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Assignment 3 Research Paper

**19th century Hand-colored Photographs**

The need for realistic portraits and technological advances brought great breakthroughs in the invention of photography. From its inception, photography was not only seen as science, but as a tool to document 19th century life. Its reception in the art world was not always enthusiastic because of its mechanical processes. When compared to traditional painted portraits, photographs were often criticized for their lack of color and therefore lack of realism. As a result there was a demand to create photographs that had the same color realism of painted portraits (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 2-3). Within the constraints of available materials and processes of the 19th century, methods to add color where used to add slight embellishments of jewelry and eyes, as well as, full hand colored photographs. It was debated whether a chemical process of adding color was possible, so manual modes of coloring were employed by photographers (Henisch & Henisch, 1996, p .10). Studio team workers, portrait miniaturists, women and “color specialists” were employed by photographers to color photographs (Henisch & Henisch, 1996, p.154, 164). Hand-painting, hand coloring, over painting, tinting, retouching are some of the terms used to describe the process of coloring black and white photographs.

From the early years of photography, attempts at adding color are seen in many of the early processes. Attempts at adding color to black and white photographs are seen as early as the 1840’s. Johann Baptist Isenring is first credited for attempting to color daguerreotypes with oil paints. This produced daguerreotypes that looked more like paintings then photographs (Ferguson, 2008, p.14) In 1842, a process using dried pigments with stencils or a stippling brush and then using ones own breath to set the color were recommended (Ferguson, 2008, pg.15). Because of the texture of daguerreotypes gum arabic, wine, fish glue, sugar and gelatin was used to thin out dry pigments once applied to produce more transparent colors (Ferguson, 2008, pg.16) By 1850, commercially prepared pigments for daguerreotypes were available and techniques from miniature portraitists to apply the colors were widely used (Ferguson, 2008, pg. 17). Once of the preservation concerns with hand colored daguerreotypes are that different types of pigments and color adhesives have different concerns. Pigments made from organic materials and brilliant colors are light sensitive and fade faster. While metallic and sulfide based pigments and adhesives lead to oxidation and tarnish (Ferguson, 2008, pg. 18)

Around the same time photographers were also experimenting with color in calotypes and other paper printing processes. Starting around the 1850’s, retouching negatives using, bleach, pencils, inks, chalks and scratching tools to make indents were a common practice to edit photos to hide and embellish details in black and white gradations. To retouch further, the positive image was also altered with watercolors, pastels and oils (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 41-45). The best method that was recommended to colorize calotype photos was the use of watercolors (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p .54). Besides direct coloring of photographic prints there were also methods of coloring photographs from behind. One method was by completing covering the photograph with varnish and applying colors from behind. The second method also requires varnishing of the photo but also requires outlining the tracings of the photograph with cardboard. Then applying color to the areas that were traced and then combine from the back of the print to reveal the colors (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 74). Some stereograph’s from the 1870’s and onward were made out of tissue paper and colored from behind because the transmission of light shining through would create the transparency of color often sought after (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 78). Albumen prints were also colored with watercolors to “tint” them or provide a wash of color. They were also colored using aniline dyes that was for the dying of textiles (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p.65).

There was a demand for more color in photographs so images went beyond retouching, tinting to to full colored photographs (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 53-54). Cartes d’viste were more colorized then cabinet cards, despite public yearning for colors in portraits (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 50). The longer process of coloring details in cabinet cards due to their larger sizes might have been one reason. Despite process used to create paper prints; the coloring of paper prints varies between photographer preferences between watercolor, oil, chalk, pastels, crayons and oil. With watercolor and pastels or crayons being the most favored for paper prints (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 54-59).

Other types of photographs required materials that best suited the surface of the photographs. Tintypes required the use of oil paints because the metal surfaces where not suitable for other materials like watercolors and pastels. These metal surfaces provided smooth uniform layers that also prevented the paint from cracking (Henisch & Henisch, 1996 p. 104). Ambrotypes were also painted like daguerreotypes but could be painted from the front or back of the collodion image. An image would be mounted collodion side up with black velvet or colored papers placed behind it. Another way was by painting on the collodion image and then mounting the image collodion side down (3).

It is difficult to create a liner history of the developments of hand colored photographs from the 1850’s to 1900’s because the history of photography is not liner. Many developments and processes where going on at the same time, so photographers hand coloring preferences and tools were also amidst several different processes and media. The experimentation of coloring different types of photographs and media was a result of creating photographs that were more realistic then painted portraits. This paper is by no means an extensive historical look into hand coloring photographs, but is meant to provide a mere glimpse into colored photographs before colored chemical processes in the 20th century.

**Resources**

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