

Misinformation

By Rob Sheppard

Myth:
Inkjet prints fade too quickly to be used for fine-art printing



(P E R M A N E N C E)



(Y E A R S)

Everyone agrees that inkjet printers have always promised a lot—control, creative options, no toxic chemicals, no total darkness needed, and even a slow printer is faster than most color film processing and printing. But there was a big problem: The dyes faded within a short time when exposed to bright light and certain airborne chemicals. Early inkjet prints could incur fading within six months.

The prints weren't of much use, then, if a photographer wanted to sell them for long-term display on a wall, and no photographer could give prints to a client for promotional purposes that started to fade and unpredictably shift colors in a matter of months.

There's a strong impression among many that inkjets can't be used for fine-art prints, for example, yet this is a myth based on past performance. The closest thing to a set of standards for comparison of print life span comes from Wilhelm Imaging Research (www.wilhelm-research.com), an independent company that researches the stability and preservation of color photographs and motion pictures. It publishes data on the permanence of prints from specific inkjet printers. Henry Wilhelm is a founding member of the American National Standards Institute/ISO subcommittee, responsible for developing standardized accelerated test methods for color photographs

and digital print materials.

His studies are specific to particular papers and printers, so we can only point out a few key trends regarding print life. The choice of paper makes a huge difference in the life of a print it turns out, with matte papers generally having a much longer life than glossy. Epson's pigmented inks usually will last well over 100 years if framed with archival materials and UV-filtering glass, and well over 200 years in dark storage.

Realize that this is data based on highly technical accelerated testing. What will a print look like at 101 versus 100 years? No one really knows. The testing looks for a noticeable change in the image. If it takes 100 years for a slight change, it's likely that further change will be gradual, but since no one has yet to keep a print for 100 years, it can't be known for sure.

Dye-based inkjet prints from Epson, Canon and Hewlett-Packard typically last 10 to 70 years, depending on the specific ink and paper used, when framed with archival materials and UV-filtering glass. Testing of such materials is technical and complex, which is why so many people rely on the Wilhelm data.

The point is that inkjet prints *do* have archival qualities that match and beat traditional film prints. Standard

color prints often will begin to fade within 20 years (or less) when displayed in bright light.

One problem is the lack of accepted standards used by all manufacturers. Wilhelm Research has become a de facto standard for many inkjet materials. Recently, however, Kodak bucked the trend and used its own, less-stringent testing than Wilhelm's in rating a new inkjet paper, claiming 100-year life with all inkjet printers. Kodak asserts that its process is more "real-life," but the more conservative Wilhelm testing may be more appropriate to the photographer who wants to feel secure in selling fine-art prints.

While the longevity issue has mitigating factors, the quick answer is that inkjet prints can be suitable for sale to collectors when they're made with the proper materials and kept under the proper conditions. Photographers can't control how a collector will display and store a print, but we can make inkjet prints that have the potential to last at least as long as those made from traditional photographic materials. DPP

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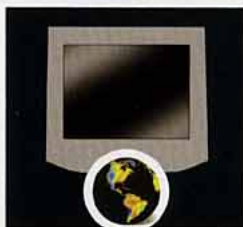
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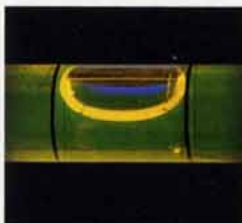
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