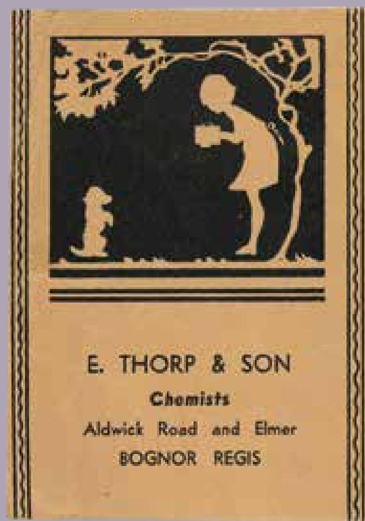
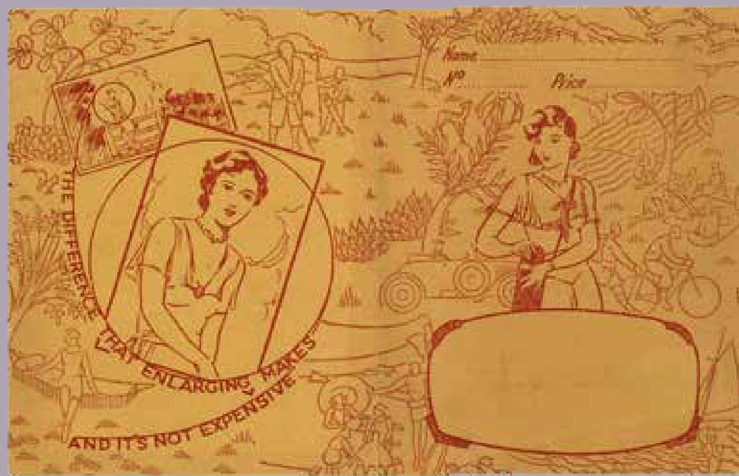


1



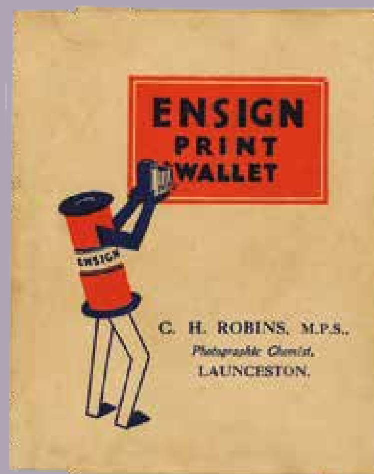
2

3i

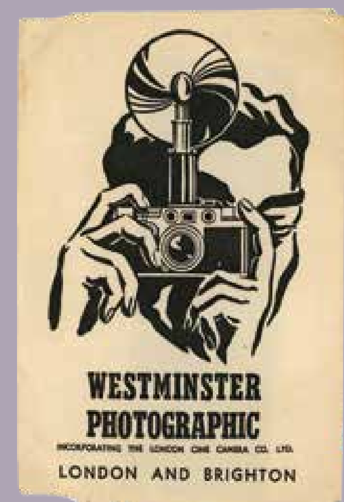
3ii

4

5



6



7

8

9

1
Early wallets often illustrated photographic practices using non-photographic techniques, from line drawings to silhouettes.

2
The young woman on this interwar wallet is both photographer and subject. The pointillist scenes show photography's links to leisure: motoring and cycling, golf and fishing, picnics and hammocks.

3
Her hemlines and hairstyles changed over time, but whether her camera was a Box Brownie in the 1920s or an Instamatic in the 1960s, the smiling Kodak Girl, in a striped dress, was an aspirational model for over fifty years.

4
The smartly dressed couple in this Durbins 1930s photo wallet hold a photo wallet featuring a smartly dressed couple in a pictorial mise en abyme.

5
An interwar wallet by Durbin & McBryde of Croydon outlines photography's democratic appeal across all ages and genders, while simultaneously showing a photographic golden rule: keep your light source behind you.

6
Personified cameras and film canisters were popular motifs on interwar photographic wallets, such as this one by Ensign. These characters often provided customers with photographic tips.

7
With Brylcreemed hair and an arched brow, the heroic figure concealed behind an eye-level device at the centre of Westminster Photographic's wallets, c.1950s, is part-man, part-camera.

