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Afghan Box Cameras: how street photographers captured a nation



▲ Afghan Box Camera: street portrait photography with handmade equipment. Photograph: Charles Berger/Dewi Lewis Publishing

Roving street photographers and studio portraitists in Afghanistan have been using the big, box-shaped wooden camera known as the *kamra-e-faoree* since the early 1950s. Their trade has survived the Soviet invasion of 1979, the civil war that followed it, Taliban rule in the 1990s and the invasion by America and the allies in 2001. Now, though, the rise of digital technology in Afghanistan is doing what wars, invasions and fundamentalist tyranny have failed to do - the age of the *kamra-e-faoree* is almost over.

The *kamra-e-faoree* was once viewed as a magical contraption in parts of rural Afghanistan, say Austrian artist Lukas Birk and Irish ethnographer Sean Foley in their fascinating book, *Afghan Box Camera*. Using the basic photographic process Henry Fox Talbot introduced to England in the 1840s, it was a camera and dark room in one, needing no electricity but using natural sunlight to expose the silver gelatin paper inside. The subject sat still on a chair before a black drape while the lengthy process took place. The end result often resembled a passport photo, but as their expertise improved and studios sprang up throughout Kabul, elaborately hand-painted large-format prints were also made.

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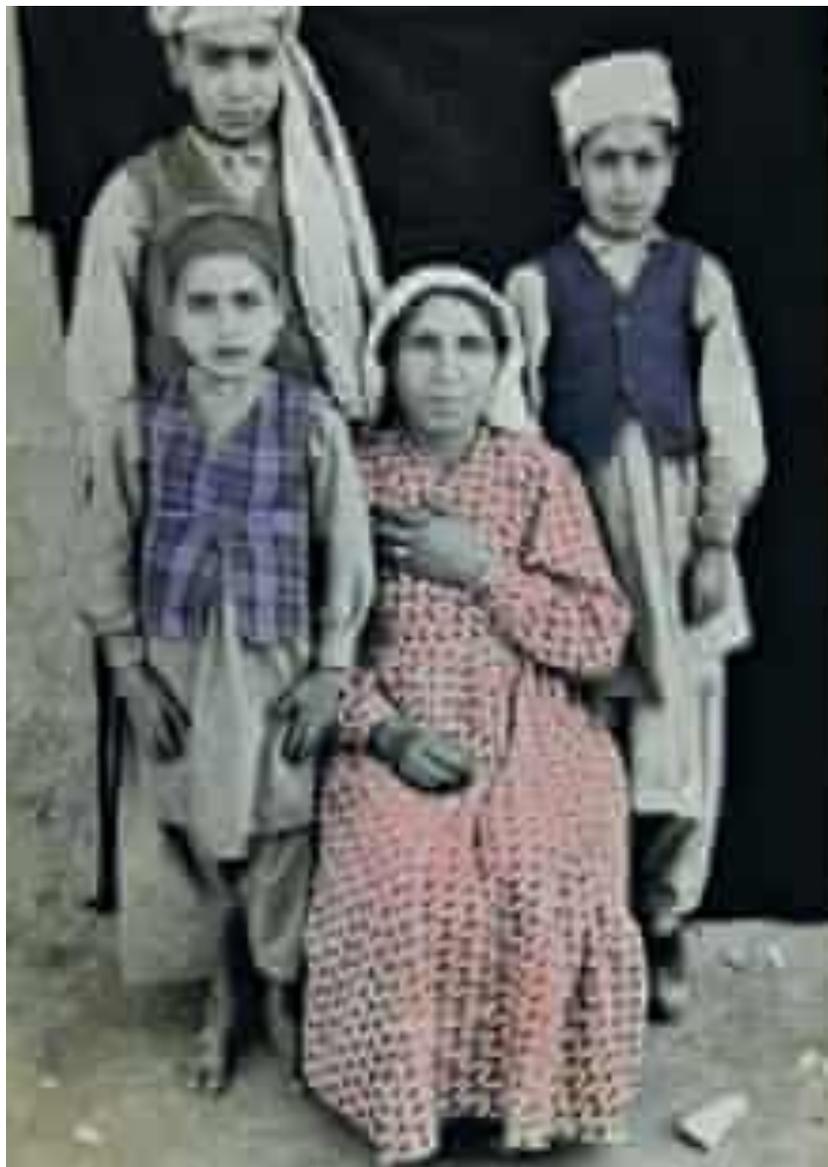
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▲ Abdul Satar's family, c. late 1950s, from the album of his son, which was kept safe during the civil war and hidden during Taliban rule by an aunt. Photograph: © Abdul Satar

