

The Devil's in the (Printing) Details  
by Betsy Bear

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*Rose Bouquet*  
*Watercolor by Betsy Bear*

“You made this yourself?” I’m often asked this question by shoppers with a touch of cautious optimism in their voices. After all, we know that computers and copiers do amazing things these days, seemingly at the mere “push of a button.” *It must be so easy to do*, is the hopeful thought.

New desktop ink jet printers and archival inks have opened up a world of opportunity for any artist wanting to self-publish high quality prints. After trying my hand at this for the past few years, I have learned much about the process, the benefits and the challenges of making my own art prints. I’m self-taught and definitely not an expert, so I won’t bore you with any real technical details. I’ll stick to the basics, because that’s all I know; but therein lies the inspiration. If I can do it--anybody else without a real life can too! It’s not so bad. As my husband has said many times, “Where there’s a passionate artist, there’s a way.” Actually, I think he said “fool,” not “artist,” but that’s before

his nose got broken.

Painting watercolors is my **real** passion; printing and marketing make painting feasible and keep IRS happy. The printing part is much more complex than the painting part. There are so many more variables--hardware, software, tiffs, pixels. If I paint something that doesn’t work, it quickly goes in my reject drawer. No fuss. Mishaps on the computer tend to expand in time and energy, like some manic theory of relativity. Watercolor paint is fairly inexpensive, as is paper. Computer upgrades and repairs aren’t. Brushes never get outdated or need more Ram, rom, or hard drive space. So why punish myself making my own art prints? I’m not sure, but I think it has something to do with being a creative control advocate (not your ordinary obsessive control freak). I like being able to make my own adjustments until the print is perfect, according to ME. I have my original to compare to the print, as opposed to sending off a slide or computer file to a printer somewhere in Asia. And, mostly, I am



*Betsy starts with an original watercolor.*

willing to pay for my own extensive set up time so I can get it right and have the flexibility to print on demand.

Digital fine-art printing had its beginnings in the late 1980s with the unlikely combination of Graham Nash, his collection of photographs of the rock group, *Crosby, Stills, and Nash*, and the new **Iris** ink jet printing technology. All that, and great music too! Since then, fine art digital printing has evolved from being a prohibitively expensive process available only on room sized printers to the now efficient and affordable desktop printers. The large-format machines are still used by the commercial printers; however, the new archival inks and desktop printers have, according to printer Kevin Rich of *Hunter Editions* in Kennebunk, Maine, “developed to a degree of quality where they are considered by some to be challengers to the Iris’s long held top spot in the fine art Giclée field.”

Which brings us to that intimidating French term for a digital fine-art print, **Gicle`e**. It’s pronounced Zhee-**clay**, not **Gik**-lee (*like prickly*) as my husband decided after his five other guttural utterances already had me in hysterics. Gicle`e literally means “that which is sprayed”--*ink*, in this case. Thankfully, some bright person figured the French *Gicle`e* sounded better than *sprayed print*. “*Hope you enjoy your new sprayed print, sir.*”



*Barefoot Boys 1947*  
*Giclee' from watercolor by Betsy Bear*

Making a digital print starts with capturing a high-resolution (300+ ppi) scan or digital photo of the work. If the piece is larger than your scanner capabilities, use at least a 5 mp digital camera set at the highest resolution, a tripod, and natural lighting if possible. Save the images as raw or tiff files if that option is available, as jpeg files result in lost data.

Download the image files to your computer and open them in a photo editor as tiffs. You need a good full-featured photo editor such as Adobe Photoshop so you can make custom adjustments in size, color, white balance, sharpness, etc. This process can take a few minutes or few hours, depending on the particular image and your goals. The many variables involved in making adjustments can be complex so it is good to have plenty of time and paper on hand for testing. There are many good web sites and resources for editing help--do a search or go to <http://www.photoshop-help.com/>. If you'd like to learn photo editing **and** keep your sanity, consider taking a semester long university class. Mastering Digital Printing, by Harald Johnson, available from Amazon.com is a great resource if you just want to do the “*read, try, and cry*” method.

When your print is finally adjusted and looks absolutely fantastic on the computer monitor, you will need to make a proof. This is where things can get real sticky, since what is see is not always what you get. A high resolution printer and

quality paper give the best results. I have an Epson 2200 that uses 7 Ultrachrome pigment-based inks (which means I'm always running out of one color or another) and prints up to 2880x1440 dpi. I don't think those numbers really mean much because every printer I've ever seen boasts that it prints at least 3 trillion dpi. Paper affects your print color and quality to a large degree. Epson has several good (i.e. not cheap) art papers available in various sizes. I've found the Epson enhanced matte paper wonderful for reproducing rich, deep colors. A good source for papers, inks, and digital equipment is <http://www.bhphotovideo.com/>.

Finally, when the set-up is complete, the color proofs are perfect, the printer is primed, the paper is loaded and ready, and the computer is purring softly. . . .then you press that magical button (while secretly praying to the great technology spirit in the sky). Seeing a print emerge just as beautiful as the original piece is a very exiting feeling. Just remember to back up every bit of data frequently and sign up for a Roling session to unkink everything above your waist. The craftsmanship and artistic skill involved in self-publishing is considerable, but is a natural extension of the artist's creative process. Following a painting through from inspiration to packaged print gives the artist a larger hand in the end product--and that's a *good* thing for everyone.



*Alaska Range*  
*Giclee' from watercolor by Betsy Bear*

*Betsy Bear is a local watercolor artist who has recently set up a studio in her North Pole, Alaska home where she sells her original watercolors, prints, and note cards. Betsy taught in the North Pole area for over 20 years, retiring in 2001 to pursue her passion for art. Alaskan florals and landscapes have been her focus, although she has painted still*

*lifes and figures and does commission work. Betsy's work is available at the Alaska House Gallery, and at her home studio in North Pole. She has had solo shows at Light in the Attic Gallery and Gulliver's Second Story Cafe, and has been included in several local juried shows in the past year. She attributes much of her success in watercolor painting to her membership in the Fairbanks Watercolor Society ([www.geocities.com/fairbanks\\_watercolor/](http://www.geocities.com/fairbanks_watercolor/)) and the Fairbanks Arts Assn. Please visit her web site at [www.betsybearcreations.com](http://www.betsybearcreations.com) or call Betsy at 907-488-2129 for more information. This article was first published in Alaska Trading Store ([www.alaskatradingstore.com](http://www.alaskatradingstore.com))*