

History and stylistic evolution of gelatin silver developing out paper

Paul Messier¹

Ubiquitous and ordinary, the “black and white” photograph represents one of the most significant, widespread and accessible imaging technologies in history. This success is owed to the rare combination of attributes possessed by gelatin silver developing out papers. Well-processed and properly stored, a gelatin silver print has outstanding permanence especially as compared to almost any other photographic printing process. Gelatin silver papers have reliable handling properties in the darkroom, allowing quick and large-scale production by amateurs and professionals alike. Capable of subtle manipulations and available in great variety, the paper is a versatile medium for artistic expression, bearing masterworks of modern and contemporary art.

The origins of black and white papers are found in the late 19th century where silver bromide and silver chloride gelatin emulsions were coated onto baryta coated papers for the first time. These papers were generally poorly received in part due to a lack of experience handling the new, highly light sensitive, papers. So called “gas light” papers addressed these handling problems by reducing light sensitivity thereby allowing photographers to make contact prints under low light conditions in a manner somewhat familiar to those accustomed to the preceding generations of printing out papers. Though hugely successful in the amateur market, the advent of electric light enlargers in the late 1910’s and 1920’s and the increasing popularity of smaller format cameras gradually helped to supplant gaslight papers and provided new opportunities for paper manufactures. A new generation of “enlarging” or “projection” papers resulted, forever moving photographic printing into the darkroom. By the early 1930’s the dominance of gelatin silver developing out papers as a photographic printing medium was firmly established and assured. Competition among numerous manufactures promoted a tremendous diversity as papers were produced with almost no limit to the combinations of paper color, weight, texture and sheen. In the 1940’s, these aesthetic and stylistic achievements were overshadowed by wartime shortages and new requirements for prints made quickly and cheaply. Following the war, manufacturers and photographers alike focused increasing levels of attention to color print materials. While a large variety of black and white papers remained available, manufactures gradually provided fewer and fewer choices. Consolidation among manufactures also served to limit options for the black and white photographer. By the late 1960’s, black and white photography showed some remaining vitality as an art making medium as color printing firmly and forever changed the work habits of photographers. During this period the market for black and white papers continued to decline, with fewer and fewer manufactures, brands and surfaces. By 2005 when Eastman Kodak announced the inevitable decision to stop production of gelatin silver papers, the impact was almost incidental within the larger context of the shift from silver halide-based photography to digital imaging,

With darkrooms shutting down, photographers, curators, collectors and conservators are being challenged to mark the historic transition away from chemical photography and interpret the gains and losses. Part of this accounting is the growing realization that any understanding of a photographic print must include a comprehension of the historical development, expressive potential and stylistic qualities of photographic paper.

¹ Conservator of Photographs, Paul Messier LLC, Boston, MA 02135, USA, 617 782 7110, pm@paulmessier.com