

CONCERNS FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

The emergence of digital printing methods has given rise to the idea of consistent “print on demand”. To quote the owner of an established master print shop, long a leader in traditional and digital solutions- “print on demand is not a right nor even a privilege. It is a convenience that users want to be able to rely on but is subject to the variations in paper pulp, pigment source, printer condition of the day, printer availability in the future, parts for printer availability in the future, capability of computer host system to run operating system on which product RIP is dependent.”

The expectation of image files safely stored over long periods of time, easily be opened exactly as they were, and printed to identically match prints from the same file say, a year ago, is unrealistic.

In light of this there are several things artists involved in digital output should keep in mind to avoid future disappointments.

Keep expectations realistic. We can not go in the darkroom and literally exactly match a print made months ago, even with good notes and identical materials. However, I know I could make one I like as much if not more than the original. Therefore the expectation of exact repeatability has always been a myth, and that hasn't changed. If an artist is doing an edition and feels the need for each print to be literally identical, unfortunately the entire edition should probably be printed all at once. On the other hand, unless we have changed materials or process, it's reasonable to expect an excellent match after a period of months if we go through another proof stage for approval.

Continually back up your image files, multiple copies, on contemporary drives and media. No digital media is 100% reliable over time, that includes CDs. Check that they open from time to time, make and keep copies. Though we keep some files here for clients that repeatedly submit orders from them, we are not in the business of archiving.

We are subject to the same material variations with which the traditional photographer has always grappled. Instead of our favorite photographic papers and chemistry either “improved” beyond recognition, or simply dropped from the market, we have paper and inks that also evolve. The digital world changes very rapidly, manufacturers are constantly updating products to capture this emerging market. We are doing things today we couldn't do only a year ago. One advantage we have over traditional methods is careful hardware linearization of our equipment and materials, enhancing our chances of reliable repeatability, assuming unaltered materials.

In addition to evolving materials, in this realm we also have evolving computers, printers, software, file formats, storage media, etc.. Even though we love the look and feel of these prints and find no fault with them, we are constantly monitoring developments in this technology and expect to take advantage of any remarkable new advancements.

Were we to anticipate a change of some kind that would make it impossible to match previous work, we would certainly alert our clients before proceeding.

You are an artist, and we are printmakers. Perhaps a print that is beautiful, and meets your needs, is more important than whether or not it precisely matches an existing print. Who knows, perhaps it will be even better. This is art, and though we now have some new tools, we still have to approach our processes as artists, as we always have.

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