# the World of Plate Photography

by PHIL NESMITH

There is an interesting change occurring in many areas of the industrialized world. People are growing tired: tired of merely consuming products, tired of relying on manufacturers to provide everything they want or need. The need for manual effort has been removed from many aspects of our modern lives, and that loss has left a void in the primal fabric of what makes us what we are. The majority of human beings fail to notice this void. A growing percentage of us, however, have taken note: the age of technological dependence has arrived. As a result, most of us have become dependent on technology that we do not fully understand and do not have the ability to fix when broken, a dependence that only adds to the swirling feeling of being surrounded by an uncontrollable world. In reaction to this state of technological dependence, a growing movement to reclaim the skills of the past seems to be emerging.

**ALMSROUND** (WET COLLODION TINTYPE)

The field of photography is as diverse as the people who call themselves photographers. This is also true of subsets of processes that comprise the field, including the reemerging plate photography methods of the mid to late nineteenth century. These methods—once the most popular and successful methods of photographic image-making of their time—are now generally known (along with many other processes) as "Alternative Photography". Sir John Herschel made the first known glass plate image in 1839, and the same year Louis Daguerre presented the first commercially successful photographic process, the daguerreotype, to the world. Daguerreotypes, wet collodion ferrotypes (tintype), ambrotypes, lanternslides, glass negatives, and the souvenir dryplate tintypes of the early 1900s boardwalks are all forms of plate photography once viable for commercial use, but which fell out of favor following the next "greatest" development in process. These methods were the casualties of an ever-forward, marching momentum toward a "better", easier cost-effective solution...a movement that eventually lead to today's digital image-making boom.

For the past five years I have been involved in the exploration and practice of plate photography, specifically the creation of direct positive images such as wet collodion/dryplate tintypes and ambrotypes. Volumes can (and have) been written on the technical aspects of these forms of image-making, but this article is less about the "how-to" of a specific process, and more about the "why" of the current resurrection of interest in plate photographic methods of the past.

Originally my own interest lay simply with the collection of vintage daguerreotypes. At the time, primarily working in digital adventure photography, I was not aware that the material and knowledge to make plate-based images still existed. I would often sit down at night to examine my small but growing collection of leather encased daguerreotypes, hypnotized by not only the shimmering image itself, but by the entire package. When I held it in my hand, the image-object—the whole thing a work of art and craft—seemed to connect with something deep inside me. It was during one of these experiences, as I explored the origin of the feelings I was having, that I realized something: today, we rarely make images that can be held. Moreover, our modern image-making processes are centered on rapid and accurate reproducibility. This reproducibility was the driving desire that led to the demise of the daguerreotype and to the rise of numerous negative-to-positive processes — processes that revolutionized commercial photography and removed the limited on-off nature of the daguerreotype, wet collodion and dryplate direct positive methods. Our modern digital images are not meant to be tangible. They are not meant to carry any weight as physical objects, not intended to be touched, carried, or experienced in any way other than from an optimum viewing distance or on a tightly color calibrated monitor...or flashing on a digital picture frame from Walmart. I realized then what was missing from my digital image work: the ability to actually work with my hands, to bring something physical and completely unique to life.

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In the cold November weather of 2006, when I moved into a tee pee on the farm of wet collodion master John Coffer in upstate New York to learn from him, I could count fully on two hands the number of people making serious work with plate photography methods. Of those, Chuck Close, Sally Mann, Jerry Spagnoli and Robb Kendrick were the most widely known. The work of these artists and the knowledge they hold has played an important role in reintroducing the world to the plate processes of the 1800s. Indeed, the success of the photographers/artists noted provides a powerful public face to contemporary plate photography, but the survival of plate photography can also be attributed to work done by many lesser known photographers/artists who have been keeping the technical knowledge alive and passing it along to others. Since my early explorations in the history of plate-based photography started in 2004, the number of people working with plate processes, available learning opportunities, amount of technical information, and availability of contemporary equipment has sky-rocketed (comparatively).

