

Let 'er RIP

An Independent Review of ImagePrint Lite 5.6

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Fine art B&W photography is one area where digital techniques have been slower to emerge. Most digital cameras produce only color images, and the few that offer B&W output typically offer B&W images that are lacking in contrast and dynamic range.

Techniques have evolved that allow digital photographers to craft high contrast, Ansel Adams-like images in B&W from an image that started out in full color.



Figure 1. “Via Toscana, Rome” Printing images like these can be a real challenge.

There are several moments of excitement when you finally finish the conversion of a color image into a fine B&W image. You worked hard to achieve subtle gray tones and stark contrasts. You open that box of expensive fine art paper you bought for this moment, using cotton gloves to avoid damaging the tender surface, and you even tell

Adobe Photoshop to use the ICC printer profile you obtained from the manufacturer's Web site for your fine art paper. You do everything you can to craft the very best B&W fine art print possible. Then you turn Photoshop loose to print the image. Yikes! Instead of those subtle gray tones you worked so hard to emphasize, you get a print with a mauve- or mossy-colored cast.

B&W images with neutral tones are extremely difficult for pigment-based printers like the Epson 2200 and even dye-based printers like the Epson 1280. Even higher-end ink jet printers, like the Epson 9600, will move the average fine art photographer to a combination of tears and profanity when they attempt to print in B&W.

The fault lays in the printer drivers that ship with most printers. Most of the effort in their design goes into producing exquisite color images with continuous tones and saturated colors that rival or exceed photographic prints. B&W is not a priority.

You might conclude that B&W images are composed just from black ink. Some ink jet printers (for example, the Epson 2200) even have two blacks. So you might be tempted to think B&W prints use both blacks. Well, they do! But they also use various combinations on cyan, magenta, and yellow. Black and light black (or gray) alone yield a duotone, not a continuous grayscale image.

So What Is ImagePrint Lite?

ImagePrint Lite is a RIP. RIP = Raster Image Processor. Think of it as a third-party printer driver. One that is on steroids!

ImagePrint Lite handles all of the ink and layout management when you print. It takes your bitmapped image and talks directly to your printer, bypassing the manufacturer's printer driver. It takes on the responsibility of converting the various shades of gray in your B&W image into the optimal combination of tiny colored dots that will produce neutral tones.

Many printer drivers clip colors. This is true for the Epson 1280 and 2200 printers. ImagePrint Lite can give your color images even more saturated colors than the OEM printer drivers. Your color images will also benefit from ImagePrint Lite.

You do not use ImagePrint Lite in lieu of something like Adobe Photoshop. It is not an image editor. Where Adobe Photoshop excels at photo editing, ImagePrint Lite excels at printing images. You use Adobe Photoshop to prepare your image, and when you are ready to print, you jump to ImagePrint Lite.

ImagePrint Lite gives you a lot more control over page layout. If you have ever tried to place an image precisely on a printed page with Adobe Photoshop and an Epson 1280 or Epson 2200 printer, you probably found it to be an exercise in extreme frustration. With ImagePrint, you can print one image or multiple images on the same sheet of paper,

dragging them around the GUI display of the page on your monitor, and then watch them print just where you intended.

It Costs How Much?!

ImagePrint Lite is not an inexpensive solution. It costs \$495 per user. The \$495 version is a scaled down version of ImagePrint – a much more complete printing package -- that works only with the Epson 1270/1280/1290, 2000P, 2100/2200 printers. It costs nearly as much as the Epson 2200 printer itself!

It is important to keep the cost of obtaining exquisite B&W prints with an Epson 1280 or Epson 2200 in perspective. If you do not use a RIP, like ImagePrint Lite, your other alternative is to use third-party ink systems. Those are also expensive solutions. ImagePrint Lite produces absolutely neutral B&W grayscale images using Epson inks. There are no third party inks to leak or clog and void your warranty, no need to swap cartridges in and out, and no reason to flush ink lines.

