

# Back Burner

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## PRESERVATION



# Back to the Future

At Chicago Albumen Works, photographic images are reclaimed and restored using a variety of new techniques and some surprising old ones

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**W**hen it came time for

the Norman Rockwell Museum, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to restore and digitize thousands of badly deteriorated black-and-white negatives for the museum's current exhibition, *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, the institution didn't have to look far afield for help. All the help it needed was based just down the road, in the old Monument Mills factory complex in the village of Housatonic, Massachusetts, at a low-profile, forward-looking visual arts company with the unlikely name of Chicago Albumen Works (CAW).

The state of the art, digital-age facility located in a former textile mill building restores, duplicates, prints, and creates digital versions of old photographic negatives using top-of-the-line equipment—just what was necessary to make the exhibition, and the book of the same name by Ron Schick, possible.

"The work started four years ago when we realized we had a real treasure trove of Norman Rockwell's archival records that needed digitization," explains Stephanie Haboush Plunkett, the museum's deputy director and chief curator. "The acetate was literally dissolving and the negatives were becoming unstable. We wanted to record and digitize the negatives and then preserve the originals by putting them into cold storage."

Using the restored negatives, CAW produced the one hundred twenty prints that visitors to Norman Rockwell:

LEFT: CHICAGO ALBUMEN WORKS DIRECTOR DOUG MUNSON AND HEAD OF DIGITAL SERVICES OLEG BABURIN.

## How Doug Munson Does It

**How do you organize your time?**

It organizes me.

**Have you had a mentor?**

John Szarkowski, former curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art.

**Your iPod playlist includes:**

Philip Glass, Miles Davis, *A Briefer History of Time*, "Never Not Funny" podcast.

**Most recent business purchase over \$5,000:**

Sinar 54H digital camera.

**Berkshire-based business you admire:**

Boyd Technologies.

**What metrics do you use to measure the success of your business?**

Customer satisfaction.

**In what ways have advances in technology changed your business?**

The digital tsunami forced us to change totally how we provide preservation and archiving services. The challenge was not so much the new technology, but how to molt from traditional to digital while retaining our same focus and philosophy.



OLEG BABURIN WORKS ON A PHOTO FOR THE MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK.



TODDY AND DOUG MUNSON EXAMINE A GLASS PLATE FROM THE CITY OF DEADWOOD PROJECT.; BELOW: CHICAGO ALBUMEN WORKS HEADQUARTERS IN HOUSATONIC, MASS.

Behind the Camera see on the gallery walls. The company pursues “a very aesthetic approach to the production of the images,” Plunkett continues. “Rather than just printing out what’s there, they take into consideration how viewers will experience the images.”

According to Plunkett, Chicago Albumen has collaborated with the museum over the past two decades. “They were very attentive to this project and very careful about the quality of the images they gave us,” she says. “We feel fortunate to have a company that has such an amazing reputation right down the street. They function with such high quality, this is really their specialty, and we were lucky to be able to take advantage of their expertise.”

Other former Berkshire-based clients range from the Williams College Museum of Art, the Berkshire Athenaeum, the Berkshire Historical Society, and The Clark to the Stockbridge Fire Department and the Tyringham Historical Society. Nationally, the company has worked on major restoration projects for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Museum of Modern Art, and the

Museum of the City of New York (all in Manhattan), as well as the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The company also has served such diverse organizations as the National Park Service, the Gordon Parks Foundation, and the Jack London State Historic Park in California.

Chicago Albumen Works is devoted to the art of preserving the legacy of the camera, and its services focus on traditional techniques as well as digital preservation of photo collections. It can recover and restore deteriorated acetate sheet film going back to the early 1930s, as well as deteriorated microfilm. The company offers one-stop shopping for digitizing and preservation of vintage photo collections, no matter what their source.

The company was created thirty-three years ago in the Windy City by Doug Munson and his partner, Joel Snyder, and relocated to the Berkshires in 1982. Their factory hideaway, a labyrinth of comfortably appointed offices as well as processing studios and darkrooms designed and assembled by



Munson, blends original exposed brickwork with modern oak interior walls and incandescent lighting. Munson’s office walls are adorned with framed original prints.

Munson, the company’s director, and his wife, Dorothy (known as “Toddy” since childhood), oversee a full-time staff of four highly-qualified, well-trained specialists. Snyder remains

president and founding partner, but is no longer involved in the day-to-day operations; he is the chairman of the art history department at the University of Chicago.

“We’re not a mom-and-pop company,” Doug Munson stresses. Annual sales range from \$600,000 to \$700,000, he said, adding that the company is expanding despite the impact of the recession.

A satellite studio opened recently in the Chelsea section of Manhattan to fill a need in New York for a company dedicated to digital archiving of photo or flat-art collections for institutions that don’t have their own in-house facilities.

As members of the photo-materials group at the American Institute for Conservation, the company stresses the

DOUG MUNSON WITH THE SIX-FOOT TRANSPARENCY THAT IS PART OF THE EXHIBITION NORMAN ROCKWELL: BEHIND THE CAMERA, NOW ON VIEW AT THE NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM IN STOCKBRIDGE, MASS.



concept of “reversibility.” “When we make duplicate negatives from a digital file,” Munson explains, “the duplicate has to be so good that it can do anything the original did—a clone, a surrogate.”

**D**oug Munson, a native of Burbank, California, traces his interest in photo restoration to his studies at the University of Chicago, where he acquired a bachelor’s degree in geophysical sciences and a master’s degree in history. “At the same time, I was dabbling in photography,” he recalls. “During that period, there was very little interest in the history of photography. No institutions were collecting photographs. It was really a nascent endeavor in the seventies when we started this company.”

