

# AFGHAN BOX CAMERA PROJECT

the untold story of Afghan photography



HERAT

MAZAR-E-SHARIF

KABUL

JALALABAD

PESHAWAR







The *Afghan Box Camera Project* preserves a record of the ‘kamra-e-faoree’, or instant wooden box camera, which as a living form of photography has all but disappeared in Afghanistan. Led by Austrian artist Lukas Birk and Irish ethnographer Sean Foley the project captures a unique and previously unknown culture of photography. A wide range of project material is freely available online. An accompanying book, *Afghan Box Camera*, is also available.

[www.afghanboxcamera.com](http://www.afghanboxcamera.com)

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# Background

## In May 2011

*The Afghan Box Camera Project* began research on the ground in Afghanistan. That year the project covered Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif where they began to learn of the techniques and history of the kamra-e-faoree from the many Afghan photographers who shared their knowledge with them.

They were also fortunate enough to meet the last two working box camera photographers in Kabul and just in time: by the summer of 2012 these photographers had stopped working, bringing a culture of photography that had prevailed since at least the 1950s to an end in the capital.

In 2012 the project returned to Afghanistan, travelling again to Kabul in addition to Herat, Jalalabad and Peshawar in Pakistan. Recognising that a significant part of Afghan cultural life has been displaced due to warfare over the previous thirty years, the Peshawar leg had particular significance in understanding the life of Afghan photography under refugee conditions.

Focusing on the craft of photography imbued with the culture of Afghanistan the project has from the outset treaded uncharted territory bringing a previously obscure but deeply rich and routed culture of photography to light for the very first time.



Abdul Samad. Kabul, c. 1950s.



