

Ambrotypes



General Information

The collodion positive or ambrotype process was in widespread use from 1852 to around 1890, although its popularity declined somewhat after the introduction of the carte de visite around 1860.

Ambrotypes were produced by taking an underexposed wet collodion glass negative and backing it with black fabric or black paint. This gives the impression of a positive image. Ambrotypes were usually cased in a leather union case with a gilt matt to cover the uneven edges of the photograph.

Since there was no need to print the negative and the wet collodion process required the negative to be processed immediately after exposure, ambrotypes can be regarded as the nineteenth century equivalent of the 'instant' photograph. It also meant that ambrotypes were considerably cheaper than photographs produced by earlier processes. Hence, they were important in the spread of photography and the development of a mass market for photographs.

In general, backgrounds in photographs became more elaborate towards the end of the nineteenth century, although this varied with the higher quality studios tending to more elaborate settings than the simpler, cheaper studios. Because of the complexity and expense involved in photography the number of amateur photographers at the time was small. Ambrotypes are almost always the work of a professional studio photographer.

Conservation

A wet collodion negative, sometimes treated with a chemical to render the emulsion milky white, was put against a black backing of paper or textile, or was painted with black lacquer. Seen in reflected, rather than transmitted, light, the image appears as a positive image. These collodion positives (ambrotypes) were popular for portraits.

Sometimes the image is hand-coloured. The normal presentation is with a stamped metal overmatte and a lined case.

The main risk with these images is the separation of lacquer and photographic emulsion from the glass support, caused by fluctuations of humidity and temperature. To look after the image, you should place it in a cool, dark, stable and fairly dry environment. The image may be displayed as long as it is not in a room which has high levels of daylight or artificial light, and is not hung near a fire-place, radiator or other intermittent heat source.