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# Profile: Getty Images - A visionary called Getty

Leading the field in selling electronic pictures is a famous name who has branched out. By Dana Rubin

**Dana Rubin** • Sunday 05 April 1998 00:02 •  [Comments](#)



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AT GETTY IMAGES, the world's largest seller of visual images, the picture scanners are working overtime.

Within the next six months, the London-based company will start selling its core collection - 65,000 images belonging to its prestigious Tony Stone unit - over the internet. Prospective purchasers will simply log on, select an image, download it and then pay by credit card. At least, that is how it is intended to work.



While exploring the company's web page last week, I experienced first-hand some of the technical hurdles that Getty Images confronts as it moves from an analogue to a digital platform. In other words, it is set to switch from the traditional method of selling images from pictures in a catalogue to the downloading of images directly from the internet.

Despite the fact that the Tony Stone images are not yet available for online purchase, I still thought I would explore the web site. After logging on to Getty Images' home page ([www.getty-images.com](http://www.getty-images.com)), and clicking on the Tony Stone logo, I followed instructions to download something called a "helper application" that would supposedly make it easier to deliver "enhanced features".

Instead, all I was able to see was a blank screen. And my computer has not been the same since. Unable to fix the problem, the office technicians say it had to do with the graphics drivers.

"Really? I find that extremely odd," said Jonathan Klein, one of Getty Images' two founding partners, when I tell him about my downloading disaster. "On occasions, it happens," he acknowledged. "There are definitely issues in getting on to the web efficiently."

To be fair, I tried accessing the Tony Stone area from a different office computer, and this time it work-ed fine. And indeed, some of the images do look fantastic.

~~Still like all companies selling their wares over the internet, fine-tuning the~~

computer glitches - whether the problem is at the company's or the user's end - is one of the biggest challenges facing Klein and his partner Mark Getty, both 37.

They met when they were working together in corporate finance at Hambros Bank. When they decided to go into business together, it was natural that they would use the Getty name. After all, it is Getty money that got the business off the ground, and anyway the Getty name stands for success in the business world.

"Yes, it's good branding," conceded Getty, one of 16 grandchildren of the oil magnate John Paul Getty, who became the world's richest man by consolidating much of the oil industry.

Mark's father is J Paul Getty Jr, who famously beat a heroin addiction and became a benefactor of British art - and recently a British citizen - by preserving for the nation such treasures as a 13th-century map of the world, Canova's Three Graces, and Sir Winston Churchill's private papers.

In 1993, Mark Getty began cobbling together \$30m (pounds 18.75m) from various family trusts, together with some money from Rothschild Investment Trust and Hambros Group Investments.

Then he and Klein went on a shopping spree, snapping up some of the world's most prestigious photo stock banks, and assembling an unparalleled collection of about 30 million images and 9,500 hours of footage.

Now the challenge is to scan those images, link them to keywords so they can be easily found by a client, caption them, and smooth out any kinks in the distribution system.

But technical barriers persist. "It's been much harder to develop systems of delivery of these images than anyone thought," says James Pickerell, publisher of Selling Stock, a photo agency newsletter in Rockville, Maryland. "Many people have tried to make their systems too complicated and have tried to put too much stuff into them," he said. "The buyer at the other end finds the whole thing too confusing and says: 'I'll just use paper catalogues instead'"

Industry analysts say there's no doubt the technology will eventually pay off. "From a stock standpoint, the key is that the cost of distribution via the web is going to be so much lower than the expensive and cumbersome paper and people-intensive distribution system," said Genni Combes, an internet analyst at Hambrecht & Quist in San Francisco. "Their operating costs and their cost of sales should go down fairly dramatically," she said.

Now worth about \$800m, the company had sales last year of \$100m. Combes predicts the figure will rise to \$184m next year.

Once they knew they wanted to launch their own business, Klein and Getty spent two years searching for the right opportunity, which led them to what is known as the visual content business. A \$1.5bn market today, it has traditionally been a highly fragmented field with lots of small players.

Obviously there was room for growth. "When we started to look around, we saw pictures everywhere. We're completely surrounded by images," said Klein, looking wide-eyed as he gestured at the walls, the books, even the design on the coffee mugs in the airy office he shares with Getty in the company's Camden headquarters.

"Where do all these images come from?" he ventured. "We thought there must be some monolithic organisation supplying them, but we discovered that wasn't the case."

So he and Getty decided to create that monolith. Their first purchase, in 1995, was Tony Stone Images, for \$40m, a prestigious bank of 2.5 million photos covering every subject, from sports and travel to nature and fashion, with a catalogue-based distribution system already in place.

The collection contains images of stars like Jackie Onassis and Marilyn Monroe, as well as the more prosaic but profitable pictures of subjects such as babies, water droplets and mountain ranges. For a big advertising campaign, the unit might sell image rights for tens of thousands of pounds.

The core of the collection consists of 65,000 negatives, stored in six gun-metal gray cabinets on the sales floor. Tony Stone today accounts for more than 85 per cent of

In the past two years, Getty Images has added: the Hulton Deutsch archive collection (later called Hulton Getty), with 15 million images from the very beginnings of photography; Fabulous Footage, a Toronto film company with 5,000 hours of stock film; Energy Film Library, a stock footage business; and Gamma-Liaison, the North American photojournalism agency.

But it was the \$167m acquisition of PhotoDisc, a Seattle-based owner of 50,000 images that were already digitised and being sold over the internet, that has been key to the company's online aspirations.

PhotoDisc started out selling photos on CD-Rom, but in the last two years has been dramatically increasing its internet sales, which last year amounted to \$7.5m - nearly 20 per cent of total sales (\$41m). PhotoDisc's technology is now being expanded to the company as a whole.

The only other stock photography company currently engaged in digitising images for online sales is Corbis, the company started by Microsoft founder and chairman Bill Gates. But Corbis, with annual estimated sales of \$10m to \$15m, is tiny compared with Getty.

Getty Images' other main competitors are Visual Communications Group, owned by United News and Media, and Image Bank, a Dallas-based subsidiary of Eastman Kodak.

But none of those companies can match the size of Getty's image bank. Nor do they have what is without doubt a uniquely attractive asset - the Getty name.

Mention this in front of Mark Getty, however, and he gets distinctly touchy. It is clearly not his favourite topic of conversation. Could it be because he's grown just a little fed up with talking about it?

"I've always been tired of talking about it," he groans. "It's not relevant to the business on a daily basis."

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