



Over the past decade, these former outcasts have morphed from disrepute to acceptance, respectability, and ultimately, desirability. Canvas replicas of Old World masterpieces are offered through a host of mail order catalogs. There are galleries and specialty furniture stores at malls where wall décor is entirely devoted to canvas replicas. Many artists and publishers of limited edition prints now regularly offer canvas versions of their new reproductions. Even on the web, new sites appear monthly featuring canvas replicas or posters with a canvas mounting option.

Canvas Transfers: How These Moneymakers Are Made

by Art Ernst

Not too long ago, reproductions on canvas were often chided as unworthy, even exploitative, fabrications in an industry most respectful of creativity and proper form. Nervous artists and purveyors of original oils regarded replicas as quasi-forgeries. Print vendors saw them as pricey curiosities of no greater intrinsic value than the far cheaper underlying poster. Even consumers considering their purchase would hesitate at the prospect of buying something that might be viewed as tacky or controversial. “Bill, I did not realize that you owned the ‘Mona Lisa.’”



As part of the framing industry, you are most likely well aware of the availability of ready-made canvases offered directly from publishers and catalogers. Retailing these pictures is entirely parallel to selling posters and limited editions, with standard wholesale discounts and ordering via stock number.

However, recent surveys indicate that over 90% of frame shops and galleries do not partake in the offering or distribution of custom canvases. These

are replicas whereby a customer selects an image heretofore available on paper only with the intention of having that image transferred to canvas.

Given the hundreds of thousands of different prints and posters outstanding, versus the few thousand items directly marketed on canvas, there is a huge potential for expanding consumer choice, and thereby growth, for shops who take advantage of the custom transfer market. Understanding the process, opportunities, and limitations of creating custom replicas can only be helpful toward this endeavor and such is the purpose of this article. Legal concerns and marketing strategies will be addressed in future issues.

Terminology

Because of the different processes and marketing efforts that exist, a number of different terms and phrases are used to refer to effectively the same thing. For instance,

canvas replicas are also known as canvas reproductions, canvas transfers, canvases, replicas, and transfers. Note that the word reproduction, without the canvas modifier, usually refers to paper prints.

In fact, custom canvases (the main focus of this article) have nothing at all to do with reproduction or replication. Pictures that are made by printing directly onto canvas are certainly canvas reproductions, but they are not *transfers*.



Photo 1: In order to "seize" the image, it can be laminated. However, many studios apply a liquid acrylic polymer as seen here.

Canvas transfers are made from already existing posters.

The actual reproduction of an image occurs at the printing press. The transfer is the movement and mounting of ink and, perhaps paper to canvas. Occasionally, the term "mount" is used instead of "transfer," especially with regard to processes that involve little or no removal of paper. Lastly, with apologies to purists, the terms lithograph, print, and poster will be used interchangeably, referring herein to posters printed with less than ten color separations.

The Transfer Process

While there are variations in the techniques and chemical constituents, most transfer methodologies consist of three major phases: seiz-

ing the image, peeling the image, and mounting to canvas.

Seizing the Image

The first phase of transferring an image to canvas is bonding the ink to a clear film. One method used by a few studios, as well as stores equipped with a heat press, is to laminate the poster to heat activated laminating film. These films usually have UV inhibiting properties and are made of either vinyl or polyester.



Photo 2: Laying the images on a rack is a common way to allow them to dry.

Perforated sheets are recommended so that air can pass through during pressing time. Normally, a sheet of clear laminate is cut to a size slightly larger than the poster image. The film is then peeled away from its backing and placed over the

poster. With protective foam atop, the coated poster is put into a heat press. After three to five minutes with heat in the 185°F to 225°F range, the print should be properly laminated.

The more common method of seizing an image, (and the one used by the major studios), involves the application of a liquid acrylic polymer to the surface of the paper print. Some studios roll-on the polymer. Others spray it on in one or more coats. Still others brush it on (see Photo 1). Often, the method of application chosen is simply a function of the viscosity of the chemical used. Thinner solu-

tions are best for spraying, while thicker gels can be economically applied by hand.

