

Bound Histories: Memories, Materialities, and Meanings of Photo Albums

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In the summer of 2024, a series of articles in the French daily newspaper *Le Monde* explored a photo album of occupied Paris between 1940 and 1942. A random flea market find, the photo album would become the point of departure for an investigation into forgotten histories undertaken by journalist Philippe Broussard. In recent years, photo albums have been the subject of inquiry of numerous historians, from Tal Bruttmann, Stefan Hördler and Christoph Kreutzmüller's *Un album d'Auschwitz* to Clémentine Vidal-Naquet's study of a 1919 wedding anniversary album, assembled amid the ruins of World War I. If albums represent sources for a multitude of histories and microhistories, we want to take stock of the ways in which photo history has engaged with the medium.

Photo albums have long been neglected and certainly count among the least theorized objects of the photo historical discipline, as Kathrin Yacavone pointed out in a recent article. Hence, in Pierre Bourdieu's seminal survey on the social uses of photography – *Photography: A Middle-brow Art* of 1965 – there is no "album" entry in the index. Between the 1960s and 1980s, as the flourishing art market became interested in nineteenth-century photographs, albums would be dismantled and detached pages sold as individual prints, some of which can still be found at flea markets or photo dealers today. Keenly aware of these practices, French heritage institutions took action in 1996 on the occasion of the symposium "The Photographic Album," which provided the first platform for discussing the integrity of albums, their material conservation, and the complex histories they contain. Yet the initiative had little follow-up. In recent years, as scholars have turned their attention to so-called "vernacular" images and practices, there has been a renewed interest in photo albums, notably those assembling family photographs and amateur images. One possible explanation for this renewed interest – as part of the material turn in our discipline – might be that photo albums have all but disappeared from our everyday lives, or at any rate have significantly shifted in the age of digital photography.

From early on, the history of photography was inaugurated, so to speak, by photo albums. Hippo-

lyte Bayard, inventor of one of the first paper-based processes, was its producer, and the album which he called his *Cahier d'essais* (now in the collections of the Société Française de Photographie) is one of the first proper photo albums ever produced. Over the course of the 1850s, once daguerreotypes were gradually abandoned and paper prints became common, the practice of making albums spread more widely, around the same time as other print products were popularized with other printing techniques.

The marketing of albums significantly took off along with the growth of the portrait industry – and not least Disdéri's fashionable *carte-de-visite* portrait 1854. On the French marketplace in the 1840s, album makers (for drawings and prints) could be found in paper mills such as Contier and Delarue in Paris, or at wallet manufacturers who offered their customers *carnets de bal*, agendas and albums. But it wasn't until the mid-1850s that an "album" section appeared in commerce directories, such as the *Bottin commercial*. Photo albums gradually became a trade. In the *Moniteur de l'exportation*, we find several ads by merchants seeking album merchandises to export to England and as far as Asia: in 1863, for example, a certain Gombrich "made considerable purchases of photographic albums, stereoscopic views and gilded jewelry, on sale and at market price, for his buyers in China."

Across a variety of geographies and cultures, albums gradually turned into keepsakes for family photographs, merged with portraits of well-known personalities. Albums compiled galleries with portraits of contemporaries: politicians, soldiers, artists, actors, actresses, and dancers – think for example of Mathew Brady's *Gallery of Illustrious Americans* on view in New York in the 1850s. The album form bears witness to the success of new consumption practices of portraiture, and cultural changes such as the fact that it had become possible to know the faces of one's contemporaries, down to the smallest details. At the same time, "album-collectors" of photographic advertising portraits enjoyed great success: Justin Lallier's *Album contemporain européen* (50,000 copies printed in 1865), the *Album des contemporains des Grands magasins du Printemps* (1865), the *Figaro Album* (1875), as well as the *Felix Potin chocolate albums* (c. 1900). Between the 1860s and the beginning of the twentieth century, "albums were veritable bourgeois dressing rooms," as Manuel Charpy wrote, marked by a certain physical rigidity and a quest for dignity in the poses. These albums' material format reflects the image of bourgeois portraits: large metal clasps, gilded edges, rigid leather or tortoiseshell covers, and so on.

If photo albums rose to fame in large part thanks to their connections with the portrait trade, yet they were also marked by other new practices. Consider for example the albums of "landscape and customs" photographs that were sold to a wealthy clientele of travelers in Japan in the 1860s and 70s. By the close of the nineteenth century, the emergence of amateur photography and the arrival of the postcard would give rise to a new frenzy of albums, with Kodak providing a new visual vocabulary of consumption and nostalgia.

Today, photo albums are much less visible, yet they have not disappeared. On the contrary, as anthropologist Richard Chalfen has suggested, along with shoeboxes, albums are one of two major containers for family and domestic photographs: celebrations, birthdays, important moments in life, events or travel. Not only family albums, but all kinds of photo albums have been around since the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century: commercial or industrial albums, studio albums, exhibition albums, model and advertising albums, souvenir and travel albums.

