

20 of the Best Photo Books You Can Buy Right Now

There are few better ways for a photographer to find inspiration than looking through photo books. Coffee table books. Art books. Artist monographs. Whatever you want to call them.

It's not uncommon to see a stack of photo books in the home of someone who doesn't even practice photography, either. Many photographers consider a published photo book as an indicator of success and it's one of the most accessible ways to view photographic art.

Whether you're looking to add to your own collection or for a great gift for a photographer, we've gathered a list of 20 of the best photo books you can buy right now.

Browse the list by type of book below:

Individual Artist

Multiple Artists

Instructional / Essays

Where to Buy Photo Books

Photo Books by Individual Artists

Whenever we're feeling the need for some inspiration, flipping through a photo book always helps. Most of our favorites are books showcasing the work of an individual artist. Take a look at some of the best artist monographs that you can currently buy, listed in alphabetical order.

***Photographer*, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Yves Bonnefoy**

344 Pages, Published 2020

There are few photographers of the 20th Century as celebrated as Henri Cartier-Bresson. Credited as the father of street photography and a master of candid images, [Photographer](#) is a retrospective of Cartier-Bresson's immense career.

Blurring the lines of photojournalism, candid photography, and portraits, Cartier's black and white images are often touted as a masterclass in composition. While many of the photos presented in *Photographer* are nearing a century old and oftentimes document significant

historical moments, there is a feeling of timelessness that one feels while leafing through the pages.

Readers are presented with only the date and location of each photo. We oftentimes wish for more information to contextualize the images, but when you're dealing with a master of their craft, sometimes it's truly best to just let the work speak for itself.

Guide, William Eggleston, John Szarkowski

112 Pages, Published 2002

Between 1969 and 1971, William Eggleston shot the photos that would be displayed in the MoMa's first ever color photography exhibit, and in the photo book, [Guide](#). At the time, color photos were seen as a laughable, amateur version of the fine art photographs shot exclusively in black and white.

Eggleston changed that.

While some critics were unsure at the time, Eggleston is a big reason that color photography started to gain the popularity that it did.

The photos featured in *Guide* are extremely pared down, both in quantity, and subject matter. Featuring just 48 photos shot around Eggleston's hometown of Memphis, the simple compositions are engaging and demand more than just a quick viewing.

American Photographs, Walker Evans, Sarah Meister, Lincoln Kerstein

208 Pages, Published 2012

The most recent edition of this seminal photobook celebrated the 75th anniversary of its original publishing. When originally released in 1938 by the MoMA, [American Photographs](#) accompanied an exhibit of Evans' photographs of America in the 1930's.

One could argue that no other photographer's work has been more important in the documentation of early American life, especially during the Great Depression and the years that followed.

A true time capsule, *American Photographs* is considered one of the most important photo books ever published. Every photographer should check out this fantastic monograph, as modern photography is greatly influenced by the work presented within.

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, Nan Goldin

144 Pages, Published 2012

A raw, moving look into the lives of young people living fast and free in the '80's, [The Ballad of Sexual Dependency](#) is a powerful photobook by female photographer Nan Goldin. Goldin shot these incredible photos of her friends and lovers, many of whom were members of the LGBTQ community and drug users, both of which had much bigger stigmas at the time.

There are also many autobiographical images, with Goldin not only documenting the lives of her so-called "tribe" that she surrounded herself with, but also examining her own sexuality, family, and love life. It's not particularly common for a photographer to step in front of their own camera, especially in a published monograph.

Monumentally influential, the snapshot style of photos presented in this book continue to be replicated by many young photographers. Hell, most of them probably don't even know *who* they're emulating, but there's no doubt that Goldin's inspiration in the world of photography has been massive.

Ren Hang, Ren Hang, Dian Hanson

Tragically taking his own life only a month and a half after the publication of his first major photo book, Ren Hang was a rebellious visionary who was never afraid to go against the status-quo.

You should know that the images in [Ren Hang](#) are incredibly NSFW – Hang mostly shot nude photos of his friends in Hong Kong, where this type of photography is much less appreciated than in the US. In his earlier years, there were instances of the Chinese government [banning Hang's photos](#) and shutting down his art shows.

While the conversation surrounding his work always centers on the nudity, that does a disservice to the incredible work that Hang created in the span of his career. His unique approach to photographing people – with intertwining limbs, using unexpected props, and unique poses – is beloved and influential to many young photographers.