After it is coated, the wet print is allowed to dry. Laying them on a rack is the most common approach (see Photo 2). Overnight at room temperature is usually sufficient. Some studios accelerate the process by using fans, heaters, or humidity controlled drying rooms. During this drying time, the active molecules of the polymer penetrate the paper and bond with the ink of the image.

Peeling

The next major phase is peeling the ink-inlaid film away from the paper (see Photo 3). Of note, some studios skip this step altogether. They may not want the canvas texture to show, or they might use a coarsely textured fabric that can show some weave even with all the paper mounted. Also, there are certain situations, (such as when mounting difficult paper stocks), in which the transfers turn out better with some or all paper left on.

However, most of the canvases crafted by the major studios have as much paper as practicable removed. Usually, properly coated and dried, or laminated prints are soaked in an emulsion. When properly loosened, paper is then removed. With laminates, the paper comes off in a neat sheet.

Peeling acrylic-coated prints entails more finesse. Some shops leave a good amount of paper to ensure no loss of image. Others aim for a “total peel,” rendering an acrylic and ink sheet that will ultimately maximize the canvas texture. The actual peeling is normal-



Photo 3: Whether the image was seized by lamination or the acrylic polymer, the next step is to peel the coating away.



Photo 4: Any remaining paper can be removed by scrubbing with a brush.

ly done by hand, though sprayers, sponges and special brushes are also utilized for speed and thoroughness (see Photo 4).

Mounting to Canvas

Lastly, as far as a basic transfer is concerned, the image is affixed to canvas. Pictures crafted via the lamination method are put back into the heat press with a dry mount film placed between the laminate and the canvas. Four to five minutes of heat and pressure completes the transfer.

Replicas made with acrylics are mounted onto canvas either by hand, with a vacuum press, or both. Prints that are coated but not peeled are usually vacuum



Photo 5: The back of the image is coated with adhesive.



Photo 6: The image is mounted onto the canvas.

pressed, just as if they were posters being mounted onto foam board. Peeled images are normally pressed onto adhesive coated canvas by hand, aided by sponges or squeegees (see Photos 5 and 6). These pictures, too, can be further imbedded with a vacuum press (see Photo 7). **Important:** The press used for acrylic-based replicas

should be cold. Heat makes the acrylic coating tacky.

Stretching

Once on canvas, a replica can be treated much like an original oil painting. Though occasionally mounted onto slate or boards, (or glued to foam board in the case of miniatures), the normal next step is stretching (see Photo 8). As with the other processes, stretching services vary between studios. For pictures ultimately framed, differences herewith are moot. For art that is ultimately hung unframed, stretching is critical.

A few studios do not offer this service at all. Most that do stretch do so after transfer, stapling canvas into the sides of half-inch wide wood stretcher bars. Some offer gallery wrapping, whereby the canvas is secured to the stretcher assembly on the rear, either via staples or a spline and groove. Another look altogether is achieved



Photo 7: Transfers done with lamination are placed a press to complete the process. Those done with acrylic polymer can also be put in the press to reinforce the transfer.

when a studio uses pre-stretched canvas. These pre-stretched canvases can include side accoutrements like rubber siding.

Variations

Though most all transfers are made using the same basic procedures, the same poster can look quite different coming out of different studios. The variation can increase greatly via optional servic-



Photo 8: With most transfers, the next step is to stretch the canvas using stretcher bars.

es available.

Regarding basic transfers, the biggest factor affecting appearance is paper removal. This is often as much a factor of workmanship as process. Generally, the more paper that is removed, the more the canvas texture will come through to the surface. Total peels will appear to have been printed or painted directly onto the canvas. Mountings that involve no removal of

