Using Digital Seals
  by Fred Truck

Surfing around the Internet a few days ago, I was surprised at the number of times I discovered pictures of my bonsai on other sites. Some were tagged with my name, but most were not.

This led me to explore digital watermarking. When I first began doing digital images, watermarking was a hot ticket. Such watermarks looked like embossed words in the digital texture of the picture. Then people stopped doing it because it was distracting to the impression the author of the image was trying to achieve. Some people on Flickr who post images regularly use a copyright statement or a signature or both.

Digital watermarking software is available that puts visible or invisible watermarking in your image. Photoshop users can use a plug-in from Digimarc that does this as well.

While software that puts an invisible watermark in a digital image may be useful for tracking and catching image pirates, it doesn't stop piracy from occurring. I don't believe that anything will stop appropriation.

What I needed, I realized, was a slight deterrent that would at least slow down the appropriation. I wanted a visible Stop Sign that instead of just saying "Stop," had information about rights and about me as an artist. Finally, on 11-19-12, I hit on the idea of using QR Codes, without knowing anything about them. What I did know was that they resembled seals that collectors of the great Chinese and Japanese paintings used to mark the entrance of a work into their collections.

This painting is by the Chinese artist Bada Shanren, from the Qing dynasty. It is called Flower in Jar and was done about 1688 or 1689. The seal, indicating entrance into a collection, is in red ink next to the signature. There is another seal in the lower left hand corner. There are some paintings on which there are so many seals that some are placed on top of the image. This indicates the work has passed through many collections.

Compare the appearance of the seals above to the appearance of the first QR Code I generated:

"The QR Code was invented in Japan by the Toyota subsidiary Denso Wave in 1994 to track vehicles during the manufacturing process, and was originally designed to allow components to be scanned at high speed."--Wikipedia

Often used on the Web to contain a URL, QR Codes can contain brief text statements or other information besides numeric or binary. For my purposes, this was perfect.

I generated the QR Code above with QR Creator, an app for the iPhone. You can read the code with a bar code reader that accepts QR Code information. I use ScanLife, but there are dozens of readers available. As of this writing, QR Creator is the only creator software I found for the iPhone.

Here is another QR Code I made:

This one, unlike the previous example, is what I call a signature. It has a motto, and an attribution of the image being viewed to me. If you follow my posts on Flickr, you can see how I use these to identify my pictures.

Both of these codes can be scanned with an appropriately software fitted phone with a camera righjt from the monitor. Try it.

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