

The Usefulness of *Olympic's Color Photos*

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Introduction

It has been proposed that we look to color photos of the *Olympic* class ships to determine their correct colors. Unfortunately, the only color photos of the *Olympic* class which have been uncovered are two photos in which RMS *Olympic* appears. It may be that other color photos were taken of the *Olympic* class ships but currently there are only two which have been discovered. In this paper, these two photos which have been discovered will be examined to see if they have any value in determining the true colors of the *Olympic* class ships.

The *Olympic* Photos

The first photo which has been known for a number of years is a photo taken by Clifton Adams in 1928. The main subject of the photo is RMS *Mauretania*. Off in the distance, the funnels of *Olympic* can be seen. This is an autochrome photo which has been converted to a digital medium for use on the internet. This photo is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1

Autochrome photo of RMS *Mauretania* with RMS *Olympic* in background

The second *Olympic* photo is also by Clifton Adams taken in 1928. In this photo, *Olympic* is shown in the Southampton floating drydock. Like the first photo, this is also an autochrome photo. The authenticity of this photo was in question until recently but thanks to *Titanic* researcher Boris Mileski, it was found in the National Geographic archives. What makes this photo unusual is that appears underexposed and therefore quite dark. Additionally, it is evident that some sort of red coloring has been added to the photo. It is unclear why this coloring was added to the photo. It is also unclear why such an inaccurate color was added to the funnels. This photo is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2

Autochrome photo of RMS *Olympic*

Both photos are listed in the National Geographic archive as “unpublished”. The reasons why they were never published are speculative and really don’t matter for the purpose of this discussion.

Limitations of Autochrome Photos

[This section was summarized from an article on autochrome photos in Wikipedia found here: [Wikipedia Autochrome Article](#)]

1. Autochrome photos were meant to be viewed in person looking at the actual photographic plate.
2. Reproduction of autochrome photos in period books and magazines had to be hand-adjusted to compensate for some of the difficulties in reproduction. Consequently, they often appeared like hand-colored photos.
3. Making modern film or digital copies of autochrome photos introduces problems because the modern copies are based on the red, green, blue color system while the original autochrome photos were based on a red-orange, green, blue-violet system.

Usefulness of *Olympic*’s Color Photos

Having shown some of the limitations of autochrome photos, let’s turn to these specific photos and examine them to see if they are useful in showing us what the colors of the *Olympic* class ships looked like.

The first photo of *Olympic* in the background shown in Figure 1 has a number of problems. *Olympic* is so far in the background that each funnel is only represented by a few pixels. One can get a general sense of their color but that’s about all. The other problem with this photo taken in 1928 is that there is evidence that the original “White Star buff” color of the funnels may have changed during a modernization of her livery in the 1920s. This subject is discussed here: [The Case for More than One Formulation of White Star Buff](#). Other than the very limited information about the color of her funnels, this photo offers nothing more about *Olympic*.

The second photo of *Olympic* in the floating drydock has even more limitations. The first is that it is a rather dark photo. The second is that the funnels and the lower hull are nearly completely covered by a red color which was added to the photo. The only thing which is not covered in these red areas is a small area antifouling paint at the bow. Is this the true color of the antifouling paint used on *Olympic*? The first question which we don’t have an answer for is whether the Suter-Hartmann & Rahtjens antifouling paint was still used on *Olympic* in 1928. We simply don’t know. Even if it was, to attempt to get a true color, the brightness of the photo would have to be adjusted along with the color balance. These are subjective operations which would still produce a speculative result. Additionally, the conversion of this photo to a digital version would have introduced some of the limitations previously discussed. Therefore, this photo has little or no value in clearing up ambiguity about *Olympic*’s original colors.

Summary

This article has sought to show the limitations in the usefulness of the only known color photos of RMS *Olympic*. Both the limitations of the autochrome color process and the photos themselves have been discussed. The conclusion is that for determining the colors of the *Olympic* class ships, these photos have little value.