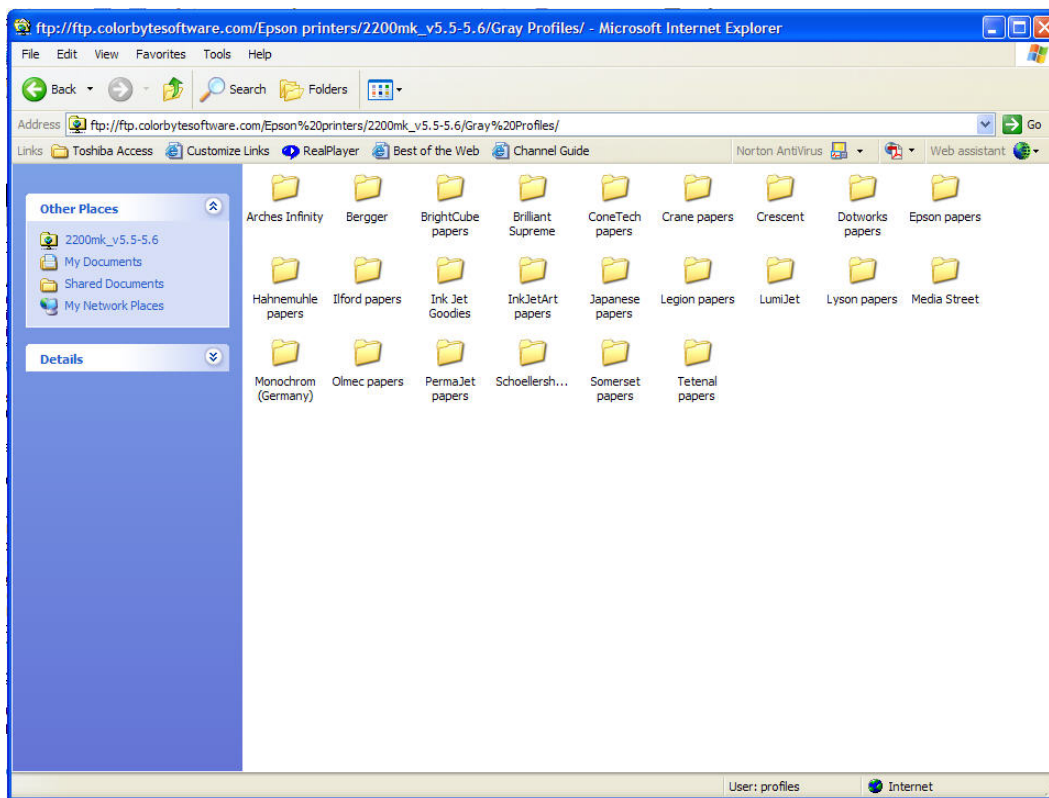


Figure 2. Grayscale profiles for the Epson 2100/2200 printer and Epson Matte Black ink.

ImagePrint Lite relies on color management to work its magic. When you purchase ImagePrint Lite, you gain access to a large library of output profiles. There are profiles for many different paper manufacturers. Of course, since ImagePrint Lite is designed for

Epson desktop printers, you will find profiles for various Epson papers. But there are also profiles for fine art papers from Arches, Crane, Hahnemuhle, Ilford, Pictorico, Red River, etc.

The quality of the profiles is excellent. There are custom grayscale profiles. They are the source of those neutral grayscale tones for B&W prints. Metamerism is a problem that afflicts the Epson 1280, 2000P, and 2200 printers. Bronzing is challenge when the Epson 2200 prints on glossy paper. Both problems are significantly reduced when ImagePrint and its custom color profiles are used.

ColorByte Software, the manufacturer of ImagePrint Lite, produces four different color profiles for each paper/ink combination. Each profile is optimized for particular lighting: daylight, tungsten, fluorescent, and mixed-fluorescent lighting.

For That Much Money, It Better Work

Hype is a persistent feature when you purchase software. There is also the problem with “the eye of the beholder.” I have read descriptions of B&W prints that claim near-perfection using Black-Only printing, quadtone inks, piezography, etc. The dithering in Black-Only printing bothered me. The hassles associated with other methods were not offset for me by the results.

Before plunking down \$495 for ImagePrint, I made a trip to their office in Tampa, FL. I wanted to see actual output. I was so impressed, I paid my \$495 on the spot.

Does ImagePrint Lite work as advertised? You bet it does! B&W prints are absolutely neutral, unless you choose to apply a tint to your image. If you do want a color cast, the Tint Picker feature is easy to use. The combination of custom color profiles and the expanded color gamut available with ImagePrint Lite can give your color prints extra “pop.”

