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Clark et al.

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(54) **MULTI-COLOR PAD PRINTING APPARATUS AND METHOD**

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Related U.S. Application Data

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(51) **Int. Cl.**[7] **B41F 17/00**; B41F 31/00

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **101/41**; 101/35; 101/42; 101/44; 101/327; 101/DIG. 40

(58) **Field of Search** ..... 101/41, 42, 44, 101/35, 327, DIG. 40

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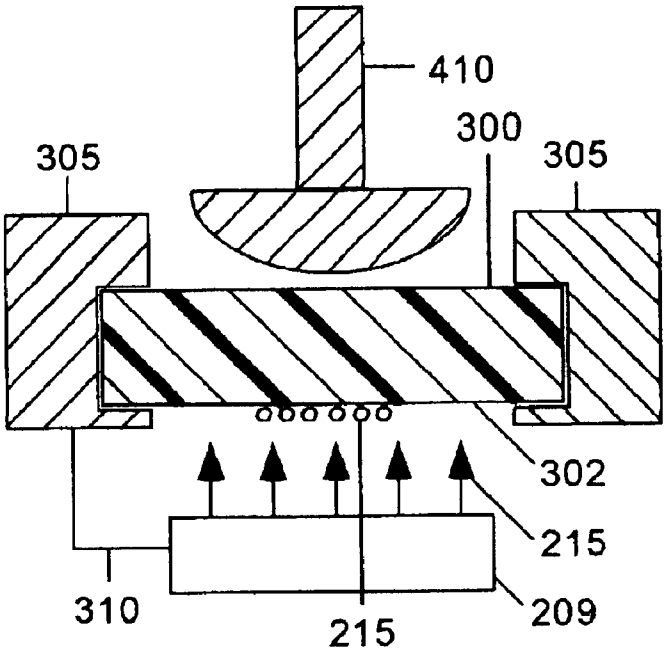
Assistant Examiner—Marvin P Crenshaw

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A system for color printing in an economical, simple, yet accurate manner comprises a computer **(200)** which causes an inkjet printer **(210)** to print a multi-color image of ink **(215)** on the surface **(302)** of a pad **(300)**. The pad is made of silicone rubber and is supported in a frame **(305)**. The rubber is either insulating or conductive, as required. Its surface can be smooth or textured. The pad is normally flat during application of the ink image. The pad can be used flat, or it can be deformed into a convex shape after the ink image is applied. The pad is then applied to a receiving object **(400)**, transferring the ink image **(216)** to the object. Deformation of the pad is accomplished using a ram **(410)**, or hydraulic or pneumatic pressure. Since the printed pad **(300)** contains all colors to be printed, a full-color image is transferred in a single operation of the pad.

