

Abstract

This paper discusses aspects of paintings executed on a photographic substrate. Inspired by Mervyn Ruggles's research into the use of this practice in the nineteenth century, this discussion presents examples of materials and techniques that have been proposed, manufactured, or employed for this purpose over the last 100 years. Information on this subject was gathered from the available literature and through personal communication with artists engaged in producing this type of artwork, as well as through discussions with manufacturers and museum personnel. North American and European instances are included, and details regarding the works of contemporary artists, such as Lynton Wells, Shirley Wiitasalo, Anselm Kiefer, and James Turrell, are noted.

Painting on a Photographic Substrate: Notes Regarding Materials and Techniques over the Past 100 Years

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Introduction

The idea of painting over photographic images has been present since the invention of photography. Sources regarding materials and techniques appropriate to this process have varied; some information has appeared in scientific and photographic publications. Communication with a number of contemporary artists, though, has shown that such literature rarely directly influenced their work. The principal factors guiding their production tended to consist of a willingness to experiment, a general awareness that such media may be combined, and the fact that this combination may serve their particular aesthetic or intellectual aims. The photographic image has also not only served as a replacement for the underdrawing, as was noted by Mervyn Ruggles in cases of nineteenth-century portraiture, but has been employed for a variety of purposes (1).

The following presents a brief discussion outlining the evolution of materials and techniques over the last 100 years. The discussion culminates in a focus on contemporary practice since the 1960s, a period in which the painter's use of a photographic substrate became more widespread.

From the late nineteenth century to 1950

In the late nineteenth century, improvements in photographic technology and the availability of commercial products made it far easier for the artist to utilize such means in the painting studio. M. L. Winter of Vienna, for example, established an operation in 1877 for the extensive production of enlarged photographs on linen, and proprietary brands of gelatin-silver emulsion-coated linen were available from the 1890s (2, 3). The introduction of faster bromide emulsions in the 1880s also greatly reduced the difficulties associated with producing enlargements, thus de-emphasizing the need for specialists (4).

Oils were frequently used for painting on photographic images, but other materials were also proposed. Instructions published during the 1890s and thereafter commonly referred to the coloring of photographs on paper supports and were directed at those lacking artistic skills. Details regarding the media proposed for this purpose have been included here because this information provides a more complete range of the materials that may be encountered, as well as indicating the interests and concerns of the time.

A number of proposals for the coloring of photographs appeared in *Scientific American* during the 1890s. An 1894 article, reprinted from *Anthony's Bulletin*, recommended the use of transparent and covering colors. These colors were to be made by mixing dry powdered pigments with a medium consisting of 100 cc filtered albumin, 5 g ammonium carbonate, 3 cc glycerin, 4 cc liquid ammonia, and 25 cc water (5). Another article, deriving from *Photographisches Archiv*, noted the use of aniline dyes. These were dissolved in alcohol and applied on the reverse (6). Another article noted the use of oils, watercolors, and pastels. These materials were only to be applied over a preparatory layer. Gelatin was recommended for oils; shellac was recommended for watercolors and pastels (7).

A proposal, reprinted from the *British Journal of Photography*, for the use of wax media appeared in a 1919 issue of *Scientific American Supplement* (8). Two

