

The Artisan Approach to Inkjet Printing

Wendy Erickson

Since the advent of digital imaging, many photographers feel they have lost touch with the craftsmanship of making a “handmade” print. If you are ready to get your artistry back, read on. Coating your own inkjet printing paper is a different approach to making digital fine art prints. You may already know that inkjet printing on uncoated paper reduces contrast and sharpness—generally the results are unacceptable. Coating paper with an inkjet receiving layer solves the problem.

inkAID

inkAID™ inkjet receptive coatings are manufactured by Ontario Specialty Coatings. inkAID liquid coatings are hand-applied to any type of paper, as well as metals, fabrics, wood veneers, canvas and more. Coatings are pH neutral, acid free and are specially-designed to work with dye and pigment inks. Shelf life is a year from the date of purchase.

Paper Selection

inkAID coatings work with any type of paper. I selected papers that currently work well for Alt-Processes like Platinum and Palladium printing. Generally heavier in weight, these papers have excellent wet strength properties—the thicker the paper, the less curling or cockling you can expect.

The array of papers available from professional art supply stores is staggering. If you don't have a local supplier, the larger stores offer papers via catalog and internet. I ordered two small fine art sample books from Talas in NY. Samplers like this make mail order paper selection and experimentation easier. Select papers that best showcase but don't compete with your images. You might even be



Quince, Japanese lace paper printed using carrier sheet. White areas are actual holes in the paper. Coated with inkAID Matte.

tempted to try that paper made from banana leaves or maybe even a flirty Japanese rice paper. I experimented with an assortment of papers including Arches Platine, Bergger Photographic Paper COT-320, Canson Smooth Bristol 260g, Nujabi, Rives BFK and Western Diploma Parchment.

Coating

Use gloves and adequate ventilation when applying coatings. MSDS sheets are available on the inkAID website. I used the following products for making test prints: Clear Gloss Type II, Clear Semi-Gloss, White Matte, Clear Matte and Iridescent Pearl Gloss.

Coatings may separate during shipping or storage, so stir them thoroughly before and during use. You'll notice the need for stirring especially with the iridescent coatings. Plastic stirrers work well and are reusable. I used a smooth acrylic topped table that I wipe down and dry before coating



A variety of products available from inkAID

paper. Tape the corners of the paper down before coating. If you like big borders on your prints don't coat the entire sheet, or use low tack tape to mask out a wide even border.

Pour a small amount of coating into a wide bowl or container. Carefully use a high quality foam brush to apply a thin layer. Allow the paper to dry flat overnight, and apply a second coat the next day. Although the company gives a coverage guideline of about 250 square feet per gallon, each paper absorbs coatings at a different rate. Some users prefer to use a high volume low-pressure (HVLP) spray gun. Spray coating allows for a more precise application. You are making small batches of artisan hand-coated fine art paper with these coatings. Work slowly and make notes for repeatable results. Clean up spills with soap and water before they dry.

Drying

I left the coated papers flat on my worktable overnight. Humidity in the room was low. The papers that ultimately got tested dried relatively flat. After drying, you may flatten paper under heavy books or use a dry mount press with low heat settings.

Printing

Check your printer manual or look online if there are concerns about transporting thicker papers through the printer. Older printers that use “pizza wheels” do not work well on metals and other glossy surfaces because the ink doesn't dry fast enough. More rigid substrates like aluminum usually require a straight paper path.

I designed a test print using images that I would typically print on fine art papers – make your own test print based on the type of work you do so you can judge the various combinations of coatings and papers. I used five different coatings on each sheet of paper, applying them in two-inch sections top to bottom—so with six different papers this resulted in 30 different custom paper samples to visually evaluate.

With the Epson 3800 printer I used the standard sheet feeder as well as the rear feed slot, holding the paper gently as it fed into the printer. I set the printer to a platen gap of “wider” and paper thickness to 5. Some people tape a leader (a plain piece of paper or inkjet paper) onto the leading edge of the paper to ensure easy transport. You can also use a carrier sheet for thinner materials.

Try using the printer driver, selecting “semi-gloss or enhanced matte” paper settings for printing, at the highest quality setting. When you decide on a specific combination of coating and paper, you can create your own custom ICC profiles. Due to the many variables, there are no canned profiles available from inkAID.

Finishing

The current coatings are not “instant” dry, so after printing, let prints dry at least eight hours. Depending on humidity, they may need even more time to dry. Treat these handmade prints carefully. Although pigment ink may be permanent, Clear Gloss



Test prints on various substrates



Ft. Wadsworth, 2010, Comparison treatments

Type II, Semi Gloss and Iridescent coatings are affected by water and moisture. Since these papers are very delicate, Ontario Specialty Coatings recommends you apply a protective coating. Use a solvent-based varnish like Krylon Crystal Spray or Golden MSA archival varnish over those coatings. In contrast, The matte coating needs a polymer varnish such as clear shield type C made by Clearstar Corp. Let the prints dry for several days before applying a protective covering.

Finding Your Way

Each inkAID coating offers a unique result. You can also combine coatings, for example, one layer of Clear Gloss over a layer of Iridescent. There are infinite combinations.

White matte covers up the paper tint—if paper tint is important to you, try one of the clear coatings. You may have guessed that the white matte gives the best Dmax right out of the box. You can adjust this by using profiles, and also in printer settings.

Clear Semi-Gloss applied to smooth fine art papers like Rives BFK and Arches Platine gives a traditional air-dried silver halide paper look. Iridescent Pearl also gives a similar look with an extra bit of inner radiance. On smooth fine art papers it's stunning. Iridescent also are available in blue, gold, red and silver.

Clear Matte coated on Rives BFK and Arches Platine gives the look of an Alt-Process platinum print. I'll be using these products for various portfolios in the future.

Ready to try your hand at coating your own papers? inkAID offers a sweet sample kit from their online store for \$29.50 with free shipping to the continental US. It contains 4 oz. (125 ml) of White Matte, Clear Semi-Gloss, Clear Gloss, Clear Gloss Type II, Clear Matte and Pearl Iridescent. The inkAID website is an outstanding resource, with step-by-step instructions, technical information, links to how-to videos, artists using the products and extensive and informative FAQs.

Wendy Erickson is a photographer, writer and teacher deeply-rooted in the traditions of photography as fine art. She uses both film-based and digital imaging in her work and is interested in a variety of hybrid processes and materials to create photographic images. She holds BA and MFA degrees in studio art/photography. Dedicated to the craft and history of photography, with special emphasis on education, Wendy currently teaches photography at Montclair State University in New Jersey. Visit her website, www.wendyerrickson.com.

To ask a question or comment on this article, visit our online Forum: www.phototechforum.com

Product Resources

inkAID: <http://inkaaid.com>; Papers: Art Paper, Arches, Bergger, BFK Rives, Butler-Deardon Paper, Canson, NY Central Supply Company, Talas, Western Diploma Paper; Books: *Digital Art Studio*, by Karin Schminke, Dorothy Simpson Krause and Bonny Pierce Lhotka, *Digital Photo Art* by Theresa Airey; Brushes: Poly-Brush foam brushes; Varnishes: Golden Paints, Clearstar, Krylon.