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 operators 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.

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
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