

FINE ART and DECOR PRINT SALES (and the "not-so-fine" fine art market)

by Royce Bair

SELLING MORE FROM LESS

About 25 years ago I became acquainted with a photographer / artist that was making a good living from just four (4) images that he sold through a handful of picture framing shops across the country. Every few weeks he'd spend a few hours in the darkroom and make about a hundred 11x14 B/W prints from four different negatives. He'd then ship these off to his dealers, who sold them for him on commission.

This artist went to only one or two outdoor art shows a year, with a much larger inventory, and with the purpose to find out which images were most popular with the public. He'd use this once or twice a year sales "field trip" just to test the market and update his offering of four top sellers. After reviewing his sales at the art show(s), he'd add one or two new images to see if these sold better than any of his existing top four sellers. This way, he was able to make sure that his top four sellers remained current with public tastes and trends.

I asked him why he didn't expand his offering of images to his dealers (rather than just updating and replacing), and he informed me that he could make more money with much less effort by focusing on just those top four sellers. I've never forgotten that lesson.

USING THE "80/20" PRINCIPLE TO MANAGE YOUR FINE ART / DECOR PRINT SALES

In 1906, Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto created a mathematical formula to

describe the unequal distribution of wealth in his country. Pareto observed that 80% of income in Italy was received by 20% of the Italian population. Other economist and management thinkers have written about this principle or rule. One of the latest to write on this principle is the author of the international best selling book "The 80/20 Principle - The secret of achieving more with less," by Richard Koch

For artists, this principle might best help them if they were to discover that 20% of clients are often responsible for about 80% of their sales volume, or that 20% of their images often produced about 80% of their sales. Identify those top clients or their top images (or both) could significantly boost their sales; or it could help them maintain their present income with less stress in their lives.

THE "64/4" RULE: This 80/20 principle can be taken even further, with the wider phenomenon of "Pareto distributions." If the parameters in the Pareto distribution are correctly chosen, then one would not only have 80% of the sales coming from 20% of the images, but also 80% of that top 80% of sales coming from 20% of that top 20% of images. This implies a "64/4" rule (80% of 80% is 64%; 20% of 20% is 4%), where as much as 64% of one's sales could come from only 4% of one's images -- very similar to what happened in the above story of my photographer friend who chose to market only four of his top images. Yes, he lost some potential sales, but he lessened his inventory and stress considerably.

I used this principle in a decor print business I once owned. I licensed from The Flavia Company, who owns the trademark on Bessie Pease Gutmann, to be the exclusive Internet seller of Giclée reproductions of this popular deceased

artist. In her lifetime (1876-1960), Bessie painted over 600 illustration, mainly of children. The Flavia Company had about 330 scans from these illustrations. Most of these scans have major problems, because the originals from which they were copied have damage, fading or other deterioration. To restore each image to what our staff felt was worthy of the original painting would sometimes take a whole day of digital editing in Photoshop.

For this reason, we chose only 100 images to restore and feature on our Web site. In the beginning, we had about five pre-printed copies of each featured image in inventory (a total of about 500 prints). The other 230 images were available by special ordered at a custom print price that was about three times what a featured image would cost.

Eventually, we discovered there were just four images that sold better than any of the other 96 featured images. In fact, these four images made up more than 60% of our sales. (Sound familiar?) We then began to concentrated on those four images, only keeping inventory on just those four prints. We went from 100 featured images, down to four; and we made everything else a custom print order, at three times the featured prints price. Life became much less complicated and the business more profitable.

VOLUME PRINTING QUALITY AND PRICE POINT Simply Elegant Matte Canvas and Simply Elegant Everyday Matte Canvas

Canvas Giclée prints have always been popular with my clients. I like canvas because it not only gives my photography the look of fine art, but its texture can help hide a "multitude of sins"—one of which

comes in the form of grain or noise from my style of high ISO night photography.

I recently reviewed Simply Elegant's Matte Canvas and their Everyday Matte Canvas to see if they could meet my demanding needs. My "NightScape" images are typically low-key images that have a lot of black in them. This puts a high demand on any canvas because of the heavy ink load the coating is required to handle.



Both Simply Elegant Matte Canvas products were able to handle the rich tonal ranges and deep blacks in my "NightScape" series ("Milky Way Tetons" in GTNP)

Both of these canvases produced good shadow separation and rich blacks, without muddying up the mid-tones and highlights. Color saturation was excellent.

These two canvas products have great price points: 99-cents per square foot for the Matte, and 65-cents per square foot for the Everyday Matte. The Matte has the elegance and quality I've come to expect for fine art editions printing, and at a very competitive price. The Everyday Matte should be a real winner in the decor market where price point for high-volume printing can be critical in profitability.

Although the Everyday Matte print quality was every bit as good as the Matte, it's 100% polyester fabric and 2:1 double weave were just a little too perfect for me, compared to the artsy irregularities of the Matte's cotton blend—but that's just my old-fashioned tactile preferences showing

through. Everyday Matte still has much more character than a faux canvas. And many people will actually prefer Everyday's super stability when it comes to stretching.

Lower volume artists, who might be using desktop printers, will be impressed that this product is not only available in rolls, but also in all the popular cut sheet sizes. Because Everyday Matte has a 16-mil thickness (vs. a more normal, 20+ mil base), and remarkable thickness consistency, it feeds much better in the smaller, desktop printers (although I did notice occasional printhead banding on some desktop printers with non-adjustable platen gaps).

