

## Rough-Hewn Images for Rough-Hewn Times

In photography's family tree the daguerreotype is the genteel aunt and the tintype the itinerant cousin. Both 19th-century techniques involved the exposure of a

### ART REVIEW

KAREN ROSENBERG

metal plate to light and produced a unique, reversed image, but their applications differed widely. A daguerreotype portrait was a formal (and expensive) affair; tintype tents and studios, meanwhile, functioned almost like the photo booths of today. A subject would pose for a few seconds, often in front of a painted backdrop, and wait just minutes for a one-of-a-kind (albeit muddy-looking) portrait.

"America and the Tintype" at the International Center of Photography, organized by the center's chief curator, Brian Wallis, and the photography dealer Steven Kasher, includes some 200 examples of this democratic form of image making from the museum's collection. Most of the artists, and subjects, are unidentified. These works form a group portrait of Americans, mostly working and middle class, struggling to adapt to the rapidly shifting social and economic conditions during the four decades after the Civil War.

The exhibition makes the most of the tintype's range of subject matter and emotion, from post-mortem shots to vaudevilian caricatures, freedmen to minstrels. It does not dispute the daguerreotype's superior potentials for artistry but simply asserts that tintypes have been unfairly overlooked because of their ubiquity, affordability and anonymity.

The tintype required only a small investment in equipment and training time. Whereas the daguerreotype was composed of copper, silver, mercury or gold, the tintype was merely a thin sheet of iron (known colloquially as "tinplate," hence the misnomer) coated with a light-sensitive black varnish.

Tintypes were not only cheaper but also sturdier than the delicate daguerreotype or albumen print, rendering them highly portable keepsakes. They were

"America and the Tintype" continues through Jan. 4 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street, (212) 857-0000, icp.org.



INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Striking a pose for a tintype portrait around 1875.

### America and the Tintype

International Center of Photography

carried on one's person in gilded frames or envelopes, or even worn as jewelry.

In a fascinating catalog essay Mr. Kasher dissects the tintype's abject, slightly seedy associations. He quotes the photography historian John Wood, who sees in the tintype the sullied image of post-Civil War America: "The daguerreotype was simply no longer our fitting image. Our faces had found their way to the tintypes."

The tintype was a populist medium from the very beginning; it first took hold during the presidential election of 1860. (One of the images here, from 1868, shows a pile of campaign buttons for the Democratic nominee, Horatio Seymour, who lost to Ulysses S. Grant.) Soon after, Civil War soldiers were sending home tintypes from the front. In several tintypes in the show, uni-

formed men pose with their rifles in front of painted backdrops of military camps.

In family albums back home the soldiers' tintypes would be displayed together with pictures of other family members, living and dead. The first section of the show includes some startling post-mortem portraits of children, among them a set of unidentified triplets laid out in a row and photographed from above.

The tintype documented injury and disfigurement as well as death. The image on the cover of the exhibition catalog is a picture of a man whose face is almost entirely obscured by bandages. Less noticeable, but just as affecting, is the full-length portrait of a man who is missing two fingers on his right hand. Whether taken as medical documents or as demands for visibility, these images are frank and assertive.

Another category was the "Occupational," or worker's portrait. These pictures make up nearly an entire wall of the exhibition. Blacksmiths, butchers, newsboys and maids are posed in uniform

and with the tools of their trade. Entertainers — acrobats, clowns, musicians — also ply their skills.

As the wall text notes, the rise of the tintype corresponded with a period of financial crisis. The Panic of 1873 and ensuing depression, and the replacement of skilled artisans with industrialized labor, encouraged workers to preserve their jobs in photographic form.

Even so, tintypes were hardly all work and no play. About half of the show is devoted to giddy, attention-seeking forms of leisure. Men act out robberies, flaunt their biceps and even cross-dress; women pose in pageant costumes and feed each other bananas with a smile and a wink. People let their hair down in defiance of Victorian morals, sometimes literally; one riveting image shows eight girls with lush, wavy locks cascading down their backs.

A related group of tintypes, more problematic from a contemporary standpoint, attests to the popularity of minstrel shows. Mixed in with pictures of performers in blackface, however, are portraits that reveal various aspects of black American life before, during and after the Civil War. A portrait of a black nanny with her white ward, from 1860, hangs next to one of a freedwoman taken five years later.

Tintypes were superseded around 1890 by George Eastman's celluloid roll film, an innovation that made tricky wet-plate negatives obsolete, further democratizing photography. So why should we care about the tintype?

Mr. Kasher, for one, sees it as the ancestor of the disposable digital portraits uploaded daily to photo-sharing Web sites like Flickr and Facebook. The tintype has also been revitalized, or at least recognized, by a small number of contemporary photographers. (Those women with flowing hair, for instance, appeared in a 2006 group exhibition organized by Justine Kurland and Dan Torop.)

A more persuasive reason, evident throughout the exhibition, is that no other form of photography does as much to convey the social and economic upheavals of the late 19th century. So what if subject matter triumphs over technique — in the tintype, the American subject as we know it comes into being.