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10 questions to ask a digital printmaker

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Rock Garden (detail; oil and acrylic on canvas, 60x60) by Jon R. Friedman

## Business

■ By Eileen Fritsch

# Can You Say *Giclée*?

Ten good questions to ask before selecting a digital printmaker to produce *giclées* of your artwork.

**M**any artists today are choosing to sell *giclées* (zhee-klayz) or fine art reproductions created with pigment-based inks on high-resolution inkjet printers. Digital printmaking saves you from having to buy and store more prints than you sell. But you can easily waste money if you need to take your work to more than one digital printing company to get the results you want.

Thousands of commercial print shops, photo studios and digital service bureaus now claim they can do fine art reproductions. But simply owning a wide-format inkjet printer that can print on canvas or art paper doesn't necessarily qualify them to reproduce your art. If you choose a *giclée* producer primarily on price, you may be disappointed.

The following questions, directed to the shop owners, can help you determine whether a digital printmaking company can provide the highest levels of quality and service:

### 1 How long have you been in the art reproduction business?

Firms that have been digitally reproducing art for at least five years have probably worked out all of the technical kinks. They are also more likely to understand the art business and have relationships with buyers

■ **Eileen Fritsch** has been writing about large-format inkjet printing since 1994. She was founding editor of two magazines that show how digital printers are being used in fine art reproduction, professional photography, signage, interior décor and advertising.



of art prints. Most important, they will probably still be around when you need them to output additional prints.

Mike Teal of Nocerino Editions (Centennial, Colorado) color-corrects a file that will be output on the studio's new 64-inch-wide Epson Stylus Pro 11880 inkjet printer.

### 2 What type of printers, inks, substrates and finishing materials do you use?

Late-model, high-resolution printers from Epson, Canon, and HP all use water-based (aqueous) pigment inks that can produce prints that can last for decades when properly protected and displayed under normal indoor lighting conditions. Inkjet printers that use solvent-based inks also produce long-lasting prints, but they can't match the resolution or color gamuts of the newest aqueous inkjets. (Solvent inks also aren't as environmentally friendly.)

A qualified digital printmaker will offer a choice of materials with different surface textures, weights, composition and base colors. If the company is experienced in *giclée* production, the representative or art director will be able to tell you about the advantages and limitations of each material.

If you want canvas prints, ask to touch a sample of art prints they have protected with clearcoat (a clear liquid applied to the canvas to make the print more resistant to abrasion, airborne pollutants



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## Business

and fading). Firms that specialize in commercial digital printing tend to apply thicker coatings. A qualified giclée print provider knows that a properly coated art canvas should never feel like a plastic placemat.

### 3 How will my art be converted into a digital file?

Image capture is by far the most important step in the art reproduction process because it determines how many details, tones and colors will be available in the print file. Some giclée printing companies use specialized "scanning-back" cameras for ultra-high-resolution capture with minimal risk of damage to the original. Compared to 10-megapixel consumer cameras or even 39-megapixel pro-model cameras, a scanning-back camera captures from 200 to 416 megapixels of data in every image.

"Proper lighting techniques also matter," says Susan Fader of Ditto Editions (www.dittoeditions.com) in Marblehead, Massachusetts. "The correct lighting equipment avoids highlights and makes it possible to capture every nuance (even brushstrokes) of a painting without glare or hot spots."

Marc Leftoff, who trademarked the term *Masterpiece Giclée*™ at Gallery Street (www.gallerystreet.com) in Roswell, Georgia, agrees that a high-resolution, properly lit, color-managed capture process is critical to getting the sharpness, detail and color accuracy you expect. Artists who believe they can simply use a good-quality camera to create an image file from their artwork may end up with blurry or fuzzy prints that don't show all the fine details of their originals.

### 4 Where will my art be stored when I submit it for scanning?

You must be able to trust your digital printing firm to care for your artwork. Will it be stored in a secure, clean

area? Is the company adequately insured against theft or damage?

### 5 How will the captured image be archived?

After your artwork is scanned, the digital file should be treated like a valuable asset. A digital printmaker who has invested time helping you perfect the file will want to keep the original master file so the company can continue to provide prints for you after your first prints have sold. Make sure the print provider has adequate backup systems for storing files.