\* Research locations

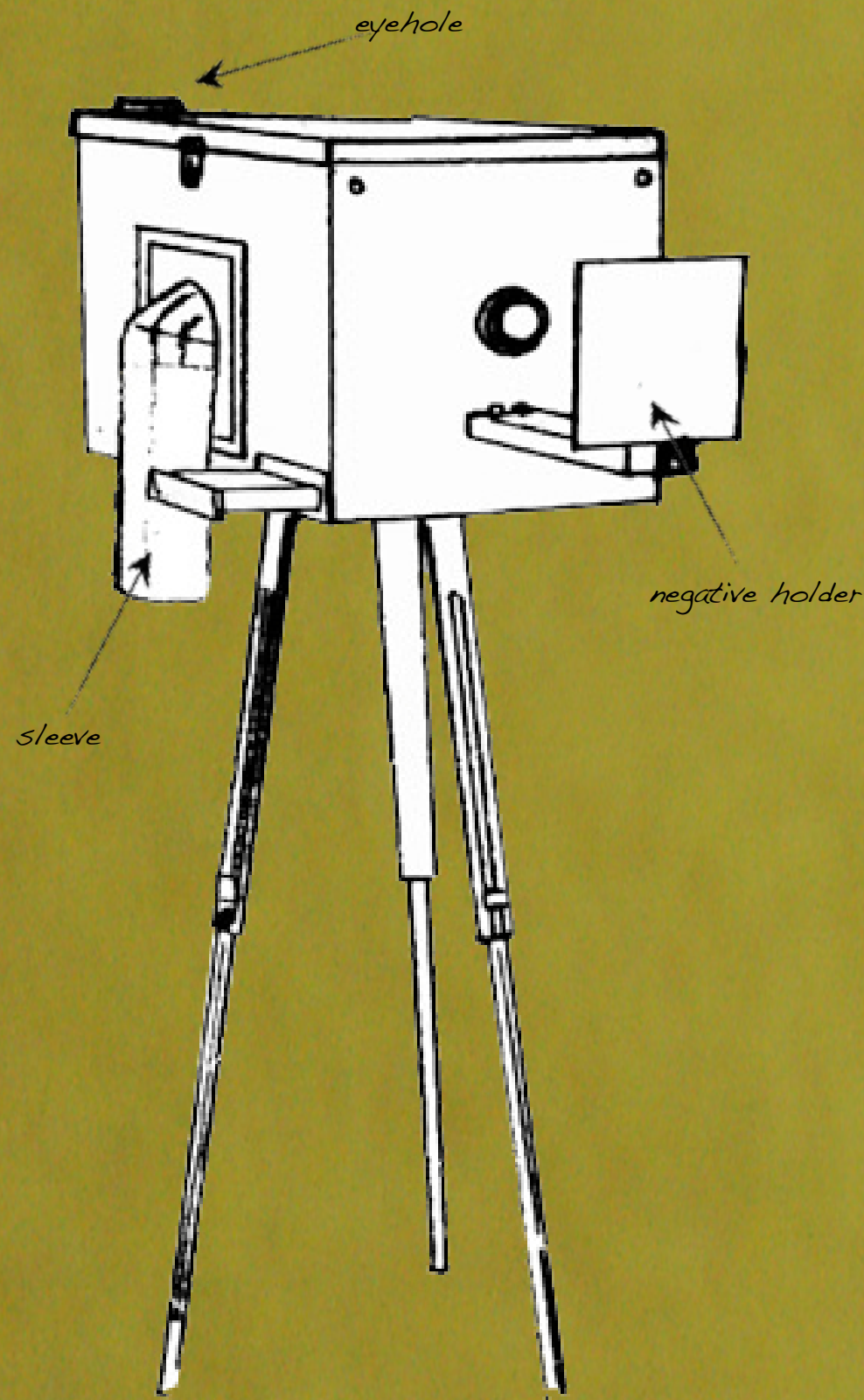


Photographer Izzat Ullah worked as a box camera photographer in Peshawar, Pakistan since he was a young boy. His family originally came from Jalalabad to Peshawar in the 1990s as refugees. Peshawar, 2012.

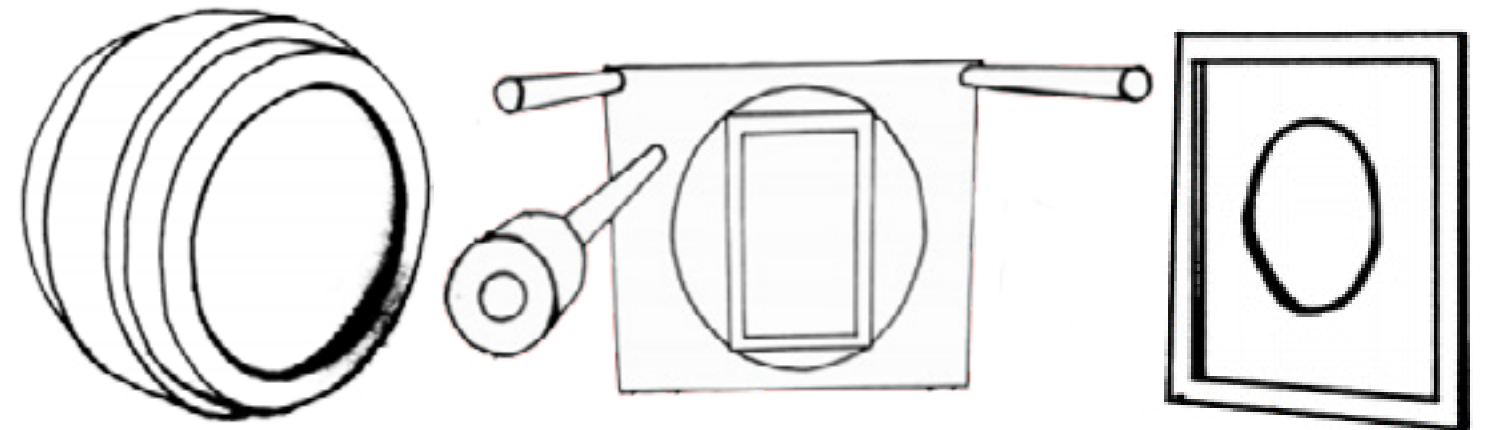




# The Camera



Opposite (left & right): sketches of camera parts from the project's free How to Build a Kamra-e-Faoree manual.