Mostly, flipping through *Ren Hang* reminds you that you don't need the best gear or the most picture perfect locations to create captivating images. All you need is a camera, a friend or two, and the ability to think outside the box.

Modern Color, Fred Herzog

320 Pages, Published 2017

Fred Herzog's [Modern Color](#) explores an early innovator's explorations with a new medium. Shot mostly on Kodachrome slide film, Herzog masterfully navigated the world of color photography while the rest of the world was miles behind.

New technology in the past few decades has brought new life to the artist's slides, as he was able to better translate the deep, intense colors produced by Kodachrome, to the page.

The layout is simple and clean with a satisfying sequencing that explores the relationship between many of the photos.

Show Me the Picture, Jim Marshall, Amelia Davis

288 Pages, Published 2019

Anyone interested in the 1960's-1970's and the music that soundtracked the era should check out [Show Me the Picture](#). Jim Marshall is a prolific photographer who created iconic images of rock stars, jazz musicians, and civil rights leaders during this monumentally important era of American history.

While many of the photos, especially of well-known musicians, have been shown elsewhere, *Show Me the Picture* exhibits many unseen images, exploring Marshall's foyers into other photographic genres.

This art book has something for everyone; music lovers, photography fanatics, and those who're interested in American history. While Marshall's claim to fame may be his portraits of musicians, many of the photos capturing major historical events are just as captivating.

Where I Find Myself: A Lifetime Retrospective, Joel Meyerowitz, Colin Westerbeck

352 Pages, Published 2018

Joel Meyerowitz's decade-spanning, famed career as a photographer is the subject of [Where I Find Myself](#). Presenting the images in reverse-chronological order – starting with his most recent photo and ending with his first – is an interesting way to examine the changes that took place during Meyerowitz's 40+ years making images.

There's quite a variety of subject matter as Meyerowitz has practiced many genres of photography throughout his lifetime. Some prefer a more focussed subject for an artist's monograph, but we also enjoy retrospective collections, like *Where I Find Myself*.

With an artist as prolific as Meyerowitz, it can be overwhelming diving into their work, but this coffee table book is a great overview.

One thing to note is that the layout of this book is quite disliked by some readers. Many of the photos are printed across two pages, making it difficult (if not impossible) to view the entire image correctly.

I Can Make You Feel Good, Tyler Mitchell

208 Pages, Published 2020

Tyler Mitchell's career really took off in 2018 when he became the first Black photographer to shoot the cover of American Vogue. The [images of Beyoncé](#) that graced said cover were bright, intimate, and would come to represent his photographic style.

[I Can Make You Feel Good](#) is Mitchell's visual exploration of the dream of a Black utopia. Focused on portraits of young POC, the images in this art book exude feelings of joy, optimism, and most importantly, a deep trust in the photographer.

Mitchell's signature style, using natural lighting with bright, saturated pops of color, is exemplified in the layout of this book which displays no white space. Each page commands your attention and celebrates Black life in a way that few photo books have been able to.

The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957, Gordon Parks

168 Pages, Published 2020

The first Black photographer to be employed by *Life* magazine in the '50's, Gordon Parks shot a gritty, provocative set of images chronicling crime in the United States' biggest cities. Originally taken on assignment, the photos would go on to become [The Atmosphere of Crime](#).

There are few photo books that come to mind that feel so deeply important and powerful; Parks rejected clichés of the time and refused to portray crime in a negligent way. Instead he made thought provoking photographs that question the societal issues that cause crime to run rampant in so many cities.

The images Parks shot on his six-week journey were not only radical for showing the country what crime and criminal work were really like (unlike the fictional accounts they'd seen in movies), but also because they were shot by a Black man, not even 100 years after the end of slavery.

Parks approached the assignment with the utmost care and empathy, with each image maintaining the subject's humanity, no matter what the situation may have been.

Also noteworthy is the use of color photography by Parks, who was (and still is) known largely for his black and white work. While we're sure that the photos would've still been captivating if

they'd been shot black and white, the choice of color further pushes *The Atmosphere of Crime* into a realm above and outside the rest of Parks' fantastic work.