Before the coming of the box camera, a small number of photographers catered only to the rich and privileged. This humble apparatus democratised photography, allowing ordinary citizens to have their portraits taken relatively cheaply. The boxes were made by local carpenters - only the foreign-produced lens had to be bought - and were feats of considerable ingenuity. The lens hole and the focus plate had to be accurately aligned and the whole structure made sturdy enough to withstand extreme temperatures, continuous transportation and the constant risk of it being knocked over as it was set up on the narrow pavements of Kabul.

Heavy and cumbersome, it also required the photographer to travel with a table and a tripod. Often the boxes were brightly painted or decorated with patterns and charms to attract the attention of curious passers-by. As Birk and Foley point out, every single camera was different, and dealing with their idiosyncrasies - leaking light, rickety tripod legs, the long sleeve through which the photographer had to manipulate the negative, sight unseen - was an art in itself. For several generations of Afghan children, the camera remained a thing of magically transformative power.



▲ Portrait of an Afghan child. Photograph: Hekmatullah Arababzadeh

In the late 1970s, when large numbers of young Afghans joined the army and the *mujahideen* to fight against the Soviet invaders, the kamra-e-faoree photographers thrived as they were called on to provide images for military identity cards. Likewise, in 2001, when the Afghan education system was overhauled, student identity cards were made compulsory.

Ironically, though, it was the country's inescapable bureaucracy that has helped seal the fate of the Afghan box camera. Of late, all identity photographs have to be in colour and, as a result of that one edict, box cameras are suddenly rendered obsolete. Many were thrown on rubbish dumps, many more left to gather dust in storerooms across [Afghanistan](#). Now, photo studios are doing a thriving trade in digitally reproducing old family portraits, removing tears and wrinkles, and producing several copies of an often talismanic single photograph taken decades ago on a box camera.



▲ A street photographer takes portraits of children against a cloth backdrop. Photograph: Jean-Marie Juid

The images collected in Afghan Box Camera range from the charming - several head shots of uncertain-looking children - to the surreal - a double-exposure of one Abdul Samad in his best suit. Some are ominous - a Taliban member holding flowers and a walkie-talkie - and others wonderfully kitsch - a hand-painted collage of an Afghan exile in Peshawar next to the Pashtun actress, Yasmeeen Khan. Interspersed with shots of the street photographers in action and portraits of the best-known practitioners, they comprise a social history of Afghanistan over the last seven decades. A portrait of an age, and the humble camera that recorded it.

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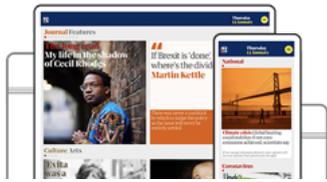
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It is the way of all things before the camera there was the sketch artist it is called progress, next will be the 3d picture.

Report



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It's not progress, it's just alternative ways to achieve the same thing. Sketch artists still exist, as do portrait painters. 3D effect pictures are simply crap and pointless, although I can see people being scanned for a 3D print out sculpture of themselves.

Report



roghitch ↪ salamandertome 14 Feb 2014 9:28

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Was the car a alternative to the horse we still have horses. If it does the job better, faster, cheaper and anybody can do it surely that is progress. Do you still use candles instead of electricity is that not progress both light a room.

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too many requests for selfies didn't help

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