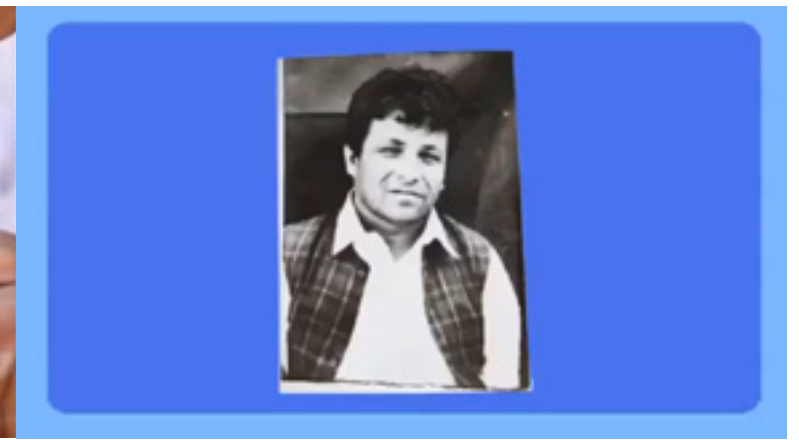
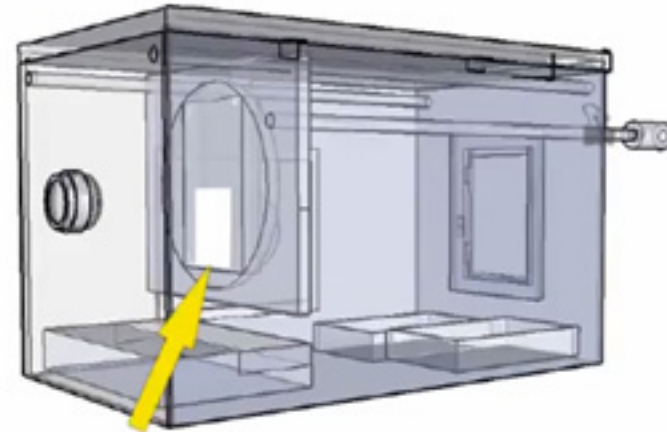
## The kamra-e-faoree

is a camera and darkroom in one holding a lens in the front and a viewing window in the back. To take a photograph the photographer exposes an image onto light sensitive paper which is then developed and fixed inside the camera. Traditionally, the camera was built by a carpenter using local materials. Since the 1950s generations of Afghans have had their portraits

taken with the kamra-e-faoree, usually for identity photographs. At one stage it was even outlawed when former rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban, banned photography, forcing photographers to hide or destroy their tools. After 2001 and the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, box camera photographers in Kabul experienced a boom in business but over the following decade the trade declined to the point where the camera has all but disappeared as a means to earn a living in Afghanistan.



