

It's all about your IMAGE

STEVE MACLEOD, a director of Metro Imaging, tells Annabelle Ruston why the London-based company has moved into framing, having been printing, processing and mounting images for 38 years



The reception area of Metro Imaging's Clerkenwell HQ is buzzing with couriers and customers holding intense conversations with the company's technicians. Fridges full of camera film and a 'by appointment to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales' plaque speak of the company's traditional side, while the over-sized Perspex-mounted surreal image above the desk reminds us that Metro Imaging is a highly contemporary creative hub too.

One wall features a display of the same image presented in six different ways: block mounted onto MDF; a stretched canvas; reverse Perspex; a box frame; a keyline frame; and a 'classic frame'. In a box alongside the display, customers can handle samples of the same image mounted onto a range of substrates, including foam board, aluminium and Perspex. It's interesting that only one of the presentation options is a traditional mounted and glazed frame.

The busy reception area fronts a 5000 square foot space where 26 employees are busy manipulating digital files, taking photographs, scanning, developing film and printing images using wet and dry processes. In a 9000 square foot workshop in Vauxhall, south London, a further three employees are making frames, mounting images onto a range of substrates and creating lightboxes.

Surprisingly, Metro Imaging has only been making frames for 18 months. 'It made sense to take framing in-house, rather than sub-contract it, and controlling our framing facility means that we can push the creative boundaries,' says Steve Macleod, a director of the company. 'We are always



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Opposite page:
Duratran printing at Metro
Imaging (Duratrans are
translucent, allowing light to
diffuse through the image);
image © Steve Macleod
This page:
Printing a C-type image

being asked to innovate. Fashions change very fast nowadays and we can respond quickly to new trends. We now handle every aspect of production in-house: wet and dry processing, image capture, printing and display, plus delivery and installation if the customer requires it. We can work with very large-scale pieces in-house too.’ After pausing for thought Steve adds, ‘Another reason that we have started making frames is that customers are requesting framed artwork a lot nowadays. It’s fashionable. In the past unframed presentations were more popular.’

The company’s impressive list of customers includes photographers of the calibre of Mario Testino, Rankin and Juergen Teller, and artists such as Marc Quinn, Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst. Gallery customers include Flowers, Atlas Gallery, Spring Projects and the Saatchi Gallery. ‘There are four of us who are experienced at talking to clients about their needs,’ says Steve. ‘Sometimes we have meetings with an artist, gallery director and curator, plus our own technicians. Many of our clients have very exacting requirements.’

Around 80 per cent of Metro Imaging’s work is producing and displaying fine art, while the remaining 20 per cent is commercial work for

photographers working within the advertising industry. Framing is a fast-growing aspect of the business. Five per cent of turnover is accounted for by analogue printing and ten per cent by film processing.

Production facilities

The Clerkenwell operation is packed full with hundreds of thousands of pounds’ worth of computers, processing, image capture and outputting equipment. Visitors navigate their way along corridors and into a vast basement, between a bewildering array of large grey machines.

Photographic printing is handled by a formidable looking Durst Lambda device, which is a massive dry processing unit, while the £300,000 Océ LightJet 500XL is calibrated for laser printing fine art photographs. These machines are often set up to produce display graphics, but Metro Imaging can meet the stringent demands that fine art customers make concerning image quality, colour fidelity and longevity.

Metro Imaging is the only company in the UK that can produce C-type photographs as large as 6x10’. (C-types are coloured photographs produced from digital files, negatives or slides. They are produced by a chromogenic

process whereby a conventional silver image is replaced with a dye image.) It is also the only UK company that can create archival silver gelatine fibre-based prints from digital files, and print them up to 50” wide.

Image capture is taken care of by two Celsis drum scanners and a Kodak flatbed scanner. If you ask Steve about the photographic equipment available for image capture he waves his hands airily and says, ‘Oh we’ve got everything you can imagine up in the studio. Loads of cameras and lenses.’

Top-of-the-range Epson Stylus Pro 9900 and 11880 machines handle non-photographic giclée printing. A wide choice of PermaJet and Hahnemühle papers and canvases are available for customers to choose from.

Metro Imaging boasts an impressive film processing facility. ‘Not many people are still processing film,’ explains Steve, ‘But there are lots of artists who only shoot film. There’s a swing back to traditional processes; colleges and institutions are investing heavily in wet labs.’

One of the main facilities provided by the Vauxhall framing workshop is space. ‘We need a huge layout area. Some of our sheet materials are delivered in 2x4m pieces. We need the →



room to trim and laminate large artworks.' There is no computerised mountcutter, as not much artwork is displayed with a window mount, but Steve concedes that the company is moving into new areas so this is something that is being considered.

Presentation

When it comes to presentation, the staff at Metro Imaging imply that the limit is your imagination. 'We enjoy innovative display options: turning art into 3D objects, printing it onto vinyl or projecting it onto a wall. We like to play with traditional assumptions about how art should be displayed.'