***The Last Resort*, Martin Parr, Gerry Badger**

84 Pages, Published 2010

[*The Last Resort*](#) is the project that introduced famed photographer, Martin Parr, to the world. Examining the fading seaside resort of New Brighton, Parr provided viewers with an eye into his home country of England, though a part of the country that wasn't likely to be exhibited in photobooks.

Upon the release of *The Last Resort*, reviews were mixed; some felt like the images were excessively voyeuristic and mocked those who'd been captured by Parr. But many more saw the comedy and the humanity in the images that were, if nothing else, extraordinarily authentic.

As street photography has continued to gain popularity, the images presented in *The Last Resort* hardly seem as controversial as they may have once. With photographers like Bruce Gilden blurring the line between mockery and flattery in his candid images, Parr's work feels like nothing more than an incredibly sincere documentation of a unique place, at a unique time.

***Andy Warhol. Polaroids*, Richard B. Woodward, Reuel Golden**

408 Pages, Published 2017

One of the most prolific artists of *any* medium, just about everyone is familiar with the work of Andy Warhol. Throughout his career, Warhol maintained an interest in many types of art, including photography, although his prints and paintings are the most well known.

Covering the three plus decades that Warhol shot instant photos, [*Polaroids*](#) exhibits the extent to which Warhol experimented with the medium. He shot all types of photos on Polaroid, from landscapes, to still lifes, to portraits of the many famous friends that made regular appearances in his life.

While many of the images might be considered "snapshots", this collection isn't intended to be a grand artistic statement, rather an intimate look into one of the many art forms that Warhol practiced up until his death.

***The Suffering of Light*, Alex Webb**

204 Pages, Published 2011

Alex Webb is known as a masterful practitioner of color photography with much of his work emphasizing light and color in breathtaking manners. Many would call his work “street photography”, though most of his images feel too complex to distill into a singular genre. Webb has even commented that “to me it is all photography”.

[*The Suffering of Light*](#) is an all-encompassing collection of images from 30 years of work. The large format of this coffee table book is well earned by the content within; each image is rich with vibrant colors and details hidden deep within the complex compositions.

There are few photo books that leave us feeling so inspired and eager to exercise our creativity. Any photographer of any genre can certainly learn from Alex Webb, and *The Suffering of Light* is a great way to get acquainted.

Photo Books Featuring Multiple Artists

There are plenty of fantastic photo books that feature the work of multiple artists. It can be interesting to view a variety of viewpoints all focused on a similar theme or topic. These types of art books can also be a great way to discover new photographers that you aren't familiar with.

Magnum Contact Sheets, Kristen Lubben

524 Pages, Published 2017

Featuring 139 contact sheets from 69 different photographers, this collection gives a deeper insight into the editing process that takes place behind many iconic images.

It's fascinating to look at the outtakes and really helps the reader get a better understanding of some of the most prolific photographers of all time. Not only through the images, but [*Magnum Contact Sheets*](#) also includes text written by each of the artists to accompany the photos. (The texts for photographers who have passed are written by experts selected by each of their respective estates).

It's also quite interesting to look at a photo book that covers so many subjects and such a broad time period. Anyone who's interested in photography of any kind, especially film photography, is sure to find something of interest in *Magnum Contact Sheets*.

Bystander: A History of Street Photography, Joel Meyerowitz, Colin Westerbeck

400 Pages, Published 2017

First published in 1994, [*Bystander*](#) takes a look at the evolution of street photography in a chronological view. A combination of images (curated by Meyerowitz, a celebrated street

photographer), and writing (by Westerbeck) gives you some information to help contextualize the art form.

This particular title has been edited and re-released multiple times, most recently in 2017, with each edition expanding on the artists featured, adding new photos by modern photographers.

Whether or not you're interested in the accompanying text, this book is more focussed on the photos, with a fantastic selection of images by all of the quintessential artists that have made important work during street photography's existence.

***The Family of Man*, Edward Steichen, Carl Sandburg**

192 Pages, Published 2002

[*The Family of Man*](#) was one of the most ambitious photography exhibitions of all time, originally opening at the MoMA in 1955. Featuring 503 photographs from 273 different photographers, the original exhibition was intended to draw connections on humanity and explore photography's role in some of these connections.

The photos, all in black and white, mostly feature human subjects from around the world, engaged in circumstances that are universally relatable.

While the wide array of photographers provided different perspectives on a common theme, it's worth noting that 233 out of the 273 photographers represented were either American or European. While the photos may cover every section of the globe, the work presented is, largely, through a Western eye (and...lens).