28 Claims, 5 Drawing Sheets



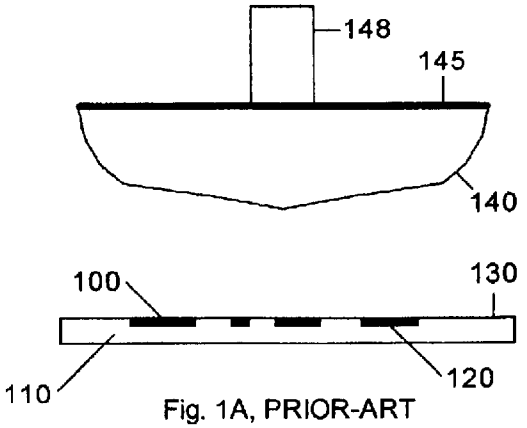


Fig. 1A, PRIOR-ART

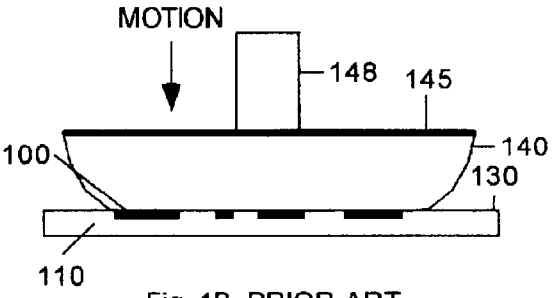


Fig. 1B, PRIOR-ART

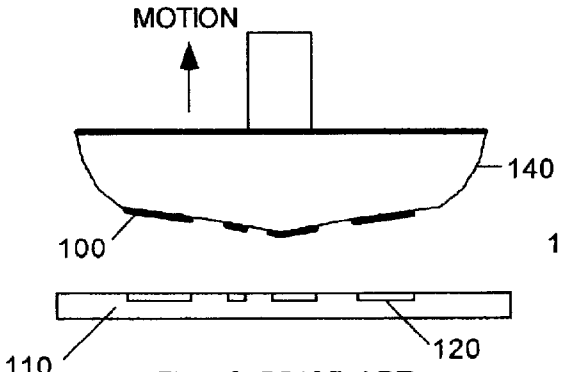


Fig. 1C, PRIOR-ART

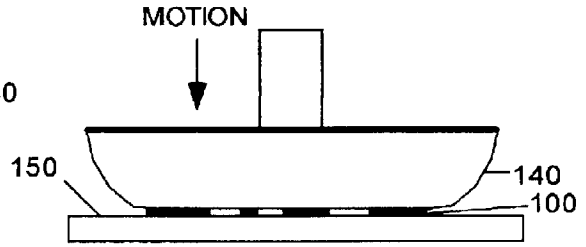


Fig. 1D, PRIOR-ART

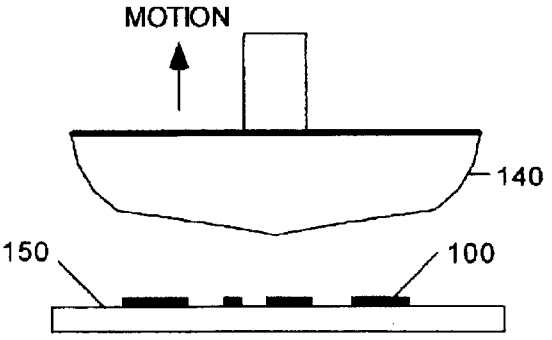


Fig. 1E, PRIOR-ART

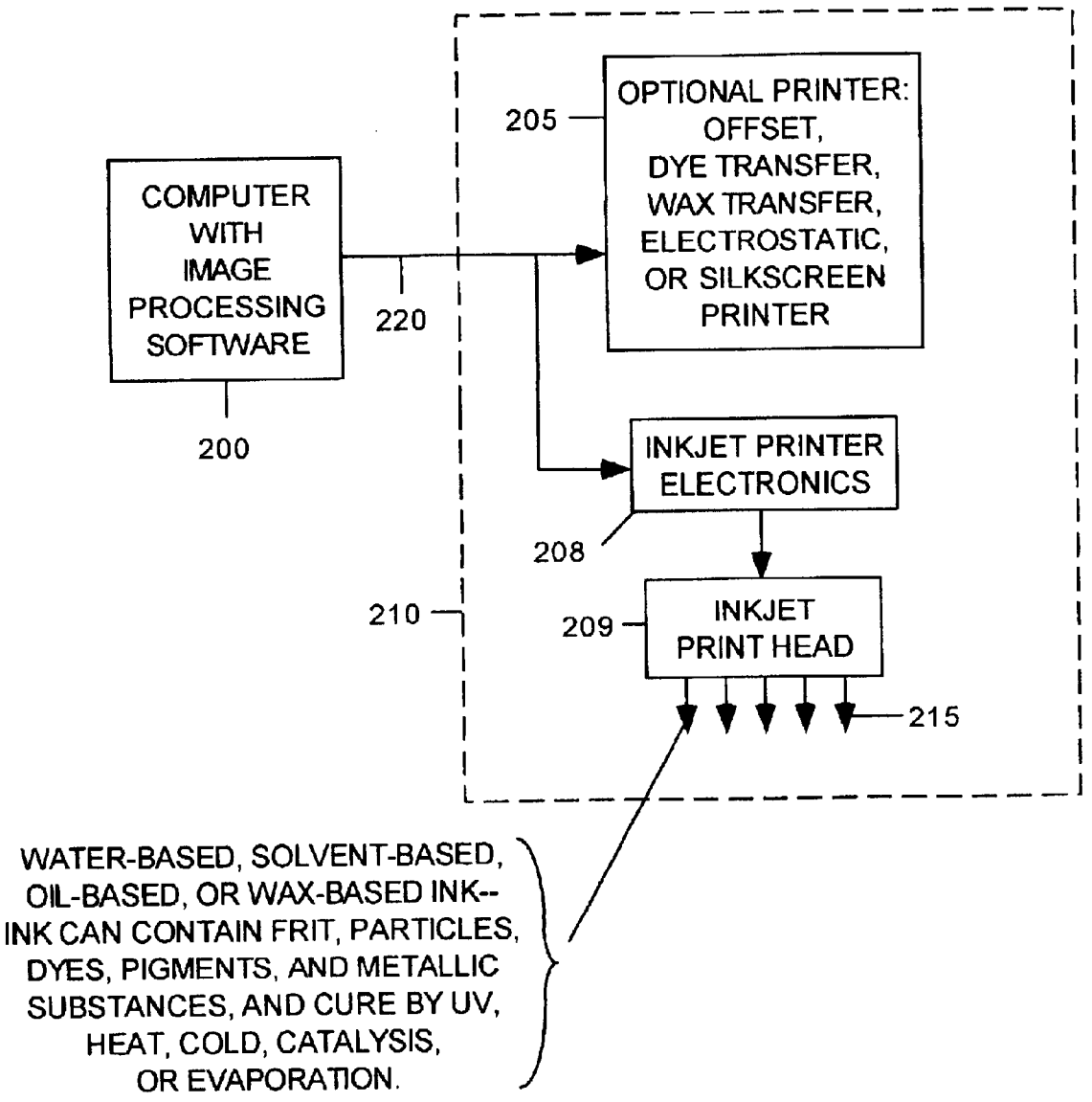

205
OPTIONAL PRINTER: OFFSET, DYE TRANSFER, WAX TRANSFER, ELECTROSTATIC, OR SILKSCREEN PRINTER
COMPUTER WITH IMAGE PROCESSING SOFTWARE
220
200
INKJET PRINTER ELECTRONICS
208
210
209
INKJET PRINT HEAD
215
WATER-BASED, SOLVENT-BASED, OIL-BASED, OR WAX-BASED INK-- INK CAN CONTAIN FRIT, PARTICLES, DYES, PIGMENTS, AND METALLIC SUBSTANCES, AND CURE BY UV, HEAT, COLD, CATALYSIS, OR EVAPORATION.

