

REVIEW PROCESS

CHOOSING THE RIGHT FINE ART GICLÉE PRINTMAKER

by Gary T. Kerr

Perhaps you have met with several accountants to find the right one for your needs, or you have had to change dentists several times because your expectations were not met. Either way, you know that a poor choice in a trusted professional can lead to later regret. When it comes to choosing a fine art giclée printmaker, the stakes are just as high.

While there are numerous ways to reproduce fine art today, the giclée process is widely accepted. However, the quality of giclée printmaking varies as much as the art itself, and therein lies the challenge: How to set about making a good choice of fine art giclée printmaker? How do you know you are getting museum quality at competitive pricing? It starts with determining the experience of the printmaker and establishing a level of trust before handing over your art.

First and foremost, the shop you choose should handle the digitizing of your art in-house, offering specific expertise in techniques for lighting and capturing original art properly. The accuracy of the process to digitize your art will determine 90% of the quality achieved in the final print. I doubt anyone in this industry would challenge the axiom that a superior capture will make a better reproduction on a low-end printer than an inferior capture can make on a high-end printer. As a result, for a printmaker not to handle this most essential step in-house is a red flag. Similarly, do not think that you can photograph the art yourself. This is the single biggest pitfall in replicating original art, as lack of image sharpness, inaccurate color, and loss of detail inevitably lead to failure in giclée printmaking.

Once you have established that you are dealing with a printmaker who will capture your art in-house, the next step is to ask the right questions to qualify the shop's claims to offer high quality giclée printmaking. What method do they employ to capture artwork? BetterLight scanning backs and Cruse scanners are known for their ability to capture art accurately, so if you hear those terms, you are probably on the right track. The only reason we utilize 35 mm cameras in our studio is to make slide transparencies for portfolio and marketing purposes.

With regard to the megapixel is-

sue, today's industry standards call for 100 megapixels or more. Quality work can be achieved with less on smaller works of art, but why not make the investment in a preservation-grade digital capture to ensure that the DNA of your art is retained in the digital image?

Next, ask about proofing policies. Make sure you have the final say on proofing and accept nothing less than a near replication of the color, sharpness, texture, and nuance detail of the original. If a printmaker offers a fixed fee for proofing but allows you to view and adjust the image without running up additional

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proofing fees, you have probably found a competent printmaker. Also, it is imperative that you are able to view the proof with your original art in order to achieve a gallery acceptable print.

The next step is to ascertain the ink and media choices the printmaker offers, as these determine image permanence. You need to ensure your prints don't shift or fade in color over time. (Ratings are published by independent experts like Henry Wilhelm.) In order to meet the high standards of the fine art market, make sure your printmaker can declare that they are utilizing industry-tested archival media and pigment inks.

You can also qualify a printmaker by the type of art they are capable of reproducing. It is clear that oil paintings can be more difficult to replicate

accurately than a watercolor. If a shop is not reproducing oil paintings on canvas with a liquid laminate surface protection, you have another red flag.

Other insightful details to discover include the printmaker's policies for certifying a print as a limited edition with respect to a Certificate of Authenticity. This certificate is your assurance that the printmaker will support your efforts to make a limited edition print and your guarantee that the edition is not compromised.

Another important subject to broach is who owns the digital file. If a photographer points their camera

at your art to digitize it, it is only legal to do so with your express permission as the owner of that copyrighted image. This is a widely misunderstood area of copyright law, so make certain your fee for the capture includes your right to possession of that file after the project is complete, and accept nothing less. When we capture original art in our studio, our clients receive the actual production file on disk for a nominal fee. It is your copyrighted material, and the printmaker has no right to hold you hostage by not offering you a copy of the production file.

Finding a good digital fine art printmaker is similar to buying real estate, minimize the number of negatives. Make sure they don't raise any of the following red flags:

- Outsourcing the digitizing of the art to a third party.

The 10 Warning Signs of an Inferior Giclée

- Blurred or soft image focus.
- Poor image delineation or sharpness.
- Overexposed highlight detail or underexposed shadow detail.
- Pixel artifacts; Jpeg compression, poor scan quality, pixel noise.
- "Halo" outlines or improper/excessive image sharpening.
- Poor color rendition or "fake" looking colors, flat or lifeless colors.
- Printer malfunctions; banding, streaking or other misprint patterns.
- No texture, detail, or nuance in the print.
- Lack of UV coating on canvas prints.
- Color cast, poor gray balance, or odd tint.

- Telling you to get your art scanned anywhere and they will print it.
- Immediately accepting your digital file without a cautionary note.
- Talking about brands of printers while downplaying the importance of the capture quality.
- Employing a 35 mm camera or consumer scanners for capture (39 megapixel digital cameras are sufficient for smaller works).
- Being unwilling or unable to allow you to view and approve a proof in the presence of your original art.
- Utilizing dye-based inks for printing instead of pigment inks.
- Telling you that laminating canvas isn't necessary.
- Not offering you a master copy of the production digital file.
- Boasting a low cost per square inch to get your business.
- Being unwilling to send a sample of their work.

One final consideration is whether you would be more comfortable working with a boutique printmaker where you deal directly with the people who are performing the services versus a larger shop that employs an account representative. Either one can probably serve your needs, but compatibility with your customer service expectations is another important factor in choosing the right printmaker.

As you can see, there are a prodigious number of issues to resolve before entrusting your art to a printmaking studio. Even if you feel you have found a quality shop, my suggestion is to give them one painting and go through the entire process from start to finish to see how they handle your project. If you trust them with one painting instead of taking a chance with 10, you reduce your risks and can make a sound judgment from your own experience with that particular printmaker.

Be certain you get your questions answered upfront and take the time to assess the skills, history, policies, and reputation of the printmaker prior to sending your artwork. In the end, choosing the right printmaker can make or break the market acceptance of your prints.

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