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Why Aluminum Holds a Photograph Better Than Paper

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Take a tour of the next photography exhibition. How many framed photographs are on show? What is the main material: paper under glass, canvases, acrylics, or perhaps aluminum? And how are these photographs distributed throughout the gallery space?

And there is an explanation for that.

The aluminum prints are viewed differently from afar, as they retain light and colors appear closer. The prints on matte paper acquire additional depth when viewed. Curators note this difference, although they cannot quite explain it.

This technology is old enough to have become generic yet not old enough to be amazing only when seeing pictures of such prints. Dye sublimation prints embed the image in the aluminum, rather than printing on top of it.

What Dye-Sublimation Does to a Photograph

Printing presses are devices that typically use ink for printing images. Ink is turned into gas in dye sublimation, and the process of dye sublimation allows the gas to enter the surface directly.

The aluminum panels already have a polymer coating. Heat and pressure turn the dyes into gas, which reacts on the molecular level with that polymer coating. The image is not put on the top of the panel but becomes part of the surface. That is why the dragging fingernail on the metal print will encounter nothing.

This procedure is done on ChromaLuxe aluminum and other panels by Canvas n’ Decor, and the polymer coating has an extremely bright white point. The whites remain pure white instead of becoming cream-colored, and this factor is extremely important in black and white prints.

The practical result is a set of **metal photo prints** with higher apparent resolution than the same file produces on paper. Gloss surface, edge-to-edge coverage, and a color range that holds up in full color or monochrome.

Why the Material Lasts

Paper turns yellow. Canvas attracts dust in its weave and begins sagging in the stretcher bars within a couple of years. Both issues are not very serious and occur frequently, so collectors do not

find them surprising anymore.

The aluminum surface does not turn yellow, and the panel comes with a warranty regarding that. Also, the dye lies under an abrasion-resistant coating. Canvas n' Decor gives the prints between 40 and 100 years of life depending on location and maintenance.

Exterior use affects the number of years significantly. Although the panels are waterproof and can endure bad weather conditions, exposure to sunlight will eventually fade any sublimated image. A metal print on the shady patio will last for many years, while the print placed in the sun in Arizona will deteriorate sooner.

Keeping an HD print in shape takes very little:

- Wipe the surface with a clean microfiber cloth and glass spray
- Dust between cleanings with a Swiffer wand
- Avoid abrasive pads and scrubbing, since the gloss coating does not need them
- Keep direct sun exposure limited if the print hangs outdoors

Shade is the variable that costs nothing to plan around.

Choosing a Size

Sizes range from 4 by 6 inches to 30 by 40 inches in standard sizes, and larger panels can be ordered upon request. This range includes all sizes, starting from a print for a desk to a panel for a big sofa wall above.

Size choice usually depends on wall space and distance from the viewer to the panel. For example, 4 by 6 panels fit perfectly in a shelf or on an easel on a desk. 8 by 10 size is suitable for a hallway. Everything above 16 by 20 starts to act as a focal point in a room, not an accent.

The thickness of a panel remains consistent at 0.045 inches (1.12 mm). Light enough to mount onto drywall without a stud finder, rigid enough for a 24 by 36 panel not to bend when handled.

Mounting Changes the Look

Three mounting styles exist, and each one changes how the print relates to the wall.

Mounting Style	Best For	How It Sits
Metal easel	Mini prints, 4×6 through 8×10	Stands on a shelf or desk
Float mount	Most sizes, 8×10 and above	Flush to the wall with a small gap behind
Chrome stand-offs	Large panels, gallery settings	Suspended on visible metal posts

Metal easels work well for the miniature sizes of 4 by 6 inches to 8 by 10 inches. Unlike other prints that hang on the wall, the print sits on the shelf or desk, making it a table-top piece of art and not wall art.

Float mounts involve fixing the panel to an invisible frame, leaving a bit of space between the print and the wall. The panel looks like it is floating, and light falling through it creates a shadow line between the print and the wall. This option works mostly for larger prints.

Chrome stand-offs attach the panel to metal rods, leaving it floating a bit from the wall. The hardware is clearly seen, and it fits in industrial spaces and galleries.

Designing the Print Online

Canvas n' Decor offers an online editor for their Canvas n' Decor layouts; here is a list of features they offer that go above and beyond typical online layout editors.

- Realistic previews of work within the canvas at the finished size of the crop.
- Accurate crop and resize tools for aspect ratio changes.
- Photo effects, borders, and frame treatments
- Clip art, backgrounds, and custom text in multiple fonts and colors.
- A collage builder for multi-image layouts

Two of these features are actually justified in their inclusion. The preview feature, for instance, allows the user to see what the final print will actually look like. This is crucial in preventing the most common error in image ordering – i.e., an image that looks great on a mobile device's screen but has a main element cut out because of an inappropriate aspect ratio for print. The text feature, on the other hand, is sufficient to manage all captions, dates, and titles without the need to bring in further design software.

Canvas n' Decor manufactures in North America to keep your products made within their own borders. Most of their common products with float mount are ready to ship in 3 business days. Orders for stand-off mount, print only, or oversized panels take 1 to 3 weeks.

Conclusions

The lifespan of an aluminum photo print depends on three factors.

It is essential to check the image for print prior to ordering. The images produced via dye sublimation will be soft and have very fine details, which are going to remain the same even after printing. But it's impossible to correct poor-quality images.

First choose the mounting and then the size. An image mounted in a float frame on a 16 by 20 inches panel will look different from the same image mounted using stand-offs on a 16 by 20 inches panel. The wall where it will hang determines which option is best.

If you take care of these three points, your print will probably last longer than the wall it is hanging on.

Photo: Vitaly Gariev via Pexels

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