Fig. 2

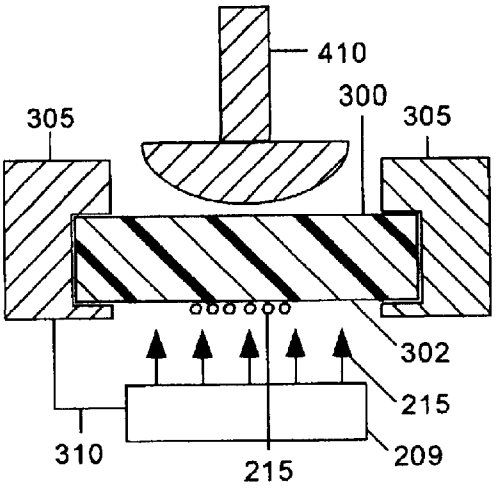


Fig. 3

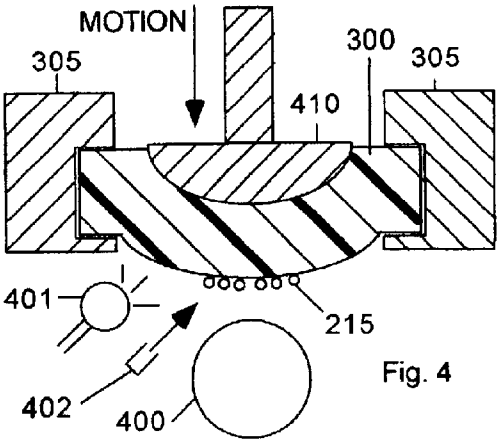


Fig. 4

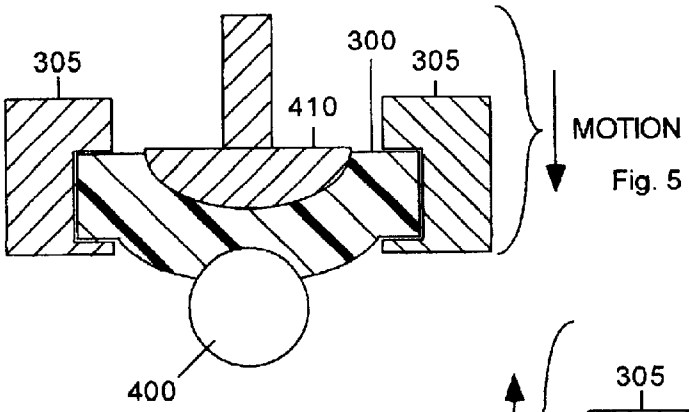
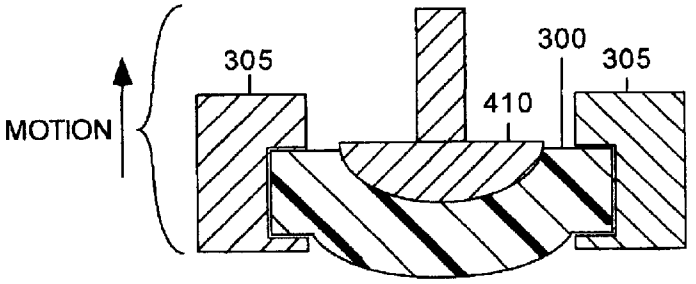