# HOW TO USE A KAMRA-E-FAOREE



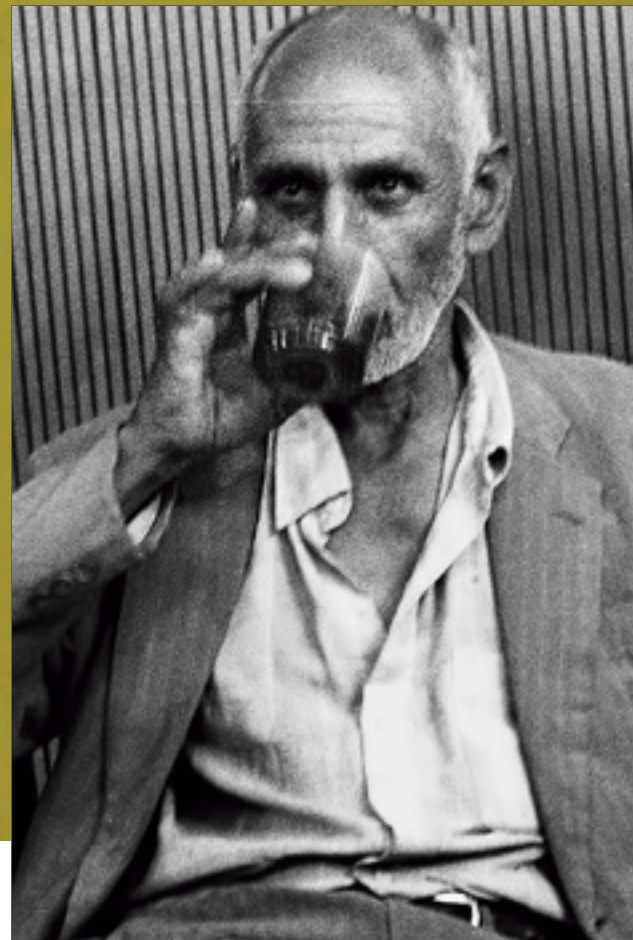
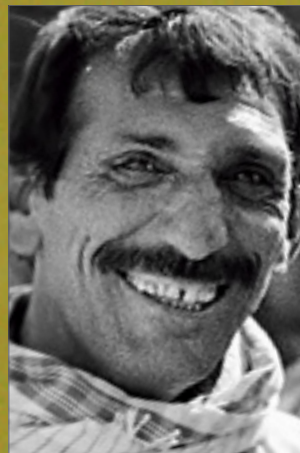




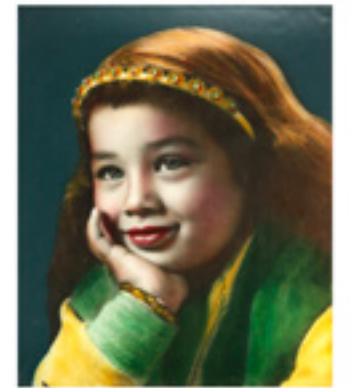
A kamra-e-faoree stands beside a cobbler's pitch. Charikar, 2003.



# The Photographers



Opposite: a large format hand-coloured portrait from the Tagin Studio in Mazar-e-Sharif.



## Afghan photographers

are the mentors of this project. It could simply never have happened without the help of the dozens of them, many who have been in the trade decades, some over half a century, who shared their life stories with us, showed us their techniques, opened their family albums and welcomed us into their homes.

Many of the photographers had been taught how to use a kamra-e-faoree by their father or other family members when they were so little they had to clamber up on a chair just to reach the camera. It was common that they were also skilled with the taking and painting of sophisticated large format photographic portraits.





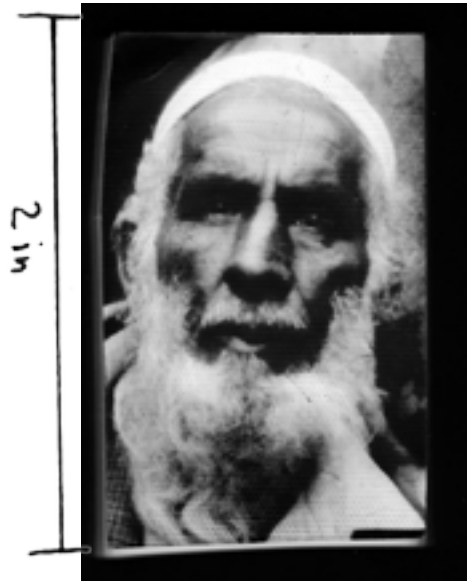
Below: Rohullah makes a copy of a digital passport photo which offered a cheaper duplication option than having extra digital copies made.



