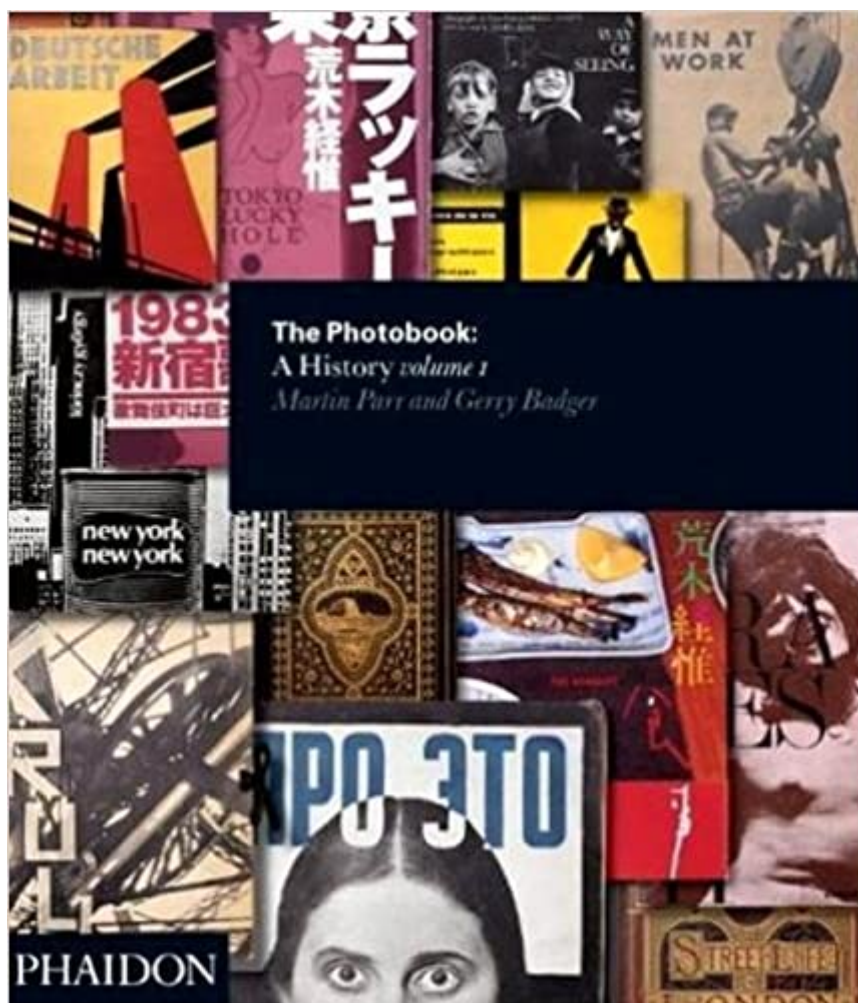


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The Photobook: A History, Vol. 1



Synopsis

The book is divided into a series of thematic and broadly chronological chapters, each featuring a general introductory text providing background information and highlighting the dominant political and artistic influences on the photobook in the period, followed by more detailed discussion of the individual photobooks.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

From Street Life in London to Hiroshima, from The Royal Mummies to Perspective of Nudes and The Sweet Flypaper of Life, photobooks encompass a tremendous diversity of subjects and styles. While some of these illustrated volumes are famous (Eadweard Muybridge's Animal Locomotion, Robert Frank's The Americans), many others are known only to specialists. The Photobook: A History offers an engrossing survey of this art form, beginning with early experiments in photography in mid-19th-century England and ending with raucous Japanese photo-diaries of the 1990s. The scope of this handsomely designed book's the first of two volumes is so broad that only a few pages of each photobook could be illustrated, and some of the 750 color and black-and-white reproductions are quite small. But the incisive commentary by British photographer Martin Parr and photo critic Gerry Badger opens up new worlds of visual information. The authors provide essential grounding, not only in the history of photography, but also in the artistic and social movements that influenced the look and content of photobooks. In the 19th century, the object was to collect and to classify, whether the subject was a foreign landscape, a war, the surface of the