Fig. 5



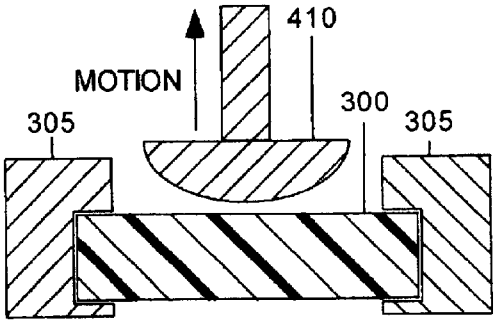


Fig. 7

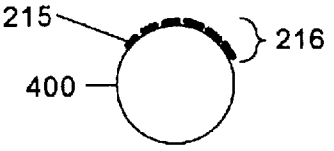


Fig. 6

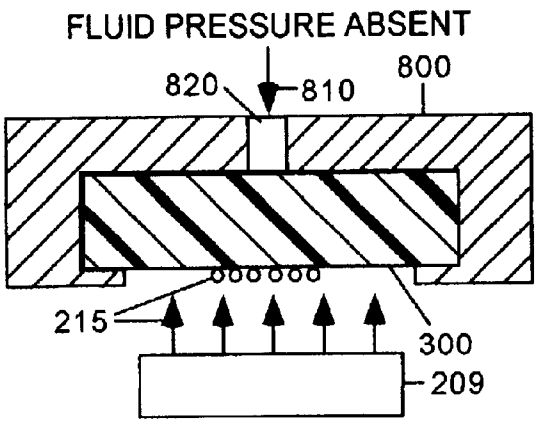


Fig. 8

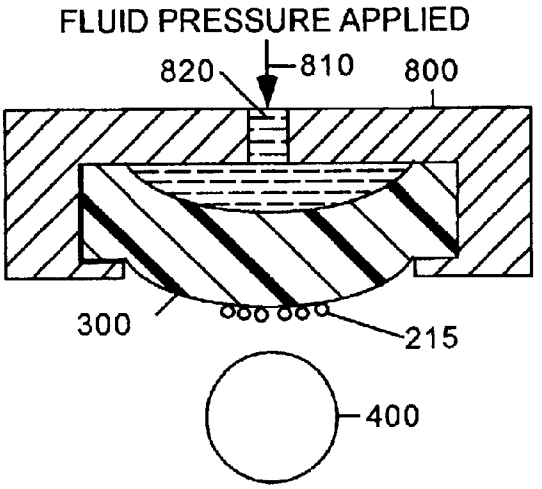


Fig. 9

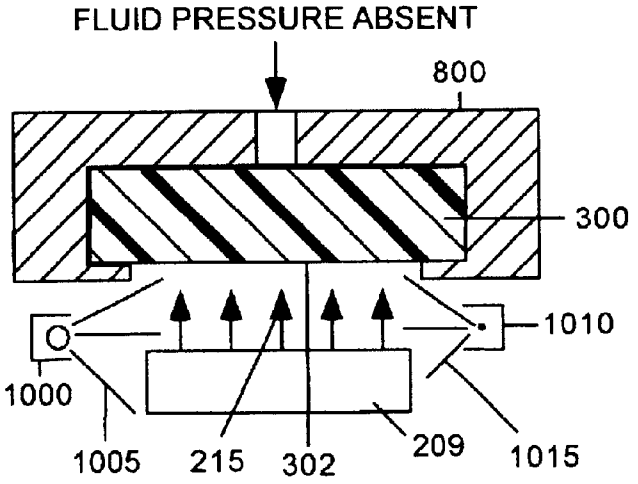


Fig. 10

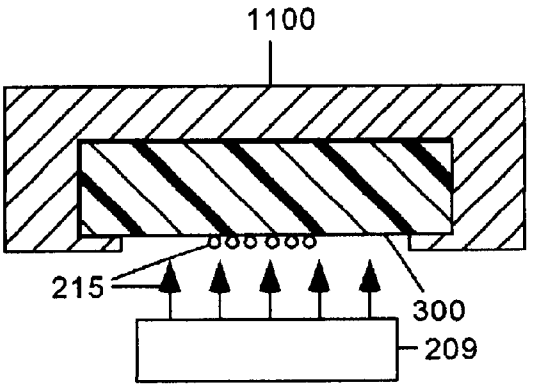


Fig. 11

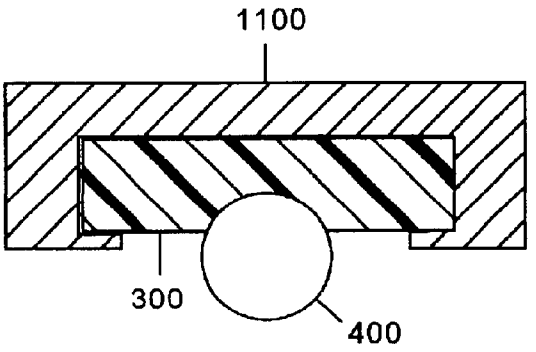


Fig. 12

MULTI-COLOR PAD PRINTING APPARATUS AND METHOD

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims priority of provisional patent application, Ser. No. 60/352,091, filed Jan. 24, 2002.

FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH

None

SEQUENCE LISTING

None

BACKGROUND

1. Field of Invention

This invention relates generally to pad printing, and in particular to transferring multi-color images.

2. Prior-Art—Pad Printing—FIGS. 1A–1E

Image transfer through pad printing is an old and well-established art. It is a type of offset printing that is used to apply markings and images to a variety of flat, curved, and irregular surfaces, including watch faces, golf balls, and bottles. The steps in prior-art pad printing are shown in cross-section in FIGS. **1**A through **1**E.

FIG. **1**A shows a cross-sectional view of a prior-art pad **140** suspended over cliché **110** after cliché **110** has been inked. A cliché is a stereotype or printing plate which is etched in a pattern to be printed and which is inked. Ink **100** is doctored into image-shaped depressions **120** in cliché **110**, in well-known fashion. The flat surface **130** of cliché **110** is scraped clean during the process of doctoring ink **100** into depressions **120**. Pad **140** later lifts the ink from the cliché and applies it to the final receiving surface (not shown).

FIG. **1**B shows a cross-sectional view of pad **140** in contact with surface **130** of cliché **110** and ink **120**. A soft, typically conical, flexible rubber pad **140** is affixed to a rigid plate **145**. Plate **145** is rigidly attached to shaft **148**. Shaft **148** is connected to a ram (not shown) which moves shaft **148**, plate **145**, and pad **140** up and down. To pick up ink **100**, pad **140** is pressed against cliché **110** with adequate force, between 0.2 and 50 kilograms, to deform pad **140**, fully spanning all inked areas. The surface of pad **140** is thereby wetted with ink **100** in the pattern of the image to be printed.

FIG. **1**C shows a cross-sectional view of pad **140** with ink **100** which has been removed from cliché **110**. Pad **140** is next lifted away from cliché **110**. Ink **100** adheres preferentially to pad **140**, and is removed from depressions **120**.