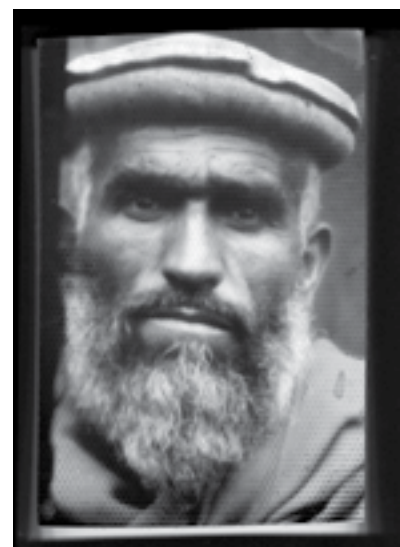
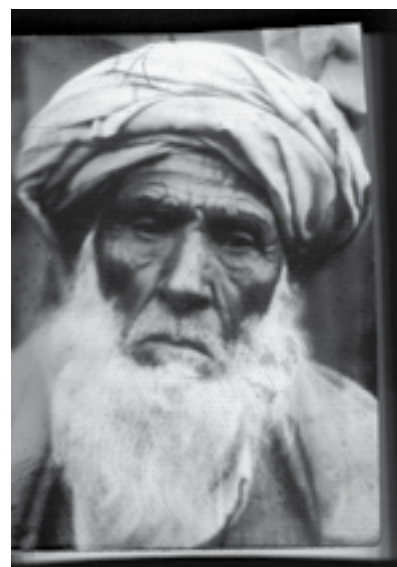
**Rohullah** was one of the last two kamra-e-faoree photographers still working in Kabul in June 2011. Pictured above with his son, he had been in the trade forty years and was taught how to use the camera by his brother. His customers were mostly young school children who got their photos taken for identity documents. With the rise of digital photography, security issues, and a lack of photographic paper, Rohullah's future as a kamra-e-faoree photographer was under considerable threat and in 2012 he left his pitch to set up a grocery store on the edge of the city.







**This project is for everyone.** Hosting project material online and making it free to access has meant that tens of thousands of people worldwide have learnt about Afghan photography by Afghans.





# HOW TO BUILD A KAMRA-E-FAOREE



AN ABCP SHORT FILM SUPPORTED BY THE  
CENTRE FOR VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY





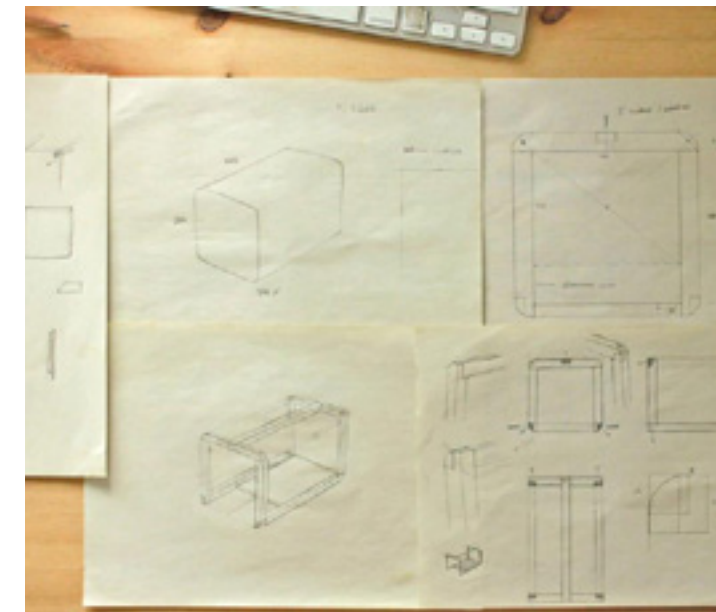
# Community & Education



Above: Crayon drawings of an Afghan box camera photographer at work. Steve Xiong from the Media Department at the Boys Club of New York showed a group of six to nine year old students the “How to use a kamra-e faoree” film and then got them to draw the camera, Qalam the photographer, and Javed the sitter to illustrate they understood the concept.

Opposite: what Romain Lefevre Roland calls his “Boîte photo social” (Social box camera) because of the more personal encounters it inspires between photographer and subject.

Since 2011 dozens of enthusiasts around the world have contacted ABCP with requests on how to build a box camera. Many have used the free project manual as a base for their explorations. The camera has been used in community centres and as a teaching method for primary school children to understand the principles of analogue photography while the name ‘kamra-e-faoree’ has also gained popular currency.



Above: Plans made by a Malaysian creative studio to build a kamra-e-faoree using the ABCP's free manual.