moon or the manufacture of bread. Conversely, 20th-century photobooks are often frankly subjective, drawing on movements ranging from surrealism to the Beats. Yet a quasi-scientific approach could result in poignant imagery (as in *Facies Dolorosa*, a study of the faces of seriously ill people), and artistic subjectivity could yield bitter truths (Helen Levitt's *A Way of Seeing*, images of poor children in New York). Describing photobooks of the polemical 1930s as "the great persuaders," Parr and Badger remark that the best documentary work demonstrates an awareness of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the medium. Although we tend to think of propaganda solely as the product of totalitarian regimes (see "Long Live the Bright Instruction," a Chinese tract featuring unnervingly happy workers), the authors remind us that photobooks celebrating the American way of life often naively ignored the complex socio-political forces that underlie a sentimental or cheerful scene. The final chapter, devoted to postwar Japanese photobooks, vividly illuminates the cocktail of hedonism, rage and despair that makes these volumes extraordinary visual documents. --Cathy Curtis

Parr, an influential British photographer, admits to an obsession with collecting photobooks, and this sumptuous collection intends to establish the genre's importance in disseminating photographic styles and trends. Alongside acknowledged masterpieces by Walker Evans, August Sander, and Nobuyoshi Araki, Parr and Badger consider many less well-known examples. There are art books like "Paris," by Moÿse K. Beiderman, a Lithuanian contemporary of Brassaï's didactic works such as the German medic Hans Killian's sixty-four images of suffering patients; and outright curios like Owen Simmons's 1903 "The Book of Bread" (forty life-size portraits of slices of bread). Sections on Soviet photobooks of the nineteen-thirties and Japanese photobooks of the nineteen-sixties point to two particularly fertile periods. One hopes that publishers may be spurred to reprint some of these exceptional books. Copyright © 2005 The New Yorker

Good updated supplementary backup for primary histories.

A very interesting manual on photographic books. A lot of images and information on authors and items.

This is a marvelous volume that can be enjoyed by book and photography lovers alike. As an object in its own right it exhibits a level of refinement in conception and execution that has become rare in our age of mass-produced books. Of course, there are many specialist photobook publishers but

they seem to focus exclusively on print quality to increase the perceived value of their publications, whilst neglecting the vital contribution of design in a book's overall appearance (and desirability). In the Phaidon-volume, the exquisitely judged rhythm of layout and typography complement the vivid reproductions of vintage photobook material into a very exciting whole. To be sure, the care spent on the production of this book is not gratuitous. To the contrary, it is a statement that reinforces the basic conceptual tenets held by Badger and Parr. From the introductory pages we learn that not every and any book that has been conceived around a collection of photographs merits to be included in the class of "photobooks". A photobook - as Badger and Parr understand it - is more than just the sum of its parts: pictures, words, design, and choice of subject all contribute to something which transcends the meaning of a photographic portfolio. This is all illuminating and one could certainly say that the "Photobook" is an instructive example of this synergy between various elements. However, I wished that the editorial team would have left it at that. I think Badger and Parr are moving onto much more controversial ground when they hold forth that the emblematic photobook is a kind of dramatic event, "comparable with a piece of sculpture, a play or a film" in which the individual photographs lose their own character as things in themselves. Apart from being theoretically doubtful, I believe this criterion is simply too stringent and many vintage photobooks featured in this survey do not comply with it. For example, many of the early books were photo albums in the true sense of the word: bound collections of original prints glued onto white pages. Similarly, it is difficult to see in some of the modernist books - such as Erhardt "Das Watt" or Mendelsohn's "Amerika" - anything more than an expertly produced photographic portfolio. In each of these examples there is coherence, but it does not derive from some kind of dramatic or narrative logic. It can simply be a unity of style which holds a photobook together. Positioning the photobook "between the novel and film", therefore, raises more questions than it provides us with answers. It doesn't really help to make sense of "a ragged and sprawling subject, with more than its fair share of anomalies". It is perhaps more useful to investigate how Badger and Parr have tried to organise their material within the confines of this volume (and the next). They seem to have relied on three different lines of thought. The first is chronological (it's a history after all). The survey starts with the very first publications, early on in the history of photography and will end with a section on "The Photobook and Modern Life". In this sense, the book can be studied as a remarkably lively and varied panorama of how photographers have engaged with their craft over the last 150 years. The second organising principle is geographical: some of the individual chapters focus on a distinct area of cultural production (the US, Europe and Japan; the next volume features a chapter on "The Worldwide Photobook"). Finally, there is "intention" as a structuring element. Photobooks have been