The explosion of digital image-making capability, and more importantly accessibility, has been credited with the prolonged, much-analyzed and debated "death" of film-based photography. Commercial offerings for chemically-based photography material such as film, papers, and cameras have been disappearing at an increasing rate for the past few years. Educational institutions that once owned large chemical darkroom facilities have since sold the equipment at fire sale prices and turned those spaces into digital "lightrooms". The standard photographic work in galleries is now a 60" face-mounted aluminum digital print, instead of the hand-produced silver gelatin print typical of earlier days (and characteristic work of the great names in photographic history). Photojournalism has been changed forever by the omnipresent digital image, the capturing capabilities of cell phones, and the surveillance systems that make it seem as though a camera is waiting, on location, at every breaking news event.

**CONTAINED** (DRY PLATE AMBROTYPE)

The current wave of change that digital imaging has brought to photography is very similar to those faced by photographers when Scott Archer introduced wet-plate collodion in 1851, the introduction of sliver bromide gelatin emulsion by Richard Leach Maddox in 1871, and the development of the first roll film camera by George Eastman in 1888. Technical advancement and continual change is the nature of photography. Surprisingly, it would seem that the same forward march of technology that killed off older photographic processes may be bringing a few back, as demonstrated by growing interest in the plate photographic methods. Perhaps this interest is a push-back response to the perfect, efficient, clean, totally controllable and endlessly reproducible images provided by the digital imaging revolution.

It's not only the rise of digital imaging that has played a role in the resurrection of plate photography processes; the advent

THE LOOK (DRY PLATE AMBROTYPE)

of the networked world has proved important as well. Google has digitized historic publications and interactive forums have been formed to share information and problems—a development that has flattened out the steep learning curves. Practitioners willing to take on students and suppliers of chemicals and equipment are as close as the next Internet search, speeding an entrance into the world of plate photography. Without the Internet and the sharing of information that it facilitates, the practitioners of plate photographic methods would be isolated from each other, and the information required to start such work might be buried deep in antique book stores and scattered libraries.

Just as the ability provided by the Internet to share or seek information directly has been extremely beneficial to the rebirth of interest in plate photography, the development of social networking sites like Facebook and community specific sites like Flickr have also connected geographically distant groups that might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact. These sites allow communities of people to virtually congregate around a shared topic of interest, such as various photographic methods. Some plate photographers have even started to branch out from the traditionally technical workshop experience and now provide similar information and training online through a combination of videos, chat sessions, books, and companion DVDs.

The people who are rediscovering plate photography come from many different photographic backgrounds and are pursuing the older methods for many different reasons. There are those who know no other form of photography, and there are those who call themselves digital refugees. There are the living historians, the fine artists, the experimenters, the educators... the list goes on and on, but they all (including me) have a number of important desires in common. Strong undercurrents of feeling persist: the need to slow down, the ability to control a photographic process from emulsion to varnish, the use of handmade equipment, the creation of a truly unique, physical photographic image, being witness to chemical magic and the directness of the plate processes all surface again and again as motivations.



No matter the personal motivations for entering the world of plate photography, and regardless of the choice of processes explored, there is an excitement in knowing that one is a part of a diverse community with important historical ties: a community that is deep-rooted, but one that is also forward-looking. Participation not only helps to preserve knowledge of the past, but also helps to carry some of photography's best attributes into the future. Many involved in plate photography are also integrating digital imaging-making knowledge and practice into their plate making. Digital output from plate sources and the use of initial digital captures in the creation of physical plate images are common examples of mixing 19th and 21st century image-making processes. With the elimination of many "traditional" photographic products such as favorite films, papers, chemicals, and cameras, it is easy to feel that chemical photography will soon be gone forever. We should all take heart in knowing that the rebirth of plate photography shows that the future does not have to be dark for those things no longer deemed commercially viable. Instead, for those willing to mix up chemicals, brew emulsions, build darkboxes and cameras, cut and file glass, bake asphaltum plates and—most importantly, perhaps—to let go of the idea of total control, there remains a widely open landscape of possibility. §

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THOUGHTS OF HOME (DRY PLATE AMBROTYPE)