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Interior motives

Digitally printed fabrics provide a world of opportunities for home interior applications.

by Holly O'Dell

Mass production has become the hallmark of American retail and design, but some consumers are ditching what they deem as cookie-cutter products and using interior designers to help them create one-of-a-kind furnishings and accessories for their homes. In turn, these designers seek unique solutions for their clients, but many of them either don't consider or don't know about one emerging option: digitally printing on fabric. End product manufacturers (EPMs) and print shops can cater to this market by touting the benefits of custom printing and create a new stream of revenue in the process.





Makers of digitally printable wall coverings, 4walls.com offers an extensive library of images but also allows users to create their own one-of-a-kind designs. The company prints its wall coverings using a variety of UV and ink jet printers, depending upon the end use and price points. Inks include six-color solvent and four- or six-color UV. This particular design is available on 18-inch pre-pasted wallpaper, 54-inch self-adhesive material and on Type 2 20-ounce commercial vinyl or canvas. Photo: 4walls

Though not without its challenges, digitally printing on fabric provides many opportunities for the end user—whether that be an interior designer looking to create a special window treatment or an artist who wants to place his or her design on a throw pillow.

“End users are really looking for a unique style or feel when it comes to home interiors,” says Paul Lilienthal, president of Pictura Graphics in Minneapolis, Minn. “They can use something they have designed, a photographic image that they like or a specialty look that doesn’t come from a stock wall covering.”

“This is an artist’s dream to be able to design something original, and then have it produced in a form they can use at home,” adds Jeanelle Dech, president of Adaptive Textiles in West Chester, Pa. “This opportunity has never been there before without being backed by a large company or contracted for a big swatch.”

The immediacy of digital printing also appeals to those who have used it to create custom furniture or drapery pieces. “Digitally printed fabrics are much more on-demand,” explains Joseph Terramagra, sales and marketing representative, western region, for Mimaki USA, based in Suwanee, Ga. “You don’t have to worry about the old method of screening. Setup time is less. And if you have any changes, you can make them quickly.”

The print shops and end product manufacturers benefit, too: “If you’re digitally printing for a client, you don’t have to stock rolls of fabric that no one is going to use.”

How to proceed

End product manufacturers and print shops that want to further develop their skills and offerings to the home interiors market have a vast array

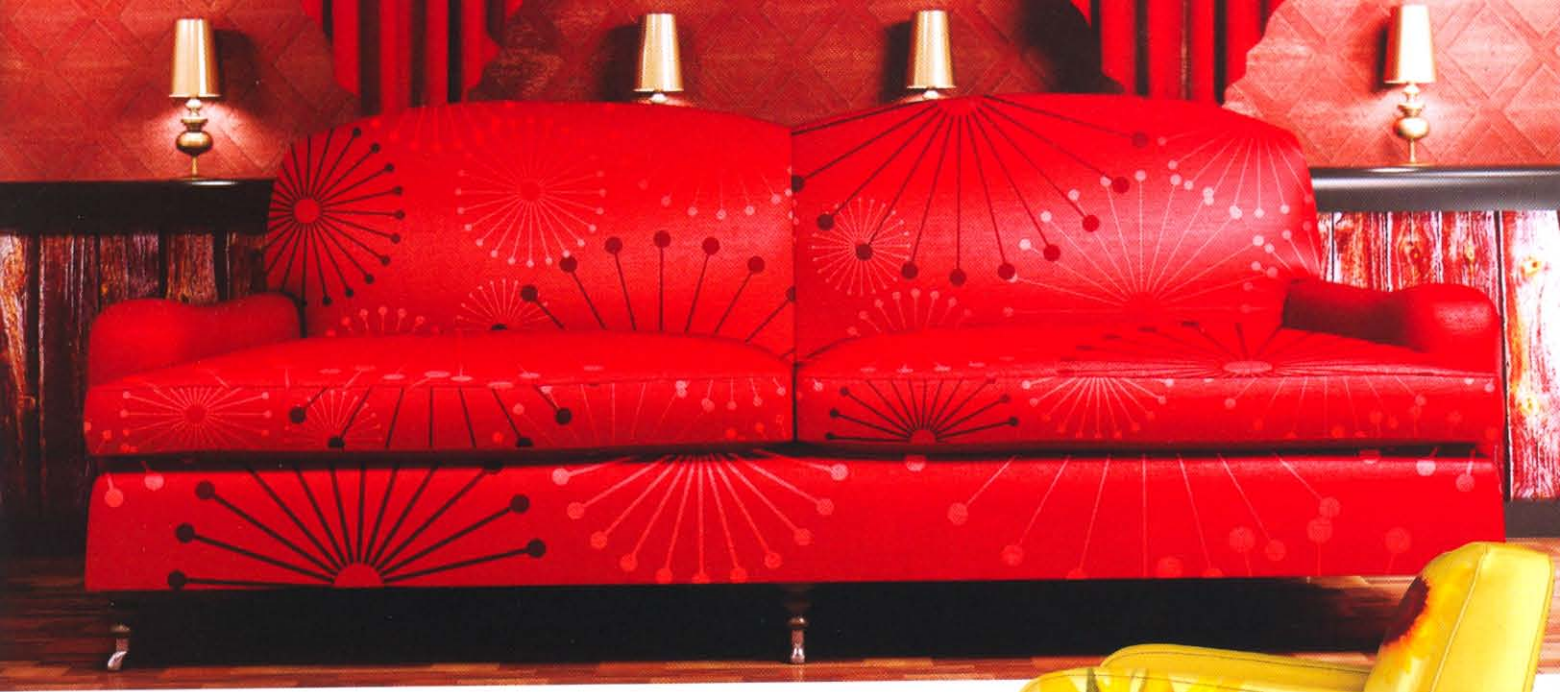
of digitally printed fabrics to consider. Over the years,

