

Twilight of the color photo

As printed snapshots vanish, we're losing more than shoe boxes full of mementos

By Dushko Petrovich | January 4, 2009

ONE HUNDRED YEARS ago, one of Paris's richest men had a quixotic dream. Returning from a personal trip to China and Japan, the banker Albert Kahn decided to build a huge visual archive of the planet. Kahn believed that mutual misunderstanding was the source of world conflict, so in 1909, he began funding scores of photographers as they set out across five continents. By the time the Great Depression finally bankrupted him 22 years later, Kahn's intrepid op??rateurs had managed to document almost 50 countries, returning to France with 120 hours of film footage and 4,000 black-and-white pictures. This alone would have been a remarkable legacy, but the real jewels of the collection were printed on glass, in a full spectrum the world had never seen. The recently invented technique of the autochrome - which made portable color photography possible - meant that Kahn's emissaries could also amass a staggering total of 72,000 color plates.

Today, Kahn's project - still housed in a suburb west of Paris - is a stirring and underappreciated monument: the first great work of color photography. Princeton University Press is marking this centennial with a beautifully illustrated book. "The Dawn of the Color Photograph" is a handsome document full of lush and memorable images. Most of us still picture 1909 exclusively in black and white, so it's a revelation to peer back 100 years and see such eerily bright hues. French soldiers - dressed inadvisably in red, white, and blue - carve trenches through the verdant countryside; members of the Indian aristocracy, though recently stripped of power, still gather for a portrait wrapped in a defiant regalia of lavender, gold, maroon, and orange. Back in its heyday, the Moulin Rouge is pictured truly red. The most poignant autochromes - the really haunting ones - are those where the richness of color fixes people whose ways of life are unwittingly on the verge of extinction: Farmers, shepherds, and weavers all stand still as their tools and costumes enter the afterlife through a revolutionary new medium.



A train upended by Westward-fleeing Greeks in 1923 in Turkey.
(Photo copyright 2008, Musee Albert Kahn)

In the years since Kahn sent his crews out with thousands of pounds of coated glass, the color print has evolved from an expensive novelty into an affordable, nearly ubiquitous object. What used to take specialists many painstaking hours can now be done by machine in a matter of seconds; 30 cents now buys an accurate, glossy color the likes of which the wealthy Kahn could only have dreamed of. As an object, the color print has finally been perfected. And yet, the 100th anniversary of Kahn's project isn't so much a triumphant moment as an elegiac one. Like the shepherds, the color print has nearly vanished. Today, you get some glossies sent out as holiday cards, and some lucky ones get matted and framed, but the vast majority of color photographs now taken - and there are countless millions of them - pass before us, just briefly, on a screen.

Our rituals have already shifted. We no longer hand vacation photos around patiently at dinner parties. If we do reach for our photo albums, the collections start to thin out around 2006. Family pictures migrated from our desktop to our "desktop," and showing off a wallet photo is suddenly very rare. Instead, we flip open to the snap on our cellphones, where our beloved's low-res face competes brightly with the time, date, and number of bars. (Many of our friends are smiling away inside that camera phone.)

Printing is still just as easy and cheap as it ever was, but given the option, we now prefer to save - or upload - instead. That tells us something about our appetite for convenience, but even more about what we want from photographs in the first place. The object itself, no matter how crisp and permanent, how lush or mysterious, turns out to matter less than our ability to capture, store, and share an image. Without the print, photography's magical power - to freeze a moment in time - is still ours. In fact, although we continue to think of the photograph as a physical thing, we are finding out that it better serves our needs without being printed.

