

L IS FOR LOOK
CHILDREN'S PHOTOBOOKS
19.09.2025 – 01.02.2026

L is for Look presents a study of the children's photobook, from its industrial production and growth as a publishing phenomenon in the 1930s through to the present day. Although such photobooks remain a minor feature in the publishing landscape, their production allows us to track the development of our perception of the medium, the history of pedagogy, and the status of children in Western societies over the course of a century.

When new image-based educational methods emerged, photography began to be incorporated into all types of children's literature, from picturebooks to fiction, including publications designed for pedagogic or educational purposes. While photography helped to reinvigorate the genre, new and specific uses of the photographic form were also mediated with the collaboration of graphic designers, artists, illustrators, and authors.

This exhibition concentrates on one hundred international works, focusing on original creative uses of photography, with the idea not only of highlighting its heritage and characteristic features but also of examining its contemporary manifestations. Women photographers play a key role in this publishing genre, which brings together two areas traditionally believed to be feminine, education and child portraiture, culminating in the creation of a specific genre in the 1970s that is involved in constructing the gaze of young readers.

L is for Look allows us to discover the creative process of a photobook, from the initial camera shots to original mock-ups. The exhibition has been designed in collaboration with the educational teams of partner institutions, and offers books to handle and read as well as interactive experiences for children and adults.

All the books displayed in the showcase are part of the Photo Elysée collection. When the printing technique is not specified, the works are exhibition prints on Fine Art paper.

1. PEDAGOGY

Since the 1930s, children's photobooks have been effective in helping toddlers and preschoolers acquire vocabulary and knowledge. Such "early-concept books" present images of familiar objects like toys, clothing, and food. This allows infants and caregivers to engage in a repeated "pointing-and-naming" games that help children practice their first words and develop fundamental concepts about the world around them.

As children grow older, picturebooks introduce more advanced concepts, including colors, geometric shapes, the letters of the alphabet, and basic numbers. Beyond merely teaching concepts, these primers address the very act of seeing, guiding young readers' attention to details as an important prerequisite for knowledge acquisition.

ABCs and number books, with their predictable and structured format, have proven to be fertile ground for many renowned photographers. Equally important to the imagery are innovative graphic design and formatting—such as spiral binding, interactive cards, and foldouts—all of which emphasize embodied learning. These primers thus form a unique intersection of education and artistic experimentation, evolving into a hybrid form that appeals not only to children but also adults.

2. EDUCATION

Children's literature—especially books with an educational purpose—would choose photography, based, first and foremost, on its realistic and universal qualities.

Transmission is achieved through children's figures and characters whom the reader could see as doubles. In the years following World War II, various Western photobooks collections invited children to discover the world. This period was imbued with a humanist ideology; children became citizens of the world, bearing within them the aspirations for a peaceful future.

This prepared the ground for teaching children about difference, which extends into everyday life on multiple levels, manifesting in lifestyles, skin color, disability, etc. Photography seems capable of representing all of these things, using documentary, metaphor, or narrative. But discovering the unknown also proceeds via the discovery of oneself and one's emotions, which need to be identified and welcomed.

Education based in empathy also brings to the fore a different way of relating to children, who "have the right to expect their sadness to be respected, even if it's about losing a pebble," as claimed by the Polish pedagogue Janusz Korczak.

3. FICTION

In the 1950s, children's photobooks began to branch out into fiction through the documentary use of photography in the live performing arts and more generally in the media through film and television. The book format permitted the sequencing of images as a means to render narrative.

The first stagings were borrowed from the popular tradition of puppet theater, which is well known for its pedagogic qualities. The expressiveness of these figures derives more from their movement and demeanor than from their facial expression or what they say. These constructed worlds lend themselves particularly well to visual storytelling. They are the result of close collaboration between creators and photographers, whose technical mastery exploits light and framing effects. The interplay between text and photo confirms the literal nature of the story: photography is used to support the fiction.

During this period, photography was also acknowledged as a subjective form of expression. It officially acquired artistic status and was used in contemporary work. Conceptual artists and photographers who made a name for themselves in the realms of performance and mise-en-scène offered new contemporary interpretations of traditional fairy tales with a personal touch, blending fiction with reality.

4. ANIMALS

Animals have a special place in children's literature. They provide the "right distance" between the reader and reality to support the child's individual development. Photographs of animals have shaken up this tradition by awakening us to their morphological singularities and allowing us to study their behavior.

Children have been ambassadors for the animal cause since the nineteenth century and are the natural addresses and heroes of this literature. While the earliest children's photobooks were still tied to the conventions of graphic illustration, the 1930s witnessed the emergence of a more respectful representation of animals' specific behaviors.

Animals also inspire imaginary stories for didactic or moral purposes or for entertainment. Anthropomorphization—endowing animal characters with human behavior—is a feature of this literary genre.

These stories are driven by children, whether by virtue of their shared vulnerability, their exceptional capacity to read feelings, or their attitude of kindness toward other species. Animals accentuate children's empathy, while children highlight the sensitivity of their companions. The animal characters, mainly domestic, also embody the virtues attributed to them, such as courage and loyalty for the dog.

5. PHOTOGRAPHISME

One of the key features of children's photobooks is their free use of photography and graphic innovations.

These visual creations mine other image sources (amateur photographs or pictures taken from magazines of various kinds). They also allow images to be freely manipulated using a wide range of techniques, from cropping and cutting out to montage. Introduced by the avant-garde art movements that flourished in Europe after World War I— such as Dadaism, constructivism, and surrealism—these techniques make it possible for the imagination and reality to be combined in a metaphorical *détournement*.

Photographers, graphic designers, illustrators, and artists free up the page layout by playing with formats, through their placement of photographs, and through their use of flat color tints and graphic and typographic elements. Technological revolutions, and more recently digital tools, have also helped expand this mixed-media technique, combining drawing and photography, which is now commonplace in children's illustration.

6. STIMULATING CREATIVITY

Children's photobooks are an invitation to learn about photography itself. A mode of pedagogy is developed here, mediated by seeing and doing, one in which the world is transformed, staged, and imaged as a means to stimulate the sense of observation and creativity.

Photography reveals diverse worlds and offers a wide range of creative possibilities, from sequencing to framing, from shadow play to distortion, by way of documentary realism and fictive invention.

Encouraging young people to focus their attention in these many things, children's photobooks have the potential to develop the practice of looking, whether through the images themselves or in the associations they prompt, and as an invitation to take part in a game that involves drawing comparisons between them.

Things are then switched around, and it is the children's turn to do. Staging everyday life, putting cameras in unexpected places or adopting unusual postures, and suggesting new visual associations: this is what these books propose. They have an overtly participatory and playful dimension that helps to develop an approach to the medium and the world that is at once critical and open.