FIG. **1**D shows a cross-sectional view of pad **140**, ink **100**, and image-receiving surface **150**. Pad **140** is next forcibly pressed against a new receiving surface **150** which may be a flat, curved, or irregular object. During this pressing, pad **140** is deformed to the same extent as shown in FIG. **1**B. By deforming pad **140** to the same extent as shown in FIG. **1**B, an ink pattern identical to the original image-wise pattern of ink-containing depressions **120** is recreated on surface **150**.

FIG. **1**E shows the final printing step in which pad **140** is removed from surface **150**, leaving ink **100** behind. Pad **140** is next lifted away from receiving surface **150**. As pad **140** is lifted away, ink **100** leaves the surface of pad **140** and adheres to receiving surface **150**. An ink replica of the original image in cliché **110** is thus transferred from cliché **110** to receiving surface **150**.

Pad **140** is typically between 5 mm and 20 cm in diameter, and between 5 mm and 10 cm in height. Depressions **120** can be any shape and are typically between 0.25 mm and 5 mm in extent, and 0.025 mm deep.

Although a flat receiving surface **150** is shown, other shapes are possible. Images can as easily be transferred to curved and irregular surfaces.

The preparation of cliché **110** involves well-known photographic processing and etching or dissolving away of the pattern of depressions **120**. Each cliché is used to print one color at a time.

Printing of multi-color images requires preparation of more than one cliché. An image composed of two different component colors requires the preparation of two clichés. Three-color images require the preparation of three clichés, and so forth. Full-color, process printing involves the preparation of three or four clichés, one each for cyan, magenta, yellow, and optionally, black. Separation, exposing, and etching of the clichés is time-consuming and expensive.

Printing of multi-color images further requires precise registration of the printed images. This means that the pad must be precisely positioned over the first inked cliché, then again precisely positioned over the receiving surface. Then, the pad must be precisely positioned over the second inked cliché, and again precisely positioned over the receiving surface, and so on. The precision required to obtain visually acceptable images places very stringent requirements on the skill of the operator in preparing the clichés, and in operation and tolerances of the equipment which transfers the ink from the plates to the final receiving surface. These operations require significant expenditures of time and labor.

When any of the steps above contain positional and other errors, these errors can result in improper registration and alignment of the multiple colors and hence failed prints which must be discarded. This results in extra costs to the manufacturer and wasted materials, time, and money. In addition, making one or more clichés for each print costs time and money.

OBJECTS AND ADVANTAGES

Accordingly, several objects and advantages of the present invention are to provide an improved pad printing system which can print monochrome and polychrome images without multiple transfer operations, to provide an improved pad printing system in which the component cyan, magenta, yellow, and black (or other printing colors) are precisely registered without operator intervention, to reduce the amount of time and labor required to print these images, to reduce the amount of wastage caused by misregistration of the printing colors, and to introduce a novel method, apparatus, and system for pad printing which does not employ a cliché. Other objects and advantages are to provide a system in which pad printing can be easily accomplished using a standard computer and printer, and a pad which contains all the colors to be printed, all in a single stroke.

Additional objects and advantages will become apparent from a consideration of the drawings and ensuing description thereof.

SUMMARY

In accordance with the present invention, a method, apparatus, and system are provided for producing low-cost, partial, or full-color pad-printed images. All colors contained in an image are first printed directly onto the pad by an inkjet or other printer to form a mirror image of the final

desired image. Then all colors are simultaneously transferred from the pad to the final receiving surface with a single transfer stroke.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGS. **1A** through **1E** are cross-sectional views of a prior-art pad printing process.

FIG. **2** shows a computer and inkjet printer used in the system of the present invention.

FIGS. **3** through **7** show the steps in printing an image onto a pad and transferring the image to the surface of a receiving object.

FIGS. **8** and **9** show an alternative embodiment.

FIG. **10** shows a second alternative embodiment.

FIGS. **11** and **12** show a third alternative embodiment.

DRAWING FIGURE REFERENCE NUMERALS

100	Ink
110	Cliché
120	Depression
130	Surface
140	Pad
145	Plate
148	Shaft
150	Receiving surface
200	Computer
205	Optional printer types
208	Inkjet printer electronics
209	Inkjet print head
210	Printer
215	Ink droplets
216	Image
220	Cable
300	Pad
302	Pad surface
305	Frame
310	Wire
400	Object being printed
401	Illumination source
402	Heat, cold, gas, humidity source
410	Ram
800	Alternative frame
810	Fluid
820	Port
1000	Radioactive source
1005	Radiation
1010	Plasma source
1015	Plasma
1100	Alternative frame

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Preferred Embodiment—FIGS. **2** Through **4**.

In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention, an image for a pad preferably is prepared using a standard, personal computer **200** (FIG. **2**) with image processing software. A widely-used software program which can prepare images is sold under the trademark Photoshop, by Adobe Systems Inc., of San Jose, Calif., USA. Suitable original images can be obtained from photographs, computer-generated artwork, and the like. A software program which can prepare computer-generated artwork is sold under the mark Illustrator, also by Adobe Systems Inc.

