

Definition of **vintage prints**

There shouldn't be any confusion about the actual meaning of "vintage print" anymore. Yet, I realize--to my absolute surprise--that there is. A lot. Apparently, many industry people use the term "vintage" rather indifferently, meaning classic/Modernist/(early) 20th Century photographs. And then there are others, who define the time frame of "vintage" very loose.

However, most international photo professionals I know use the term to define prints that have been made by the artist or under his/her supervision close to the time the image was taken (the film exposed). There is, on the other hand, no agreement on how long after the image was taken a print can be considered truly "vintage". Part of the problem is that sometimes the actual time of printing can't be narrowed down enough in the first place. That's why I personally favour the "5 year" limit, which seems to be common amongst top photo dealers. So, this means prints made within those first five years can be called "vintage". This allows for marginal errors of a year or two. If one favours a much stricter time limit of a year or so, then very few prints can be called "vintage" with good conscience.

I strongly agree with the by-line "by the artist or under his/her supervision". But please keep in mind the story I told you about Edward Weston. His fabulous later prints done by his son Cole (or sometimes Brett) were always supervised by Edward, yet it has no bearing on the value. They are "later prints" or "modern prints" or "life-time prints" with a fraction of the value, a vintage print from the same negative will fetch. In other words, for valuation purposes, it's WHEN a print was produced, whether it is signed or not, and the current conditions that are most important. The WHO is important, but is second to the WHEN. Or think of Magnum, for example. Many documentary/reportage photographs that have become modern icons, were shipped off undeveloped by the photographer from the place in the world, where they were taken, and to a lab/the agency, where they were developed and printed. Often, the photographer didn't even get to handle and print from his/her own negatives for quite some time. So, the earliest prints were made by labs, with the photographer thousands of miles away.

As far as a "confirmed and valued source", I just searched my personal library and here is the definition from the glossary of a book I own, called "Photographs of the Past: Process and Preservation" by Bertrand Lavédrine (Getty Publications, 2007), stating: "Vintage Print: A print made by the artist (or under the artist's direct supervision) soon after the original negative was made. An interval of a few years is considered compatible with the 'vintage' designation." In the early part of the same book (page 10), it describes the "vintage print" as the "earliest prints from a negative--those made within a few years of the negative itself". I probably have similar/additional sources in my library, but as you can see, the time frame is always rather vague, which is another reason why I like to put an actual number on it: within the first 5 years. It makes it less ambiguous and open to "interpretation". But to me, five years is the maximum extent of "vintage". Everything beyond, I would term "early print".

By Daniel Blochwitz in May 2018