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Buffalo Bill rides again, thanks to digital printmaking

Denver Business Journal - by [Ed Sealover](#)

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The giant billboard advertising a 122-year-old Buffalo Bill show that hangs in a Centennial printmaking studio is both a symbol of an emerging business trend, and a link between the Old West and today's Colorado.

The 9-by-32-foot advertisement originally was meant to be plastered on a wall somewhere in London, hawking the Wild West showman's 1887 performance at Earls Court. It shows Buffalo Bill Cody, backed by his cavalcade of performers, nodding to Queen Victoria, who sat in the grandstand for a May 11 show.

Rare poster collector Steve Woodruff discovered the long-lost gem at a shop south of Paris in November, and bought it after the curator of the [Buffalo Bill Museum](#) in Cody, Wyo., told him he didn't know such a billboard still existed.

But more than a century of being rolled up — it appears the poster never was hung in public — left the relic with holes, and Woodruff took it to someone who could preserve the image.

Woodruff owns Christopher & Co., a vintage poster gallery in Edwards. He routed the billboard to Patrick Nocerino, who photographs and digitally re-creates old artwork and other documents. Nocerino opened his business, Nocerino Editions, 12 years ago, when he said about 70 people in the country were doing what he did.

Today, digital printmaking is more widespread, and Nocerino is flush with work at his location at 7330 S. Alton Way. Some of it comes from art collectors looking to make a print of paintings before they sell them, while other jobs are from artists who want prints of their work ready to go when the economy finally improves.

But while Nocerino has been handling more turn-of-the-century art as it ages and becomes more fragile, he hadn't worked on something so large or old. And that, he and Woodruff believe, is where the collision between the state's past and present comes into play.

"It's not just the art," Woodruff said. "There's so much American and American-Anglo history in that piece. It's a history of decades on here ... how the American West became romanticized across Europe."

Cody was a symbol of the Wild West, a man who exported Western culture around the world lacking television or the Internet, showing European royalty how Westerners lived. He began a travelling show in 1883 that included horseback riders, shooting exhibitions and Native Americans, and four years later he took the show to Europe.

The billboards were made from wood-block etchings transferred onto a flimsy paper, equivalent to newsprint. Many were about 40-by-28 inches, and were slapped onto public walls and later hidden by more show placards placed on top of them.

Woodruff's poster is remarkably larger — it was made out of 32 wood-cut sheets — and has a plethora of characters from the show, in addition to Cody and the queen. There is the Indian Black Elk holding a rifle, daring equestrian Mustang Jack standing off to the side, and shootist Annie Oakley astride a horse close to the grandstand.

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After capturing the image in a series of 32 blocks — each of the eight four-block panels took up 1.5 gigabytes of computer space — Nocerino and assistant Mike Teal digitally stitched them together as the panels fit, showing even the creases. The two now are reconstructing some of the color lost due to deterioration, and filling in the billboard's holes.

Woodruff plans to sell a limited-edition run of the digitized prints, beginning at about \$500 and rising in price as the prints increase in size.

He will place the original billboard on display at Christopher & Co. beginning July 1 and expects to show it for at least a month. After that, he hopes to sell it to a museum.

He, Nocerino and Teal hope that the business of art, the business of digital printmaking and the state's history can converge to leave a unique legacy for Colorado residents.

"When you think about how light it is and how much it takes to print one of these, you can only assume this is the last one," Teal said.

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