Computer **200** is connected to a printer **210** by a cable **220**. Printer **210** can optionally be an electrostatic, offset, dye transfer, wax transfer, inkjet, or any other type of printer. The preferred embodiment employs an inkjet printer. Inkjet printer electronics **208** cause inkjet print head **209** to emit ink droplets **215**, which can be monochrome or of multiple colors. Head **209** can be operated in any orientation. The spacing between head **209** and the surface on which ink droplets **215** are deposited is critical. In general, this spacing must be less than 1 or 2 mm. Printer driver software (not shown but well known) provides communication between the image processing software in computer **200** and printer **210**, in well-known fashion. One such print head suitable for use in this application is the model SL-128 manufactured by Spectra, Inc., of Lebanon, N.H., U.S.A. Inks suitable for this application are manufactured by Hilord Chemical Corporation, of Hauppauge, N.Y., U.S.A.

Many inks are suitable for use in the present invention. These include water, solvent, oil, and wax-based inks. These inks can contain frit, particles, metals, magnetic substances, dyes, and pigments. The inks can be cured by infrared or ultraviolet light, visible light, microwaves, heat, cold, catalyst, or evaporation.

Inkjet print head **209** is used with a flexible pad **300** and a ram **410**, as shown in FIG. **3**. Pad **300** is flexible and is shown in cross-section. It is preferably made of a silicone rubber elastomer and is nominally 10 cm on a side and 1.5 cm thick. Surface **302** of pad **300** may be smooth or textured. Typical texture or roughness factors using the standard, well-known Sheffield scale, can range from below **10** on the smooth end to more than **300** on the rough end. Pad **300** is held in place by a frame **305**. Print head **209** is positioned beneath surface **302** of pad **300**, having been moved to this position by a known mechanism (not shown). In the case of an inkjet printer, because of the requirement for close spacing (discussed above) between inkjet head **209** and the surface receiving droplets **215**, it is generally advantageous to print onto a flat surface. Maintaining close spacing between head **209** and surface **302** would be very difficult and the trajectory of head **209** would have to be adjusted for each pad if surface **302** were not flat. Therefore pad **300** has a normally flat surface facing head **209**. Since pad **300** is flat, a simple print head transporting mechanism (not shown) which operates in a line or plane can be used. Print head **209** is arranged to spray a monochrome or polychrome image comprising droplets of ink **215** onto surface **302** of pad **300** under the command of computer **200** (FIG. **2**).

Special care must be given to the material from which pad **300** is made. Prior-art pads in use today are generally made of cast silicone rubber, such as part number TSE3457T, manufactured by the General Electric Company, of Fairfield, Conn., U.S.A. This prior-art material is normally electrically insulating. Because of the small size of droplets **215** associated with inkjet printing, static electricity buildup on surface **302** of pad **300** can cause droplets **215** to deviate from their intended trajectory. This causes undesirable blurring of the image and unintended mixing of colors on the pad.

Therefore, in the present system pad **300** in the preferred embodiment is made of part number CRTV5120, a conductive silicone rubber, also manufactured by the General Electric Company. This rubber compound has a conductivity between 200 and 800 ohm-cm, and durometer hardness of about 35–40. Using this conductive rubber under the conditions described below, buildup of static electricity is eliminated.

Frame **305** is preferably made of a metallic conductor and is in electrical contact with conductive pad **300**. Frame **305** is electrically connected to head **209** by a wire **310** so that pad **300**, frame **305**, and head **209** are held at the same electrical potential. With all three elements at the same electrical potential, there is no electric field between head **209** and surface **302** of pad **300**. The absence of an electric

field in the region between pad surface **302** and head **209** prevents misdirection of ink droplets **215** due to static electric charge buildup on surface **302** of pad **300**. Ram **410**, not currently in contact with pad **300**, is later used to deform pad **300**.

Once the image comprising ink droplets **215** (monochrome or colored) is complete on surface **302** of pad **300**, print head **209** is moved away and pad **300** is positioned over a receiving object **400**, such as a golf ball, as shown in FIG. **4**. The image comprising droplets **215** is now ready to be transferred to object **400**. In pad printing, ink **215** is normally transferred from a convex-shaped pad to the final receiving surface. This prevents the unwanted spread of ink **215** due to trapping of air between pad surface **302** and object **400**. Thus ram **410** is arranged to exert force against the back side of pad **300**. The motion of ram **410** is relative to the position of frame **305**. Therefore ram **410** forces pad **300** into a convex shape and transfer of droplets **215** from pad **300** to object **400** can commence. The amount of force required to deform pad **300** is determined by its thickness, extent, hardness, and the amount of deformation required. The radius of curvature and shape of ram **410** can range from flat to a small radius, depending on the material properties and dimensions of pad **300** and the shape of the surface being printed upon.

An optional illumination source **401** is arranged to illuminate droplets **215** with illumination of a predetermined wavelength from microwaves through ultraviolet. Optional heat, cold, gas, and humidity source **402** applies heat, cold, gas, and humidity to droplets **215** and pad **300**. Sources **401** and **402** and their use are described below.

Operation—Preferred Embodiment—FIGS. **3** through **7**

Inkjet head **209** is positioned beneath pad **300**, as shown in FIG. **3**. An image comprising ink droplets **215** is sprayed onto surface **302** of pad **300**. Multiple colors of droplets **215** can be used. Ram **410** deforms pad **300**, as described above and as shown in FIG. **4**. Object **400** is positioned beneath pad **300**. Pad **300**, ram **410**, and frame **305** all move toward object **400**, compressing pad **300** and ink droplets **215** (not visible in this view) against object **400**, as shown in FIG. **5**. As in the case of the prior art print system described above, this force is typically between 0.2 and 50 kilograms.

