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Digital printing brings one-of-kind home interior products to the masses

By Katherine Salant October 27, 2016

Digital printing is revolutionizing the textile, tile and wallpaper industries, and in the process opening up the world of custom design to anyone. (Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Want to have a custom floor, wallpaper or curtain design in your house that's unique and perfectly suited to your taste? Even if your budget for this is minuscule?

Digital printing, the same technology that the inkjet printer in your home office uses, is making this possible.

It is revolutionizing the textile, tile and wallpaper industries, and in the process opening up the world of custom design to anyone — you can now design these products yourself. It's no longer hugely expensive and you likely have the skill set required to design original work.

A deep knowledge of manufacturing techniques, dyes, fabrics, fibers, papers, glazes and inks — expertise that generally takes a professional designer years to acquire — is no longer a prerequisite. You only need to know how to use a personal computer and how to upload your own original artwork or photographs onto a manufacturer's website. To customize a manufacturer's online offering, you just manipulate what appears on your computer screen. You communicate directly with the manufacturer, which fulfills the order within a few days or weeks.

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Another plus with digital printing for home interior products: There is no minimum order required. You can order just enough fabric for drapes for one window, wallpaper for one wall, floor tiles for a front entry or material in even smaller quantities.

The printing process itself has been streamlined. You no longer need a separate run for each color, which made conventionally printed multicolored fabrics more costly; instead, all the colors can be printed at the same time. Because the printer calibrates the colors before the printing process begins, the manufacturer does not have to expend quantities of yardage just to get each color calibrated correctly.

Spoonflower.com offers a preview feature that allows you to see what the wallpaper design would look like in a furnished room. Katherine Salant designed the green alligator wallpaper shown here, using a drawing by her daughter Shelley. (Spoonflower.com)

How difficult is it to take advantage of these online opportunities?

When I tried my hand at "digital decorating" I quickly realized that it would take some time to learn my way around, and the results would not be featured in a home decor magazine. But they would be imbued with something that no professional could ever offer: They would be something I created..

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I designed fabric (for $17.50 to $38 a yard) and wallpaper on spoonflower.com, the only website I found that offers both of these options. It was not hard to create a simple, hand-drawn motif that was pleasing to the eyes and upload it to the site. The really hard part was creating a motif that is equally pleasing as it repeats across a wall or on a sofa, without cutting off heads in the wrong place or creating some other jarring visual.

My beginner mistakes were immediately apparent because the site shows how a proposed wallpaper pattern ($5 to $7.50 per lineal foot) would look in a room with furniture or, on its sister website, roostery.com, how a fabric pattern would look on a pillow or as a place mat. A novice can eventually figure out how to make it all work, but for most people the easier path, by far, will be to customize a design that is already offered.

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If you're more comfortable with fewer choices, minted.com (for $32 to $34 a yard) offers a limited menu. For most of the nearly 600 fabric designs featured on the MintedHome section, you may change only one color (usually the background), and the choices are usually limited to four or five. The site provides electronic previews for each color option and each application, including fabric-covered lampshades, throw pillows, table linens, drapes and yardage. The preview of drapery as seen from across a room is especially informative, as many patterns look quite different when viewed from afar.

For the more adventurous, weaveup.com (for $17.99 to $39.99) offers nearly

For the more adventurous, weaveup.com (for $17.99 to $39.99) offers nearly unlimited customization options for its 10,000 fabric designs. Not only can you change as many as 12 colors in the same pattern, but each color also can be any one of more than 1,600 that you select from a color wheel that appears on the screen with the pattern to be customized. You can also increase or decrease the size of the repeat. By the time I had changed all 11 colors and the repeat of "Batik Vibration," the result bore so little resemblance to B.B. Kolanz's original design that I considered it a "Salant original."

Spoonflower does not offer a customization option for the more than 350,000 fabric and wallpaper patterns on its site, but it will forward a request to change the color in a particular pattern to the designer, who usually will do this at no charge.

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Minted.com offers novices a preview feature that shows how its fabric will appear from across the room when it is used for curtains. "The City" by JeAnne Jasper is quite lively up close but, as shown here, much more nuanced when seen from afar. (Minted.com)

By contrast, the two tile websites that I explored, imagesintile.com, based in Joplin, Mo., and MIPA's customcoloursystem.it in Modena, Italy, are very accessible to their customers, perhaps because they offer unique services that cannot be easily handled online.

MIPA's tiles are still handmade, using an intaglio technique developed more than a century ago. But you select the tile pattern and colors at MIPA's site, choosing among five floor patterns, 80 individual tile patterns, and 29 traditional and contemporary colors. As you choose each color for an individual tile, the site shows how an entire floor in that pattern and those colors would look. The immediate feedback was quite helpful as I strove to create a balanced look without one color dominating all the others.

Though common in Europe, MIPA's terrazzo tiles will be new for most Americans. They're made with tiny chips of marble and other stones that give the smooth finished surface an unusual textured look.

I "designed" two tile patterns in different color groups, which MIPA produced and sent to me as samples. Compared with the website, the colors are significantly lighter and more muted and the textured look more pronounced. They would be a great floor finish for any wet area in a house, but I would get at least one tile sample before selecting the other colors for the space where you intend to use them.

The Italian tile manufacturer MIPA still makes its tiles by hand, but you choose the tile pattern and colors. (MIPA)

The tile design and colors for these two pairs of finished MIPA tiles ("Re di Quadri" above, "Bacio" below) were chosen from MIPA's website. (By Katherine Salant)

Unlike all the other websites, which have large online catalogues, imagesintile.com specializes in creating one-of-a-kind tile murals, using images that its customers upload. Of all the websites that I tried, theirs was the easiest to use because all you do is upload your photograph or artwork, and the site

handles the rest. The overall size of the mural, which can be as small as 12 by 18 inches or as large as the side of a building, is determined by the resolution of the images you submit. The size of individual tiles in your mural can be as small as 1 by 1 inch or as large as 24 by 24 inches, depending on the resolution of your image and your preferences.

To guide your decisions, imagesintile.com will send you several preview shots to show what the tile mural will look like. The previews include your image with a grid overlay so that you can see where the grout lines will fall and a detail of the mural at full size so you judge the quality of your hugely enlarged image for yourself.

To see what imagesintile.com can do, I sent them two vacation photographs. My "Hawaiian shoreline," taken with an iPhone 5S, could be as large as 24 by 30 inches, but for the photo to look right at that size and not appear out of focus, the firm used software to soften the image so that it looks like a painting (my husband really liked it). My "Swiss mountain stream," taken with a much more sophisticated digital camera, could be as large as 4 by 6 feet, and even at that size the image was crisp and sharp. (The smaller mural was $250; the larger was $1,200.)

Whitehillenterprises.com, headed by Paul Whitehill, a former partner in Images in Tile and also based in Joplin, offers a similar service.

How would I sum up my experience with the online digital decorating world?

Most people associate online purchases with speed and immediacy — order it now and get it in three days. But in this case you need to take it slow and get samples before committing yourself to a larger quantity. The colors on the actual item may vary from what you see on your screen. With textiles, the color also can be affected by the fabric you select.

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