

Tintypes: The Poor Man's Photograph

by Diane Day, CPF

During the Nineteenth century, there were three major photographic processes that did not have paper as their support: the daguerreotype, the ambrotype, and the tintype. The daguerreotype was a process using highly polished silver-plated copper. The image was quite fragile and was placed in a case with a glass cover protecting the plate. The ambrotype was a negative on glass, backed by a black lacquer coating or a piece of black fabric, which turned the negative into a positive image. It resembles a daguerreotype, but lacks the fine tonalities, as well as the silvery, highly reflective finish.

The tintype, a distinctly American form, was a modification of the ambrotype. The photograph was developed on a thin sheet of black or brown japanned (lacquered) iron instead of glass. The process was patented as a melanotype in 1856, and was originally referred to as a ferrotype. Tintype was the folk designation that has lasted ever since.

The tintype provided photographers with a faster, cheaper process than those previously available. For the first time, working-class people of modest means were able to possess portraits of family and friends. It was a durable photograph that could easily be sent through the mail, protected in an album, or worked into jewelry or buttons. The Civil War was a boon for this process; itinerant photographers near the battlefields did an enormous business. Tintypes continued to be made well into the Twentieth century.

Tintypes were made in a wide variety of sizes and, at first, were placed in cases similar to those protecting ambrotypes and daguerreotypes. More often, however, they were unmounted. Sometimes, their corners were

clipped to allow them to be slipped into albums and special paper sleeves with an opening of viewing.

They are generally of little value (millions were made and many have survived), except for the rare outdoor view. They have low contrast and poor definition. Since the plate is thin, it is easily bent which can cause the protective varnish coating (if one was applied) to crack. If

moisture gets to the iron support, then rust might blister or pit the image. George Gilbert, founding president of the American Photographic Historical Society and recognized authority on tintypes, advises that retouching not be attempted.

Damage may have occurred to the tintype while the emulsion was still wet, especially at the surface coating edges that are prone to grime, small imbedded particles, or fingerprints. If the surface was never lacquered or if the coverage appears uneven, it can be recoated with an extremely thin mixture (almost like water) of shellac and denatured alcohol.

This will restore the surface, and often it will produce an improved overall brightness, according to Gilbert. However, a conservator should be consulted before this is attempted.

Methods for restoring tintypes are limited. The image can easily be copied by current photographic methods that will also enhance the contrast. Tintypes can be cleaned by briefly washing the surface of the plate with a soft, wet cloth and a solution of mild soap and water. They should be air dried, but a hair dryer may be used. There is a danger of rust if moisture reaches the support, so a trained individual should inspect the photograph first.

The George Eastman House places tintypes in sink mats (to give them a 3-D effect), or float mounts them



Allan Lamb, CPF, suggests displaying tintypes in an area with subdued lighting.

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using polyester corner pockets for an exhibition. Allan Lamb, CPF, author of *Framing Photography*, suggests the use of French matting and a Victorian frame (particularly if the photo is from the Nineteenth century). He suggests a dark mat be used as opposed to a light one because it will tend to bring out the image. (A light mat tends to make the photograph appear darker.)

If the tintype is in its sleeve, do not remove it if at all possible; it is part of the original piece. If there is no indication that the piece was ever in a sleeve or a case, then do whatever looks best aesthetically. Tintypes are “light sensitive to a point,” says Lamb. Therefore, it is best to hang them in an area with subdued lighting.

Sometimes, the corners of tintypes can roll up, to which Gilbert suggests three options: 1) The framer can leave them alone and use a lift mat to accommodate this

fault; 2) Unroll the curled metal corners, covering the front of the plate with a protective plastic sheet first. A blunt wooden tool (metal instruments can scratch the delicate surface) should be used to push the rolled metal outward until it is flat; or 3) Snip off the corners. This is a standard practice by period photographers that should not be done without first obtaining a signed disclaimer from the customer. Better yet, let the customers cut off the corners themselves. ■

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