

Are You Keeping Pace With Digital Prints?

by Patrick Sarver

Imagine, if you will, a dozen customers coming into your shop on a single weekend looking to have digital prints framed. If you're like most framers, chances are, these customers would be a mixed blessing—even if you have some basic knowledge about digital prints.

The reason: it's entirely possible today for each of those customers to have different types of digital prints. The framing options may be significantly different—or they may not. The important thing is to be able to identify the specific kind of digital print you have to deal with. Not only is it important to know what the item is, but it's also important to be able to advise the client on appropriate framing for the item.

Are you up to the challenges of this opportunity? If you haven't been keeping up with the proliferation of digital ink and media combinations, there would be a good chance your selection of framing options for those prints might not be the most beneficial.

It's important to be able to identify the specific type of digital print your customers bring in for framing.

Because of the numerous types of digital printing and substrate options, framers who don't stay up to date can find themselves at a disadvantage. Compared to traditional fine art and photo prints, in which there are relatively minor variations, digital fine art and photographic prints have a variety of characteristics you need to understand in order to frame them correctly or to sell framed digital prints knowledgeably. As the printing processes of digital

art continue to evolve, keeping abreast is an ongoing process.

Five years ago it might have been possible to simply ignore digital prints. But it has been almost two years since an art industry survey found that digital prints had overtaken serigraphs in the number of prints sold at galleries and frame shops nationwide. Add to that the rising number of photographs and artwork produced on digital prints by home printers, and the trend to digital prints becomes even greater. The fact is, it's highly likely that the percentage of digital prints will continue to increase in the foreseeable future and may well soon become the most common type of print in a few short years.

Types of Digital Prints

New papers and inks are constantly coming on line as manufacturers in the fine art field seek to create prints with outstanding reproduction qualities. Here's a quick review of the primary kinds of ink and media—



As digital art becomes commonplace and consumers increasingly display this media, it's important for framers to be educated about it. Knowing how to identify, handle, house, and store these works of art enables you to assist your customer in deciding how to frame their items. In this six-part, bimonthly series, "Digital Directions," PFM has invited several writers in the industry to discuss the topics related to this subject today. This month, Patrick Sarver discusses the growing importance of digital fine art and photographic prints to professional framers.

◆ Fine art prints may be printed on traditional watercolor paper, treated watercolor paper (also called coated paper), canvas, or other substrates such as fabric. They may even be transferred to hardboard.

◆ Every combination of ink and substrate has different longevity and color gamut characteristics. These characteristics can be affected by the amount of visible light, temperature, humidity, and atmospheric pollutants in the environment where the print is hung.

◆ The two primary kinds of ink are dye-based and pigment-based. Pigment-based inks generally have greater longevity but the colors are usually not as strong as for dye-based inks. The differences between the two types of ink have narrowed considerably in the past few years as ink and print media have improved.

◆ Inks and papers for digital photographic prints are generally comparable in longevity to traditional color photo prints, which may not be as colorfast as some fine art digital prints. There's a great variation in digital photographs this due to the

proliferation of inks and substrates for home printers.

Handling and Conservation Differences

Digital prints on watercolor paper made with dye-based inks need to be handled with the utmost care. They are even more sensitive to water than traditional watercolor paintings. Even a droplet from a sneeze can be visible because it can cause ink to run. This is true for both treated and untreated watercolor paper. They must be framed with the same care and consideration as the best watercolor painting, keeping in mind that visible light can fade the inks as much as ultraviolet rays do. Spray-on or other protective coatings can reduce the print's vulnerability to water, but even these prints should be framed like quality watercolors.

Pigment-based inks are less vulnerable to water, and oil-based pigments can generally be handled the same way that traditional serigraphs are handled and framed.

Digital photographic prints are largely just as susceptible to prob-

lems with moisture as are traditional photos. Home digital printers vary in the kinds of inks they use. Many use water-based inks, although some use more durable pigment-based inks.

No matter what kind of digital print you're working with, it is important to find out how and where it was printed. If it is a fine art print, ask where a customer purchased it. Look on the back to see if it has any printing information or see if it came with a certificate of authenticity. If it was printed using a home computer, find out what kind of printer was used.

There are some strategies for framing home-produced digital prints or prints of unknown origin. In general, it is advisable to stay away from heat-related mounting techniques, especially the use of a dry mount press, for all digital prints. The susceptibility of digital prints to water damage also means avoiding any kind of water-based mounting process.

If a print brought to you was produced at home by the customer, ask if a second print would be avail-

able. This second print could then be used for testing the effects of different mounting techniques.

One alternative is to use a cold laminating system to mount the image. Another is to use hinging and conservation framing techniques, including the use of UV-filtering glazing. Despite the expense, because of the uncertainty of the image's durability and longevity, it's preferable to frame a digital print to maximize its life. This means explaining the options to the customer, including the fact that a digital print with unknown longevity needs to be framed in a way that will ensure that the print will achieve its maximum longevity.

Explaining the Options

Mounting options, along with proper care for digital prints, need to be explained. If you know the kind of print it is and what inks

and media were used to make the print, you'll be able to explain the options clearly along with what the expected lifespan of the print is.

Keep in mind that longevity ratings of prints are based on when a print *starts* to show noticeable fading compared to an original. Most people won't be able to see the fading until it becomes more intense. If you do not know enough about digital prints to be able to explain all this your customers, you run the risk of alienating them if the print fades faster than they expect.

How to Keep Up to Date

Where can you keep up to date on the current and new types of digital prints?

◆ One important source has been *www.wilhelm-research.com*, the site of the primary industry tester of longevity for inks and substrates.

Currently, the site is "under construction" as the lab is undertaking a major study of testing procedures as well as the effects of humidity and atmospheric pollutants on digital and photographic prints. Wilhelm's prior longevity ratings have been the standard for digital prints.

- ◆ Manufacturers and distributors of papers, canvas, inks, and digital printing equipment often post the latest information on their specific products on the web or can send you any available data.
- ◆ Manufacturers of preservation framing supplies can also keep you up to date on recommended materials and techniques for digital prints.
- ◆ And, of course, *PFM* will pass along advances in framing digital prints as it becomes available. ■