

Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period

Kristina Wilson, Associate Professor of Art History, Clark University

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In 1904, the Worcester Art Museum staged one of the first exhibitions of photography in a U.S. museum, featuring the works of photographers from across the country, as well as local amateurs. This winter, WAM offers another example of its cutting-edge support of photography with its exhibition *Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period*. Nancy Burns, Assistant Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, and I co-curated *Cyanotypes*, which is the first major museum exhibition in the U.S. to examine the 150-year history of this distinctive, blue-tinted photographic process. It not only resurrects the history of a largely overlooked technique, but also establishes a chronology of key figures and highlights some of the expressive qualities of these insistently blue works. The exhibition features one of the earliest examples of a cyanotype, a photogram of a honey locust leaf made by the British botanist Anna Atkins in 1854. It also includes a variety of cyanotypes taken in and around Worcester in the late nineteenth century (some of which might have been part of that original 1904 exhibition). And, it shows how artists working in the late twentieth century and in the contemporary moment have adopted this historical process to create incredibly diverse, expressive works that speak to issues in today's world.

Cyanotypes: in and out of focus

Almost immediately after the cyanotype process was invented in 1842 by British scientist Sir John Herschel, Anna Atkins began exploring the medium over several decades in a series of prints to accompany her studies of British algae and British and American ferns. From the 1870s through World War I, cyanotypes became popular among amateur photographers because it was a quick and easy way to produce a photographic image. One simply had to procure readily available chemical solutions of iron and salt, mix them together, and brush them onto absorbent paper. Once the paper had dried, it was ready to be exposed in the sunlight. Since cyanotypes did not require a darkroom, they were frequently made by those new to photography. However, even established artists, such as F. Holland Day, Paul B. Haviland, and Arthur Wesley Dow—all represented in the exhibition—were captivated by the possibilities of printing entirely in blue and created cyanotypes with subtle variations in tonality that resonate poetically.

The cyanotype largely disappeared after World War I, persisting only as an inexpensive copying process in architecture and engineering (where it was commonly known as a “blueprint”). Relegated to a forgotten corner of photography history, cyanotypes are not even mentioned in most historical accounts of the medium. The process was resurrected, first in the 1950s, by Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, and again in the 1970s by photographers attracted to its capacity for abstraction and to the idea of making photographs in the sun. More recently, a diverse group of contemporary artists, including Christian Marclay and Meghann

Riepenhoff, have explored the expressive potential of the cyanotype process. These include printing on different materials, experimenting with variations on the blue tint to comment on how racial color is depicted in our culture, and working with photograms and abstraction to create meditative pieces of subtle beauty. With its focus on the singular process and artistic range of the cyanotype, this exhibition offers a major contribution to the history of photography.



Empowering students through collaboration

Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period is a cutting-edge exhibition not only in its scholarship, but also in the model it offers for collaboration and education among Worcester institutions. Co-curators Nancy Burns and Kristina Wilson wanted to teach college students how to put together a museum exhibition. Together they developed and, in the fall of 2015, taught a seminar for upper-level Clark University art history students, focusing on cyanotypes. Each student was assigned an individual work of art in the exhibition to study. Through extensive research, as well as conversations with experts across the country, they learned about the cyanotype process and the objects in the show. Each student also wrote a short essay that will be published in the *Cyanotypes* catalog (available February 15).

The Clark students also were instrumental in developing the exhibition. They met with many different departments at the Museum to learn how an exhibition is designed, installed, and shared with the community. They also wrote object labels and blogged about their experience on social media. “By participating in this ground-breaking project, these students have helped to do nothing less than write a history of the cyanotype, one of photography's most over-looked processes,” says Professor Wilson. “That's an experience they will never forget.”



Kristina Wilson, Nancy Burns, and Hannah Jaffe

Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period Opening Reception
Thursday, February 18, 2016 6pm

Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period is sponsored in part by Skinner Auctioneers and Clark University.

Reflections on Cyanotypes

Hannah Jaffe, Clark University, Class of 2016

Hannah Jaffe, Clark University Class of 2016, was a Clark LEEP (Liberal Education and Effective Practice) Fellow at WAM during the summer of 2015. She was also one of 11 students who, in the fall of 2015, participated in a special Cyanotypes seminar, taught by Kristina Wilson, Associate Professor of Art History at Clark, and Nancy Burns, Assistant Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs. We asked Hannah to reflect on her experience as part of the team that produced the exhibition, Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period, and the accompanying catalog.

This past summer, I had my first glimpse into the world of exhibition planning and curatorial work. In the planning of an exhibition, everything is thought out, from the frames used to the color of the walls. My specific work was researching the artists who will be featured in *Cyanotypes*, in addition to creating a scaled-to-size maquette, or small model, of the show. To create this maquette, I scaled photographs of all of the pieces to be displayed, so that they would fit into a miniature foam-board-representation of the exhibition; this work was critical for the planning and laying out process. I also had the opportunity to visit the studios of two photographers in the Boston area, Jesseca Ferguson and Laura Blacklow. While in Ferguson's studio, I was able to witness the process of creating a cyanotype for the first time. It was so incredible to be able to contextualize cyanotypes through seeing actual contemporary artists at work.

In the *Cyanotypes* seminar at Clark University, I, along with ten other students, have been devoted to conducting research for the exhibition catalog. As we each worked independently to uncover information about our specific artists, we also unearthed the ways in which all of the works interact with one another. Throughout this course,

we have become passionate about our respective artists, this exhibition, and, in the general sense, cyanotypes. Because there is still a great deal left to be uncovered about cyanotypes, we feel that the work we are doing is exciting, challenging, and daunting. We now see value in the color blue in a way that we never have before, and recognize the lofty, ethereal quality of this color and what it does for a photograph.

Exhibition catalogs

The following publications are available for purchase in the Museum Shop. For more information, please call 508.793.4355.

Frederick Coulson: Blueprints of a Golden Age

By James A. Welu, director emeritus of the Worcester Art Museum. This beautiful book showcases the remarkable cyanotypes of Worcester-based photographer Frederick Coulson, who had close ties to WAM founder Stephen Salisbury III. \$24.95

Cyanotypes: Photography's Blue Period

Edited by Nancy Burns, Assistant Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, Worcester Art Museum, and Kristina Wilson, Associate Professor of Art History, Clark University. \$19.95

The exhibition catalog features scholarly essays on the history and conservation of the cyanotype by Nancy Burns, Kristina Wilson, and WAM paper conservator Eliza Spaulding. It also includes focused essays on twelve works of art from the exhibition, written by students in the Clark University seminar.

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Right: Frederick K. Coulson, *Untitled (Workman with Book)*, May 31, 1894, cyanotype on cream wove paper, Eliza S. Paine Fund, 2010.270.49

