

What you should know about the “Magic Moment”:

What would YouTube videos of people demonstrating the wet-plate process be without the “Magic Moment”? What tintype Pop-up Artist gig could make a buck unless they had it in their bag of tricks? And, what live or virtual wet-plate photography demo or workshop could get by without it being prominently featured and thoroughly pumped up? I’ll stop here and explain to the uninitiated what the “magic moment” or the sweet M&M of the modern wet-plate collodion photography movement is. Here’s how it goes: When it comes time to fix the developed and rinsed tintype or ambrotype plate, it is done in a tray or clear sided dip tank outside of the darkroom situation in room light or subdued daylight. This works fine and presents no problems, as long as it’s not done in bright direct sunlight, which could cause slight solarization issues in the highlights of the image. This we know, and has been known since the dawn of the wet-plate process. What makes the magic moment *the* “magic moment” is the show. That’s exactly what it is when it’s done with the expressed purpose to show all on-lookers the developed image magically coming out of a blue cloud, to become a fine positive. This chemical reaction generally takes place in just a matter of seconds, when using the traditional Potassium Cyanide Fixer and usually a little longer using Hypo and other sorts of fixer chemistry. It truly is eye candy and great “alchemy”. It is a thrill to watch every time. People who have not seen it before are often completely wowed, and some have even been moved to the point of tears when the image coming out of the mist is of them and their loved ones. Many sitters and on-lookers video the procedure using their phones, making it hard to see sometimes what’s going on, there are so many phones hovering over the tray! The phone videos are instantly sent over social media to rave reviews. At the beginning of wet-plate photography’s inception and right up into the early 2000’s, the magic moment certainly took place, but the spectacle potential had not been realized yet. This dance is a relatively new phenomenon in wet-plate photography. In recent years it has become downright expected and routine. Virtually none of the early practitioners of the process in the 19th, 20th, or even first few years of the early 21th century ever gave it much thought that way. The plate was just fixed, in a dip tank, filled with the fixing solution of your choice.

It was all done in a darkroom or such workspace and then the still wet fully formed image might be shown in a rinse tray to a waiting customer and on-lookers. It seemed to be enough that everyone was amazed a picture could be made by an ancient process so fast. Faster than Photo-Mat was the joke line usually tossed out. But, going all the way back to the 19th century, it was far more customary for the sitter to not see their ambrotype or tintype likeness till it was all done, cheeks rosed, and in a fine case or paper mat. In more recent times it was considered by some to be a danger to fix a plate in an open tray of Potassium Cyanide solution. The fear was that there would be hazardous levels of deadly cyanide gas leaching out of it right into everyone's faces. It was certainly not anything a "**RESPONSIBLE** collodion artist" would do, was the consensus. That is till I came along. Here's how it went: In 2003, I decided it was time to make the world's first Mammoth Plate Tintype. The largest tintypes of the 19th century had been only 11x14 in size. Mine would be a record breaking 20x24 and would be an authentic Ferrottype. In the offing I decided to skip making a Mammoth plate size fixing bath. It had been challenging enough to make a Silver Bath for plates that large. I reasoned that, working in a well ventilate space, any leaching out of cyanide gas from a tray used for the purpose of fixing would be inconsequential. Some thought I would die in the act. Obviously they were wrong, as I churned out Mammoth Plate after Mammoth Plate to rave reviews in my shows in New York City, Santa Fe, and other galleries across the country. Fixing with my always preferred Potassium Cyanide Fixer in a tray worked so well, I soon abandoned the dip tank for any size plate for my own work, and in the workshops I teach. The students instantly loved it and some called it nothing short of "magic". And, so, the "magic moment" was born. As time went on, when I did demos at my art shows, I always gathered the group around me as I poured the cyanide solution from its well labeled plastic laboratory grade bottle onto the plate in a tray to fix the positive image out. In response, shrieks of wonderment and sometimes, "Do it again John!" were heard. It was clearly a crowd pleaser. The "magic moment" has proven to be one of many innovations from out of the mind of Camp Tintype that could have been done in the 19th century, like Mammoth Plate Tintypes, but just wasn't. Now the "magic moment" and even the making of Mammoth Tintypes has become common place throughout the world and the rest is wet-

plate history. Eventually my new improved developing procedure known as the “Enhanced Nuance” method will go the same way, I’m sure. Remember and know. JC 2021 and beyond.