



International Center of Photography

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media release



Unidentified Photographer
[Four Unidentified Men in Frames], ca. 1875
International Center of Photography

America and the Tintype

On view from
September 19, 2008
through
January 4, 2009

Media Preview
September 18, 2008
9:30—11:00 am

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The tintype is one of the most intriguing and little-studied forms of nineteenth-century photography. Introduced as a low-cost alternative to the daguerreotype and the albumen print, the tintype was widely marketed from the 1860s through the first decades of the twentieth century, and quickly became the most popular photographic medium. It was the picture making preference of the people, and was almost never used for celebrity portraiture. The tintype was affordable, portable, unique, and available almost everywhere. Because of its ubiquity, the tintype provides a startlingly candid record of the political upheavals that rocked the four decades following the American Civil War, and the personal anxieties they induced. *America and the Tintype*, on view at the International Center of Photography (1133 Avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street) from September 19, 2008 through January 4, 2009, will feature over 100 remarkable examples of this medium, drawn largely from ICP's Permanent Collection. The exhibition is co-organized by ICP Chief Curator Brian Wallis and writer and historian Steven Kasher.

The tintype was invented in the United States in 1854, and first gained popularity as a campaign-button novelty during the Presidential election of 1860. It was embraced by soldiers and their families during the Civil War, following which photographic entrepreneurs began setting up tintype operations in every city and public attraction throughout the country, while others traveled from town to town. Over four of the most turbulent decades in American history, the tintype became the popular medium for creating personal portraits. Yet outside the United States, the tintype was a rarity.

The tintype was cheaper, easier to make, quicker to process, and more permanent and accurate than anything that had previously existed in photography, especially compared to the daguerreotype and the carte-de-visite. The tintype studio produced portraits almost instantaneously, much like the latter-day photobooth.

Stepping before the camera, a person would strike a pose for two to ten seconds, perhaps pose again, and then wait as the iron plate—with its sensitized collodion emulsion—was exposed in the camera, absorbing the reflected light directly off the subject. It was then developed, dried, and varnished. A few minutes later, the result appeared. That the pictures were darkish or that they were reversed left to right did not matter to the tintype client, because—at least in the latter instance—reversal was expected, based on previous experience of the daguerreotype and the mirror. And unlike with the *carte-de-visite*, there was no negative: the tintype was basically a negative adhered to a varnished metal plate, one that yielded an image that was unique and durable.

This signaled the invention of photography for everyone. Portraiture was brought into the homes of average Americans, as millions of tintypes were commissioned at prices even the poorest citizens could afford. And tintype photographers, known as “operators,” came from all walks of life, including the most menial. The required investment in equipment, supplies, and training was so small that it could be earned back in a few days of portrait taking. Profits could be high.

The reason for this populist expansion of photographic availability lies in the nature of American society at the time. The era of the tintype, the 1860s through the 1890s, was the United States’s most anarchic—characterized by extreme tumult, anxiety, and a disdain for class-bound traditions. Americans were constantly remaking and reimagining themselves, and they took advantage of the tintype’s easy accessibility as a means of preserving a connection to their past even as they moved forward.

The tintype served as a medium for far more than straight portraiture. On the one hand, it mobilized photography, allowing images to be sent far and wide across the continent and carried everywhere, even into battle. It might portray a dead family member, positioned on the deathbed or in a coffin. At the same time, the tintype studio became a space for performance, where sitters could express and re-constitute their personal identities. Often they brought the people and things that would allow them to assert how they saw themselves, or that enabled them to re-imagine themselves in a different light. Many of the tintypes in this exhibition show sitters with family and friends, tools of their trade, costumes, masks, toys, dolls, stuffed animals, and props of all kinds. Further, as the images show, these sitters also acted out fantasies and stereotypes that reflected or challenged conventional roles as related to gender, race, and class. The very nature of the tintype process encouraged an expression of humor and play, so that the act of being photographed easily took on the parameters of a theatrical game. But in other images, those performed elements were subordinated to a direct and open expression of occupational identity, affirming the dignity of a person’s vocation at a moment when working-class artisans found themselves reduced to deskilled wage laborers.

The tintype dominated American domestic portraiture until around 1890, when Kodak set in motion its demise through a series of technical, manufacturing, and marketing innovations (though it survived into the 1920s as a novelty item, sporting a plate of enameled paper rather than iron).

Democratic forms of photography such as the tintype stand in strong counterpoint to the continually seductive and numbing effects of celebrity portraits. Then and now, on a through line that includes the snapshot and the millions of digital images that are today uploaded to sites such as Flickr, MySpace, and Facebook, they remind us instead of the equality and vibrancy of a society fed by many co-existing cultures.

America and the Tintype will be accompanied by a catalogue authored by Steven Kasher, with contributions by Brian Wallis, Geoffrey Batchen, and Karen Halttunen, and published by ICP/Steidl.