

What's In a Name: The Story of Giclée

One thing that became quickly apparent to the early digital pioneers was the lack of a proper name to describe the prints they were making. By the close of the 1980s, IRIS printers were installed all over the world and spinning off full-colour proofs in commercial printing plants and pre-press shops. These prints were used to check colour and get client approvals before starting the main print run. They definitely were *not* meant to last or to be displayed on anyone's walls. Most people called them "IRIS prints," or "IRIS proofs," or, more simply, "IRISes."

However, this wasn't good enough for the new digital fine-art printmakers like Maryann Doe of Harvest Productions and Jack Duganne, who was the first printmaker (after David Coons) at Nash Editions. They wanted to draw a distinction between the beautiful prints they were labouring over and the quickie proofs the commercial printers were cranking out. Just like artist Robert Rauschenberg did when he came up with the term "combines" for his new assemblage art, they needed a new label, or, in marketing terms, a "brand identity." The makers of digital art needed a word of their own.

And, they got it. In 1991, Duganne had to come up with a print-medium description for a mailer announcing California artist Diane Bartz' upcoming show. He wanted to stay away from words like "computer" or "digital" because of the negative connotations the art world attached to the new medium. Taking a cue from the French word for inkjet (*jet d'encre*), Duganne opened his pocket Larousse and searched for a word that was generic enough to cover most inkjet technologies at the time and hopefully into the future. He focused on the nozzle, which most printers used. In French, that was *le gicleur*. What nozzles do is spray ink, so looking up French verbs for "to spray," he found *gicler*, which literally means "to squirt, spurt, or spray." The feminine noun version of the verb is (*la*) *giclée*, (pronounced "zhee-clay") or "that which is sprayed or squirted." An industry moniker was born.

However, the controversy started immediately. Graham Nash and Mac Holbert had come up with "digigraph," which was close to "serigraph" and "photograph." The photographers liked that. But, the artists and printmakers doing reproductions had adopted "giclée," and the term soon became a synonym for "an art print made on an IRIS inkjet printer."

Today, "giclée" has become established with traditional media artists, and some photographers. But, many photographers and other digital artists have not accepted it, using, instead, labels such as "original digital prints," "inkjet prints," "pigment prints," or "(substitute the name of your print process) prints."



This is the first-known use of the word "giclée" in print (note misplaced accent). From the Bartz Studio newsletter for ArtExpo California, Fall, 1991.

For many artists, the debate over "giclée" continues. Some object to its suggestive, French slang meaning ("spurt"). Others believe it is still too closely linked to the IRIS printer or to the reproduction market. And some feel that it is just too pretentious. But, for many, the term "giclée" has become part of the printmaking landscape; a generic word, like Kleenex, that has evolved into a broader term that describes any high-quality, digitally produced, fine-art print.

One problem, of course, is that when a term becomes too broad, it loses its ability to describe a specific thing. At that point, it stops being a good marketing label--and make no mistake about it, "giclée" is a marketing term. When everything is a giclée, the art world gets confused, and the process starts all over again with people coming up with new labels.

This is exactly what happened when a new group formed in 2001--the Giclée Printers Association (GPA)--and came up with its own standards and its own term: "Tru Giclée." The GPA is concerned with reproduction printing only, and its dozen or so printmaker members have approved a short list of printing equipment and materials to bear its logo (see above).



The Giclée Printers Association's logo for "Tru Giclée"

giclée (zhee-clay) *n.* 1. a type of digital fine-art print. 2. Most often associated with reproductions; a giclée is a multiple print or exact copy of an original work of art that was created by conventional means (painting, drawing, etc.) and then reproduced digitally, typically via inkjet printing. First use in this context by Jack Duganne in 1991, Los Angeles, California.

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