Blue revival
Exhibit examines rise, fall, and rise again of cyanotype photographic process

By Nancy Sheehan
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Do you dream in color or blue and white? The answer might well be the latter after immersing yourself in the intensely blue tones of a groundbreaking new exhibition at Worcester Art Museum. “Cyanotype: Photography’s Blue Period,” which opened Jan. 16 and runs through April 24, takes a comprehensive look at an early photographic process that enjoyed great popularity until it was eclipsed by more sophisticated methods that taught us to see the world in black and white. The show is the first major exhibition in the United States to examine the cyanotype from its historical roots through its modern resurgence.

The early popularity of cyanotypes arose in large part from the simplicity of the process. In its most basic form, making a cyanotype image merely requires coating paper or cloth with iron-based chemicals in a darkened area then exposing the prepared material to the sun or some other source of ultraviolet light. Images can be produced by laying photographic negatives or an object – a leaf, flower, whatever – upon the treated surface. The areas exposed to light will turn vivid shades of blue after being washed in water.

The method was popular among amateurs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and considered a more pedestrian pursuit rather than a fine art process. Today, however, there are a number of preeminent artists and photographers working with the medium. The WAM show traces that historical arc and also the artistic impact of cyanotypes.

A lot of the scholarship to date has mostly been about the technical aspects of the process, but the WAM show takes that a step further, according to Kristina Wilson, associate professor of visual and performing arts at Clark University. Wilson was co-curator of the show with Nancy Kathryn Burns, WAM’s assistant curator of prints, drawings and photographs. “Our shared interests were more how cyanotypes are meaningful as works of art and what is the resonance of this blue,” Wilson said.

“And also what has been their social status because there has been this really interesting shift from the early 20th century ‘til now.”

After fading into relative obscurity after World War I and before its rediscovery, the method hung on primarily as a way to make copies of architectural drawings, hence the use of the term “blueprints” that most people are familiar with, and also in some medical applications illustrated by blue-toned X-rays in the WAM show.

The change from lowly status to cutting edge avant garde began after a handful of noted artists, including Barbara Kasten, began to revive the process in the 1970s. The WAM show includes one of Kasten’s works, an untitled 1975 photogenic paint-

ing, a graceful abstraction that ably demonstrates how contemporary artists have pushed the boundaries of the medium. Cyanotype had become a fast-growing trend among contemporary artists by the mid-1990s.

“It’s not a coincidence that that’s the time that digital starts really getting its foothold in the fine art establishment,” Burns said. “And cyanotypes aren’t unique in that a lot of artists were revisiting many very crafty, hands-on, early antique processes all of these kind of obscure resurrected processes.”

While many of the other early methods have gotten some play in museum shows, cyanotypes have not, Burns said. “While you see them show up in some exhibitions on early photography and even in comparisons to later photography, they’re never exclusively about the cyanotype.” Until the current WAM show, that is – and even that was not initially intended to be the definitive cyanotype showcase it ended up being.

The exhibition’s concept arose from a group of cyanotypes by Worcester photographer Frederick K. Coulson, whose father happened to be the gardener for WAM founder Stephen Salisbury III. Burns’ interest in the images, most of them dated between 1890 and 1908, spurred her to

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contact Wilson, an artistic and intellectual colleague she had known for about 10 years and with whom she had long wanted to collaborate. Wilson also involved a group of Clark students in the project.

“Nancy had this group of cyanotypes in the collection that not a whole lot of research had been done on and there hadn’t been a lot of opportunities to show them,” Wilson said. “So that presented itself as what at the time we thought would be a nice, contained small project, but it rapidly spiraled out of control.”

What happened was they had hit upon a serendipitous combination of an underrepresented historical method that was enjoying new-found traction in the contemporary art world. “I was shocked at the number of people who approached us to try and get into this exhibition, not the other way around,” Burns said. The pitches came from private collectors, galleries and artists. “I had lots and lots of artists sending me stuff,” Burns said. “It eventually got to the point where I had to say ‘Our checklist is full. We can’t accept more work.’”

The show’s historical arc begins with “Honey Locust Leaf and Pod,” a circa 1854 image by Anna Atkins. An English botanist and photographer, Atkins is known for her pictograms, or cyanotypes made with objects rather than photographic negatives. Her book on English algae, particularly seaweed, is considered by many to be the first book ever published that was illustrated by a photographic process. Atkins’ early-adopter status probably owes to her friendship with Sir John Herschel, an English scientist and mathematician who invented the cyanotype process in 1842.

The other end of the arc stretches over more than a century and a half to a 2014 diptych titled “Moonescape-Moon” by Boston artist Jessica Ferguson. Though new, the work looks a bit like an antique etching as it evinces much greater detail than most early cyanotypes seemed to capture. So why does Ferguson choose to work in an older medium at a time when the mainstream – including museums – is so enamored with digital?

“I like cyanotype because it is the underdog or sort of disregarded and seen as more lowly,” she said. “But it’s incredibly cheap compared to platinum or something like that, so it’s very accessible, but then there’s kind of a challenge to use this somewhat primitive process to get an image with nuance and mystery and beauty. That appeals to me, and also the color blue is kind of mystical for me.”

Between Atkins’ and Ferguson’s eras are works by a range of photographers and artists from the well-known, such as Edward Streichen, F. Holland Day and Edward S. Curtis, to unattributed early images of local scenes, including views of South Street in Westboro and Worcester City Hall.

Streichen, who died in 1973, might have cringed had he known that one of his works would be included in a show of cyanotypes because he preferred to keep to himself the fact that he occasionally used in a finished work an uncomplicated pro-
Nancy Kathryn Burns, assistant curator for prints, drawings and photographs for Worcester Art Museum, and Kristina Wilson, associate professor of visual and performing arts at Clark University, co-curated “Cyanotypes: Photography’s Blue Period,” which opened at WAM Jan. 16. T&G STAFF PHOTOS/CHRISTINE HOCHEPPEL

Moonscape - moon (constructed) and Moonscape - mountains (constructed), by Jesseca Ferguson, 2014, both cyanotype, gum bichromate, 19th c. book board, part of the Cyanotype: Photography’s Blue Period” exhibition at WAM.
Blue moon diptych (constructed), by Jesseca Ferguson, 2006, cyanotype, 19th c. book boards, found paper, ink, colored pencil. T&G STAFF PHOTOS/CHRISTINE HOCHKEPPEL