

# Misinformation

## What Does Archival Really Mean?

By Rob Sheppard

**Myth:**  
"Archival"  
Is A  
Standard



At the PMA photo trade show this past winter, discussion about the life of prints, from inkjet to dye-sub, came up again, this time with some industry in-fighting. It seems that "archival" or "long-lasting" in describing prints don't have standard definitions. Companies are tending to use the terms in ways that sound "right" and make everyone think those companies are giving a "truth" based on some absolute.

Unfortunately, it isn't.

"Archival" and "long-lasting" have no standard to which everyone agrees. Companies will tell you that their papers (and inks) meet a standard—unfortunately, that "standard" may be something only recognized by that standard. The biggest issue has been Kodak's archival paper claims versus nearly everyone else. Kodak firmly stands behind its way of measuring archival qualities that's different from the rest of the industry.

"Archival" and "long-lasting" definitions aren't an internal industry squabble, however. They're used for marketing and advertising purposes in a whole host of areas that may or may not be appropriate to the photog-

rapher's true need for archival qualities in media. The standards organizations, such as ANSI (the American National Standards Institute) and the International Organization for Standardization, have grappled with a consistent standard for the life of images, but haven't come to any decision. (The cynical view is that these organizations are too closely tied to the manufacturers.)

In addition, there's an effort by certain groups of consumer labs to claim their prints are more archival than inkjet prints. No one ever has claimed that all inkjet prints are archival, so that's true in one sense. Some inkjet prints are far more long-lasting than any traditional color print materials, however, so these sorts of claims simply muddy the waters for everyone and can cause problems for the pro who's selling a high-quality, long-lived inkjet print.

To look at archival qualities, it's helpful to understand how materials are tested. We can't see what an inkjet print will look like in 70 years, obviously, because inkjet inks and papers haven't been around that long. Henry Wilhelm of Wilhelm Imaging Research ([www.wilhelm-research.com](http://www.wilhelm-research.com)) has devoted his career to the study of photographic material preservation. His book, *The Permanence and Care of Color Photographs: Traditional and Digital Color Prints, Color Negatives, Slides, and Motion Pictures*, is a classic in the field, and his Website is filled with well-thought out and carefully researched material about photographic image life.

I don't know anyone in the industry who doesn't respect Wilhelm's work in this area. Some manufacturers quote his data directly, so his work almost has become a de facto standard. It isn't, though, because not all companies

accept his techniques (notably Kodak), and some consider his work too conservative. When a photographer is selling an image as fine art, a conservative estimate of print life probably isn't a bad thing.

Wilhelm tests photo prints using the Predictive Display Permanence Rating Test, developed by Wilhelm Research, which places prints under a high-intensity light for 12 hours per day and then measures them constantly for any change in color, contrast or tonality. This data is interpreted to give a print life in years under standard indoor display conditions.

Manufacturers looking for a standard that can be consistently applied across the industry have come to Wilhelm for a solution. He has offered a certification program that independently certifies a certain life to a printing paper or ink based on his conservative methods. Several manufacturers have taken him up on this, including Hewlett-Packard, which includes the information on its packaging.

Epson has created a certification program for printers using some of its inks and papers, which guarantees prints against fading for at least 80 years. Admittedly, the guarantee won't replace the value of the print (only the materials used), but it's significant that any manufacturer would stick its neck out this much on inkjet media. Less than 10 years ago, inkjet inks and papers often faded in time measured by months rather than years. Today, they can be measured in decades.

Photographers must be completely aware that "long-lived" and "archival" aren't standards, however. You must pay attention to where the terms come from and what testing the manufacturer is using. Wilhelm Research is a trusted name and its Website is well worth a visit if archival print quality is an issue for you.

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Howard Schatz

**Editor's Note** "Fix it in Photoshop" has become a mantra of the digital age. As the editor of *Digital Photo Pro*, I get to talk to many of the very best professional photographers in the world. One thing all of them have in common is that I've never heard any of them utter those words.

For years, we've heard detractors claim that digital technology marks the downfall of photography because the technology makes it easy to make good images. The reality is markedly different, though. Sure, RAW files and sophisticated software can help you get more out of an image file, but if you disregard the necessity of proper exposure, sharpness and composition, you're never going to get a decent image. Early hype on RAW files was that they essentially allow people to blow the exposure and still get a perfect shot. It simply isn't true.

You'd think that if there was any class of photographer that would be apt to rely on software and post-processing it would be photo-

journalists. We spoke to one of the top photojournalists in the world, Lauren Greenfield of The VII Photo Agency, who dispelled that myth. Greenfield finds that all of the same rules apply today. Getting the shot right the first time isn't an option for her; it's a requirement.

I recently heard a story from a top-level pro who was having some work done by a hot-tub repairman (it's important to be able to relax and unwind after a day in the studio or on location). The repairman and the pro got to chatting, and it turned out that in addition to working out the issues with water jets and filters, the repairman was a photographer, too. In fact, he shot all of the images for his company's products and he owned the latest and most high-tech gear available. "As soon as photography became more about computers than photography, I knew I could make it," he said. While he knew comparatively little about composition, exposure, lighting and controlling depth of field, etc., the fact was that by using Photoshop and taking a lot of time, he was able to

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*By Jeff Schewe, Seth Resnick And Martin Evening*



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### EDITORIAL OFFICES

Werner Publishing Corporation

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