Some studios will provide you with a CD with lower-resolution files that you can use on your website or to print other marketing materials. A full-service art printing company can repurpose the archived master file in whatever form you need. Wendy Colson of Colson Art Printing (www.colsonartprinting.com) in Valdosta, Georgia, notes, "One advantage of using a full-service art-printing company is that, because we scanned the original, we know how it should look when we reproduce the file for all the different types of printing we offer."

### 6 Will I have a chance to see a proof before printing?

Is a proof included in the pricing? Will you be able to view the proof under color-correct lighting? This matters, says Janet Smith of Springfield, Oregon-based Sterling Editions (www.sterling-editions.com), because inks and paint pigments react differently under different temperatures of light (i.e., cool, blue lights or warm, yellow lights). If you can find a qualified printing firm in your area, you can view your proof alongside the printing technician. This gives you the same point of reference when discussing color issues. The digital printmaker should keep your approved proof on file and use it for color-matching future prints.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF DITTO EDITIONS

This photo shows Ditto Editions' newly completed, custom-built digital capture studio. The room is designated only for scanning and is outfitted with expandable metal walls that can be adjusted to accommodate original works of art up to 8x12 feet. Sliding the metal doors apart reveals a custom-built vacuum frame for holding works on paper in position for scanning.

## 7 Whom will I work with to ensure my art is reproduced correctly?

Your digital printmaker should share your passion for getting it right. Companies that offer fine art reproduction as a sideline often have urgent commercial deadlines to meet and may not be prepared to provide you with personalized attention.

"Reproducing art with the *giclée* process is inherently a custom service," says Smith. A good digital printmaker will have a discerning eye for color, computer skills, patience and honesty—and enough experience to ask the right questions in order to deliver the results you want.

Pat Nocerino of Nocerino Editions ([www.nocerinoeditions.com](http://www.nocerinoeditions.com)) in Centennial, Colorado, says digital printmaking is not only a collaborative process, but it can also be a creative one. When he shows clients some of the amazing things they can do on the computer, artists will often experiment with techniques that result in prints that go well beyond reproductions of the original art.

## 8 What additional printing services do you provide?

Some companies offer *giclée* printing as a complement to lithographic printing for longer-run print jobs. For example, Colson Art Printing is a one-stop shop that cannot only provide *giclées*, but also lithographic prints, marketing and advertising materials, posters and business printing.

Gallery Street can enlarge and reproduce artwork onto a wall-covering material to create wall murals for restaurants, hotels and offices. Wide-format inkjet printers are incredibly versatile. Some *giclée*-only studios can also output note cards, posters and other products.

## 9 Can you help me sell my work?

Although it's not their job to market

your art, the best digital printmakers know that the more prints you sell, the more often you'll return for more prints. Nocerino says art consultants often ask him to recommend artists working in a certain genre or style. Fader offers customized art-marketing consultations to customers of Ditto Editions.

## 10 What color-management system do you use to ensure that additional prints made later will continue to match the original?

Color management is a quality-control process to ensure the fidelity, consistency and predictability of digital color. You don't necessarily have to understand it yourself, but your *giclée* producer definitely should—and should be continually updating and refining the color profiles for their cameras, scanners, moni-

Jed Molaver takes aim at a T. Michael original painting with Gallery Street's state-of-the-art digital capture system. The 48x72 painting is hung on Gallery Street's custom-built magnetic wall.

tors and printers. Companies new to fine art reproduction may not be accustomed to doing the extensive color correction or record-keeping it takes to guarantee a color match on reprints.

Leftoff of Gallery Street urges artists who have had bad experiences with digital printmaking in the past to give it another try. The key is to find a *giclée* producer who thoroughly understands the fine points of the entire process: capture, color management, printing and coating.

If you find a digital printmaker who is willing to act as a partner with you from beginning to end, the



PHOTO COURTESY OF GALLERY STREET

results can be amazing. As Nocerino of Ditto Editions points out, "The best possible rendering of art requires the help of the person who knows it best—the artist." *✶*

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