Subsequently, as shown in FIG. **6**, pad **300**, ram **410**, and frame **305** all move away from object **400**, leaving behind an image **216** comprising now-transferred droplets **215** on object **400**. Finally, as shown in FIG. **7**, ram **410** is removed from pad **300**, allowing pad **300** to return to its initial flat shape. At this time, pad **300** may be cleaned by a cleaning mechanism (not shown), as required. Pad **300** is now ready to receive and transfer another image, as shown in FIGS. **3** through **7**.

The ink in image **216** can cure, or become permanent by any of a variety of means, such as evaporation or catalysis or by exposure to ultraviolet radiation, microwaves, visible light, infrared radiation, hot air, heat, cold, or moisture such as water or solvent vapor. At the present time, we prefer ultraviolet radiation.

Optionally, droplets **215** can be partially cured after deposition on surface **302** of pad **300** prior to transfer. This can be done by evaporation of solvent, catalysis, exposure to heat, moisture, or cold from source **402**, or illumination, including microwaves, supplied by an illumination source **401** (FIG. **4**). Illumination supplied by source **401** comprises predetermined wavelengths from infrared (IR, wavelengths longer than 900 nm) through ultraviolet (UV, wavelengths shorter than 400 nm), or microwaves (wavelengths on the order of 1 cm). Partial curing renders droplets **215** tacky, thus improving transfer from surface **302** of pad **300** to object **400**.

Most inkjet printers in use today are capable of printing multiple colors using only one print head assembly. The ability to form a complete, multi-color image comprising droplets **215** on pad **300** permits single-pad, single transfer printing of a multi-color image. Thus no alignment of serially-applied pads is required. This results in a considerable saving of time and expense in printing the image. Further, the pad is reusable, and each succeeding image can be different. This makes possible pad printing of individual serial numbers, barcodes, legends, and the like on products, for example.

Description and Operation—Alternative Embodiment—FIGS. **8** Through **9**

Instead of ram **410**, shown in FIGS. **3** through **7**, pad **300** can be deformed using hydraulic or pneumatic means. To do this, pad **300** is sealed within frame **800**, as shown in FIG. **8**. Fluid **810** is forced through port **820** at a nominal gauge pressure of roughly 4 bar and presses against the back side of pad **300**, forcing pad **300** to bulge, as shown in FIG. **9**. The curvature of pad **300** can be adjusted by varying the pressure in fluid **810**. Ink **215** can now be transferred to object **400**, as described above. After the transfer step, the pressure forcing fluid **810** is removed from the back side of pad **300**, allowing it to return to the flat shape shown in FIG. **8**. If required, a vacuum can be drawn through port **820** to assist in flattening pad **300**. At this time, pad **300** can be cleaned, if necessary, and a new image applied by print head **209**.

Description and Operation—Second Alternative Embodiment—FIG. **10**

Alternative means can be used to prevent accumulation of static charge on the surface of pad **300**. In this case, pad **300** can be made from an insulating rubber. Ionizing means can be applied to the air in the vicinity of pad **300**. A radioactive source **1000**, such as the element Americium **241**, emits radiation **1005** which ionizes the air in its vicinity in well-known fashion. An abundance of positively and negatively-charged air ions circulate in this region. Electrical charges (not shown) which adhere to surface **302** of pad **300** attract charges of opposite polarity from the ionized air, thus becoming neutralized and removing the electric field between print head **209** and surface **302** of pad **300**.

Alternatively, an alternating-current discharge **1010** can supply a mixture of positive and negative ions **1015** in the region between print head **209** and surface **302** of pad **300**. Again, this abundance of charge of both polarities provides charges which neutralize any charge which has adhered to surface **302** of pad **300**.

Another option is to provide high humidity in the air or gas surrounding pad **300**. High humidity generally prevents the accumulation of static electric charges. Still another option is to provide an electrically conductive gas environment in surrounding pad **300**. Gases of various types and humidity can be supplied through source **402**, described above.

Operation—Third Alternative Embodiment—FIGS. **11–12**

In some cases, it may be desirable to transfer ink droplets **215** from a flat pad, as shown in FIGS. **11** and **12**. In this embodiment, pad **300** is held in frame **1100**, and pad **300** remains flat at all times. In FIG. **11** ink **215** is applied to flat pad **300** as described above in connection with FIGS. **3** and **8**. In FIG. **12**, flat pad **300** is forced against object **400**, transferring the image. This arrangement will be most useful in the case where object **400** is generally convex.

CONCLUSIONS, RAMIFICATIONS, AND SCOPE

Thus it is seen that we have provided a system which can print one or a plurality of colors on a flat pad, then transfer

a complete image in a single transfer operation which does not require a cliché, photographic processing, or precise registration of multiple single-colored images, which is inexpensive, which requires minimal labor, and which results in fewer failed prints and less wasted time and materials.

While the above description contains many specificities, it will be apparent that the invention is not limited to these and can be practiced with other parameters and materials. A smooth or a textured pad surface can be used. Different shapes of pads, rams, and printed surfaces can be used. A piece of spring steel can be incorporated into the pad to urge the pad to return to a flat shape after transfer of an image. The pad surface can have various pre-determined affinities for the ink. Various surface energies will cause the ink droplets to either bead up or flatten out. The process variables including surface energies, wetting angles (well-known to those skilled in the art of printing), drying times, curing methods, and the like are determined by the individual application and surfaces to be printed.