Susanne Jansson, owner of Better Mousetrap in Long Island City, N.Y., has created for her clients everything from draperies to upholstery.

“We use contract-market fabrics that have excellent durability, such as faux leather, suede and silks with a material base of polyester,” says Jansson, who adds that today’s synthetic fibers are light years ahead of the poly products of the 1980s. “I also like to play with cotton-poly blends where you achieve light and dark impressions in the material due to the fact that poly sublimates the ink and the cotton receives a lesser percentage, therefore giving a hint of color or shadow.”

Aurora Specialty Textiles Group Inc., Aurora, Ill., has developed a line of 100-percent polyester fabrics engineered specifically for dye sublimation printing. The collection’s 14 styles include Muslin, Linen, Upholstery and Twill.





“These textiles look and feel like cotton and are made with spun yarns instead of filament yarns,” says Michael Richardson, director of sales and marketing, print media. “That gives them more of a natural fiber look even though they’re synthetic.” The polyester-based fabrics require dye-sublimation printing, which employs dye-sub inks and uses a large rotary heat press wherein the ink turns into a gas and bonds with the fiber in the material.

Still other end users—not to mention print shops and end product manufacturers—prefer to use natural fabrics, including cotton, linen and silk, which are ideal for window treatments and throw pillows, as well as grasscloth, a popular choice for wall coverings. Digital printers for these textiles can use acid, reactive or pigment inks. A steaming process pushes the ink into the fabric in this process. “Most recently we have tested, with success, printing with latex ink,” Richardson adds.

Even leather is starting to make headway in the digital printing market. Start-up company Digital Leather in Sarasota, Fla., is getting in on the act. “We are bringing the world of digital printing into the analog world of leather,” says Digital Leather’s Chris Cudzilo. “Anything you can design or capture digitally you can put on leather now.”

The company prints an image on a smart imaging film, then laminates it to the leather, which is in the middle of the tanning process. The product is then finished just like traditional leather. “Once the image is on the leather, it becomes the leather,” Cudzilo notes. “You can’t scuff it or scratch it. To ruin the image is to ruin the leather itself.”

Overcoming obstacles

Like any industry, digital printing, particularly with home interiors, is not without its obstacles. One challenge, of course, is the economy. People are spending less money, but those who have cash are willing to invest in a product that brings creativity and often adds value to the home.

Another potential limitation with the direct-to-fabric digital printing process is the depth of color.