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD Simply Elegant Metallic Inkjet Papers

When I first started to review the Simply Elegant line of five Metallic Inkjet Papers I began with a bit of negative bias, as they all appeared to be somewhat of a gimmicky product line, like a fad that will quickly wear off. What I discovered was quite the opposite, and within a few hours into the testing, I began to feel more like a kid in a candy store!

Let's start out first with the Metallic Pearl. The product sheet describes it as a luster surface with a "Platinum-Like...luxurious, upscale finish...[that] sizzles with a unique sheen." Wow! I was immediately skeptical with that kind of Madison Avenue word smithing. But when my first print ejected from the printer my cynicism began to wane.

My immediate impression was to compare it to the Kodak Endura Metallic or the Fujicolor Crystal Archive Digital Pearl, both wet-process photographic papers. Both the Fuji and the Kodak have medium to high gloss finishes compared to the

Metallic Pearl's luster finish. However, all three share a subtle creaminess that is somewhat reminiscent of an opalescent paint job on a car. I have a feeling that there must be some kind of "mica" beads that are crushed and embedded in the paper's coating.



You'll need to experiment to find which images work best on the various Metallic papers from Simply Elegant.

The Metallic Chrome Gloss is similar to the Metallic Pearl, albeit slightly cooler in tone (to me), and as the name implies, just a bit more on the glossy side.

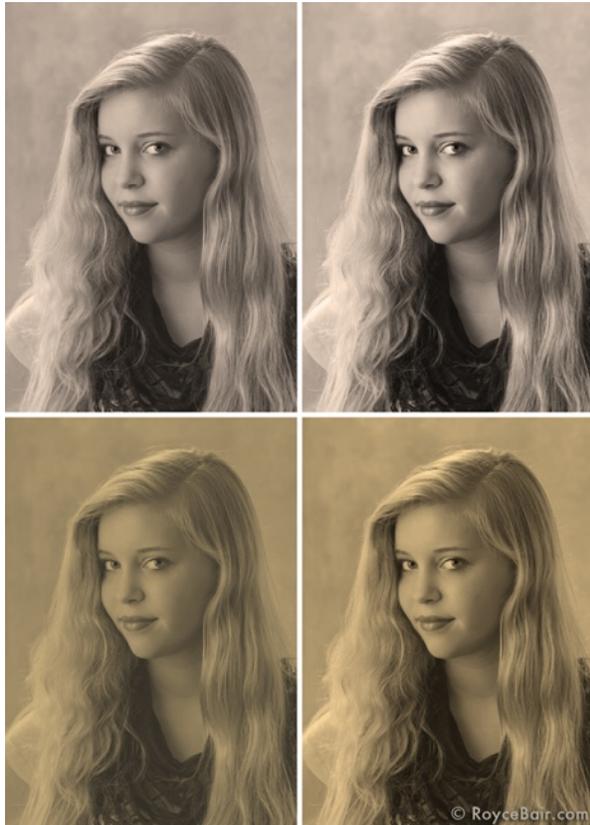


Some images will work better on Metallic papers after being converted to black & white or a sepia tone.

Metallic Moonglow is a luster that has a warm undertone of gold which is quite striking. I found it the most outstanding product of the metallic line. The golden coloration and sparkle is more subtle than the Metallic Pure Gold (see below), and will have more applications for me.

Metallic Pure Silver and Pure Gold are semi-gloss papers that have an intense metal glitter. You'll need to experiment to find just the right subjects for these papers,

but when you've found your match there is a definite "wow" factor that grabs attention. Both papers have swellable polymer coatings that take several minutes for the ink to dry enough before you can touch the surface, and about 30 minutes before you can spray it with a solvent protective coating, which is recommended.



Contrast Adjustment: When the top left image was printed on Metallic Moonglow (bottom left) it went flat. A increase in contrast (top right) was needed to produce a more pleasing print (bottom right). *Note: These two-dimensional reproductions of Moonglow only show color and contrast. They cannot begin to show the third dimension of depth from the iridescence and opalescence produced by this unique inkjet paper.*

WHITE POINT ADJUSTMENT: Keep in mind that the white point on the Metallic Moonglow, the Metallic Pure Gold, and the Metallic Pure Silver are considerably lower than regular inkjet papers, so you'll need to adjust your images and give them more contrast, otherwise they will appear quite flat on these papers.

SCREEN vs. PRINT: With e-publishing and social media being so prevalent today, many of our images will never make it to print, which is a shame, because a good print is a wonderful thing to behold. This Metallic line adds another reason for making real prints over just showing them on an electronic screen view, and that reason is a third dimension. Every one of these prints produces a unique, third dimensional experience that you cannot see until you view the physical print at a variety of angles. As you hold the print in your hands or walk around it, it changes before your eyes. Some images almost come alive and appear animated. In all, the papers in this line have the potential, with the right image match up, to grab attention and further emphasize what your image is trying to speak. With the right combination, your image will stand out from the crowd.



As you move around this image that was printed on Simply Elegant's "Metallic Pure Gold", light reflects back from the gold and shines through the ink colors, producing almost a 3rd dimension of depth, not to mention the addition of iridescence and opalescence.