.

Much of what we know about collectors' marks is due to Frits Lugt, a 20th-century Dutch art historian and collector, who cataloged the marks. *Les Marques de collections de dessins & d'estampes*, published in French in 1921 and supplemented in 1956, is an alphabetical list of all known collectors' marks, including short biographies on the collectors. In the introduction, Lugt wrote, "The need for a well-documented handbook of all the known marks has long been felt," and indeed, Ongpin confirmed, "I've almost never come across a collector's mark that isn't in this book, or in its online supplement. It's very thorough." Today, the thousands of cataloged marks—each of which has a Lugt number—are all online, and are constantly being updated.

Although applying collectors' marks stayed in practice through the 20th century, today they have fallen slightly out of fashion. "Collectors do it less and less because now the idea of applying something to a work of art, to the sheet itself, is sort of frowned upon by conservators," says Ongpin. "You often find marks on the mount nowadays." However, their significance to the people who study and collect them

The collector's mark of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), as seen on a detail of Pietro Faccini's *Study of a Seated Youth, Leaning to the Right*, 16th century: Red chalk. 23.7 x 33 cm (9.4 x 13 in.). Courtesy of Stephen Onpgin Fine Art.

The marks of collectors Sir Peter Lely (1618–1680), Richard Houlditch Jr. (died 1760), and Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792) on a detail of Giorgio Gandini del Grano, *Studies of the Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1520s. Red chalk, pen, and brown ink, with touches of brown wash and white heightening. Courtesy of Stephen Onpgin Fine Art.

has only been magnified. Collectors' marks are essential for determining provenance—in a way that is specific to the medium of drawing. "It's something that is not really found anywhere else in fine art," says Ongpin, "where there's this very unique way of identifying a work of art as belonging to a particular person."

Collectors' marks also give insight into the life of the work of art—who might have used it, whether it was for display or inspiration, inherited or purchased, if it was owned privately or part of a public collection. As Lugt put it in 1921, collectors' marks "bring back to life those who used them and the ensembles these collectors constituted." These marks, though small, position each drawing within larger personal histories, establishing a connection between owners past, present, and future.