

# INTO THE WOODS

BRANCH OUT INTO SUBLIMATING ON REAL WOODEN PANELS AND PLANKS

BY CARY GREEN, LASER REPRODUCTIONS, INC. (LRi)

NOVEMBER 2015

Some substrates—like ceramic and polyester—are natural canvases for sublimation. Other materials, like metal panels, are sold with special coatings to accept sublimation. Despite consumers loving the natural look of wood, sublimation-ready wooden blanks were not readily available until recently. Now, specially formulated coatings enable sublimators to print on natural wood surfaces. Retailers are seeing a lot of new sublimatable wood products available, from panels to frames.

## PHOTO WOOD PANELS

Sublimated wood can make a big splash with your customers, in part because the average consumer isn't used to seeing these products. When you sublimate wood panels to create photo and fine art reproductions, wall-mounted hangings, awards, signage, table tops, chargers, trays, and just about anything else you can think of, people stop to take a second look.

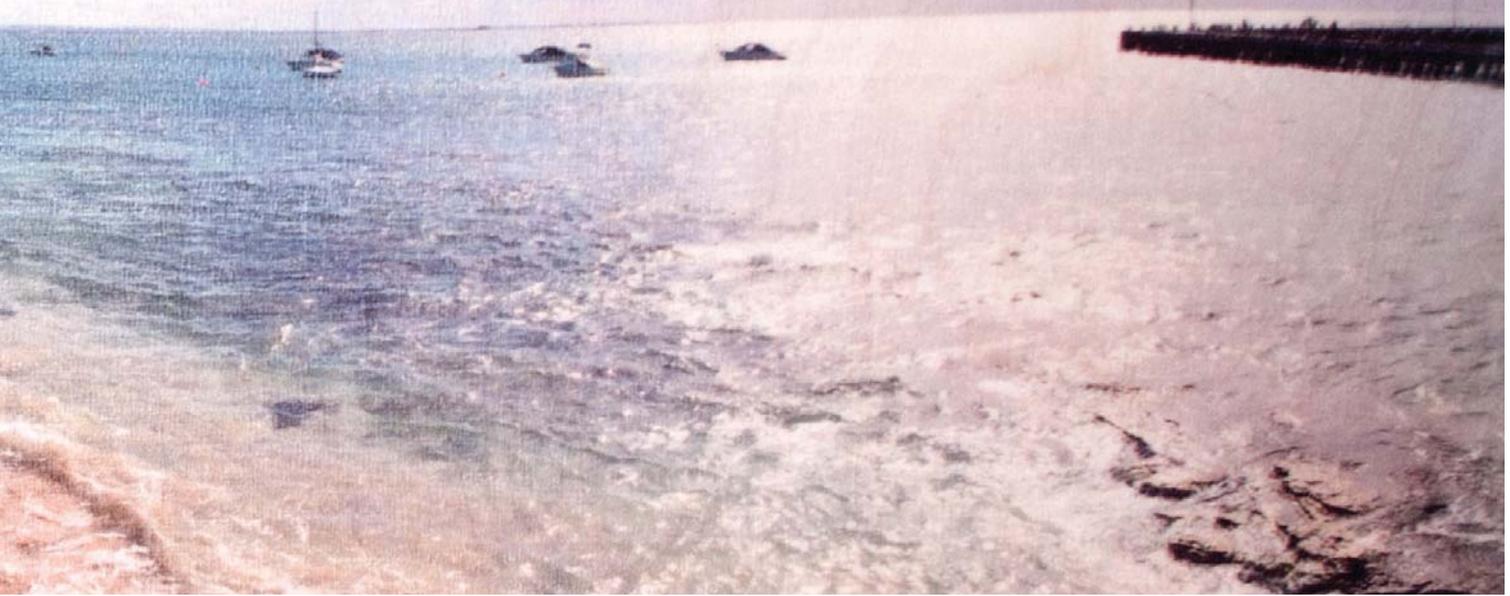
The feel of the piece is determined not just by the photo you sublimate on it but also by the wood itself. This means you must make choices about the best size, shape, thickness, and finish for your project. At LRi, for instance, we make our photo wood panels from 5/8-in.-thick Baltic Birch, a high-grade, white plywood, but we also offer stock sizes from 4 in. by 4 in. to 23 in. by 60 in. in a variety of shapes. Custom shapes, sizes, and thicknesses can be produced.

Because there is a coating on the wood, you'll need to decide which finish best suits the look you and your customer want. Different suppliers will have different looks, so you may need to ask for more details or try a sample. At LRi, you can choose a semimatte finish, known as "plain natural," or a white-wash finish. The plain natural finish makes the wood appear slightly lighter, but you can't detect the difference unless you compare the coated and uncoated sides. The white-washed panels offer better white balance for vivid color. Need a semigloss finish? Add an optional clear coat. This will also increase color intensity and resistance to water, sunlight, and common household chemicals.

## GO BIG WITH PLANKS

One of the issues with sublimating large panels, whether the substrate is plastic, metal, or wood, is that you are limited by the size of your printer and heat press. When it comes to wooden products, we've figured out a way around that—one that's convenient for you and attractive to your customers.

When you use planks, instead of panels, you can sublimate and assemble barn-wood style murals in virtually any size. For example, you can print and assemble a mural image using 6-in.-by-16-in. planks, then assemble them into a large finished piece. Take into account the size of your printer and heat press before ordering planks for



A beautiful photo is transformed into a work of art when sublimated onto a Photo Wood Panel that allows the grain to show through the image. The presentation can elevate the content, affecting the viewer in different ways. In this case, the wooden panel creates a halcyon effect.

this purpose. Many sublimation printers have an 11-in.-by-17-in. maximum sheet size, and LRi's planks can be purchased in 16-in. lengths. If your printer is smaller, you can purchase 5-ft lengths and cut them to any size that suits your equipment or the look you seek. These planks are offered by LRi in solid poplar wood or birch plywood.

You can configure the finished product vertically or horizontally. If you need some ideas, Google some of the keywords used here, like *barnyard mural* and *plank mural*. A lot of the results are pictures that consumers have pinned to Pinterest or that are being sold like hotcakes on Etsy. These new products let you get in on the action while accommodating the limitations of your equipment.

### STEPS FOR SUBLIMATION

All of the woods are pressed using the same time, temperature, and technique. You must use a swing-away heat press, not a clamshell style.

1. Preheat press to 400 degrees F.
2. Place the Photo Wood Panel or Poplar Plank with the coating side facing up. Place the transfer facing down on the wood. Top this with a 1/16-in.-thick thermal rubber mat. The mat ensures uniform pressure and better results.
3. Using very firm pressure, press for 1 minute and 45 seconds. If you don't have a thermal rubber mat to use, press without it, reducing the time to 45 seconds.
4. Apply a top coat to the print. This is recommended for the best results. To use LRi's water-based top coat, shake it for 1 minute, pour a small amount on the wood surface, and immediately brush it out in both directions to ensure

complete coverage. It air dries in 10 minutes and is cured in 6–12 hours. ■■■

Cary Green is president of Laser Reproductions, Inc. (LRi) in Skokie, IL. The sublimation supplier offers blanks, printers, heat presses, inks, and much more—including Photo Wood Panels and Poplar Planks. Visit [www.laserreproductions.com](http://www.laserreproductions.com).



Poplar planks allow sublimators to create barn-wood-style murals that are larger than the limits of their printers or heat presses. Custom "rustic" murals are popular, and endless creative options are popping up on Pinterest, Etsy, and other sites. Your customers may be surprised and pleased to find out that you can help them create a custom piece for their homes and businesses.