

Platinum Paper Tins

Caroline Minchew

The Platinotype Company and other manufacturers of sensitized platinum papers sold their products in airtight metal storage tubes with a calcium chloride desiccant to keep the contents dark and dry. Platinum paper's sensitivity to light and humidity required that the tubes be resealable in order to prevent the ingress of moisture that would decrease the papers' shelf life.

The tins, or "calcium tubes," were cylindrical canisters made from soldered iron sheet metal, and they were essential tools of photographic artists working in platinum.

Portraits of photographers with their platinum tins demonstrate the central role these containers played for artists such as Edward Weston (1886–1958) and Margrethe Mather (1886–1952) (fig. 1).¹

The design of the tin included a slip-on or screw-on top. An elastic India-rubber band slipped over the joints to help to make them airtight.² Patented storage tubes, which could be purchased directly from photographic supply firms such as the Platinotype Company and E. & H. T. Anthony Company, featured a main compartment that held the paper, some with a perforated false bottom that housed the calcium chloride preservative (fig. 2). Storage tubes were also advertised in shorter lengths for storing

cut pieces of sensitized paper and making paper easier to transport.³ Alternatively, the local tin man could custom-make canisters to order.⁴ The market for this type of tin was not exclusive to platinum printing. E. & H. T. Anthony advertised similar Anthony's Safety Cans for preserving both sensitized albumen and platinum papers.⁵

The desiccant was commonly mixed with a fibrous material (often asbestos) and wrapped in a muslin or paper packet. If the desiccant became damp, the packet could be removed and heated until it returned to its dry state



Figure 1. Imogen Cunningham, *Edward Weston and Margrethe Mather, Platinum Rolls*, c. 1922. Gelatin silver print, 20.4 × 16.5 cm. © The Imogen Cunningham Trust.

APPARATUS.

PATENT
STORAGE
TUBES.



WITH SUPPLY
OF CALCIUM,
COMPLETE.



2a

Figure 2. Examples of storage containers for sensitized paper.
2a. The Platinotype Company's patented storage tube. From Platinotype Company, *Instructions for Platinotype Printing: Simplest Photographic Process* (London: Platinotype Company, n.d.), 27. Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of American History Library.

2b

2b. E. & H. T. Anthony Company's storage tube. From E. & H. T. Anthony Company, "Anthony's Safety Cans," *Illustrated Catalog of Photographic Equipment and Materials for Amateurs*, 1891 (New York: E. & H. T. Anthony Company, January 1891), 94. The cutaway illustrates the perforated bottom with the desiccant packet.

(fig. 3).⁶ Interleaving paper helped to prevent direct contact of the desiccant packet with the paper, which otherwise could cause the paper to spoil.

The labels of platinum tins were imprinted with product details including the image tone, texture, thickness, dimensions, and sometimes the date of manufacture or product expiration, as well as basic printing instructions (fig. 4). A separate leaflet was often included that provided detailed processing directions, information regarding new products, and recent modifications of the printing process.

Photographers' dependency on the platinum tins extended through decades, and some found new and unique

ways to use them. After harbor authorities stopped the early commercial photographer Frank Meadow Sutcliffe (1853–1941) from dumping his used Platinotype tins into the sea at the English resort town of Whitby, he repurposed them as ventilation pipes for his darkroom (fig. 5).⁷ As late as the 1970s the ubiquitous platinum tin continued to be an essential tool of platinum artists. The photographer Laura Gilpin (1891–1979) used her old Willis & Clements tins, with a piece of silica gel as a desiccant, to store her hand-sensitized paper long after the Platinotype Company ceased production of its sensitized products.⁸



3a



3b

Figure 3. Desiccant packets for Columbian Photo Paper Company's Water Tone Platinum Paper storage tubes, c. 1900, 2.0 × 2.0 × 4.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Photograph Conservation Department.

- 3a. One side of the packet identifies the contents.
 3b. The other side provides directions for reheating the desiccant if it became damp.



Figure 4. An unopened Platinotype paper tin and its original box, Quality AA, 5 × 4 in., 24 sheets. Courtesy the photographic study collection of Rob McElroy, Buffalo, N.Y.

