The hand-colored photo

by Philip G. Hockett

CORA BUSSEY HILLIS COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

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Photographers and consumers have searched for ways to add color to monochrome photographs since the beginning of photography. Daguerreotypes were hand-tinted with gold to highlight a necklace, ring, or pocketwatch chain and with light shades of color to accentuate clothing. One method involved mixing dry color tints with wine and applying them carefully with a camel's hair brush.

With the widespread use of albumen prints after the 1850s, commercial photographers offered a variety of monochrome images—portraits, stereographs, or landscapes—that could be colored with oils, watercolors, or crayons. The 1880s cabinet card above shows an amateur's efforts to regain the color of what must have been a fun-filled event.

In the hands of a professional, far more sophisticated results could be obtained—consider the 1940 graduation portrait on the right. A product like Marshall's Oil Photo Colors (see sample tubes) offered hues ranging from "cheek," "lip," and "flesh," to "tree green," "Chinese blue," and "raw Sienna," and could be applied with cotton tufts to "hair, grass, rocks, roads, tree trunks, brick walls, etc." The Marshall brochure also explains that everyone from "children who want to apply a few simple washes of color to a print to amateur and professional colorists making colors for studios or . . . magazine covers" could use the transparent oils to transform their "black-and-white prints into gorgeous color photographs," and that the advantage "over direct color photography is that the colorist is not limited by the original color of the subject."

The persistence of hand-tinting long after direct color images became readily available is hard to explain. Perhaps some photographers believed that so intimate a thing as color had to be applied by hand, and that the artificial look that resulted bridged the arts of painting and photography, thus providing the best of both worlds.

Hand-coloring became a skilled craft, that lasted well into the 1960s as a mainstay of portraiture and wedding photography. ❖