But as with each of our advances, something else is being lost. It is easy to think of the print and the digital image as the same thing, but they're actually very different. Even as cameras tout their ever-increasing megapixels, nearly everything we view is projected out at 72 dots per inch, the standard resolution of a

monitor. The resulting pictures are back-lit, vivid, and very easy to scan, so we hardly notice how hard it is to look into them. Your eyes move side to side, and you can easily gather all the information, but if you linger for a minute - an actual minute - you'll notice that the screen doesn't quite accept your gaze. A printed photograph, however - even when small, or blurry - has a way of letting you in. The paper surface is less aggressive than the liquid crystal one, so your eyes can roam around. The brightness of the pixel has a price: The illusory space of the photo is subtly reduced, along with its invitation to wander - or simply rest - inside it.

Of course, the real space photographs take up is also reduced. Like most technology, the color print seemed ever so sleek . . . until we saw the upgrade. A laptop effortlessly holds what hundreds of shoe boxes could not; we now send 50 pictures with a click. Still, the actual third dimension is an important aspect of the supposedly 2D print; the physical contact establishes a certain intimacy. Who has not held a photograph and wept? Who hasn't felt their nostalgia settle for an instant on the thinness of a print? To hold a photo is to hold a person, or even a place, in your hand - a momentary illusion that has no parallel on a monitor.

The digital gems we hoard can number in the thousands, or even in the tens of thousands. Of course, the idea is that any and all of them could be printed, if an occasion were to arise. But what would that special day be like? Years pass, and it never comes. The prospect of printing them all out becomes unthinkable. The reason they never turn into objects is precisely because these photos have already served their purpose: At the party, which we wished would go on forever, we posed and we clicked. Then we showed each other the little LCD screen, and we were satisfied - the moment would last. (A little while later, we repeated the ritual.)

But just as the paperless format erases one kind of closeness, it can open entirely new realms of intimacy - the minute you hit "upload." While our stored photos are shy (you have to search for them) and a little vulnerable (they can all disappear with a hard drive), the ones we put on the Web are gregarious and immortal. Never before has the photo been so emphatically public, announcing our achievements and pleasures with a swiftness we never dreamed of. So even when these disseminated images come to haunt us, it's not in the manner of the print - which conjured private sentiments, like longing or regret - but with rather more civic feelings, like shame and embarrassment. Usually these unnerving photos are the ones other people have posted (and "tagged"), but what's really irksome is that other people are seeing them, and that these other people can even copy them and distribute them, if they so choose. The old idea of "destroy the negatives" sounds pretty quaint in a world of endlessly reproducible jpegs, as does the notion of asking to take someone's picture. We're all celebrities now! But it is the photographs, not their subjects, that are godlike in their movements.

The lowly print, meanwhile, can only exist in one place at a time. It's easily damaged, or hidden, or lost. In these weaknesses, however, lies a particular charm. Only a few years have passed, and we already wax nostalgic about the old processes. Remember when you used to have to wait? The premeditation is gone, as well as the anticipation, investment, and surprise. The photograph is less of an occasion. Don't worry, we can take another one! In the era of prints, the image was just part of the photograph. The carefully avoided thumbprints, the unfortunate creases, the ugly red digital date stamps - we will come to miss these subtle markings. Hold them by the edges! But the new images don't even have edges - they're all front. It has become common for critics and artists to mourn the passing of particular formats - the Polaroid, the Lomo, or the Kodachrome - but these eulogies only scratch the proverbial surface. What we will really miss is the print itself.

It seems strange that this long-awaited miracle - this icon of modern life - would even have a life span. But after a century of printing full color images of our lives, the habit is quietly dying out. Of course, hobbyists and art schools will keep the techniques alive. Liberated from utility, the photograph is already following other antiquated printing processes - like engraving and lithography - into the domain of craft and fine art. And old-fashioned photos will probably still be employed, like wax seals and letter-press invitations, to commemorate special occasions.

But Kahn's haunting autochromes - which are cracked and worn, imperfect, fragile, and well traveled - should remind us that there is magic when the object itself, not just the occasion, is special. Whether they have crossed continents, or just sat in somebody's pocket, even the flimsiest photographic prints take on a certain weight. As they fade from use, we can start to sense what these objects really did: They carried feelings their images didn't intend, feelings that mattered more than anyone knew at the time.

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