Under some circumstances, an electric field can be applied between the conductive pad and the print head. If a uniform electric field is applied between these two elements, ink droplets can be made to fly straight from the ink jet assembly to their desired position in the image formed on the pad.

A perfect rendition of a flat image can be applied to a curved or irregular surface by pre-distorting the inkjet image to be transferred using computerized image-processing programs. Alternatively, an artistic effect can be obtained by deliberately distorting the final image.

Accordingly the scope of this invention should be determined, not by the embodiments illustrated, but by the appended claims and their legal equivalents.

We claim:

1. A system for pad printing, comprising:

a. a source containing ink of at least one color,

b. a pad having a flat, non-patterned surface which is capable of being deformed from a flat shape into a convex shape,

c. a printer connected to said source and capable of printing an image containing said ink from said source onto said flat surface of said pad, and

d. a receiving surface for receiving said ink in said image from said pad,

whereby said image can be printed onto said pad while said pad's surface is flat, and then said pad can be used to transfer said ink, while said pad's surface is deformed into a convex shape, onto said receiving surface.

2. The system of claim **1** wherein said ink is selected from the group consisting of water-based, solvent-based, oil-based, and wax-based inks.

3. The system of claim **1** wherein said printer is selected from the group consisting of offset, dye transfer, wax transfer, inkjet, and electrostatic printers.

4. The system of claim **1** wherein said ink is selected from the group consisting of frit, particle, metallic, magnetic, dye, or pigment-containing, ultra-violet curable, infrared-curable, light-curable, heat-curable, cold-curable, catalyst-curable, microwave-curable, and evaporating inks.

5. The system of claim **1** wherein said surface of said pad is smooth.

6. The system of claim **1** wherein said surface of said pad is textured.

7. The system of claim **1** wherein said receiving surface is selected from the group consisting of flat, curved, and irregular surfaces.

8. The system of claim **1** wherein said pad is electrically conductive.

9. The system of claim **1** wherein said pad is electrically conductive and is electrically connected to said source of ink.

10. The system of claim **1** wherein said pad is electrically insulative.

11. The system of claim **1** wherein said ink is partially cured while on said pad through the use of one or more modalities selected from the group consisting of evaporation, catalysis, moisture, heat, cold, and illumination.

12. The system of claim **1** wherein said pad is made of a material that can be reused so that subsequent versions of said image can be the same or different.

13. The system of claim **1** wherein said image can be printed onto said pad while said pad's surface is flat, and then said pad can be used to transfer said ink, while said pad's surface is flat, onto said receiving surface.

14. A method for pad printing, comprising:

providing a source containing ink of at least one color,

providing a printer capable of printing an image comprising said ink and connected to said source,

providing a deformable, non-patterned pad for receiving said image, a surface of said pad being flat,

providing a receiving surface for receiving said image when transferred from said pad,

printing said image from said printer onto said flat surface of said pad,

deforming said pad into a convex shape, and

transferring said image from said surface of said pad onto said receiving surface by pressing said pad against said receiving surface,

whereby said image is printed onto said pad while said pad is flat, and then transferred to said receiving surface by said pad while said pad has a convex shape.

15. The method of claim **14** wherein said ink is selected from the group consisting of water-based, solvent-based, oil-based, and wax-based inks.

16. The method of claim **14** wherein said printer is selected from the group consisting of offset, dye transfer, wax transfer, inkjet, and electrostatic printers.

17. The method of claim **14** wherein said ink is selected from the group consisting of frit, particle, metallic, magnetic, dye, or pigment-containing, ultra-violet curable, infrared-curable, light-curable, heat-curable, cold-curable, catalyst-curable, microwave-curable, and evaporating inks.

18. The method of claim **14** wherein said surface of said pad is smooth.

19. The method of claim **14** wherein said surface of said pad is textured.

20. The method of claim **14** wherein said receiving surface is selected from the group consisting of flat, curved, and irregular surfaces.

21. The method of claim **14** wherein said pad is electrically conductive.

22. The method of claim **14** wherein said pad is electrically conductive and is electrically connected to said source of ink.

23. The method of claim **14** wherein said pad is electrically insulative.

24. The method of claim **14**, further including partially curing said ink while on said pad through the use of one or more modalities selected from the group consisting of

evaporation, catalysis, heat, cold, moisture, and illumination.

25. The method of claim **14** wherein said pad comprises a material that can be used and the process is repeated with another image.

26. The method of claim **14** wherein said image is printed onto said pad while said pad is flat, and then transferred to said receiving surface by said pad while said pad is flat.

27. A deformable pad and deformer for pad printing, comprising;

a. a source containing ink of at least one color,

b. a flexible pad body of an elastomer having a flat, non-patterned surface,

c. a printer connected to said source and capable of printing an image containing said ink from said source onto said flat surface of said pad,

d. a frame means for holding said flexible pad body,

e. deforming means for deforming said flexible pad body into a convex shape, whereby said pad can accept an image while flat and can print an image while deformed thereby avoiding entrapment of gas during printing.

28. The pad of claim **27** wherein the properties of said elastomer are selected from the group consisting of insulative, conductive, smooth, and rough.

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