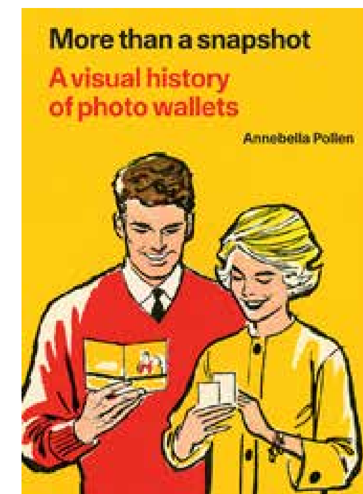
8
A woman photographs a blank-faced child frolicking in shallow water in a mid-century wallet by German manufacturer, Gevaert.

9
Loader's Photo Centre in Worthing styled themselves as purveyors of 'Everything Photographic'. This simple graphic photo wallet, c.1940s, has a space on the back for processors' remarks.

A carrier bag theory of photography

Annebella Pollen

...paper ephemera enthusiasts will not need telling that packaging is highly instructive as a cultural form. The photographic industry, in particular, cultivated an ideal visual image



More than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets by Annebella Pollen is is newly published by Four Corners Books, priced £12. www.fourcornersbooks.co.uk/books/more-than-a-snapshot

WHEN THE LATE, GREAT Maurice Rickards was compiling his magisterial *Encyclopaedia of Ephemera* (British Library, 2000), he found a modest place for a modest item, the 'Film Wallet'. He described its 1908 origins in Kodak: the American camera company proclaimed it to be a 'neat double envelope' whereby prints and negatives, processed from roll film, could be returned to customers. From these humble beginnings, the printed and illustrated film wallet, sometimes called a 'print wallet' or a 'photo wallet', when it was named at all, became a standardised form in common use by photo-processing companies large and small, across the world, for over a hundred years.

Once ubiquitous to the point of invisibility, if you deposited a film at a high-street chemist or camera retailer or sent it off by post to a mail order service provider, for most of the twentieth century, you would have received one of these photo wallets. Carrying the company name, and firstly line drawings, and later photographic illustrations of photographers and their subjects, photo wallets acted as silent salesmen for products and services; indeed, early in the century, they acted as sales tools for photography itself. Illustrations showed novices how photography should be done through the elegant models shown with cameras in their hands (often women), and through their reinforcement of what made an appropriate photographic subject (happy families and sunny days). Through implicit and explicit photographic instruction, photo wallets modelled photographic production as well as containing its outcomes.

The original prints and negatives held in photo wallets might seem to be of more importance than the mass-produced wrapping they are cased in, but paper ephemera enthusiasts will not need telling that packaging is highly instructive as a cultural form. The photographic industry, in particular, cultivated an ideal visual image; it was dependent, more than most, on looking good. Developing attractive pictures was literally its business. The photographic industry, too, traded in practices of concealment: what went on in the darkroom, behind the scenes, was rarely put in the limelight. Kodak's famous late-nineteenth-century slogan, 'You Press the Button, We Do the Rest' strategically drew a veil over what happened in commercial developing and printing; this was meant to be the dull and complex part that got between a camera user and their treasured photographs.

I started to get interested in photo wallets quite accidentally, about a decade ago, after writing my MA and PhD theses on histories of amateur photography. For those projects, I scrutinised tens of thousands of amateur photographs – orphaned interwar family photographs given new meanings in the twenty-first century secondhand market, and mass-participation photographic competitions from the 1980s onwards, which tried to create national or even global family albums. I wondered how popular photography had been developed and shaped: how beginners with their first cameras learned to do it, and what they took photographs of and why. Where had the rules come from about depicting happiness rather than grief, birth rather than death, holidays rather than everyday life?

Part of my interest in family photographs comes from my own family, as my partner buys and sells bric-a-brac and ephemera for a living. He often brings home shoeboxes of old photographs from house clearances, often still stored in the wallets processors returned them in. These bright, cheery wallets showed what was possible with a camera, but rarely what was achieved. The blurred and blotchy photographs, unwanted at the end of a life, show the dramatic distance between advertisers' ideals and amateur photographers' reality. I began to keep the wallets and looked for more wherever I could find them. I probably have close to a thousand now. Some have been given to me as gifts; those I have bought often cost less than a pound. They are battered and bruised examples rather than pristine specimens. I particularly like those with photographers' annotations, detailing their contents (holidays in Egypt or Bognor) or evaluating their quality ('Boring').