Digital Leather has found a way for designers to create custom high-end furnishings through digital printing. A high-resolution image is printed on a smart imaging film, which is then laminated to the leather. Photo: SIF



Designer Lisa Pearl developed custom designs for a couch and two throw pillows for Fred Segal's Collections. The furniture was upholstered in imitation leather, which was printed directly on a Mimaki UJV with UV-curable ink.

Inset: At the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising Chairing Styles Show, a student designer showcased a chair covered in cotton and printed on Mimaki TX2-160 using reactive dyes.

"An inkjet printer is not usually as vibrant as some customers might be used to," says Dech of Adaptive Textiles. "Occasionally we get requests for a deep blue or burgundy, but we usually don't have any disappointment on the brightness side because most people are not looking for a fluorescent orange in their interior draperies."

"Not all clients understand that we cannot always 'match' the colors they want," adds Pat Walker, managing director of 4walls.com, a wall covering designer and manufacturer in Cleveland, Ohio. "Inkjet simulates colors, and while this is simple, it is sometimes hard to explain to demanding clients. They sometimes think that digital printing is a magic wand with no limitations whatsoever."

One way to overcome this hurdle is to understand and manage clients' expectations. "We work with our customers to find the right materials with the right characteristics for the application, and to coach them on value engineering when appropriate," Walker says.

Adaptive Textiles works closely with its clients, particularly with interior designers. "We are very involved in the entire process, where we help them find a fabric ground that is appropriate for their job," Dech notes. "We also help them find the right artwork if they don't have their own already, and then being involved on the graphics end during the layout."

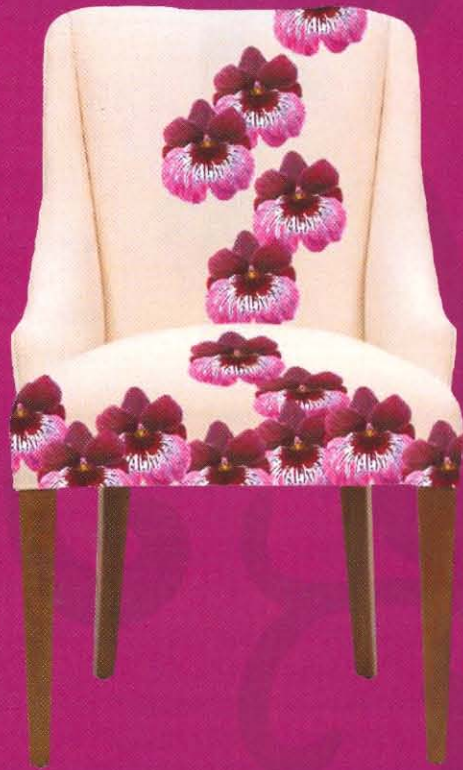
In addition, Jansson suggests to always ask about the location of the project within the home. "What we make is no different than traditional furniture," she says. "For example, a bright red chair in the sun will fade over time."

Dream it, design it, print it

Digitally printed fabrics have yielded creative, one-of-a-kind solutions for the home interiors market. The sky is seemingly the limit when it comes to design and end-product potential. Print shops and end product manufacturers have delivered a variety of products for clients, including wall coverings, draperies, blinds, pillows, bedspreads and upholstered furnishings.

Although it's been in business for less than a year, Digital Leather, Sarasota, Fla., has developed a few key products using its digitally printable leather. A customer in the United Kingdom requested chairs that showcase playing cards for his poker room. In another instance, an interior designer captured elements of an original orchid painting and turned them into a pattern for a chair.

Meanwhile, Joseph Terramagra of Mimaki USA in Suwanee, Ga., has seen his company's printers used for many home interiors products, including a couch made of imitation leather. "It's getting to the point where you can use a lot of these imitation materials to look much more high end, have good quality and hit the smaller markets," he says.



Pictura Graphics of Minneapolis, Minn., crafted a series of wall murals and floor graphics for an episode of "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." The show contacted the digital graphics and printing company with some ideas—some of them were sketches on a napkin faxed to Pictura—who then tapped its own library to find the appropriate images. The resulting project featured a three-panel wall mural at the home's entrance, along with a Minnesota Wild vinyl floor graphic in a boy's bedroom.

