Image Theft & Watermarking Digital Images

by Christopher Woods

As Bottles and More[1] magazine's June 2003 article "Anatomy of an Ebay Scam Fraud" points out, the theft of digital photographs provides anyone with the opportunity to offer items for sale that he/she does not own. This type of fraud is not unprecedented online: I have heard of many cases and it might just be more common than we think. Fortunately, there are ways to protect your photographs from theft or misuse.

Image theft can occur in one of two ways: First, the user copies the link to the photo on another (your) server location and incorporates it into his own auction description or web page html code. The photo resides in its original location on the Internet, but it is essentially "borrowed." This is what Brian Hudson did in his ebay scam. The second method is to save the photo to your computer, then save it to your own location on the Internet and claim the item as your own. Each of these methods are easily done by reverse clicking on your mouse over the image and choosing the appropriate save/copy menu choice.

Consider also the following situation: A seller has a fairly common cornucopia/urn flask that he wants to sell online. He has taken photos but they are not of particularly good quality so he browses ebay until he finds an auction of the same flask which just happens to have fantastic, detailed pictures. He saves the photos and uses them in his auction to represent his flask which is more or less identical. I see this situation of "adopted" graphics all the time with computer hardware and other contemporary merchandise. For the antique item, this may not be fraud, but it is likely to be misrepresentation of color, condition and quality. Don't do this. Thousands of eyes are looking closely at your photos and will darn well notice that the same image is being used in two different auctions.

How can image theft, "borrowing" and "adopting" be prevented? Unfortunately, the simple truth is that once an image is displayed on a computer, the viewer has the ability to save it so there is no sure-fire way to prevent saving the image by any Internet user[2]. Therefore, the solution lies in making it difficult to reuse a photo.

There are several ways to protect your images, each with varying degrees of difficulty and protection, and each having their respective pros and cons.

Perhaps the easiest and most effective way to protect an graphic is by watermarking it. Many readers will be familiar with watermarking on stationery or foreign currency (I hear that US bills will soon also be so marked) On paper, a watermark is a transparent or embossed logo which is visible when held up to light. For the digital image, it can be an applied logo or just plain text

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[1] See bottlemagazine.com for more information.

[2] Some of the more techie readers may be familiar with Javascripts that attempt to disable the right mouse click so one cannot save an image. Unfortunately, these scripts are not something you would want to be adding your auction description nor are they effective across different browsers or versions of browsers. In short, they are little more than a nuisance to the determined thief.

applied to the image. Invisible watermarking is also available from a company called Digimark but at a significant cost. This article will consider the visible watermark, which is far more practical and effective.

Visible watermarks might take the form of a solid colored band that is added to the bottom edge of the graphic with overlaid text, a transparent logo on the edges of an image, or transparent lettering crossing over the image. The form, size and design are up to the individual and his needs. Consider the examples in the graphics below (these are also viewable online at http://antiquebottles-glass.com/bam)
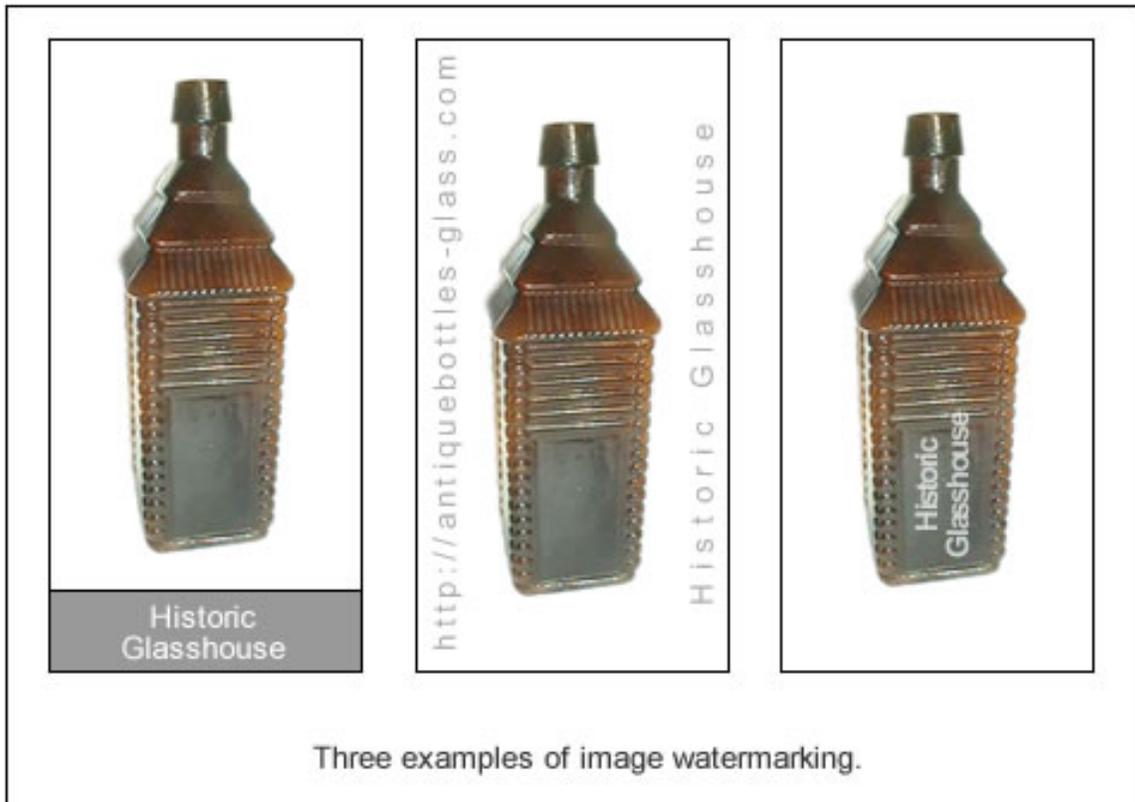
Three examples of image watermarking.

Fortunately, graphics software makes this quite easy. There are lots of graphic programs out there from the free Microsoft Paint (included with Windows operating systems) to the industry-standard (complex and expensive) Adobe Photoshop. I find Paint Shop Pro (www.jasc.com) to be the best value for the money; I found a rebate deal for under $75 at BestBuy. I will post links to online tutorials on how to do watermarking for various software programs on the BAM page on the Historic Glasshouse web site.

There are some downsides: it is a bit more work fussing over such details and the watermark might be considered distracting, taking away from the quality of the object or the photo itself. With a little practice, however, one should be able to create a unobtrusive but protecting mark off on the edge of an image.

Is the extra effort of watermarking worth the hassle? I think personalization of images can enhance an auction as part of a professionally presented description. Also, if you have something great to sell, why not make the images work for you by including your ebay user ID or contact information? Viewers who happen to save these images will be reminded of the seller, the seller's ebay ID and/or the seller's web site.

There have been enough cases of online auction "hijacking" to be assured that it is going to happen again in the future. Consider this extra step to help prevent fraud to the antique bottle community.

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