Custom Transfer Studios

| Company, State | Years Transferring | Transfer Process | Brushstrokes | Age & Crack | Stretcher Bars | Basic Stretching | Special Stretching | Framing | Brass Nameplates | Acquires Prints | Phone Number |
|--------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------|-------------|----------------|------------------|--------------------|---------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Art and Framing, NM | 13 | H | C | Y | Y | Y | G | N | N | Y | 800-530-8680 |
| Art Smart, MA | 2 | H,V | N | N | Y | Y | G | N | N | Y | 877-297-6278 |
| Art Transfer Inc., AZ | 25 | H | P | Y | Y | Y | S | N | N | Y | 602-252-2160 |
| Artomic Fusion, TX | 10 | V | C,P | Y | N | Y | S | N | N | N | 800-387-4669 |
| August Art, CA | 21 | H,V | C | N | Y | Y | G | N | N | N | 800-861-7277 |
| Betro Arts, OR | 16 | H | N | N | Y | Y | N | N | N | N | 800-635-0171 |
| Haddad's Fine Arts, CA | 21 | H | C | N | Y | Y | N | N | N | HD | 800-942-3323 |
| Marty Bell Fine Art, CA | 16 | H | C | N | Y | Y | P | Y | Y | N | 800-637-4537 |
| MB Industries, TX | 20 | H | C | N | Y | Y | N | Y | N | N | 915-544-9333 |
| Old Grange Graphics, CT | 33 | H,V | C | Y | Y | Y | S | Y | Y | Y | 800-282-7776 |
| Print Mount Company, RI | 7 | L | C | N | Y | Y | N | N | N | N | 800-531-9690 |
| Transfer Plus C., Quebec | 9 | V | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | 800-301-0258 |

All Categories: N = Not Offered, Y = Offered

Transfer Process: H = Pressed by hand, V = Vacuum press, L = Lamination

Brushstrokes: C = Clear acrylic, P = Painted with tinted acrylics

Special Stretch: G = Gallery wrap, P = Pre-stretched canvas, S = Special stretching available

Acquire Prints: HD = Haddad's own prints may be ordered for transfer at Haddad's

paper will exhibit little or no apparent canvas texture.

The fabric utilized will also affect picture appearance. Most studios use artist's grade seven-ounce canvas. This weight offers a good balance between smoothness and relatively uniform dimples. Some shops, however, mount images onto 10- and even 12-ounce canvas. These coarser fabrics are most useful in augmenting texture when a lot of paper is left on the transferred substrate. However, they can obfuscate image details of thoroughly peeled pictures.

Additionally, the coating of the canvas is important. Untreated canvas will darken an image, while gesso treated canvas will help maintain the hues of a picture. Some studios go further and pre-coat their canvas with titanium white paint, brightening the image thereon laid.

Of course, the chemicals used for the transfer itself can affect the final outcome, especially with regard to sheen. Amongst the laminates, polyester will render the shiniest of surfaces while vinyl is used for more muted tones. With acrylics, most polymer solutions result in a medium gloss finish, though varnish can be applied to gloss up or matte down the sheen.

Optional Surface Treatments

Pictures that are further enhanced with surface treatments can add even more variation. The most common addition to the surface of canvas replicas is the application of clear acrylic brushstrokes. Some shops do not offer this option at all. Others have processors who



Photo 9: Brushstrokes can be added to the image for a more realistic look.

rapidly apply the strokes in occasionally random patterns, their goal being to simply add a third dimension to the replicas.

Finer studios employ artists who paint the brushstrokes in the pattern of the original work (see Photo 9). Experienced artists at the more quality conscious shops actually replicate the logical strokes of the artist, ending applications not only where patterns change but also where colors change.

Moreover, usually at customer request, acrylic brushstrokes may be applied sparingly, heavily, or in between. Generally, artists at the shops know when to be liberal and when to hold back, basing judgments on the original painting.

Going beyond the use of clear gel, certain studios paint tinted oils and acrylics over transferred posters. Some apply them as highlights in just a few spots. A few studios repaint entire pictures, whereby the transferred poster serves as merely a mold. This can render the most realistic of reproductions, though image alteration could be of issue here.

Another option is to give pictures a distressed or aged look. Some studios merely darken images. Most that offer this option apply a chemical that cracks as it dries. Stains are then applied in a manner that allows tint to aggregate in the cracks. Some studios aim for thick cracks resembling an assembled jigsaw puzzle. Others aspire to web-like fineness.