As a result, I have joined the ranks of ephemera collectors who specialise in paper bags, although I only realised this when I began to put my book together. I saw that my compilation had something in common with other recent publications, namely Jonny Trunk's *A-Z of Record Shop Bags* (Fuel Publishing, 2022) or Tim Sumner's *To Have and To*

Hold zine series from his Paper Bag Archive project. That there is a fresh appetite for cultural detritus among the next generation of creative practitioners is interesting to me (Sumner is a graphic designer; Trunk is a DJ and record producer), especially in relation to the debates raised by Lee Bofkin in 'The Future of History' in the Spring 2023 issue of *The Ephemerist,* about how ephemera collecting may die out as established dealers retire.

Of course, there is a nostalgic element to people's interest in cultural forms that are no longer around. In relation to photographic practice, this has changed fundamentally in the last few decades. Firstly, as digital cameras began to outsell film cameras in the early 1990s, fewer photographs made it to hard copy. Developing and printing services took a big knock as digital photography appeared to eliminate the cost of buying and processing film, which was always a major restriction on photographic expansion. By the early 2010s, major photographic names went bust or completely restructured, including Kodak, and new social media platforms and online storage systems stepped into the breach. Until this time, it had been most common for most people to take merely 1-2 rolls of film a year, which typically amounted to 24 or 26 exposures a time. As digital photography became integrated into smart phones, and these became widespread, the plea that photo wallets had long repeated – 'Always carry a camera with you!' – finally came to pass. In these contexts, with people now taking 24 or 26 photographs an hour, and with photographic subjects expanded far beyond family get-togethers, the film photography practices depicted on photo wallets seem quaint.

But there is perhaps something more than nostalgia as to why I find it productive to think laterally about popular photography by looking at photographic ephemera, and it is perhaps best expressed in the 1986 essay, The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, by visionary author, Ursula Le Guin. Le Guin took the 'carrier bag theory' of evolution – that is, that the most important practices of cultural development were less about the spear-based activities of hunting, and more about the holding characteristics of gathering – and used it to develop ideas about culture more broadly. As she put it, 'it is a human thing to do, to put something you want, because it is useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people...' For Le Guin, this kind of thinking helps her understand her own processes of writing, as an act of gathering and grouping, in the carrier bag that is, for her, the novel. She characterises holding as a fundamentally human process, but also something that is less about metaphors of domination and more about modes of keeping. She sees this as a practice most often associated with women.

This brings me back to the photo wallets, which supported the few aspects of photography that were female dominated. Kodak, in particular, promoted photography to women, famously using female photographers – Kodak Girls – in its branding from the start of the twentieth century (3). These characters were fashionably dressed, active young women who adventurously took their cameras to outdoor locations to snap family and friends on hill tops and shorelines. Well-off and beautiful, the Kodak Girl featured abundantly on photo wallets, almost always in her characteristic blue-and-white striped dress, for about 50 years. Many other companies followed suit, depicting women using cameras in their advertising, and depicting the subjects and relationships that were perceived to be most attractive to women as the largest consumers of commercial print services; photographic marketing aimed at men emphasised, instead, expensive technical equipment. The main British purveyor of commercial processing for most of the twentieth century, Boots the Chemist, was keenly aware of their customer base. By 1955 they claimed to be 'the largest photographic retailers in the country, if not the world', but they emphasised that they were 'photographic specialists in the requirements of the family photographer' (12). This was usually a woman. By the 1990s, informed by market research, they knew their typical customer was female, 20+ and a 'low-fuss picture taker'.

As a result, looking laterally at the history of photography through its photographic ephemera means writing a history of photography about women: of women as models in advertisements, of women as family photographers, but also of women as low-paid factory workers operating photographic machinery. Behind the social norms that British photo wallets reproduce in their illustrations, there is another story that is not shown: that of labour rather than leisure. In 1976-78, the exploitative employment practices of photo-processing came to light. Grunwick Processing Laboratory processed films under the brands BonusPrint, DoublePrint and TriplePrint. The long hours and low pay suffered by the majority women, 80% Asian and 10% Afro-Caribbean workers who made up Grunwick's 440 employees came to a head in violent clashes that highlighted the poor treatment of migrant workers as well as trade union tactics and police brutality on pickets. In the record-breaking heat of the summer of 1976, holiday photographs proliferated like never before, but snaps were processed in windowless buildings without air conditioning where overtime was compulsory. It was a bitter irony that the photographs processed by exploited black and South Asian women workers were enveloped in wallets comprising images of always smiling and always white-skinned nuclear families at play.

When I began collecting photo wallets, I was simply charmed by their design and style, but the industry stories that they conceal, like the photographs they contain, pull their narratives in different directions. *For More than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets*, I've looked at their practical purposes, their ideological messages, the technological histories of their producers, the working experiences of their staff, and the first-hand accounts of their users and keepers. It is an expansive story that uses 100 examples to narrate a century of photographic change, and to tell a design history of popular photography. I compiled stories between the covers in sympathy with women packing photographs into paper envelopes; please take a look to see what I have gathered.