The heart of the project is the secret playroom in the basement. Pictura created, printed and installed wall coverings decorated with abstract floral patterns. The flower theme continued on pillows, blankets and ottomans printed via dye sublimation.

For a project on "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," Pictura Graphics created, installed and printed wall coverings made of a vinyl adhesive, along with pillow and ottoman poplin fabric printed on a Roland using dye-sub inks. Photo: Pictura Graphics

Creating a collection



In her book "The Design Directory of Window Treatments," interior design veteran Jackie Von Tobel created thousands of hand-drawn illustrations. But it wasn't until her friend and business associate, Jeanelle Dech of Adaptive Textiles in West Chester, Pa., suggested that she create a fabric collection based on these designs that Von Tobel knew about the possibilities of designing digital printed textiles for home interior use.

"I had to learn a new industry from the start," Las Vegas-based Von Tobel notes. "I had never designed fabric before, and I had to teach myself Photoshop." What's more, her knowledge of digital printing capabilities was relegated to advertising and trade show uses.

So Von Tobel went to work on developing a collection of 12 patterns representing 154 SKUs that features everything from feminine florals to basic zebra prints to geometric trellises. The patterns are printed on linen, cotton-linen or organic sateen yardages using the DuPont Artistri and pigment inks. Potential products include pillows, draperies and slip covers—anything but heavy upholstery. Von Tobel also created a separate line of pre-made pillows meant to coordinate with the yardage patterns.

Von Tobel found an ideal partner in Adaptive Textiles. "It was a perfect fit in that Jackie could launch a significant collection with minimal financial investment," says Dech. "We handled the graphic end of it and the sample printing, and she was able to create her collection in eight months."

Adds Von Tobel: "I have no warehousing. I have no inventory. I have no employees. Adaptive Textiles did it all."

Up next for the designer: a collection of coordinated wall hangings and window panels. Von Tobel's collection launched in November 2009 and is available for sale on her website, www.jackievontobel.com.



Getting the word out

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the industry is getting interior designers on board with the concept of digitally printed fabrics.

"It used to be that 10 years ago, the technology was the barrier, but that is no longer the case," says Patti Williams, a consulting partner with Hanover, Mass.-based IT Strategies, which advises companies in the digital printing industry. "Interior designers are used to buying already created products, so the limitations today are more market driven. How do you meet these people? How do they find you?"

For starters, Williams suggests that print shops use existing connections and establish new ones to branch out. "If they want to go after this business, they need to think of the kinds of customers they can sell their expertise to," she says. "Connections need to be made among office designers, interior designers and retail. It's not just a matter of, 'I am going to put something up on a website and everybody is going to come and buy it.'"

Print shops and end product manufacturers can make those connections through current customers—that is, if they are providing fabric signage for a client, they can let them know about their capabilities to produce digitally printed fabrics for interiors. Designer-driven trade shows, such as NeoCon or the International Window Coverings Expo, can be resources for new business. Good, old fashioned word of mouth can serve as a powerful marketing tool as well.

Additionally, promoting the green angle can offer another entry point into the market. "Print shops can sell digitally printed fabrics as a more

sustainable product than screen-printed output," Williams advises. "It's a short run, no chemicals are going off into the waste stream and you're only printing what's needed. You have to put together a reason why people want to buy, and today seems to be about green."

Digitally printable fabrics for the home interiors market can open new doors for print shops and end product manufacturers. Digital Leather's Cudzilo envisions that 30- to 50-year-olds will comprise the target market for home interior opportunities. "They are the ones in the workforce. They are the ones that are going to have discretionary incomes in the future," he notes. "They don't want to walk into their neighbor's house and see the same piece of furniture that they have. We need to deliver a customized product as cost effectively as possible."

It's an outlook that can serve the industry well as it defines ways to tap into the home interiors market. ■■

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Holly O'Dell is a freelance writer in east central Minnesota specializing in interior design, residential construction and architecture.