Much remains to be said about the ways in which we display and share photo albums, and about the collective practices that surround all these albums – who gets to view them? How are does the public interact with them? The gesture of collecting photographs in albums can also be connected to that of the scrapbook, bridging professional and intimate spheres, likening popular and expert practices. Unsurprisingly then, albums can be found almost anywhere: in most families and among a variety of collectors, in museums, archives or libraries. They form a heterogeneous, dispersed, and unstable whole.

Perhaps we can better circumscribe albums by focusing on their format: by offering the viewer a sequence of pages of photographs laid out and chosen for preservation in between covers, sometimes with captions and annotations, the album is akin to a code waiting to be deciphered. Unlike the single image, an album is a complex object, a space for staging a collection of photographs. It is also the album as a media format, which organizes photographs around different narratives, thematic or idiosyncratic motifs, that this special issue wishes to explore. By gathering a variety of photographic objects – such as prints, clippings, magazine pages, or reproductions – within a single binding, the album also constructs a discourse on photography. Looking at photographic albums can be an opportunity to question what assembling images and arranging them does to photography. In this respect, the album is also a privileged medium for observing the relationships that develop between the written word(s) and photographs.

Acknowledging the topicality of albums as objects of photographic research, this special issue of *Photographica* aims to foster reflections on both the history of albums and the ways in which they can be read and studied. What are the different ways of understanding photo albums? Should they be considered as objects with a “social” or a “cultural biography” in the sense of the anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff? In what ways do they represent one of the richest objects of investigation for the history of photography, and what do they reveal about photographic practices?

Possible topics for contributions include:

- Monographic and micro-historical studies of a particular photo album; methodological reflections and methods of investigating albums;
- The material culture and ethnography of albums; analysis of the gestures involved in their making (cutting, collage, annotations, etc.); the album as an object of intimate remembrance, the link between materiality and emotion
- Marginalized practices of album compilation; photo albums as sources for alternative photo-histories, or histories of marginalized groups
- Study of the different types of albums within the private or the public sphere, individual or collective photographic practices; study of the uses of albums in or across different spheres and contexts: memorial, documentary, educational, inventory...
- Photo albums as a key to understanding family and/or amateur photography, as well as commercial and industrial photography (model albums, tourist souvenir albums, etc.);
- Social, cultural and economic histories of photo albums, their production, marketing, and reception; forms of sociability associated with photographic albums;
- The “end” of paper-based albums and the emergence of new albums; contemporary photo album practices, including on social media
- Historiographical and/or theoretical perspectives on photo albums; the place of photo albums in

exhibition and museum collections

The editorial board encourages contributors to propose critical and/or reflexive methodologies in their submissions.

Submission and schedule:

- The call for papers is open until February 1, 2025.
- Proposals should include the author's name and affiliation, a 300-400 word abstract, and a short CV.
- Proposals must be sent to the following address: redaction@photographica-revue.fr
- Contributors will be notified in early March 2025.
- Articles of 30-35,000 characters (including spaces and notes) must be submitted by June 1, 2025.
- Publication of Photographica (n°12): spring 2026.

References in order of appearance:

- Tal Bruttman, Stefan Hördler & Christoph Kreutzmüller, *Un album d'Auschwitz. Comment les nazis ont photographié leurs crimes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2023).
 - Clémentine Vidal-Naquet, *Noces de cendres. Un voyage dans les ruines de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 2024).
 - Kathrin Yacavone, "Les albums photographiques au XIXe siècle entre souvenir privé et document public : Victor Hugo et l'Album Allix," *Images Re-vues* 2 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.4000/imagesrevues.13445>.
 - See Glenn Willumson, "The Photo-album as Cultural Artifact," in *Groupe Photographie de la Section française de l'Institut International de Conservation* (ed.), *L'Album Photographique : Histoire et Conservation d'un Objet*, (Champs sur Marne: Section française de l'Institut International de Conservation, 2000); see also Michel Quélin, "Colloque 'L'Album photographique'," *Études photographiques* 6 (1999): <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/194>.
 - See, for instance, Euriell Gobbé-Mévellec, "Griffonner, gribouiller, déchirer l'album numérique ?" *Sens public* 2021: <http://sens-public.org/articles/1488/>.
 - *Courrier des hôtels et Guide du commerce réunis : Moniteur de l'exportation*, February 4th, 1863, Paris, s.n., <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32751020r>.
 - See Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History*. Mathew Brady to Walker Evans (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989); see also Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
 - Manuel Charpy, "La bourgeoisie en portrait. Albums familiaux de photographies des années 1860-1914," *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle* 34 (2007): <https://doi.org/10.4000/rh19.1382>.
 - Luke Gartlan, "Views and Costumes of Japan: A Photograph Album by Baron Raimund von Stillfried-Ratenicz," *The La Trobe Journal* 76 (2005): 8.
 - Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000).
 - Richard Chalfen, "La photo de famille et ses usages communicationnels," *Études photographiques* 32 (2015): <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesphotographiques/3502>.
- See also Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations. The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic*

Albums (2001), Montréal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021.

Reference:

CFP: Bound Histories: Memories, Materialities, and Meanings of Photo Albums. In: ArtHist.net, Nov 17, 2024 (accessed Aug 13, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43145>>.