York in March, to mark the 50th anniversary of the birth of Kim Il-sung, the founder of the communist state," explains Santiago Lyon, AP's director of photography.

AP still had to convince North Korea to open its doors to an external, US-based news organisation, however. "The argument we made to them was that we thought by having a journalist on the ground providing independent and objective information it would allow the news from North Korea to get out to the rest of the world, in an accurate manner," Daniszewski tells BHP, so that what they said would not automatically be distorted by being interpreted by others. There's a hunger for news from North Korea, but it's usually seen through the prism of China, Japan or the US and South Korea. If we were there, in the streets, talking to people, talking directly to government officials, we could get information out - doing so objectively as facts are facts. There wouldn't be any intentional distortion and fewer opportunities for mistakes.

"I also think that for their own national interests, they wanted to make a kind of statement that North Korea is normalising its media relations with the world - that it doesn't need to be secretive; that it can have foreign journalists on its soil with confidence."

The news organisation has hired two North Korean journalists, including a photographer who is already shooting pictures for AP in Pyongyang and "is sending them to our photo-editing desk in Tokyo", according to Lyon. "In addition, our chief Asia photographer David Guttenfelder and our North Korea bureau chief Jean Lee will be visiting Pyongyang with some frequency both to report from there, as well as to train the North Korean staff."

Daniszewski adds: "With Guttenfelder, we hope we'll be able to get a visa that will allow him to stay there for long and extended periods of time - to actually reside in the country." Guttenfelder is already used to the country, having worked there several times on previous assignments. "He's known to them and is one of the world's finest photographers," says Daniszewski. "He's pretty well placed to visually tell the story of North Korea."

Guttenfelder's role will be to try "to shine a light into a country where there has been quite limited journalistic access for many years", says Lyon. "We want to show what life is like in Pyongyang, but also in other parts of the country. I think there's a lot of curiosity for such images because contact with that country has been very limited. We want to show the common scenes that people all over the world share - where do they work, what do they eat, where do they live, what do they do, what are they like and what do they look like, all of these things. It's also about reporting on what's happening, politically, in North Korea. There's a new leader now. There's curiosity to see what he's going to do. Last month, we had a series of photographs that Guttenfelder took of Kim Jong-un at a parade in Pyongyang. It was the first time we'd photographed him on our own."

Daniszewski agrees. "North Korea has been a kind of a mystery to everyone, and I think that part of the reason has to do with the fact that the general public didn't really know what the country looked like. Visually, it's an exciting story to tell - in some way, the photos are just addictive. You can't stop looking at them and what they tell you."

Of course, AP won't be getting unlimited access to the country - in fact, the organisation's journalists cannot leave the bureau without authorisation. "We have to work according to the rules and regulations that are in place in North Korea," says Daniszewski. "If they want to cover an event, they make a request."

"You just can't wander freely in North Korea, just as you can't wander freely in lots of areas of lots of other countries," Lyon adds. "But generally, when we've asked for permission to go to places, we've been able to go."

And there are plenty of places to go, because few places cry out for news coverage as much as North Korea. "Part of AP's brand is to be first and accurate, but also to be aggressive - to try to get to places where the news is before anyone else does," says Daniszewski. "So, of course, we were pleased to be the first [Western news organisation] to have a bureau there." [www.ap.org](http://www.ap.org)



Asad Ullah, at 62, is part of a family of photographers. He used to roam the country with his kamra-e-faoree, but now he spends his time retouching and repairing old photographs with Photoshop.

## REPORT Kamra-e-faoree

Box cameras have boomed in Afghanistan over the past 50 years, but the advent of digital photography has signalled their demise. So photographer Lukas Birk and ethnographer Sean Foley are preserving the history of these rudimentary, but surprisingly efficient, photographic devices. Olivier Laurent reports.

Almost 200 years after Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre created the first box camera, the device continues to be used for regular and commercial work in Afghanistan. But with digital photography now reaching even this war-torn, impoverished country, the future of the Afghan box camera is gloomy.