Widely regarded as one of the most successful photo exhibitions that's ever been assembled, the initial opening at the MoMA was followed by eight years of touring to over 20 different countries. Since its initial publication, the book has never been out of print.

Needless to say, there are few photo books that have seen such universal acclaim and popularity as *The Family of Man*.

***Contact High: A Visual History of Hip-Hop*, Vikki Tobak**

288 Pages, Published 2018

[*Contact High*](#) is a must-read for anyone interested in hip-hop and photography. A fascinating journey through the development of one of the last true American art forms, this book is full of interviews and essays on the topic, while also examining photography's role in the monumental growth hip-hop has seen since its inception.

While there are numerous coffee table books that cover hip-hop photography and imagery, *Contact High* is unique in its approach. Focussing on photo-shoots as a whole, as opposed to

the single images that may have resulted, the reader is presented with contact sheets from iconic shoots that will be familiar to any hip-hop fan.

There's something incredibly interesting about seeing the outtakes from a photoshoot; it provides a deeper understanding of the artist's process, and sheds light on the editing process that many photographers don't necessarily consider when taking photos.

Instructional Photo Books / Essays

If you're looking for a different way to immerse yourself in photography, you may enjoy checking out one of these instructional photo books. We haven't included any books that cover the basics of photographic technique, instead we've picked our favorite essays and instructional texts that provoke and inspire us to shoot photos of our own.

***The Visual Palette: Defining Your Photographic Style,* Brian Matiash**

216 Pages, Published 2015

One of the few books on this list that is more text than photos, [The Visual Palette](#) is one of our favorite "instructional" photo books that we've read. Don't worry though, this isn't your standard "How-To" book about the basics of operating a camera.

Instead, Matiash dives deep into ways that photographers can be more thoughtful with their work, and in time, develop a photographic style of their own. Divided into three sections (composition, post-processing, and sharing), this book pushes readers to create photos with intention, instead of just snapping pictures without any rhyme, reason, or meaning.

Complemented by real life examples and photos from throughout his career, *The Visual Palette* is a fantastic read for anyone looking to find more meaning in their own photographic practice.

***On Photography,* Susan Sontag**

224 Pages, Published 2001

Certainly the most polarizing selection on this list, [On Photography](#) is both beloved *and* hated, nonetheless regarded as a monumentally important piece of writing about photography.

Sontag's essays discuss the historical context and implications of photography as an artform, often diving deep into a philosophical realm. This is not, by any means, a light read, and features no images.

Ofentimes quite dense, *On Photography* has long been recommended for beginning photographers looking to find a deeper understanding of their art. While we normally opt to find inspiration in books filled with photos, sometimes it's just as inspiring to think deeply about what creating photos means and how we each fit into the historical context of the artform.

Think Like a Street Photographer, Matt Stuart

128 Pages, Published 2021

We find most instructional photography books to be...less than great. It's not usually that there's anything wrong with the information, rather it's just the same information that countless authors have written time and time again.

Matt Stuart's [Think Like a Street Photographer](#) is a unique approach to this type of photography book; we found it entertaining and felt inspired to shoot some photos after finishing.

Accompanied by a number of Stuart's own photos that help demonstrate the points he's making, the writing is interesting and has some practical tips to making better photos. Nothing like you'd find in most other instructional photography books, but we think that's a good thing.

Where to Buy Photobooks

The easiest, and oftentimes cheapest place to buy new photobooks is [Amazon](#). We encourage folks to support local businesses whenever they can, but the fact of the matter is that not everyone has access to somewhere that sells a large selection of photobooks.

Many titles have quick, free shipping making it a great option for a last minute gift for the photographer in your life.

If you're able to browse in person, most bookstores have *some* selection of photobooks in stock. You may not necessarily be able to find an exact title you're looking for, but perusing art books in person is always ideal.

There are a handful of independent bookstores that specialize in art books, some even stocking only photography books. A few of our favorite stores to browse include:

[Printed Matter](#), NYC

[Hennesey + Ingalls](#), L.A.

[Dashwood Books](#), NYC

[Elliot Bay Book Company](#), Seattle

[Photo Eye Bookstore](#), Santa Fe

[Powell's Books](#), Chicago

What photo books do you reach for when you're looking for inspiration? Let us know your favorites in the comments!