

Myth of the "HOT FINGERTIPS"

Hello, and welcome to the hot fingertips "Twilight Zone" of wet-plate photography! Here's how it goes: When pouring collodion on your plate via the tried and true "waiter tray" style method, whereby the plate is supported by your finger tips from beneath, the heat of your fingertips will magically go through the glass (supposedly only happens with glass plates) causing the collodion film on the plate to quickly dry down at those points where your fingers had been on the back and, thus, become less able to be sensitized when the plate is placed in the Silver Bath and in the end gives you five dark spots on the final image. Wowy Zowy! That sounds so scientific and reasonable, doesn't it? But, does it really happen? HECK NO! In my nearly thirty years of pouring plates, from the little ninth plate size to 20 x 24 Mammoths, has it ever happened to me, or to any of my many, many apprentices, or hundreds of students? Nope! Nor have any reported back to me that such a thing has ever happened to them.

But, wait! Believe It or Not, there is a flip flop version of the Hot Fingertips boogie-man also stalking the modern day wet-plate world, these days. In this version you don't get dark spots but rather white spots! Again, only happens with glass plates. One You-Tube version of how to pour a plate says only when it's below 50 degrees F. Another says at any temperature. But, supposedly it's not a problem ever when shooting Tintypes, the real Ferrotypes kind or the not so real cheap aluminum kind. Just glass and only glass. They say you must use the awkward "cantilever" plate pouring style when using glass to avoid this major, major problem. The reason they say that you get white spots from the heat of your fingertips radiating through the glass is that your fingertip heat is activating the silver in the collodion, making it hyper active at these points. As complicated as this is getting, I hope that you, dear reader, are still with me.

Now for the debunking part: How is it an eighth inch thick piece of glass can conduct heat from your tips through to the freshly poured and cooling (via rapid evaporation of the ether and alcohol in it) collodion coated plate far more readily than a much thinner, way more heat conductive tin or aluminum plate defies all the basic laws of thermodynamics! If you have ever varnished a wet-plate image by the standard traditional method, you know already that it takes much longer for glass to heat up than a metal plate. Yep, thermodynamics seems to work no problem there!

And then there's the problem of how can the Silver in the collodion get over-activated when there's not an atom of Silver in it or on it till it goes into the Silver Bath? And even then sensitization isn't at all instant but takes a full three minutes of soaking. If there was any fingertip heat lingering in the glass, the cool bath would almost instantly suck it out before it could do any harm.

Again, in all my years of doing wet-plate, I have never had any white spot problems due to fingertip heat using the "waiter-tray" style of pouring plates, glass or tin. Same goes for any of my students or apprentices.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, the purveyors of wet-plate fear and paranoia at one time preached that the heat of your fingertips using the "waiter-tray" method while varnishing your glass negs or ambrotypes (not tintypes), would cause dull flat "dead spots" in the varnished image (see "The Collodion Journal" #17, page 6, fourth paragraph). This proved just too big a flounder for anyone to choke down for very long and it was soon swept under the rug and forgotten about. May all the Hot Fingertip rubbish, dark spot, white spot, blue spot, green spot, whatever, meet the same fate!