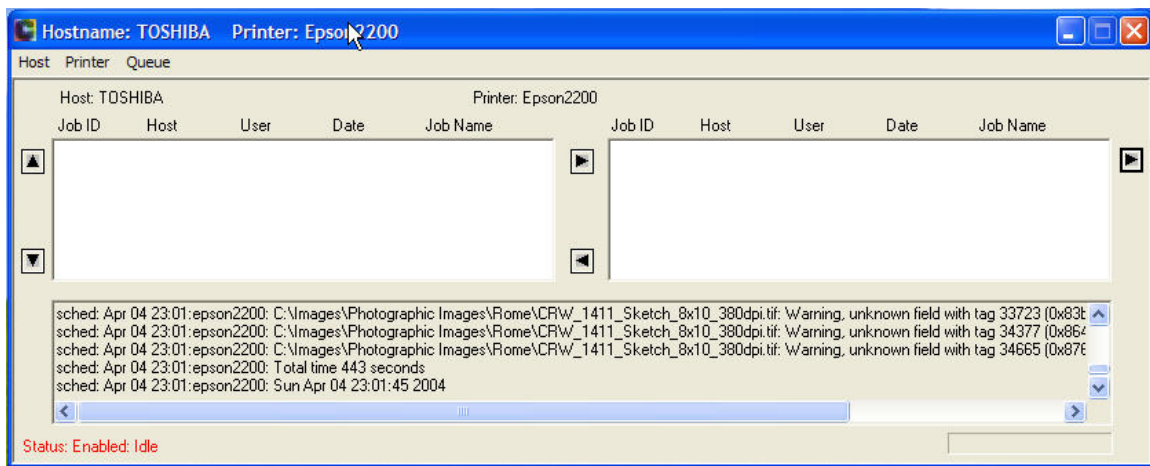


Figure 3. The user interface for the print spooler in ImagePrint Lite.

One other benefit of using a RIP is better printing performance. ImagePrint Lite includes a separate spooler. Printing occurs in the background. Large image files print much faster from ImagePrint than they do from applications that use the Epson printer driver, such as Adobe Photoshop. You can even queue jobs up and print them later, changing their priorities in the queue when you do get ready to print.

You've Heard the Pros, What About the Cons?

Depending on how you feel about copy protection, ImagePrint Lite is either mildly irritating or downright infuriating. Every copy of ImagePrint Lite is triply protected. There is a software activation code. Internet activation is a required step. In order to print without a bothersome "DEMO" watermark, you also need to use a dongle. I'll admit that I am more than a little dongle-phobic. I resent paying \$495 for software, only to be treated as a software pirate! I had not even seen a dongle for more than a decade.

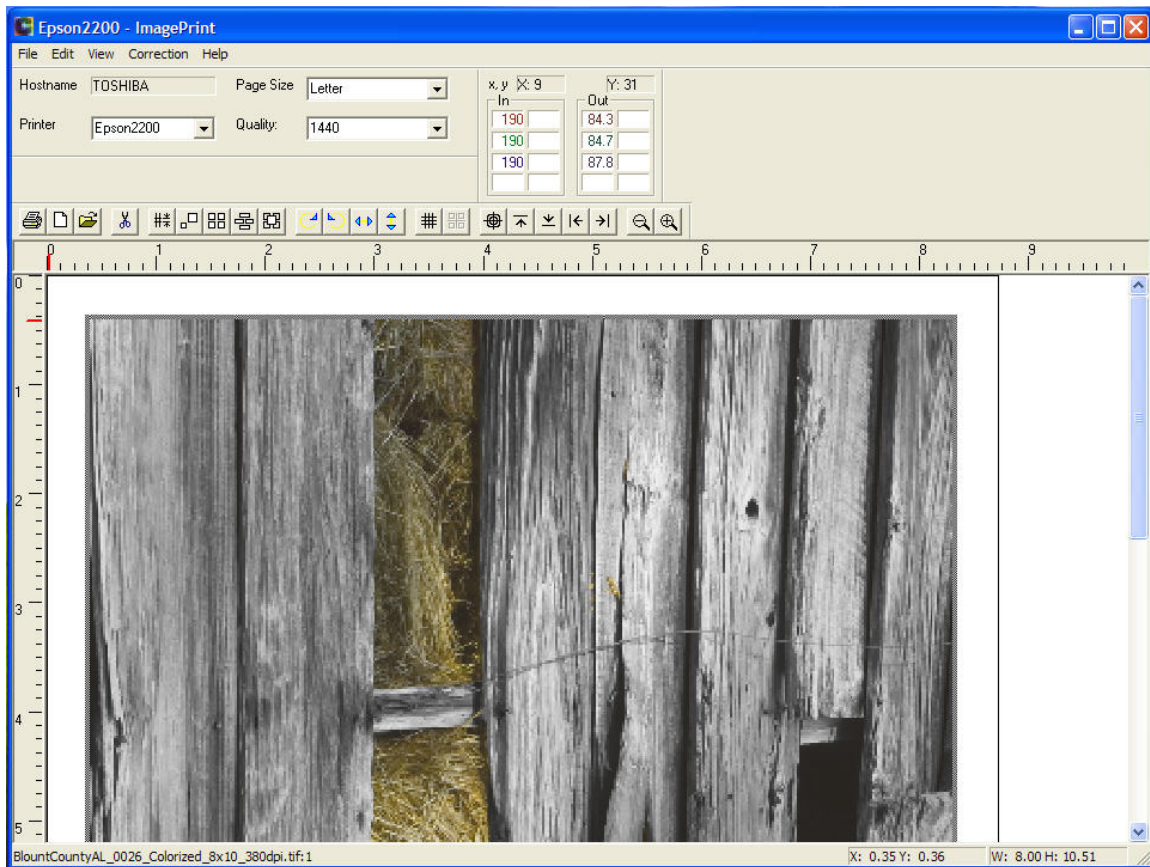


Figure 4. The user interface for Image Print Lite.