Annebella Pollen is Professor of Visual and Material Culture at University of Brighton. *More than a Snapshot: A Visual History of Photo Wallets* was published by Four Corners Books on 11 May 2023, priced £12. www.fourcornersbooks.co.uk/books/more-than-a-snapshot

10 and **11**
The association of popular photography with holidaymaking is demonstrated by wallets from the 1920s through to the 1950s featuring blue skies, sailing boats and seagulls.

12
Boots the Chemist was the biggest supplier of developing and printing services in Britain by the 1950s. In the same decade, their wallets featured the black and white photographs that were the most common format at the time.

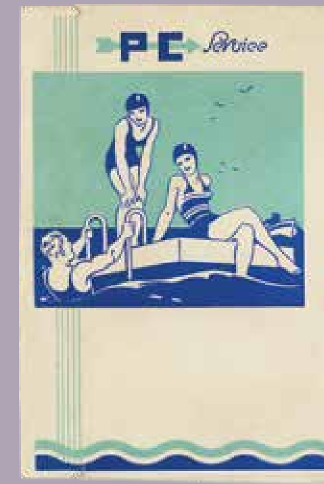
13
Ilford described themselves in the 1950s as 'today's leaders in photography'. The Dalmation, from the same decade, provides an appealing wallet illustration produced on Ilford film.

14
The bright possibilities of colour processing in the 1960s were demonstrated through eye-popping photographs on wallets where saturated primary colours abound, such as this example from former high street chemist chain, Timothy Whites.

15
Print wallets frequently advertised dream worlds: unlimited photographic successes and memories that could last forever, c. 1960s.

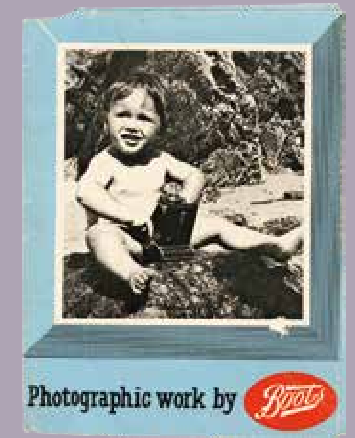
16
In the 1970s, Boots refreshed their photographic wallets with new typefaces and colour schemes, but enduring subject matter -- families, animals, leisure – remained.

17 and **18**
As print size expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, so too did print wallets. Quality, reliability, speed and care were spelled out through prominent brand names and splashy colour.

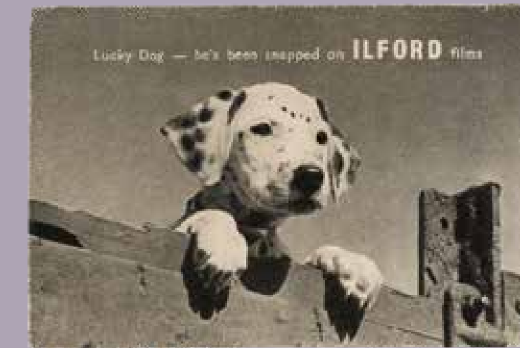


10

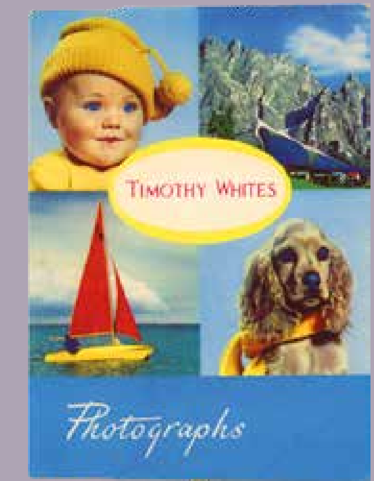
11



12

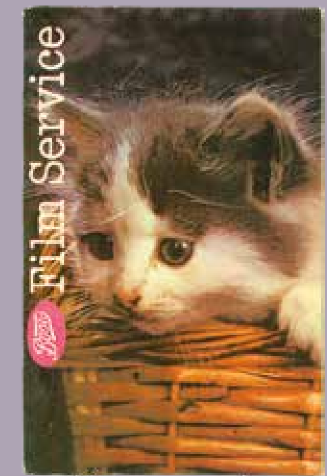


13



14

15



16

17

18