

The Photochrom: A Method of Photolithographic Color Printing, 1998-1924

ABSTRACT

The Photochrom, developed in the 1890s in Switzerland and introduced in 1898 at the world exposition in Paris, was one of the more successful attempts to reproduce images in color that preceded actual color photography. The original, secret, patented process was licensed to firms in England and America. William Henry Jackson and the Detroit Publishing Company promoted the process in America, using negatives of Jackson's work and others to produce large numbers of images.

Prints for the most part tend to be scenic views of the American west, Europe, and the Middle East. Images were produced in various sizes from postcard to mammoth plate (17 x 21 inches). Panoramas were also created by joining sheets. They are infrequently seen today, but the bulk of Jackson's work is held in archives in Michigan and Colorado.

Distinctive in appearance, Photochroms can be quite brilliant. Using a black and white negative as the base, they used a form of photolithography with as many as sixteen colors to make the final image. A hard, clear coating distinguishes them from conventional chromolithographs. Unfortunately, as the process was lengthy and labor-intensive, it was inevitably replaced by other, newer techniques.

They can be found unmounted, or mounted to card. Unmounted examples will sometimes be marked on the reverse with a stamp identifying the process. Gold lettering may appear on the lower portion of the recto, identifying the view and sometimes the maker.

As the actual method of production is still a mystery, analytical techniques are being used to identify the materials present in the existing examples. It may be possible to

at least partially reconstruct the process when all the components are known.

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Presented at the Book & Paper Group/Photographic Materials Group Joint Session on Reprographic Processes, AIC 30th Annual Meeting, June 6-11, 2001, Miami, Florida. Received for publication Winter 2002.