

# Photography

## PHOTO WALLETS

# THE DEVELOPING WORLD

Words: Annebella Pollen

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, most people shot 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, 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 fingers over the lens?

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.

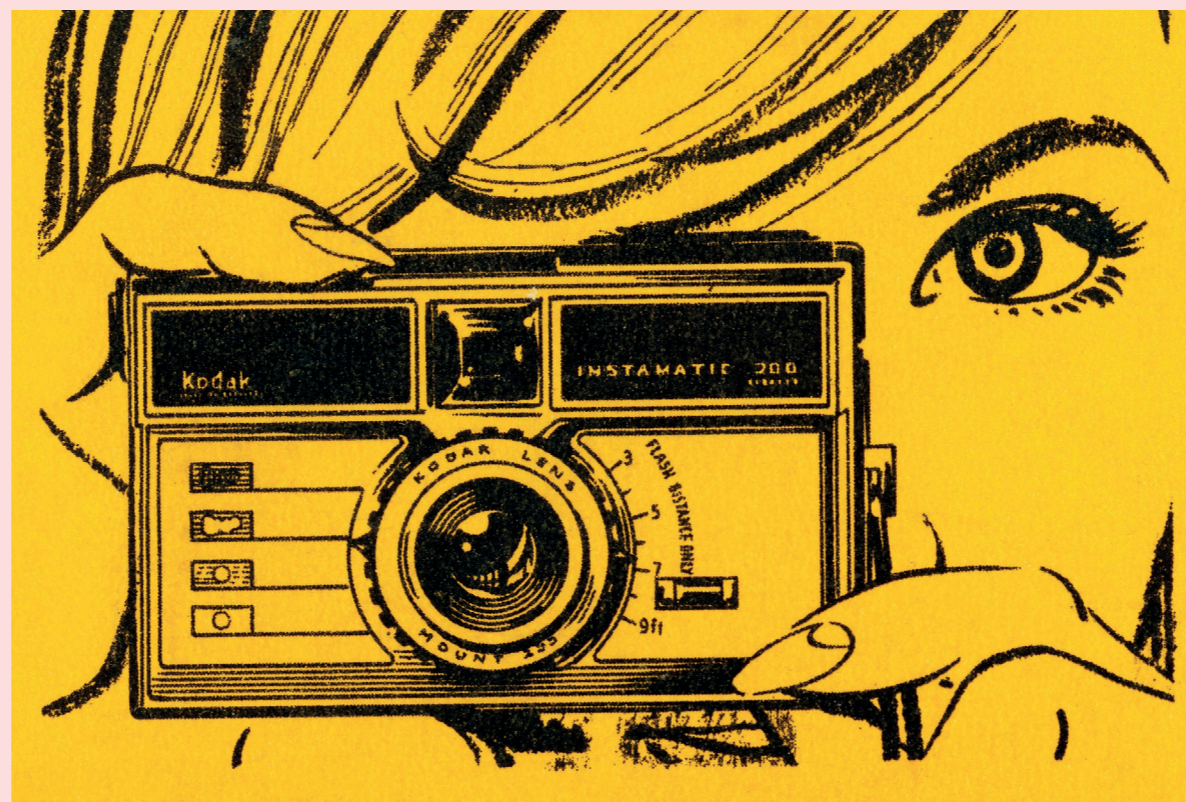
For years, I've been researching the history of photography since it became accessible to ordinary people from the start of the 20th century. What did people take photographs of? What did they do with these photographs? What did they mean to them? I've examined huge archives of tens of thousands of prints 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 like 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. The cheery paper envelopes in which processors packed your prints and negatives tell a visual story of photographic expectation, photographic instruction and photographic ideals. They also reinforced norms by what they omitted.



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

*More Than a Snapshot* offers an illustrated history of photography by looking at the packaging photos came in



Stylish and aspirational visuals from the golden age of photo wallets



Early photo wallets from the start of the 20th century promoted photography to women, who were considered to be less interested in technology and 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 for 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 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 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 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.

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## LUCY SWEET IS ON THE VERGE



Writing, as you can probably tell from this amazing column, is a fine art. The problem is, anyone who has ever written an email thinks they can do it, budgets are being slashed, and now we have another threat to the profession – AI. Who cares if you don't have any ideas or your writing skills extend to typing "Milk, eggs, Andrex" into your Notes app? Just use ChatGPT and let it do the work for you.

Meanwhile, the genius who wrote the incredible line, "Your earlobes are thick and chewy, like barnacle meat", in *Succession* is flipping McSpicy burgers and living in a skip.

The Hollywood writers' strike wasn't on when *The Night Agent* was released, but if ever a show was written by AI, it's this one. It doesn't stop this daft political thriller being entertaining and unintentionally funny though.

Long story short, it's about an FBI agent who saves countless innocent civilians from a bombing on a subway train and is recruited to answering the night phone at the White House (is this actually a thing?). From 8pm to 8am our hero sits in a room with a phone in it, a comically large phone that will only ring when something really bad and dramatic happens.

Whaddya know, in the first episode, the phone goes off, and we are taken on a circuitous journey of corruption and intrigue at the highest level.

I haven't seen the whole series yet but I'm assuming from the shifty machinations and clunky acting that the call is coming from inside the (White) House.

But why am I trying so hard to explain this to you? Let me see what happens when I put "write a funny

TV review about *The Night Agent* into AI instead.

\*Puts feet up and smokes a cigar\* Ah, here we go:

*If you're looking for a show that will keep you on the edge of your seat, The Night Agent on Netflix is not it. I mean, unless you're sitting on a really uncomfortable couch or something. The characters are about as interesting as a beige wall, and the plot moves slower than a sloth on Ambien. The only thing that kept me watching was the hope that something, anything, exciting would happen. Spoiler alert: it didn't.*

*Overall, The Night Agent is like a boring date that you can't wait to end. Save yourself the time and watch something else. Trust me, your couch will thank you.'*

OKAAAAAY, thanks, AI (can I call you A for short?). Not bad, not bad, I see what you did there with the couch, haha. I have some notes. I think we can do better than about as interesting as a beige wall. How about, "The characters could be played by cabbages wearing wigs" or "The characters have the emotional depth of a roll of damp loft insulation" or "The characters could've been written by Sooty?" And I would argue that the plot doesn't move slower than a sloth on Ambien – it's more glacial than that. Maybe you could say "moves slower than the tectonic plates of Pangea?"

Also, I must say I disagree with AI's assessment of the show as being boring. It's not boring, it's

*If ever a show was written by AI, it's The Night Agent. That doesn't stop this daft thriller being entertaining and unintentionally funny, though*

just terrible, and these are two different things.

Terrible things can be wonderfully soothing and relaxing, and *The Night Agent* has nothing in it to challenge your brain cells. It's like a Christmas movie, but with hitmen and the FBI in it.

All you have to do is take your brain off the hook, stare at that beige wall and try not to answer the phone. Actually, if you're a writer, it probably won't ring anyway, so you'll have plenty of time to enjoy the show.

*The Night Agent* is on Netflix  
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