4walls.com features an array of pre-determined designs and also invites customers to submit their own designs for custom wall coverings. Pictured here: A mural from the company's Kids Collection available in pre-pasted wallpaper, self-adhesive material and Type 2 20-ounce commercial vinyl or canvas. Depending on customer specifications and price points, 4walls.com uses six-color solvent and four- to six-color UV inks; printers include UV and ink jet. Photo: 4walls

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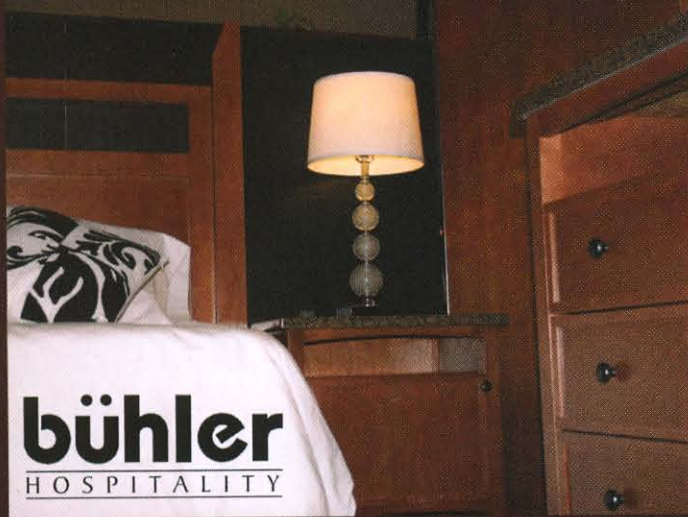
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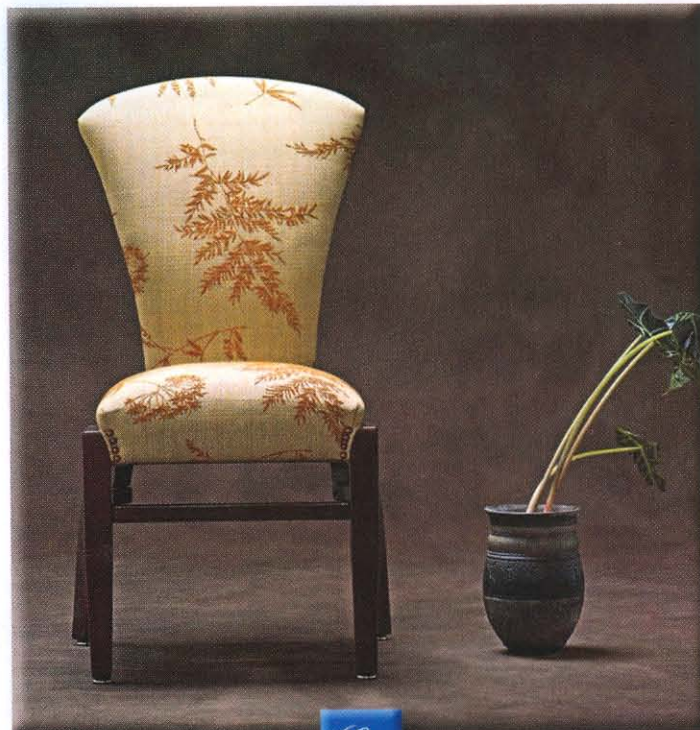
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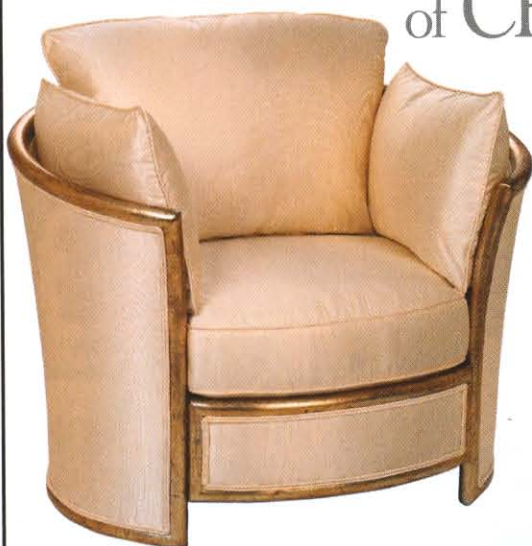
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