The age and crack option, popular among antique shops and dealers in folk art, is perhaps the least consistent (see Photo 10). Pictures from the same studio will often achieve disparate results, as the pattern of cracks is affected by humidity, temperature, time elapsed, and even the minute variations in the surface of the canvas.

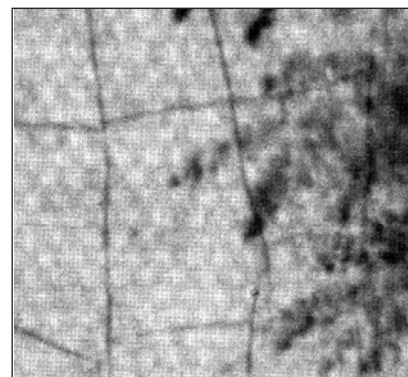


Photo 10: Sometimes, transfers are made to look aged with cracks in the surface.

Size Matters

One production factor you should keep in mind when ordering transfers is the inexactitude of size. During the peeling and mounting processes of transfers done with acrylics, the acrylic and ink substrate can stretch by upwards of two to four percent in each direction. Afterwards, as with any cotton fabric moistened, the picture can shrink as it dries.

As a result, when you send

prints for transfer, you may be surprised at the dimensions of the artwork returned. The variances are rarely more than one-half inch, but if frames are pre-purchased or if standard sizes were sent and expected back, even a fractional difference can be problematic.

Luckily, informed storeowners need not fret. No doubt, if you do your own stretching, you can handle any canvas received. Moreover, if you cut or order moulding after a replica's return, again there is no problem. But if you request stretching at the transfer company and require a given size, you merely need to inform the studio ahead of time. Of course, the required size must be close to, or smaller than, the original poster image size. Further, if there is a risk that cropping will take place, and there is a portion of a picture, such as a signature, that is near the edge but must be retained, again you need to inform the studio up front.

Non-Lithographic Prints

Heretofore, this article has focused on common lithographic prints. It is not unlikely that you may come across clients who want photographs on canvas. Serigraphs, inkjet printouts, photocopies, and limited edition prints may also come your way.

On a technical basis, photocopies and most limited edition lithographs will transfer in the same manner as regular prints and posters. However, many limited editions are printed on thick, high rag content paper that makes peeling difficult, rendering a high proportion of inadvertently destroyed

prints. Serigraphs, with the many layers of ink and even thicker papers, are more problematic and present an even greater risk of ruination. Ink jet printouts, which are predominantly made with water-soluble inks, are subject to bleeding with the acrylic coating methods, though the laminate techniques should work.

Aside from the technical issues, one might reject transfer orders of limited editions and serigraphs on a value basis. Once transferred, an image no longer has the intrinsic value it held as one of those two formats. The paper, and ergo original print, is destroyed. The canvas will be beautiful, but never again marketable as part of a series. There are also legal considerations that will be addressed in a future article.

As for photographs, because the image is actually a part of the paper, the transfer process is a little different. When using the lamination technique, after bonding the laminate to the photo surface some paper is merely stripped from the back. There is no soaking. Acrylic transfers of photos are similar in that a coating is applied to the surface and only a portion of the paper is removed. Because of the extra paper left, some studios mount photos onto a heavy canvas with deep dimples to display texture.

Other Services from Transfer Studios

While all canvas transfer studios offer the service of moving the image of a print to canvas, not all of them stretch, nor do all of them brushstroke, nor do many of them age or touch up or custom stretch

pictures. On the other hand, some provide services beyond the realm of transferring that you may find useful. In some cases, these services are intended to render a ready-to-deliver product to your customers with only the submission of a print.

One service meant to reduce hassle is the acquisition of prints. Certainly, if a customer brings in a print for transfer, you would forward such to your studio of choice. However, if a customer orders a print out of a catalog, there are a number of studios that will get that print for you. Additionally, many distributors have relationships with canvas studios such that you can order prints through them and have any or all redirected for transfer.

Another service is custom painting. While most posters have descriptive print at the bottom or elsewhere in border areas, some have the artist's name and occasionally other information printed right in the actual image. Some studios, for a fee, will paint out these letters. Similarly, if a damaged print is sent for transfer, these same studios that paint out letters can also paint out flaws. One should note, however, if a print is in very bad shape before transfer, it may be completely destroyed during the process.

