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On photography

Something old, something new: the year's best photography books

From reissues of classic editions to [an eye-opening collection of mobile-phone snaps](#), photography books in 2009 captured a medium in flux. Sean O'Hagan picks his favourites

In 2009, photography grappled more than ever with the notion that the mobile phone, rather than the cheap digital camera, may yet make photographers of us all. It seemed apposite, then, that it was also a year in which old masters reasserted their importance with books that reminded us that the truly visionary are few and far between.

In many ways, the year belonged to **Robert Frank**. Now 85, the Swiss-born photographer was garlanded with a major American touring show to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of his classic work *The Americans*. The catalogue, *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* (Steidl, £49.90), is, hands down, my photography book of the year. Complete with absorbing essays, personal letters – to the likes of Jack Kerouac and Walker Evans – and contact sheets that show off Frank's extraordinary eye for the telling vignette, it is a must for anyone with an interest in photography's past and present.

The other big American photography book of the year has just been published. **Irving Penn's** *Small Trades* (Getty, £34.99) is a valediction of sorts for the great man, who died in October. Though better known for his fashion photography, Penn started the *Small Trades* project in 1950, photographing everyday subjects – plumbers, cleaners, shop assistants – in their work clothes between style shoots for *French Vogue* in his rented Parisian studio. Shot in austere blacks, whites and greys, the portraits possess a cumulative power that is full of quiet dignity, and subtler than Richard Avedon's similar images of American workers. (Intriguingly, one of the scouts who went out on the streets of Paris to select and then persuade the workers to pose was a young Robert Doisneau.)

Closer to home, the English were the subjects of two intriguing books: **Simon Roberts's** *We English* (Chris Boot, £40) and **Chris Steele-Perkins's** *England, My England* (Nothumbria Press, £30). Roberts' book is a kind of gentle celebration, its images captured on a large-format 5x4-inch camera and owing as much to the English landscape painting tradition as any photographic precedent. It's a grower. Steele-Perkins, a Magnum veteran, opts for a more sweeping documentary approach that shows the English at work and at play over the last four decades. By turns gritty and evocative, it is a book one imagines that Orwell would have liked very much.

Finally, a book that is utterly of the moment but oddly timeless: Joel Grey's 1.3: Images From my Phone (Powerhouse Books, £21.99). Having found himself wandering through a small museum in Florida without his camera, Grey – a former actor who won an Oscar in 1972 – resorted to his Nokia 133. The images were so surprising that he kept shooting on his phone for seven months. The result is this engaging book, a kind of vivid and gritty visual diary of his travels. "For me, taking pictures is like asking questions", he says on his website. The questions he asks with his Nokia don't differ that much from the ones he asks on his Nikon – and that, in itself, may be the biggest question of all regarding the future of photography.