

During the Age of Exploration, cartographers rediscovered Ptolemy's long-forgotten maps from the second century AD and began refining them.

stubborn misconceptions that persisted for centuries, even as maps became more accurate. No wonder they view antique maps as art. “The early mapmakers thought their creations should look important, so beauty was an intrinsic element,” notes Philip Curtis, proprietor of The Map House in London.

After flattening during the worst of the economic downturn, prices for fine old maps are climbing again—reflecting, dealers say, a growing interest in tangible assets. “Nobody’s making any more 17th-century Dutch Golden Age maps,” Curtis notes. One sign of increased appreciation: Antique atlases, which used to be broken up and sold as individual maps, are now more likely to fetch a higher price intact. Yet the still ample number and variety of vintage maps mean that one can purchase a significant trove for much less than the price of an Old Master painting. Museum-worthy maps are still available: the same charts explorers relied on; maps used by opposing sides at war, reflecting conflicting claims of territory; maps showing Manhattan’s 1811 grid plan when it was just beginning to fill up with buildings. And countless more.

Map collectors are generally intrigued by history and geography. Some credit a youthful fascination with the Age of Exploration, the globe-charting era from the mid-1400s to the early 1600s, when maps were keys to great wealth and empire. During this period, cartographers rediscovered Ptolemy’s long-forgotten maps from the second century AD and began refining and correcting them. (The ancient geographer lowballed the Earth’s girth, which encouraged Columbus to cross the Atlantic.)

In 1507, Martin Waldseemüller created the first known map to show North and South America separate from Asia, and to use

A Map for That

Go online to survey the catalogues of these vintage map dealers.



the name “America” (after Italian voyager Amerigo Vespucci). The only surviving copy, purchased for \$10 million in 2003, is the most expensive map ever sold. Dubbed “America’s birth certificate,” it’s prominently displayed at the Library of Congress, home of the world’s largest map collection.

Many collectors gravitate to areas of personal interest—a specific region or period, their home city or state, a country where they holiday or do business. Seattle lawyer Chris Barry has an interest in “speculative cartography” (a classic example: maps depicting California as an island). Thus he has acquired, from La Jolla, California-based dealer Barry

Ruderman, an 18th-century French map showing much of the Pacific Northwest covered by a vast sea and a 17th-century Dutch map by Blaeu locating fabled El Dorado in South America, beside a large lake in Guyana.

“My maps are all from between 1478 and the early 20th century,” Ruderman says. “A client might be interested in mining, so he might pursue maps that show old mines near those operating today.” Most of his maps, he says, cost less than US\$5,000, and many under \$500.

Above all, Ruderman emphasizes, “Until you’re comfortable with issues such as market value and authenticity, it’s important to work with reputable dealers”—a clubby, international cohort that comes together at major map fairs in London, Paris and Miami (the world’s largest, held in February).

These dealers are expert at appraising old maps and authenticating them, based on paper and print quality, ink oxidation, and so on.

Overall, maps closest to their original condition are the most valuable. Dealers grade maps on a range of criteria, including age, rarity, size, historical value and decorative qualities.

• **ANTIQUES OF THE ORIENT**
Singapore

www.aoto.com.sg

• **BARRY RUDERMAN**
La Jolla, California

www.raremaps.com

• **COHEN & TALIAFERRO**
New York

www.ctraremaps.com

• **THE OLD PRINT SHOP**
New York

www.oldprintshop.com

• **DANIEL CROUCH**
London

www.crouchrarebooks.com

• **PHILIP CURTIS**
The Map House, London

www.themaphouse.com

Some branch out into sea charts, globes, celestial charts (with fabulous constellations) or bird’s-eye city panoramas.

, in a case filled with inert argon gas to preserve the document

Anyone with a smartphone can summon maps out of the ether, yet vintage maps still exert a timeless appeal—conjuring the world as it was, or was imagined to be.



Naturally, the most sought-after types—among them maps of the world, of the Americas and of major cities—tend to cost more, but plenty of cartographic territory remains to be claimed. Dealers expect interest in China, India and Brazil to rise along with their GDPs. The vast majority of surviving maps of these areas were not native creations. Daniel Crouch, another top London dealer, explains, “There are precious few indigenous maps of Brazil, India or China—the first because there was little printing there until the 19th century, the second because the majority of the surveying was carried out by the British, and the third because most printed material was destroyed after China cut itself off from the rest of the world at the beginning of the 18th century.” Take, for example, the splendid

Land Ho!
Americæ nova Tabula, Willem Janszoon Blaeu's figured border map of the Americas, first published 1617.

world map Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci produced in China in 1602. Only six copies survive (of more than 2,000 made); in 2009 Crouch handled the sale of one of them, for a million dollars.

How to narrow down the wide world of map collecting? “My advice is to find a subject that interests you, a geographical or historical focus, then buy the very best you can,” Curtis says. Crouch also recommends “buying the best condition available,” and cautions against buying anything damaged or with modern colour. But as collectors know, sometimes buying the map at hand can prevent years of regret at passing it up—and you can upgrade later if a better version turns up.

“It’s worth paying top dollar for the very best material, because it’s always going to be the most desirable,” insists Graham Arader, a high-profile American dealer with a blue-chip inventory. “I recommend that those getting started in collecting buy and read

map source:
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1621_Americ%C3%A6_Blaeu.jpg

,” “but there are anomalies,” Ruderman notes. “Maps are content-driven. Early impressions are generally more valuable, but later versions can be more valuable if the changes reflect important new information, such as a new discovery or the first appearance of a major city.”

“That doesn’t necessarily mean the most expensive—better to buy a nice example of an inexpensive map than a poor one of an expensive map.”

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reference books. Join local historical and map societies and museums, talk to their experts, and ask them for advice.”

The Internet has reduced the dealer’s role as gatekeeper. Buyers now have global access to the latest information on availability, quality and pricing from dealers and auction houses, as well as vast online archives. But dealers remain invaluable as sources and advisers, especially for collectors seeking to buy at auction.

Early maps were costly, high-status objects, badges of affluence and worldliness. Their makers, from Ptolemy to Mercator to a Colonial surveyor named Washington, were men of wide learning. So, too, were those who bought them, from nobles and merchants to English diarist and cartophile Samuel Pepys.

Charting History
Monmouthshire,
from John Speed’s
Theatre of the Empire
of Great Britaine,
first published
circa 1611.

“For me, maps are a perfect nexus of art, science and exploration,” says Florida-based entrepreneur and author Neal Asbury, who focuses on Asia and the Americas. “I operate in a high-stress environment. It’s refreshing to escape into the pursuit of maps. I love the feeling of being overwhelmed by a piece of history but also appreciating it as a work of art.”

Successful dealers share the same passion. “Maps are wonderful things,” declares Curtis. “I’ve been doing this for 28 years, and hardly a day goes by when I don’t appreciate something anew. The more you look at these pieces, the more you get back from them.” **4MORE** go to FourSeasonsMagazine.com/issuetwo2012 to see a gallery of vintage maps.

Jeff Book writes for *Town and Country*, *Smithsonian* and other publications.