Chapter 8 ~ Cased Tintypes

The tintype experienced greater use and captured a wider variety of subjects than any other photographic type of the 19th century.

The tintype saw the Civil War come and go, documenting individual soldiers and capturing horrific battle scenes. It witnessed the wild-west, recorded modern inventions such as electric lights, and took pictures of the first automobiles. It is like the elderly grandfather that saw everything.

The tintype was introduced while the daguerreotype was still popular, though its primary competition at the time would have been the ambrotype which was available two year earlier.

The first personal size tintypes were placed in cases in the same manner as daguerreotypes and ambrotypes, while a few large full-plate images were framed.

This chapter will cover the cased image versions, which can be found from about 1856 to the early 1860s.

Historical Review

On February 19, 1856 Hamilton Smith, a chemistry professor at Kenyon College in Ohio received a patent for his melainotype process. The patent essentially covered the use of an iron plate instead of glass for a photographic surface. The process and chemicals used were basically the same as for the ambrotype.

The patent was immediately assigned to Peter Neff Jr., a student of Smith's. Neff brought an aggressive business style and marketing expertise to the process and this new photo technique took off.

Melainotype (melaino meaning black or dark) was the first patented name for putting an image on an iron plate. Other manufacturers called it ferrotype (ferro being the chemical name for iron). The name *tintype* is a misnomer since there is no tin in a tintype – it is an iron plate.

It began losing artistic and commercial appeal to higher quality albumen prints in the mid 1860s, yet survived for another 40 years, lastly as a novelty photo.

Figure 8-1. Actual size of a quarter plate tintype (minus the case) made about 1860. As usual for the time, the children look terrified as they were probably sternly warned to not move. The exposure could have required a couple seconds.

Photographs for the Masses

Durable and inexpensive tintypes were produced in more formats than any other 19th century photograph type. This was due to several factors.

First, the image was created on sturdy iron sheets and cut to any size. It could be placed in flimsy paper holders and still survive mishandling, or it could be trimmed and placed inside jewelry cases and lockets.

Figure 8-2. Actual size pendant with lovely c. 1869 tintype.

Secondly, camera technology was improving rapidly during this time, enabling a new level of image quality and a variety of sizes.

Third, the cost of tintypes dropped dramatically by eliminating the costly case and brass accessories.

Dating the Cased Tintype

The tintype process did not change much over its life, but supporting pieces like cases, mats, and preservers did, allowing accurate dating of many images.

Is this a Tintype?

The tintype is one of easiest photographs to identify since the image is on a thin iron plate that has been japanned or varnished black. Even if the image is in a case there is a simple tintype test. Yes, the magnet test.

Since the tintype is an iron plate, it will attract a magnet. Place a small magnet on the cover glass. If it stays in place the image is a tintype. The ambrotype or daguerreotype will not attract the magnet. Do not place the magnet directly on the tintype image, as it may scratch the surface. If it does not have a cover glass, place a soft cloth over the tintype and then place the magnet. A strong magnet will even be drawn to a tintype from the back of the case.

Analyze the Preserver and Mat

The first tintype photographs were treated with the same respect as ambrotypes and even daguerreotypes. That is, they were still viewed as a means of creating a formal portrait and were placed in a protective case with mats and preservers.

However, cased tintypes can be viewed as spanning two distinct eras: Those before 1859 and then 1859 and later. Mats and preservers changed significantly in about 1859, becoming thinner and more ornate. These changes are covered in greater detail in the respective mat and preserver chapters.

Figure 8-3. Two tintype eras. A c. 1858 on left and c. 1861 on right show the different styles of mats and preservers.

The cased-image era for tintypes was very short, eventually cases disappeared around 1864.

Cased Tintype Eras	
Characteristic	Date in Use
Plain-Surface Mat	1856 - 1858
Plain Preservers	1856 - 1858
Ornate Stamped Mat	1859 - 1864
Ornate Foil-Like Preservers	1859 - 1864