"Box cameras were immensely popular. Dozens of photographers would line up in front of ministries, offering portrait photographs to be used on passports and identification

papers," says Lukas Birk, an Austrian photographer.

Birk has teamed up with Sean Foley, an Irish ethnographer, to preserve the history of the kit, compiling as much information as possible in the long-term Afghan Box Camera Project. "It all started when Sean and I worked in Afghanistan in 2005," Birk tells BHP. "We were doing research on tourism in conflict zones when we saw these cameras."

Birk and Foley were soon fascinated by the cameras. "In 2007 I made a few drawings and the following year I built my first one," says Birk. "We knew we had to go back to make some sort of record of their existence, because we know that these cameras are slowly disappearing - digital photography is taking over."

### Two in one

The Afghan box camera is a simple box-shaped wooden camera that produces instant identity portraits, says Birk, and is both a camera and

a darkroom in one. "Inside the box, [the photographer] develops a paper negative of the image, then shoots this negative to make the positive, which is then developed to produce a finished photograph," explains Birk, adding that the camera doesn't need a film - it's all paper and chemicals - and, most importantly, doesn't need electricity to operate.

The box camera became popular in the 1950s when the last king of Afghanistan, Mohammed Zahir Shah, made it compulsory for all national identity cards to carry a photograph. "This plan is likely to have been a turning point in box camera photography in Afghanistan as it provided, with masses of potential customers, a steady and guaranteed income for photographers," says Birk and Foley. Photographers were trained and sent across Afghanistan to shoot the portrait photographs. That's why the same tool can now be found all over Afghanistan.

Photographers did not build the box cameras, however. "Usually

they would ask a carpenter to make the main box, and then photographers would add the lens and the specific display windows", and decorate them to their liking. They thus transformed the kit into objects of art, which Birk and Foley are now trying to catalogue and preserve.

"We want to record the stories behind these tools, but also behind these photographers," says Birk. "We've found that photography is pretty much a family trade in Afghanistan. Previous generations were using the cameras to earn a living and support their families."

The pair needs to move quickly, though - last year there were only two box camera operators left in Kabul, and Birk and Foley aren't sure they will still be around when they return to the city in June. Things are changing, says Birk, despite the fact that box camera photographs are still cheaper than digital ones. "It can be half the price of a colour digital picture," Birk tells BHP. "But one of the two

Kabul-based photographers also owns a mobile digital printing studio. So we know that, soon, these Afghan box cameras will vanish."

### How-to guide

On their next trip to Afghanistan, Birk and Foley will collate as much material as possible about the cameras, filming and recording the stories and techniques used by Afghan photographers and creating a "How to build a box camera" film. They also plan to travel across more of the region, to research the history and development of the kit, and investigate how large-format and hand-coloured photography - two techniques that also remain popular - have influenced box camera photography.

"We want to go in different provinces, visit places in Pakistan along the Afghan border, for example, but also in Herat near Iran," says Birk. "We want to see whether Iranian photography has influenced the way box cameras are used there - and maybe they



Rohullah, here with his son, is one of the last two remaining kamra-e-faoree photographers left in Kabul, Afghanistan. Images courtesy of Afghan Box Camera Project.

TIME  
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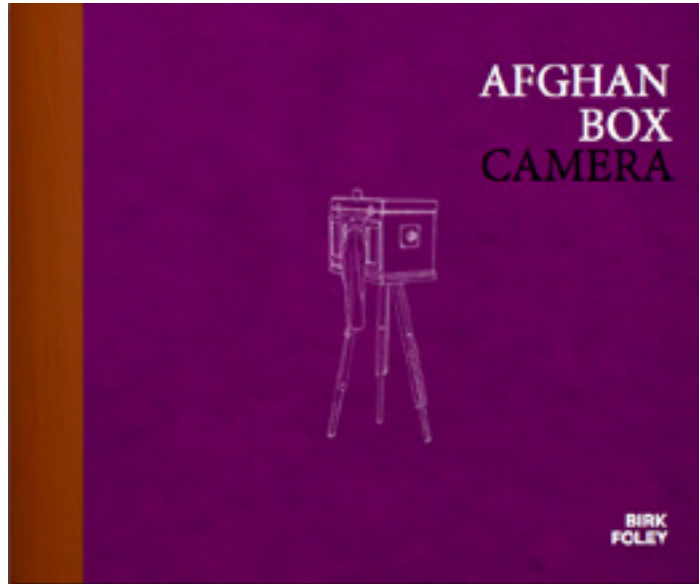
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# *Afghan Box Camera, THE BOOK*

