

Printing Photographs on Fabric

Stan Johnston, 3/04

For some time, I have been interested in printing photos on fabric. Prints on canvas can be mounted like oil paintings. Other cloth prints can be incorporated into quilts, garments, or other textile art. I have tried several methods with mixed results, but recently I discovered a technique that is by far the best yet.

Epson and others sell "Canvas Cloth" which can be run through inkjet printers like paper. It is fine for mounting, but too thick and heavy for quilts or garments. There are also T-shirt iron-on transfers for inkjet printers. They leave a thick rubbery layer on the cloth. And it can be tricky to transfer a large image uniformly without cracks or gaps. A commercial heat press works better than a household iron.

You can run most kinds of fabric directly through your printer. Just iron the fabric onto freezer paper, feed it through the printer, then peel it apart afterwards. The problem is that the ink tends to wick through the fabric, blurring and fading the image. A hard tight weave is usually best. And unfortunately most of the ink is totally non-waterproof. You can improve this with a product called Bubble Jet Set. You soak the fabric in this solution, let it dry, then proceed as above. It binds the ink to the fabric, making it somewhat water resistant. But it is messy, and my results were only fair.

I am getting much better results with fabric from ColorTextiles.com. They sell a dozen varieties of cotton, linen, and silk in a wide range of sizes, all pretreated and paper-backed. You just print it, peel off the paper, and rinse in water. The images are bright and crisp, and can stand gentle washing (use soap, not detergent). I'd recommend it for printing photos or computer-generated text and graphics.