

The hidden camera

Documentary photography wasn't nearly so commonplace 100 years ago.

Sarah McDonald, curator at the Hulton Archive, tells the story of Paul Martin, one of the craft's earliest exponents

PAUL MARTIN is among a small breed of photographers working in the late 19th and early 20th century who turned their lenses on the everyday and the commonplace to produce candid 'snapshots' which are now fascinating records of daily life of the period. Some, like Jacob Riis and John Thompson, did so in order to highlight appalling conditions of slum housing and child labour. Others, such as FM Sutcliffe or Hill & Adamson (*B&W No.9/May 2002*) posed their subjects, romanticising their simple rustic lifestyle. However, Martin, like contemporaries Joseph and Percy Byron in New York, was simply fascinated by the bustle of human activity around him, unposed, unselfconscious and completely candid.

Martin was born in 1864 in Alsace-Lorraine, but his family left for England in the wake of

the Franco-Prussian War. A visit to a London portrait studio with his parents awakened in the young boy an interest in the mysteries of photography, but his career began initially as a wood block engraver. After various photographic experiments he purchased the 'Fallowfield Facile', produced by Maille in 1892. This was a fixed focus detective camera camouflaged to look like a large brown paper parcel which was carried tucked under one arm. Measuring 8x6x11in, the mahogany camera took 12 quarter plates held in sheaths rotated by a rack and pinion mechanism. Martin made many improvements, including a self-focusing guide, which gave him greater control over his results than many other users – and after a heavy rainstorm ruined the paper packaging he had a harness-maker stitch a leather satchel casing.

Thus armed with his hidden camera, he spent his lunchtimes photographing the porters of London's markets and his days off snapping the holidaymakers at the seaside or the fair, occasionally selling some of his pictures to his employers. These images are wonderfully honest and unpretentious and are full of the happy accidents of composition where the photographer has little control over his subjects. However, this is exactly the effect Martin wanted, writing, 'it is impossible to describe the thrill which taking the first snaps without being noticed gave one.' During the evenings between 1895-6 he created his renowned *London by Gaslight* series. The exposures lasted anywhere from 10 minutes

Below A man selling a refreshing drink of sherbert and water in Cheapside, London circa 1900





Left Paddling in the sea, 1892

to half an hour, and Martin often had to cover the lens when horsedrawn cabs passed by to avoid capturing the latent image from their lamps. He won the Royal Photographic Society Medal for these images, and made them into the first of a series of lantern-slides, which toured the country.

At the time, Martin's pictures of daytrippers and London street traders were considered 'rather *infra dig*, or even shocking.' There was a lofty idea of what constituted a good photograph and few photographers would waste their precious plates on such mundane subjects. Documentary photography concentrated on notable events and famous people, while, as Martin noted himself, the artistic photographers 'felt that a plate demanded a noble and dignified subject, a cathedral or mountain.' However, he was encouraged by George Davidson, vice president of West Surrey Photographic Society and then managing director of Kodak's English branch. Davidson asked Martin to produce a set of pictures using a Kodak Falcon No 2 for use in the company's advertising campaign. Martin did not like the camera as well as his Facile and suggested improvements to film and shutter speeds which Davidson later adopted. Next,

he took a Kodak half plate camera to Hampstead Heath on the August Bank Holiday – when his 'cockney snaps' were shown in Kodak's window such a crowd gathered that the police had to intervene!

Martin refused an offer to join Kodak and turned instead to press work for the remainder of his career. He died in 1944 and Hulton Archive acquired many positives in 1947 as part of the General Photographic Agency acquisition. When the GPA archive was amalgamated into the growing historical collections of the Hulton Press Library in the 1950s, Martin's plates were scattered through the many thousands of negatives – and today research to identify and conserve them is still ongoing. >

The Paul Martin collection was acquired by the Hulton Library in 1947 and is now part of Hulton Archive, a division of Getty Images. Fine art prints can be purchased through the Hulton Getty Picture Gallery by calling 020 7367 4525 or e-mailing hulton.gallery@getty-images.com. Other images from the Paul Martin Collection can be viewed on the Hulton Archive's website at www.hultonarchive.com