

What photo wallets tell us about the history of photography

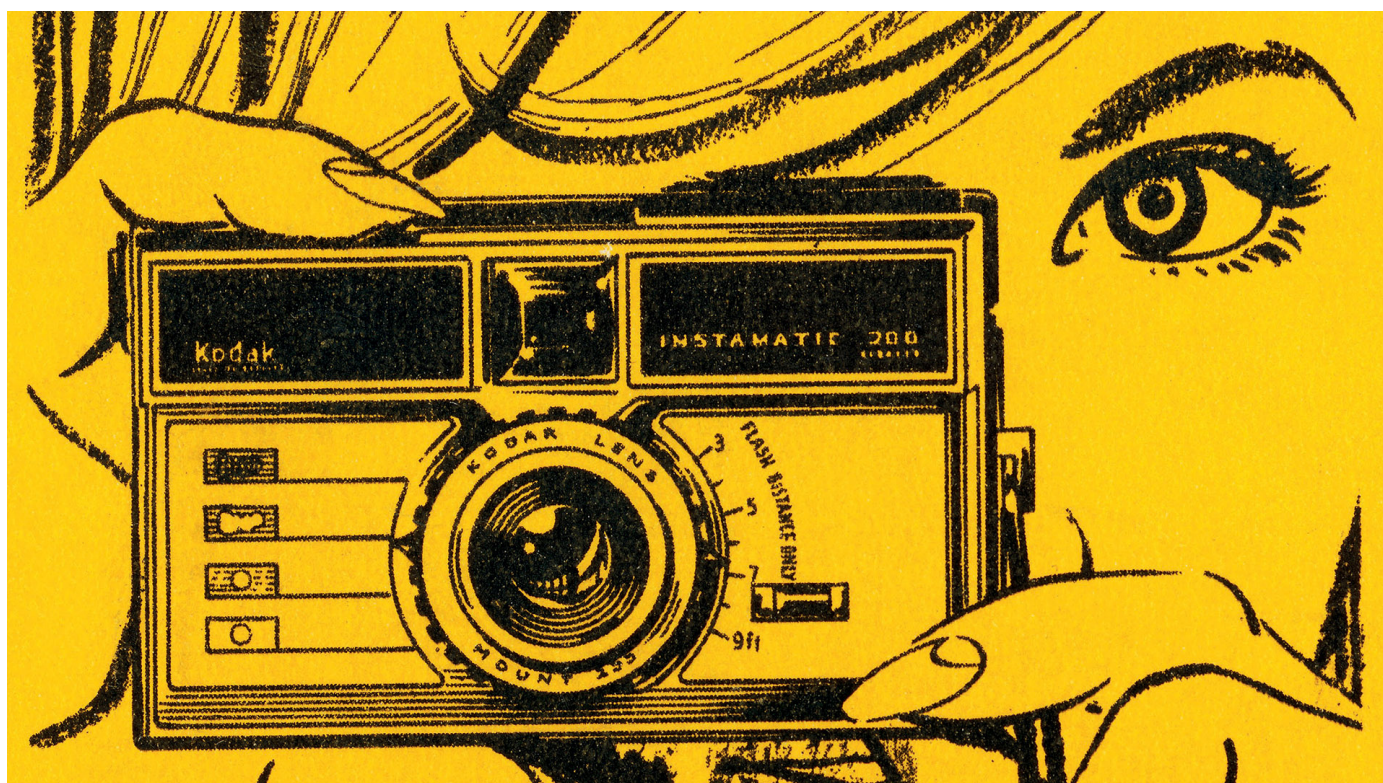
The days of amateur photography on a roll of film and anticipating its

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ANNEBELLA POLLEN | 14 May 2023



More than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets by Annabella Pollen is out now (Four Corners, £12)

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With more than 90 per cent of the UK population now having a smartphone in their pocket, taking a quick photograph and immediately seeing the results has become an unthinking gesture. Phones are used to take quick snaps of opening hours and timetables, to do a quick mirror check of your hair and teeth, and to communicate everyday activities with social media acquaintances. Look at my lunch! It is easy to forget that this instant photographic practice is very different to what went before. For most of the 20th century, cameras were much less widespread, and photographs were much slower to produce. Until the early 1990s, when sales of digital cameras overtook

film, it was most common for most people to shoot just one or two rolls of film a year. Each roll would only contain 12, 24 or 36 exposures. Unless you had access to a darkroom, most of those photographs were processed commercially by dropping the film off at a high street chemist or camera retailer or by posting it to a mail order developing and printing service.