produced to serve a variety of purposes: to tell a story, to tell a non-story (stream-of-consciousness-like books), to non-tell a story (to deconstruct), to document, to persuade, etc. Indeed, a valuable photobook can even limit itself to simply showing. Most of the chapters in the two volumes put some kind of "intention" at the center of the discussion. I think Badger and Parr's conception of their own book is to a certain extent at odds with their conceptual emphasis on the dramatic nature of photobooks. If there is drama in "The Photobook", it is mediated by the words that accompany the various chapters, not by the visuals. In other words: it is a conceptual not a photographic narrative that unfolds. As regards the visuals, curiously enough the daring use of white space and drop shadows around the book and page reproductions really make them stand out as preciously unique. Leafing through the book is akin to walking between carefully presented museum exhibits. In this sense, "The Photobook" clearly 'shows' and, therefore pulls us away from the dramatic sweep of history. Despite these theoretical misgivings there is not a shade of doubt in my mind that this book deserves five stars. It is a fabulous book and I look forward with keen anticipation to the second and final volume.

This book (and the next volume) will surely become the standard reference for anyone wanting to know about photobooks and in creating a new word for photographs in a book perhaps this will create a new publishing genre too. The author's rightly point out that photography is a printed-page medium and the four hundred and fifty titles examined, with just over two hundred in this first book, probably represent the best (or most interesting) titles ever published. The nine chapters give a lucid in depth review of photobooks to the 1970s with Anna Atkins 1843 'Photographs of British Algae' taking the first photobook prize. I particularly enjoyed chapter six, Medium and Message: the photobook as propaganda, basically dealing with Soviet books in the Thirties and the examples shown are quite extraordinary in their use of images and design. Reproducing the pages from these books would easily make a separate title. The other fascinating chapter was nine, dealing with postwar Japanese books, again the reproduced jackets and spreads show amazing creativity and vision, not only in the choice of photos but also in the use of printing and binding techniques. Stunning though this book is I thought there was one particular weakness, in so many of the books there are not enough pages shown. Many of them have two pages, for instance 'An American Exodus' by Lange and Taylor, there are fifteen spreads so it is possible to follow the flow of images or Avery Brodovitch's 'Ballet' with eighteen spreads to capture the feel of the subject. Most of the titles though are two or three to a spread allowing mostly a cover plus four or six pages from inside the book but annoyingly there is easily room for more pages had there been a slight

adjustment to the book detail text that accompanies each photobook. The excess white space really should have been put to better use. Despite this the paper and printing of the book is first class, the images are reproduced in a fine screen as cut-outs with a drop shadow and run of varnish to really make them sparkle. Parr and Badger have almost created a unique book but Andrew Roth's *Book of 101 Books, The: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century* published in 2001 must be regarded as the first attempt to capture the essence of photobooks and in both titles the editorial concept is the same, reproduce the covers and pages rather than show individual photographs. As a designer this makes both books come alive for me but I prefer 'The Photobook' for its exhilarating coverage in both words and images. ***FOR AN INSIDE LOOK click 'customer images' under the cover.

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