Notes

1. See also Margrethe Mather's portrait of Edward Weston, plate 1 on page 28, in this volume, and Alvin Langdon Coburn's portrait of Clarence H. White, figure 1 in Sarah S. Wagner, "Manufactured Platinum and Faux Platinum Papers, 1880s–1920s," in this volume.
2. Abney and Clark 1898, 70. The Platinotype Company used slip-on tops, but the Britannia Works Company, known as Ilford Ltd. after 1900, used a screw-top tin for its platinum paper, Platona, which was on the market between 1899 and 1916. An example of this container is in the Photograph Conservation Department Study Collection, National Gallery of Art. See Wagner, "Manufactured Platinum and Faux Platinum Papers," in this volume.
3. Platinotype Company 1883.
4. Abney and Clark 1898, 71.
5. E. & H. T. Anthony 1891, 94.
6. Woodbury 1896, 381.
7. Sutcliffe 1902, 317.
8. Rexroth 1977, 32.

Old Platinotype Tins.

BY FRANK M. SUTCLIFFE.

WHETHER photographs, profits, or honour increase or not, empty platinotype tins do. They are so smooth and bright, it seems a pity to throw them away, especially as my only way of getting rid of them, now that the harbour authorities have stopped me from throwing them into the harbour, is to pay a man half-a-crown to carry them in a sack and empty them down the shaft of a disused ironstone mine.

When my studio was being built, the builder and I never fell out, but we came near doing so once or twice on the matter of ventilation. He let me have my own way in the dark-room, for he did not understand such places, so I had two doors, one opposite the other, two movable windows on opposite sides, one patent ventilator let into a chimney flue; I believe this was a second-hand one, which had been fixed in someone's bedroom, but which had been taken away because of the noise it made; then there was a hole two feet square in the ceiling, and two iron ventilators in the outer wall. Total, eight. There is no lamp or gas inside the room, but to illumine the red window, which looks into another room, is a gas burner. I wanted the builder to put a ventilator in the ceiling of this room, but he would not; he said that the three iron gratings he had put into the wall, the two doors, and the window, which could be opened at will, were quite enough. I asked him how he was going to get rid of the foul air from the gas burner. He said he had never heard of anyone complain of a gas burner before, and that many shopkeepers warmed their shops by keeping the gas lit.

I knew he was wrong, and that the smell from the gas burner would be unbearable if the weather should be too cold to sit with the window open. So I got an incandescent mantle put on in place of the bat's-wing burner; but this did not act, for there was no way of raising or lowering the light, so the incandescent burner was taken off and the old one replaced, for had I not caught sight of a lot of empty platinotype tins, which suggested an efficient ventilator?

By taking the bottoms off these and joining them together and letting one end of the long tube into the chimney flue,



NOCTURNE.

BY DAVID BLOUNT.

and placing the other over the gas, all the vitiated air from the burner is carried away.

I am now saving up all empty platinotype tins. I see a great future for them. I was in the kitchen of a new house last week, which is being built by a firm of London architects. The workmen were sitting round the kitchen range smoking their pipes. Though the fire was burning, I could smell the tobacco all over the house. Therefore, the smell of the cooking will escape also. My platinotype tins will cure this. By cutting a hole in the corner of the ceiling, and carrying up a tube of tins through one corner of the bedroom above into the outer air, any room could be well ventilated.

If anyone wishes to know how badly empty platinotype tins are needed, let him, some evening, after a lamp or the gas has been burning in a room, mount a pair of steps to hang a new picture.

In shop windows, too, empty platinum tins are useful. Before I put an outlet for the heated air in my shop window, overlooked by the builder, of course, they were always steaming.

Other uses may suggest themselves to the ingenious reader.

Figure 5. Frank M. Sutcliffe, "Old Platinotype Tins," *Amateur Photographer* 36, no. 915 (April 17, 1902): 317.

References

Abney and Clark 1898 Abney, Sir William de Wiveleslie, and Lyonel Clark. *Platinotype: Its Preparation and Manipulation*. New York: Scoville & Adams, 1898.

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