



Custom Digital Photo & Graphics

# PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS

Thoughts on Making Your Own  
or Using a Lab.

We All Love Choices!

by Mike Borum

## A Very Brief History:

The earliest photographers had to do everything themselves, mixing chemicals and coating tintypes and glass plates with light-sensitive emulsion. George Eastman invented a consumer-friendly film and print service but most professionals and some dedicated amateurs processed their own film and prints until color photography became popular in the 1940's. The complexities of color made self-processing less appealing so a photo lab industry evolved, combining technical competence with affordability. Photo labs were the primary source of color processing, and much B&W, until the recent advent of inexpensive, high quality ink jet printers.

Today's photographers, from consumer snap shooters to seasoned professionals, have an astonishing variety of choices for capturing and displaying their images. With so many variables, making sense of the choices and selecting the best ones for different situations now requires more experience and knowledge than ever before.

## Digital Technology Arrives:

Photo labs that printed commercial display graphics were among the earliest adopters of digital imaging tools. Beginning around 1990, images, text and graphics could be combined using computers. The digital files were exposed onto film using digital film recorders then the film was printed, in darkrooms, on photo paper using huge mural enlargers.

By 1997 the Durst Lambda digital enlargers were exposing the files directly onto photo paper, obsolescing the digital film recorders, the mural enlargers *and* the darkrooms. The quality was fabulous and they were very efficient. They still are, a true testament to Durst engineering.

Digital technologies were very expensive, though, both in dollars and learning curve, and many labs closed rather than make the investments. Some went broke because they invested in digital technologies that didn't last, of which there were many.

The first inkjet printers capable of “near-photo” image quality arrived around 1998 but were not ready for personal use until about 2002, after much-needed improvements and declining prices. Today you can get high quality “photo-realistic” printed output from a wide variety of printers readily available at reasonable, and sometimes very modest, cost.

Shouldn't everyone have their own printer to make their prints? The answer is not simple because photographers' working styles and needs are often complex and vary widely. Following are a few issues to consider.

### **Quality Requirements:**

By whom and how carefully will the prints be scrutinized? Are they for casual use or must they meet, or exceed, common professional standards? How important will color match and consistency be for reprints?

Will you be easily satisfied simply because of the “I did it myself” syndrome? I've seen people very pleased with substandard prints they'd made themselves. Either they didn't know the difference or subconsciously felt compelled to be pleased after expending so much time, material and money.

Do you need predictable, consistently high quality prints that can be imaged again repeatedly without noticeable tonal variations? How much time, effort and money are you willing to spend to achieve this level of performance on your own? How much is required? Will the printer be used often enough to remain reliable? They work better when heavily used than when left idle for long periods.

### **Image Manipulation:**

Do you enjoy learning to use Photoshop, etc., and are you anxious to develop your own image correction and manipulation techniques or does that seem like an unfamiliar, unwanted burden? Some people really enjoy the process and learn to do adjust their images artistically and tastefully. Sadly, many others are just wasting their time and money and would be better off relying on a good lab.

### **Money Spent:**

Buying a printer is easy but is also often the smallest expense. Is your computer system able to do the work efficiently? What upgrades will be required to have a workable system? What additional software will be required? Is color displayed consistently over the entire monitor screen? Are you willing to buy a good monitor colorimeter, color profiling software and color management software or will you do without and accept more waste? Do you know what to buy? Have you fully considered the cost of ink and media and waste in your “per print” cost projections?

### **The Value of Time:**

Time, time, time! Very few people have enough of it. The biggest single cost in setting up your own color printing capability and learning to achieve consistently dependable results is time. There's time spent setting up and learning to use hardware, becoming proficient with software, learning the concepts of color management, time spent (sometimes lots of it!) testing images, time spent waiting on the prints to come out of the printer, time spent researching and upgrading.

The equipment manufacturers have poured enormous research funds into making all this easy for the consumer and they've succeeded remarkably. For some hobbyists with time to experiment, the process and results can be relaxing and pleasurable; they wouldn't miss the experience for anything, regardless of final print quality (and many do make great prints!) For some others, it's a waste and they'd really rather be doing something else, like taking pictures. Many professionals simply don't have the time or energy to devote to the printing effort.

Conclusion: Your tolerance for time spent making prints depends on many variables, none exactly the same as anyone else's. There may be times when you have the time and times you don't.

## Industry Trends:

Many average consumers are finding it really handy to print some of their own snapshots at home but they are also, increasingly, using retail digital print services for the convenience and quality available at amazingly low prices.

Some serious amateurs enjoy printing their own but turn to labs for the larger sizes, larger quantities or those images that simply need a professional touch.

Many professional photographers are now returning to photo labs because the labs have found new ways to offer special value along with consistently dependable quality. Busy pros often find it impractical to spend time staying abreast of the printing technologies unless they simply have no choice and savings are often elusive.

Are Epson, Canon, HP, etc. selling more printers and ink? Definitely! Will the trend continue? Definitely. Will some amateurs make some, or even all, of their own prints? Definitely.

Will pro labs find a growing market for custom and economy work from professionals, serious amateurs and businesses? Definitely.

Isn't that contradictory? No!

Not at all, because the world of imaging is growing and growing and growing and ..... Everyone's needs are different.

## A Final Perspective:

Printing options are still multiplying. Peoples' needs and expectations about print quality, cost, speed, print sizes, repeatability, color matching, paper types, etc. vary so widely that no one solution fits all so there's room for many.

Self-printing can be extremely convenient and having the equipment and knowledge to make your own prints can be liberating in some situations but wasteful in others.

Progressive commercial photo labs have been reinventing themselves, too, to meet photographers' and business' most demanding needs for high quality in a reasonable time frame and at reasonable cost.

The choices are welcome and there really are great solutions for everyone. But, making sense of the choices and selecting the right ones requires more experience and knowledge than ever before. Be prepared to learn and learn and learn and .....

## A Word About Color Fade:

Many early problems have been overcome with the new inks and papers from Epson, HP, Canon, Lexmark, etc. but check the specs. There still are some big differences.

Photographic papers are now ahead in the game. Kodak Endura, Fuji Crystal Archive, and Ilford Century papers all have lives of at least 100 years in "normal" display (no direct sunlight or harsh fluorescent), especially the Kodak Endura.

## Does Chromatics Make Prints?

You bet! Our experienced technical craftspeople make many prints, custom, standard and economy in all sizes, from files or film using our laser-beam digital enlargers to expose light sensitive photographic paper. The most common comment from our regular customers (some of whom also make some of their own prints) is that "I've never seen my stuff look so good! How do you do this?"

We also use Epson and HP ink-jet printers, to print artwork and photographs on canvas and fine art papers and to print vinyl banners and fabrics. Every technology that suits our customers' needs is welcome and in use.

We continuously reinvent ourselves and, as a technically advanced digital and conventional photolab, we still offer the experience and mastery of color printing required to consistently provide high quality prints from files or film to our customers. That's the one thing digital imaging doesn't change.

**Author's note:** I founded Chromatics primarily to process my own E6 film over 24 years ago in 1980. My career includes 27 years working as a commercial photographer (1970 - 1997), shooting all formats for all manner of publication from advertising to album covers to magazines. I've experienced a lot of changes in both the photography and the lab business during that time and it's never been dull! I really do love it all!