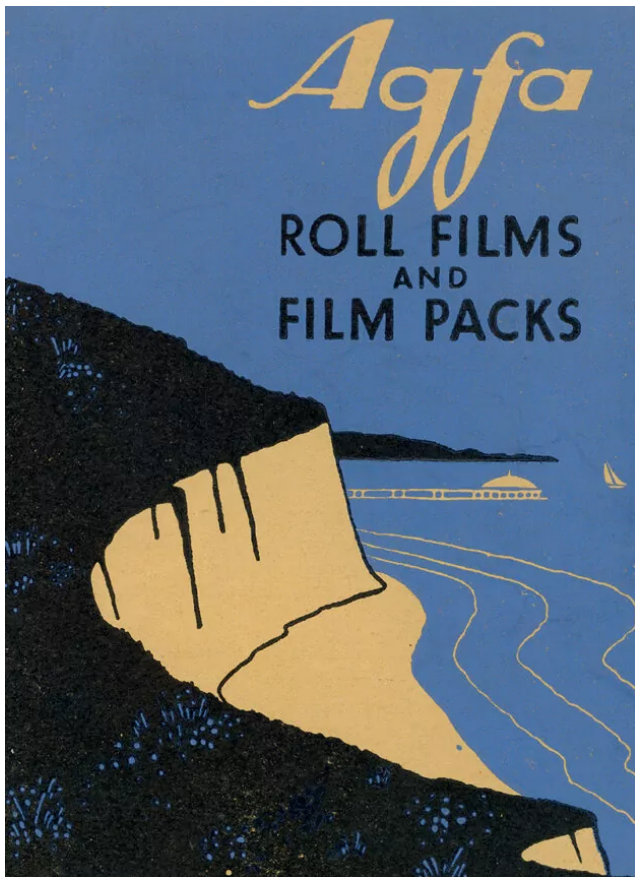


The wait between depositing a film and collecting the results might be merely an hour if you'd paid a premium at the latest high street mini-lab, or it might be days or weeks if you'd gone for a cheaper option. The sense of anticipation was intense: would your holiday snaps capture the glorious sunsets viewed from the mountain tops and the bronzed cuteness of your holiday romance? Or would there be blurred views and decapitated heads, double exposures and your fingers over the lens?

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Tearing open the envelope

When it arrived, the processors' envelope of prints might be unfolded with care, or perhaps torn open by those desperate to see the outcome. Perhaps you sat down with friends to open your wallet of prints or poured yourself a stiff drink before going it alone. Either way, the results were unlikely to match up to the smiling faces and sunny days depicted on the wallet, where families were relentlessly happy and the grass was always green.



For years, I've been researching the history of photography since it became accessible to ordinary people from the start of the 20th century. What did people take photographs of? What did they do with these photographs? What did they mean to them? I've examined huge archives of tens of thousands of prints to understand popular photography, and I've surveyed thousands of people.

My new book, *More Than a Snapshot*, looks at the services that supported amateur photography, from big names such as Kodak, high street staples such as Boots and long-lost local providers. It takes us back to those days of photographic limits, errors and waiting. It offers an illustrated history of photography not by looking at *photographs*, but by looking at the *packaging* they came in: photo wallets.

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The cheery paper envelopes in which processors packed your prints and negatives tell a visual story of photographic expectation, photographic instruction and photographic ideals. For 100 years, they showed what photographers should look like and they suggested suitable photographic subjects. They also reinforced norms by what they omitted.

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Selling photography

Early photo wallets from the start of the 20th century promoted photography to women. Women were perceived by camera companies to be less interested in technology and to be more interested in taking photos of their friends and family. Slim young women depicted on wallets hold cameras elegantly, wear them on straps as fashion accessories and take them to the beach and countryside. Photo wallets show smiling, confident women in breezy outdoor settings. They choreograph their children on the beach and they snap their leisure time in parks and gardens. The Kodak girl, a popular advertising figure for the leading provider of film and processing, spent 60 years dressed in a blue-and-white-striped dress. She was a model to emulate as well as to look at.

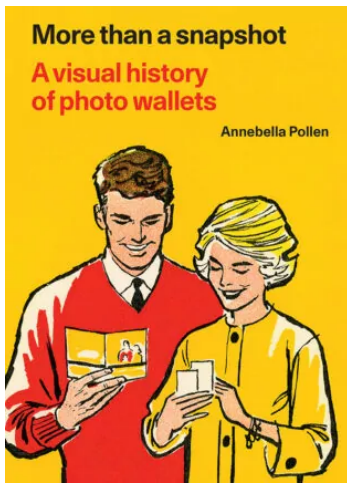


The providers of photographic services used their photo wallets to reassure hesitant customers that photography was easy, but they also provided guidance. Advice was given about lighting and distances, positioning the subject and holding the camera still.

Across the 20th century, instruction was offered on technique, with some wallets including rogues' galleries of photographic disasters, with washed-out faces and wonky horizons. In the 1980s and 1990s, processors also made value judgements about photographic quality by applying stickers directly to prints they considered faulty. Processors might even veto printing films whose subjects they considered beyond the pale. Their appraisal could be moral as well as aesthetic.

More Than a Snapshot examines the century of photography that prefigures our current age, where everything is photographable and little technical skill is needed. It shows how film photography was shaped and how it expanded, and it maps its fall from favour. Photo wallets provide an illustrated guide to this development, but in the end they could not contain the practice. Where once photographers only took 24 or 36 photographs a year, we might now take 24 or 36 an hour.

Annebella Pollen is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at University of Brighton



More than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets by Annabella Pollen is out now (Four Corners, £12). You can buy it from [The Big Issue shop](#) on [Bookshop.org](#), which helps to support *The Big Issue* and independent bookshops.

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