

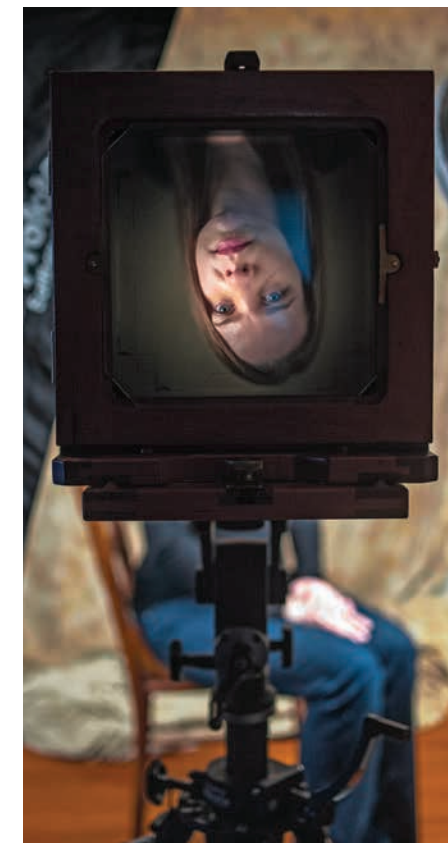
(tin) just his type

Photographer Earl Richardson revives
the rare art of tintype photography



Richardson spent 20 years working for newspapers, including *Lawrence Journal-World*, *Kansas City Star* and *Topeka Capital-Journal*. Now he does portraiture for family and friends.

Earl Richardson commissioned a reproduction of a Civil War-era camera, with original lenses from the mid-1800s.



Earl Richardson has known since childhood how he wanted to make his living. When his dad introduced him to photography, “It was just like somebody flipped a switch. From that point on I knew what I wanted to do professionally.”

Richardson earned a degree in photojournalism from the University of Kansas and spent the next 20 years from 1983 to 2003 working for newspapers, including the *Lawrence Journal-World*, *Kansas City Star* and *Topeka Capital-Journal* as the director of photography until he left to launch a freelance career. Along the way, he earned a law degree to help other photographers with copyright infringement. “I was bored,” he laughs.

These days, he produces high-quality photography for higher-education marketing. He also covers the occasional wedding and does portraiture for friends and family—some of the portraits with a vintage, 1800s appearance. His subjects are in modern dress, but the photos themselves are luminous and imperfect in nature, the result of a chemical photo process Richardson started exploring a couple years ago.

Richardson recently stumbled upon the art of making tintypes, taking photography back to its roots. “I started seeing some images out there with just a really different aesthetic,” he says.

When he first looked into it, the process seemed daunting. But Richardson reconnected with a photographer friend in Kansas City named Jeff Schotland, who had begun experimenting with tintypes and was willing to teach him. “I had a New Year’s resolution at the end of 2013 that I was going to get into tintypes,” Richardson says. After visiting with Schotland he thought, “Okay, I can do that.”

“I think with digital, everything looks too perfect sometimes. It’s nice to have something that feels a little more authentic.”

—EARL RICHARDSON

The process of creating a tintype is known as wet collodion and was developed by Frederick Scott Archer in the early 1850s. “Traditional film has an emulsion that holds light-sensitive silver in place to make your exposure. A collodion is kind of like the emulsion; it’s got collodion (nitrocellulose in alcohol) and ether, and some other chemicals like cadmium bromide. Those get mixed together and you pour them on a plate.”

Richardson says that the name “tintype” is actually a misnomer, as most tintypes weren’t—and still aren’t—made on tin. “They used something else, but they called them tintypes because tin was seen as being a cheap metal.” Richardson makes his tintypes on blackened aluminum, but says that glass or even Plexiglas works.

Wet collodion was a process that was in wide use for a fleeting amount of time, about 20–25 years. “And while it largely fell out of favor because of dry plates and film, it did see very limited use in the 20th century,” Richardson says.

The beauty—and the handicap—of tintype photography, Richardson says, is that everything has to be done while the plate is wet, which leads to some intriguing blemishes. “Most of my tintypes have a thumbprint in them,” he says, grinning.

“What I really find interesting is that even if you shoot the same setup over and over again, no two pictures are going to look alike. They’re all going to be slightly different, and I like the imperfections. I think with digital, everything looks too perfect sometimes. It’s nice to have something that feels a little more authentic.”

Richardson’s tintype “darkroom” consists of a cardboard box covered with a blanket that he takes with him in the field. “You don’t have to have a traditional darkroom. I do everything out of the back of my car when I am away from home,” he says.