'Advances in LED technology are making lightboxes more reasonably priced, and they are growing in popularity,' explains Steve, pointing to a metre-wide backlit photograph which projects about 10cm from the wall. 'This system doesn't generate much heat, includes 25,000 light hours and you can adjust the strength of the glow. The cost would be around £700 including printing the image, mounting, the LED panel, the frame and a transformer.'

That said, Steve readily admits that the company's biggest seller is the plain black wood frame. 'I think that white frames have probably peaked; they look a bit too minimal now, though they are still popular. We sell very few ornate profiles or gilt frames, but that may be a reflection of our customer-base and the style we are perceived as offering, rather than an insight into popular taste.' Most of the frame chevrons contained in plan chests at Clerkenwell are black, white, plain wood or aluminium.

So, what styles of presentation are fashionable at the moment? Framers will be pleased to hear that Metro Imaging is seeing a return to requests for framing, rather than unframed display options, such as canvas wraps and flush-mounted Perspex hung without a frame. 'Float mounting and tray frames are popular. Customers still want their images mounted with Perspex and aluminium or Dibond® (an aluminium and polyurethane composite), but they want them framed. Not all of our customers want their artwork laminated under Perspex though; quite a few want glazed frames, though this isn't always

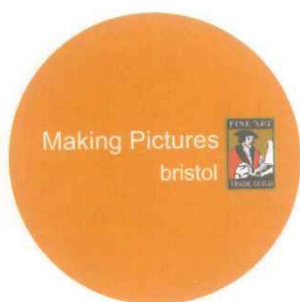
an option for large-scale pieces.'

Perspex-mounted images can have a matt, satin or gloss finish, and UV-protective film is available. 'The high gloss finish that you saw a lot at art fairs a couple of years ago may have had its day. Fashion changes very fast now.'

Very few of Metro Imaging's customers request artwork on canvas. 'We've tried pushing it and the price point is reasonable, but no one wants it. It's another trend that's behind us.'

An exception to the trend away from unframed flush-mounted Perspex is a vogue for coloured acrylic behind the image. 'For example, an image with yellow highlights can look great with yellow acrylic behind it. The image is surrounded by a subtle yellow glow and the yellow edges are discreetly visible. Acrylic comes in a wide range of colours.'

Wooden fillets under the frame are popular with Metro Imaging's customers, and mounts are generally plain and neutral. Does the company receive requests for washlines? 'Never,' responds Steve, with a look of amazement. V-grooves? 'No.'



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Monochrome presentations are the norm, such as a black tray frame with a black fillet and black mountboard behind the image.

Design options

The Metro Imaging box frame is a deep profile with a flat face and the foam-mounted image is distanced from the glass by wooden fillets. Invisible glass is the norm; standard float glass is not on offer but there is a wide range of invisible and UV-filtering options available including Schott MIROGARD® and Tru Vue options.

A border around the image is visible in the floating box frame; prints are mounted onto 1mm aluminium which is positioned above a visible undermount. Tray frames are unglazed but the print is protected by a layer of UV-filtering film and is set back slightly from the face of the frame to protect it from damage. This is a good way of displaying large images, thus avoiding the cost and weight of specialist glazing. Prints are mounted onto Dibond® and floated with a 5mm gap between moulding and image.

Keyline frames are similar to tray frames, but the image is mounted between MDF and Perspex and there is a small 2mm gap between moulding and image.

If the image is Perspex mounted it is bonded to acrylic using silicone gel, then backed with a range of substrates including 1mm aluminium, 2mm Dibond® or 3mm acrylic. The refraction of light through the Perspex provides a high definition effect and deep saturated colours. An advantage of Dibond® is that it is a third of the weight of aluminium, yet remains rigid.

Marketing

E-marketing is king at Metro Imaging. A key marketing avenue is social networking; two staff focus on this in-house, plus an outside consultant. The company has 2500 followers on Twitter and offers on Facebook, such as 20 per cent off C-type printing, are highly effective. E-newsletters and regular customer emails are a priority, as is investment in search engine optimisation.

While most of the customer-base is

trade, the company's Metro-print.co.uk website is aimed at consumers.

Customers can upload their images and order prints online. Very shortly users will also be able to order a range of simple framing options online. An app is also on its way, which will enable people to order prints and frames from their phones.

Do Metro Imaging's customers worry about price? 'Public institutions always have a budget and are very mindful of its restrictions. Most of our clients are primarily concerned with how each piece will look, and they understand the impact that the right presentation can have, but it's a competitive market and clients compare prices.'

Metro Imaging is an example of how businesses have to diversify and offer choice, expert knowledge and customer service if they want to flourish. A customer may drop in to buy a roll of film and end up ordering frames and giclée prints. Framing is the latest service that has been added, just as many framers are moving into giclée printing. ●

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