It appears that ImagePrint Lite was written by engineers who are more comfortable with hardware than the users of that hardware. The user interface would benefit from a complete overhaul. The ability to drag an image around the screen and position the image

where you want it to print on the page is a great feature. I wish the rest of the user interface even approached that level of functionality.

ImagePrint Lite is not just a “lite” version. The features of the more expensive version are there. Those menu items are not grayed out, so be careful! If you invoke an unsupported feature, your output will be watermarked. There is no warning, either. If you leave the printer unattended, you can come back to a pile of wasted paper and ink. Oh, you can disable printing for unsupported features, and to learn about that, make sure you read all of the appendices in the .PDF manual. You will need to create an empty file with just the right name in the executable directory. In my opinion, this is very poor software design. Why force the user to create an empty file when a simple menu item could enable/disable printing of unsupported features? There are many niggling issues about the user interface that cause me to grumble each time I use ImagePrint Lite.

Support for ImagePrint Lite is a major disappointment. You get 30 days or one incident. After 30 days, support costs \$150 for three months. Upgrades are only available with technical support, so after 30 days, you can expect to pay \$150 per upgrade. There is good news for users who purchased version 5.6 this winter. When I purchased version 5.6 in December, I was told purchasers of 5.6 this winter would be eligible for a free upgrade to version 6.0 (expected any day now).

In order to install and use ImagePrint Lite, you will find the necessary documentation spread across a .PDF on the installation disk, a “Quick Start” guide, an online FAQ on the ColorByte Software Web site, and readme files. The documentation could be better condensed so users do not have to search all over for it in separate files.

I had read other reviews before I bought ImagePrint Lite, so I knew the installation was a sore spot for many people. I read the Quick Start guide and the manual, but I still needed the FAQ. I had to try a couple of different options from the FAQ and a reboot in order to get ImagePrint to work under Windows XP with a Firewire connection to my Epson 2200 printer. I would like to use USB 2.0 instead of Firewire now, but the installation was such a hassle, I have not been willing to tempt fate and go back through the installation process just to change the connection from Firewire to USB 2.0.

ImagePrint 5.6 supports Adobe Photoshop .PSD files, as long as you use version 7.0 or earlier. The .PSD files from Adobe Photoshop CS are not compatible, so you will need to save your image as a .TIFF file. Speaking of .TIFF files, make sure they are flattened and contain no alpha channels. In both cases, you will get no warnings from ImagePrint Lite, but the resulting image will appear screwy.

One other piece of advice! The RIP in ImagePrint Lite will interpolate images to 360 pixels per inch. It uses the same interpolation method as Adobe Photoshop’s “bicubic interpolation.” If you want complete control over the interpolation, resize your image to 360 ppi before you load it into ImagePrint Lite.

In Conclusion

I struggled with printing neutral B&W images on both the Epson 1280 and Epson 2200. I tried Black-Only printing and did not like the result. I considered quadtone and other third party ink solutions. I could get a neutral B&W image by printing lots of proofs and applying Curves tweaks in Adobe Photoshop, but it took a lot of effort and the results were inconsistent. To make matters worse, if I took the print into different lighting, those neutral tones I worked so hard to obtain developed a mauve or mossy color cast.

ImagePrint 5.6 changed my whole B&W printing experience. I printed a B&W fine art print on Epson Velvet Fine Art paper on the first try. There was not even a hint of a color cast. The difference in my color prints, especially when printing on papers like Epson Premium Luster Photo Paper also showed visible improvement, especially when it came to bronzing.

Although I despise the dratted dongle on my USB port and the user interface is quirky, I highly recommend ImagePrint Lite to anyone who wants to make fine art prints – B&W or color – with the Epson 1270/1280/1290, 2000P, 2100/2200 printers. It is very rare today when software works exactly as advertised, and ImagePrint Lite sure does!

Ratings:

Features	*****
User Interface	**
Documentation	***
Support	**

Product Details:

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System requirements:

Windows 2000 or XP, Macintosh OS 10.2 or later
Requires Epson 1270/1280/1290 or 2000P or 2100/2200 printer.
Works with Firewire, USB, and USB 2.0 connections.