It’s not super light sensitive, Richardson says, so you never have to be in complete darkness. It’s not sensitive to red light. As soon as development stops—which takes about 20 seconds—the tintypes are safe to be in broad daylight. “So you have this wonderful 19th-century aesthetic with kind of the immediacy of digital. You’ll have a picture in your hand in under 10 minutes, and an image on that metal that’s probably going to be archival for 150 years.”

And, he says, one doesn’t necessarily have to have an old camera to get started. “Basically you can do this with any sort of camera that you can make a film holder to hold a metal plate that’s wet. I’ve seen people do this with regular 35mm cameras.”

For himself, though, Richardson commissioned a reproduction of a Civil War-era camera. “It’s nothing fancy,” he says. “It’s basically a beautiful wooden box with a bellows.” Though the camera is a modern reproduction, the lenses are originals from the mid-1800s. “I often wonder, where have these been and what have they seen in the last 140 years?” Richardson says.

Because a tintype is essentially a negative on metal, images are mirrored. And though he’s definitely fond of the metal photographs, “I don’t look at this as my end product,” Richards says. “I look at this as a really nice negative that I can scan in and make big prints from.” He is also not against flipping the images digitally so that the print displays the image correctly. But, he says, “There are purists who won’t do that.”

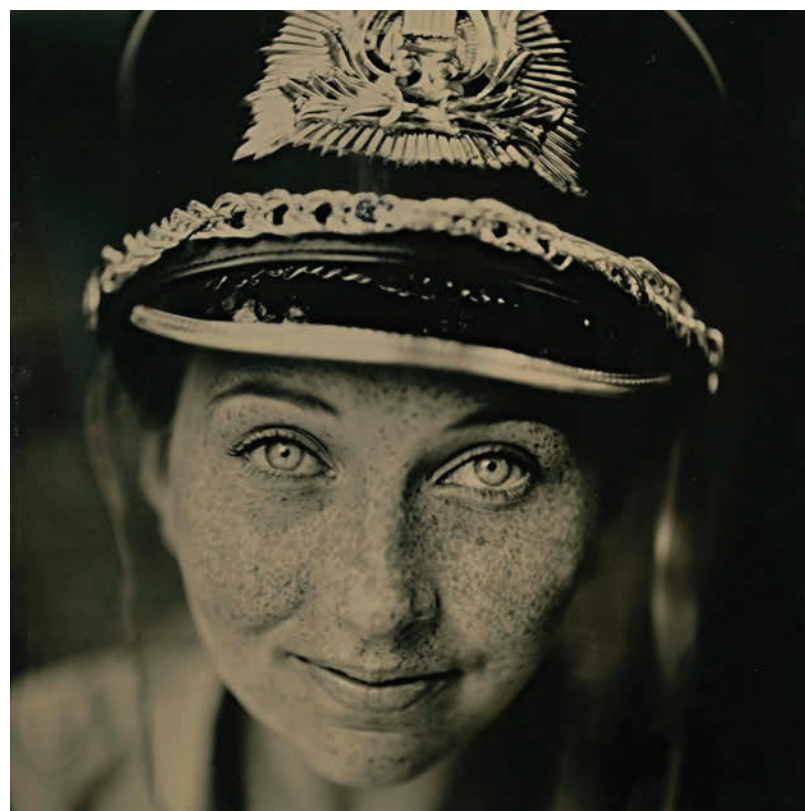
Richards often thinks about the tintype photographers who came before him. “It blows me away to think about all of those people during the Civil War taking all this stuff out in a horse-drawn wagon to a battlefield and making pictures, in pretty terrible conditions a lot of the time.”

Meanwhile, Richardson is able to talk about wet collodion with a Facebook group of enthusiasts who share tips and techniques.

“I think it’s a lot like cooking. You have to do it by experience and feel.” **KM**



Hannah Heatherman is a senior at Ottawa High School and the drum major for the marching band. Her father commissioned Earl Richardson to shoot wet plate senior pictures for Hannah in fall 2015.



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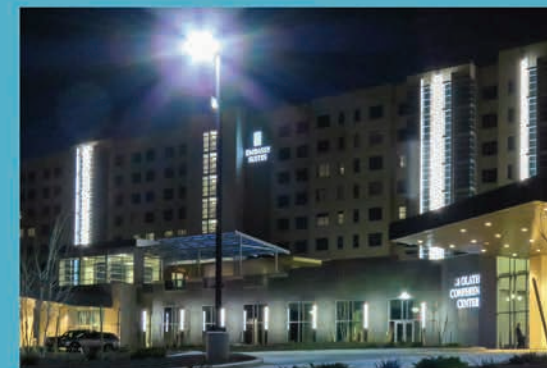
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