DEWI LEWIS  
PUBLISHING



## **In 2011**

Muhammad Usman, one of the old school photographers in Kabul, told us “Come back with a book!” His sentiment was echoed by every one of the Afghan photographers we met who shared a dream to have their craft remembered. *Afghan Box Camera*, the book, to be published in the winter, is the realisation of that dream. Combining images from the 1950s to the present-day it illustrates the techniques and artistry of a previously untold and visually enthralling photographic culture, preserving forever the story of the kamra-e-faoree.

*Muhammad Usman, one of the old school photographers, told us “Come back with a book!”*

For further information on the book publication please contact:  
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# Afghan Box Camera: the Exhibition



The exhibit 'Afghan Box Camera' draws on an extensive collection of materials including:

- \* hundreds of analogue photographs taken by Afghan photographers between the 1950s and 2012 with over four hundred original box camera photographs and hand-coloured large format portraits

- \* twenty project short films illustrating the techniques of the Afghan box camera
- \* a collection of Afghan box cameras and large format cameras used in Afghanistan

- \* three dozen photographer portfolios with biographical text, images & videos

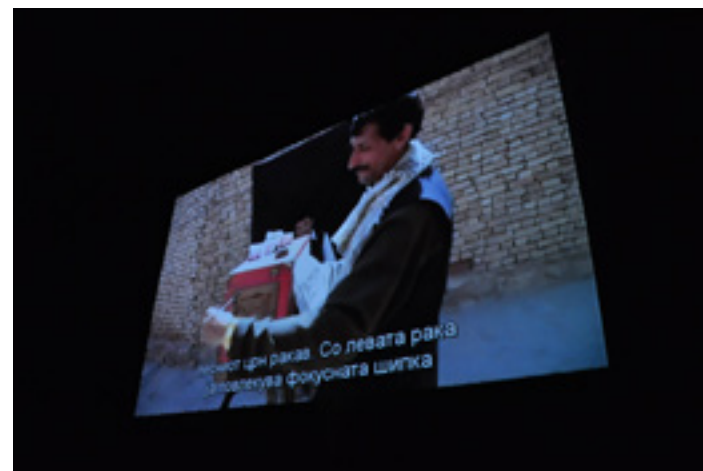
Workshops and lectures can also be organised.

To organise an exhibition please email:  
[contact@afghanboxcamera.com](mailto:contact@afghanboxcamera.com)

Opposite row (top to bottom): Exhibition invitation to "Transience" at Hong Studio, Beijing. Installation at Hong Studio. How to build a kamra-faoree film installation at the ArtScience Museum Singapore.



Below: Screening and audience of How to use a kamra-e-faoree film at the MakeDox film festival, Macedonia.





# the AUTHORS



Lukas Birk (left) and Sean Foley (right) in Mashad, Iran, 2006.

**Lukas Birk** is an Austrian artist who exhibits regularly and organises visual-media workshops. He has set up artist-in-residency programs in China and Indonesia and organised networks of local artists to co-operate with those in his native Austria.

**Sean Foley** is an ethnographer from Ireland specialising in visual anthropology. He works as a researcher on art projects and has made ethnographic films on mortuary workers in India and tourism in Pakistan and Afghanistan.



The authors encounter a box camera, Mazar-e-Sharif, 2006.



Birk tests his self-made kamra-e-faoree. Austria, 2011.





[www.afghanboxcamera.com](http://www.afghanboxcamera.com)

For further information on the project please contact: [contact@afghanboxcamera.com](mailto:contact@afghanboxcamera.com)

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