It was through friends at the University of Chicago that Munson was introduced to Snyder, who needed an associate for his contracts with the Smithsonian and with Time-Life Books to re-create the technological history

of photography. They co-produced the historical techniques section of *Light and Film*, a Time-Life volume, and created a wall of about twenty different photo processes for an exhibition at the Smithsonian Museum of History and Technology, which later evolved into the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

Both men were making their living as commercial photographers in Chicago when, in 1975, while preparing a bicentennial catalog for the Museum at the University of Chicago, they asked to borrow photos from Yosemite National Park officials, who sought to hire Snyder and Munson to prepare a publication for sale by the Yosemite Natural History

Association. “That was the beginning of Chicago Albumen Works,” Munson said. “That was the kind of name that quirky new organizations came up with at the time. We were in Chicago and we made albumen prints.” The process, originated in the eighteen-fifties, was an early commercial method of producing a photographic print on a paper base from a negative. It used the albumen found in egg whites to bind the photographic chemicals to the paper and dominated the field until about 1900.

The goal of the new company was to produce prints and portfolios for sale to the general public from original photographic negatives borrowed from museum and archive collections. Munson ex-

plained that techniques that originated in the 1870s were “just as good or better, certainly different from what we could do” a century later. “There’s a certain character in photos that were made and printed then that you can’t reproduce in twentieth-century materials, so you have to go back to the originals.” But the processes used in the late nineteenth century were unstable, prone to fading from light and deterioration from the lack of climate control.

There are similar problems with photographic materials from the twentieth century. The sudden deterioration of acetate film led the Library of Congress to commission the new company to duplicate photos just before they would “go

PRESERVATION

bad” after their typical fifty-year life span. “That contract was a watershed event,” Munson explains, “and that kind of work, making duplicates for preservation, became our bread-and-butter for nearly twenty years, through the nineteen-eighties and nineties.” Clients included museums, archives and private collectors.

The rapidly expanding company moved to Housatonic in 1982, when the low-rent studio space in an artsy, old warehouse area not far from Chicago’s Merchandise Mart was suddenly noticed by the high-end art galleries on Michigan Avenue. “We couldn’t afford the rent anymore, and we were squeezed out, gentrified out,” recalls Munson. He had spent two years in the Berkshires right out of graduate school, teaching photography at the former Stockbridge School during the early 1970s, so he focused on the Berkshires as a most-desirable year-round location. “It’s the cosmopolitan form of country living, and it suited me personally, and it suited the nature of this work.” It was also helpful to be based in the East, with proximity to New York and Boston. Munson kept the original name of the firm because it was already widely recognized at the time. “We haven’t changed anything, we just moved,” he observed. “The principle, the people, the philosophy of what we’re doing is still the same.”

Munson was among the early pioneers renting vacant space at the old textile-mill complex in Housatonic. “It’s worked out quite well for us, because it’s reasonable and we’ve been able to expand when we needed to.” Chicago Albumen remains the anchor tenant, renting close to 4,000 square feet.

As the digital revolution spun at warp speed in the late 1990s, the preservation model that had been used by institutions—making duplicate negatives and freezing the originals—became outmoded as digital archiving became dominant. “We realized that very soon we wouldn’t have a business if we didn’t adapt,” says Munson. “The transition happened much faster than we anticipated.” By 2005, ninety percent of the company’s work involved digital processing, and now it’s nearly totally digital. He acknowledges that the transition was stressful because there



TAKEAWAY

QUALITY FIRST

Changes in technology necessitate changes in procedures, in techniques, and in equipment: what should not change is quality. Success in business is predicated on the best possible product, regardless of the level of technology used.

HONOR THE PAST

As technology shifts, so do methods of record-keeping, both for images and for text. Being aware of storage needs for an organization, and keeping media current, can forestall difficulties in retrieving records in the future. Make sure that important files are stored using software that is supported.

THE RECIPE

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TODDY MUNSON



were no uniform technical specifications since digital technology had evolved so rapidly. Even now, guidelines rather than specs prevail.

The challenge for staffing his company focused on finding specialists conversant with digital imaging who also had a feeling for traditional photography. The key was to create top-quality digital files that could be reversed into traditional processes such as contact prints. But, in an ironic, back-to-the-future twist, Munson pointed out that because digital technology may evolve so rapidly over the next few decades, institutions are realizing that they need to preserve their collections on modern film, which only requires normal climate-controlled office space. “They’ll last a thousand years,” Munson quips. “If they lose their files, they can re-scan that film.”

Even the motion-picture industry, which is rapidly converting to digital film distribution, is preserving its final cuts on film for long-term physical storage. Corporations collect their documents digitally, then preserve their documents on bar-coded microfilm cassettes. “It’s a way of using film, ironically, as a preservation medium for digital archiving,” said Munson.

Going forward, Chicago Albumen is sharply focused on twenty-first-century viability and relevance by maintaining its position as a leader in its highly specialized field by remaining ahead of the technological curve.

“One of the hardest things for someone who’s been in business doing something for a long time is re-inventing themselves,” Munson explains. “In a sense, we didn’t re-invent ourselves; we continued what we were doing with the same philosophy and concerns both for the media and the clients, but we’re doing it with different equipment and a different kind of product.”

“Every time we’ve made one of these transitions, whether from vintage media printing to traditional duplicating to digitizing, we’ve carried something from that earlier phase into the next phase. It’s informed the quality of the next phase. It really does give the quality of the stuff that we produce a step up.” **BBQ**

Clarence Fanto is a regular contributor to BBQ: Berkshire Business Quarterly.