To help you complete jobs with minimal effort, a number of studios offer framing. Some do it on a contract basis. Others have their own lines of moulding displayed in catalogs. Working with these studios, you can send or order a print and receive back a fully framed canvas replica. Most of these studios will even drop ship for you if so desired. Brass name-

plates, offered by a few studios, can give an enhanced museum feel to the reproduction you are selling.

Do It Yourself?

Now that you know how to craft a replica from scratch, should you? There are companies that offer materials and instructions so that you can do just that. Depending on your excess space, patience, spare time and, cash position, this may be just the route for you.

On the other hand, if any of these attributes is missing, you might consider having your replicas crafted at one of the major transfer studios. Aside from the space and time concerns, there are also characteristics of the transfer process that could lean you in this direction.

Soaking a print too long can render air bubbles, separating the image from the acrylic. Not soaking it long enough can render a rough and damage-prone substrate. When handling after the paper is discarded but before mounting onto the canvas, the ink film is highly susceptible to tearing and distortion.

Also, every different type of paper that lithographs come on presents a unique reaction to the process. Rag content, weight, and coating all have an impact to which inexperienced hands may not react appropriately. At least two studios I know of will not let new employees coat or peel customer prints until they have practiced transferring throwaway prints daily for at least two months.

Why Consider Offering Replicas?

Chances are your shop currently

displays original oils, limited edition prints, and some wonderfully framed posters. You may even have some canvas reproductions as offered by various publishers. Why do the homework and establish the relationships needed to offer custom canvas replicas?

Profits

First, there are potentially far higher profits from your print offerings. A poster that sells for \$30 on paper could go for \$150 to \$500 on canvas, depending on the frame. A casual survey of the mail order market will show you that common open edition prints sell for hundreds of dollars on canvas in ornate yet inexpensive frames.

Larger Customer Base

Second, there is some likelihood of an expanded customer base. Thanks to the proliferation of venues by which replicas are offered, there has been growing acceptance and demand for the product. The Museum Shop and dealers in the art of Thomas Kinkadee display canvas replicas located in malls across the U.S. are two examples. In addition, popular mail order catalogs including Toscano, Around the Corner, and the Masters Collection sit on coffee tables in millions of households.

Even without third party promotion of the medium, the notion that your shop now offers canvas reproductions of almost any picture your customers chooses should bring in a new clientele.

Ease of Entry

Third, adding replicas to your menu of offerings is easy and takes

little space. If you have poster catalogs with 10 or 20 thousand images, then you already have catalogs with 10 or 20 thousand replicas. You really only need to display a sample or two to give customers a feel for the possibilities.

Increased Framing Options

Fourth, your framing options are multiplied. Instead of just offering the brass, chrome, or plastic frames that usually adorn posters, you can serve up ornate gold, pewter and wood mouldings. These are particularly attractive around works by the old masters, as most of your customers are used to seeing these paintings in such frames at museums. If you are not equipped to make frames of this type, you can order from studios with framing services.

Unique Collections

Fifth, insofar as there are assorted selections of replicas aggregated by various publishers and distributors, you too can create your own unique collection. Perhaps a type of art sells particularly well in your area. Some shops have even developed their own websites displaying canvas artwork of a certain theme. Of course, the notion that anything in print can be provided as a canvas replica provides access to the greatest collection imaginable.

How to Get Started?

If you are not already set up to offer transfers, your next step should be to get information. While not assumed to be a complete survey, the chart on page 44 provides the names, phone num-

bers, and service summaries of the major custom transfer studios.

In addition to breadth of service, issues such as turnaround and customer support should be considered. Location might play a factor, though it should be noted that some firms ship for free to the lower 48 U.S. states. Most important is the quality of the workmanship. Given the unique nature of each company's precise craft, it is highly recommended that you obtain samples from the shops you are considering. Your chances of growth abetted by repeat business will only be possible if you meet the demands of your customers. ■

Photos on opening page courtesy of Old

Grange Graphics.

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