

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

TINTYPES OF SOUTHEAST TEXAS 1850-1870



Icehouse Museum

Silsbee, Texas

www.icehousemuseum.org

The idea for this exhibit came quite by accident. Late one afternoon a woman donated a treasured family album to the museum. As I opened the blue, padded, satin album, I was thrilled to see an original collection of Civil War Era photographs of distant, and unnamed relatives. I filled in the paperwork and admitted them into the archives.

Many of the tintypes of the collection were in poor condition, understandable because most of them were at least 170 years old. Many of them were dark with a shadow of a face, while others were better. As I began to process the photography in, I scanned one of the darkest, smallest tintypes. As the image appeared on my screen in a much larger format it literally took my breath away. For “out of the shadows” appeared a woman’s face unlike what I had predetermined her to be. My mind told me she was an old woman with an unpleasant disposition dressed in dark clothing. However, on my computer screen, my eyes saw a beautiful young woman of around 19 years of age, clearly in mourning dress and pose. As I enlarged the tintype on my screen, I saw the details of her dress, the simple brooch, the pinned back soft hair, the sad posed face. I began to experience what the young woman experienced as she prepared for this photo, and to imagine fussy, old women reminding her to show respect. An exhibit formed in my mind.

Today it is possible to allow technology to finish telling the story. Technology allows us to scan and to enhance, to correct and to clean. It also allows us to enlarge so that the person behind the shadows and grit of 170 years can step back into a life-sized image, better than the original. Technology allows us to teach and retrieve days from long ago.

Nine images were selected from the blue satin album. Each image was placed into Photoshop and painstakingly cleaned and repaired by hand. Photoshop has a command that

allows the user to “clone” pixels from one area, and place them over another area. In case of scratches and missing sections of the photo, pixels are picked up immediately next to the blemish and deposited over the scar. In the cases where parts of the face (such as an eye) were missing, pixels can be lifted from the other eye and placed over the damage so that the eye can be slowly, carefully reconstructed, as a conservationist carefully repairs an ancient manuscript. In some cases, the graphic artist is required to recreate sections of the damage by painting in Photoshop. Digital brushes are selected, and the “paint” is selected from the surrounding pigments with a digital eyedropper—digitally matching the original colors.

Enlargement of the tintype to life-size proved to be quite challenging. Small images often do not have enough digital data, or pixels to clone, and the image becomes blurry as it is enlarged. Enlarging the image involved selecting areas and “sharpening” them, and then sometimes the areas had to be brushed as though they were painted to smooth the surface. Edges, such as facial features, edges of the face, the coat, or whatever appears blurry often involved redrawing the edges and blending with digital brushes to preserve its original appearance, like an archaeologist blending a piece of bone into a fossil for exhibition. In one photo of a young woman, the original tintype was 1 inch by 2 inches, with her clothing and facial features (and her black lace gloves) completely hidden. Watching her emerge from the shadows through the brilliance of technology and the eyes and hands of a living human being is what brought these long-gone-souls, and this exhibit, to life.

Careful consideration was given to preservation in every way, and the life-sized portrait was displayed next to the original for accurate comparison. The color that exists in the faces, such as the pink in the cheeks and blue in the eyes was strictly left alone, because this was hand-tinted by the photographer at the time the image was created. Imperfections are a part of the story, and they were embraced. Often the tinting was unseen until the image was enlarged. If pixels could be enhanced in the photograph to tell the story, it was allowed conservatively. For example, one of the images looks as though one man is sitting in the lap of another man. By selecting the pigments surrounding their knees and lightening and sharpening them, it was clear that both men had their legs crossed while sitting close together.

We are beginning to learn to use technology in innovative ways to engage our audiences in new and different methods. Blending historic media with technology and graphic design only enhances and completes the story that began the day the photo was taken. The tintypes and enlargements are displayed in the museum prominently, as well as online. In the case of “Out of The Shadows” technology allowed the people to step forward to meet the people of the 21st Century.

The Graphic Artist in “Out of the Shadows” was Susan Kilcrease, Museum Curator