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WORLDS APART

These Burmese Days
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The Age of Instagram Anxiety



VIEW FINDER Pre-Instagram, this was the main way New Yorkers spied on the lives of their neighbors. The artist Gail Albert Halaban shot this from a nearby apartment window.

Sign of the Times

Where the Grass Looks Greener

Instagram has created a new kind of voyeurism — in which you can look into the carefully curated windows of the rich, famous and stylish — and a new kind of lifestyle envy.

BY SARAH NICOLE PRICKETT

“THE DEPARTMENT STORE is the last promenade for the flâneur,” wrote Walter Benjamin, the German critic, whose impossible project — “The Arcades Project,” more precisely — documented street life in Paris after the Industrial Revolution. He wrote of gleaming wants, windows gazing back at him, shoppers and wanderers alike becoming reflections of their desires. “The crowd,” he wrote, “is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the flâneur as phantasmagoria — as a landscape, now as a room. Both become elements of the department store, which makes use of flâneurie itself to sell goods.”

This flâneuring took place when Paris was the capital of the 19th century. Its arcades — high iron-and-glass arches sheltering

individual blocks lined with shops — numbered over 300 (under 30, now). Manhattan, capital of the 20th, replaced arcades with department stores and made spectator art of window displays. What is the new Paris, the new Manhattan, the arcade in the age of digital reproduction? It is Instagram: the app built to make you covet your neighbor’s life.

Only now your own personal Joneses are hundreds of miles away in L.A., or on the Greek island of Patmos, or in Milan. Doesn’t matter — all it takes is two clicks for today’s flâneurs, renamed “followers,” to float onto Margherita Missoni’s balcony. That is, a small and square and semipermanent display of Margherita Missoni’s balcony that makes you wonder if an antique rocking



WISH YOU WERE HERE Clockwise from top left: Instagram images of Claridge's, London, by Jessica Diehl; a private home in Gloucestershire by Amanda Brooks; a Parisian composition by Laura Bailey; a Manhattan self-portrait by Stephanie LaCava; spectators' shoes at the Giambattista Valli show in Paris by Lisa Marie Fernandez; and a pool in Puglia, Italy, by Rafael de Cárdenas.



Belongings being so easily conflated with belonging, Instagram induces a longing to be on a scene, *the scene*, the next one, a better one.



horse isn't the outdoor seating solution you've been waiting for, although you do not have a balcony, or even a patio, and cannot in fact remember the last time you were outdoors.

If Twitter is the street, Facebook the suburban-sprawl mall, and Pinterest some kind of mail-order catalog, Instagram is the many-windowed splendor of a younger Bergdorf's, showing all we possess or wish for, under squares of filtered glass, each photographic pane backlit 24/7. Each pane is, or intimates, an entire landscape or room. Follow enough of the international lifestyle-setters, and you'll see: women's fashion, men's fashion, home or apartment décor, beautiful food, art, color-coordinated books and magazines. Of course, the tags for these old categories are updated: #birthdaylove for a many-braceleted hand holding a pink Nat Sherman; #nodiets for an aerial view of Ibérico ham on a plate.

All elements must be carefully staged to look happenstance. Only the crassest Instagrammer snaps a new pair of shoes in a box, or plainly on a floor. The canner, cinematic one will instead make a display of the shoes, arranging her feet on a shabby-chic desk next to a Grolsch bottle of daisies atop a stack of French translations. The writer Stephanie LaCava snaps her snakeskin Pradas opposite Audrey Gelman's funny bunny slippers at Paris Fashion Week. A few cobbled streets away, the swimwear designer Lisa Marie Fernandez shows off her white Manolo Blahniks next to her friend's yellow pair of Gianvito Rossis. Such Instagrams are mimetic: the contents, the casually rarefied setting, the off-kilter composition. What each says is not "this is a good shoe" or "these shoes look good on me," but "*these shoes look good in my life*," which is what Benjamin meant when he said goods are sold by flâneurie.

What feels new with Instagram is the mode of photography that feels most akin to the window display. Rafael de Cárdenas, the architect, shows off Biarritz by way of melons and Marlboros on a snowy white cloth. Jessica Diehl, Vanity Fair's style and fashion director, snaps her stay in Claridge's, the five-star hotel in London. The model-slash-writer Laura Bailey comes home from a trip with — she writes — "Paris in my bag": a strand of Chanel pearls, a Chanel stylo eyeliner, a black diamanté hairpin and a handwritten note, all displayed too well and too brightly to make anyone believe these items have ever seen the inside of a clutch.

These are technically still lifes, but in spirit they are actually the new self-portraiture. It isn't strange to say, or to hear, from an acquaintance run into on the street, "I recognized you" — not by your face or your body, but by your "style." Meaning: a hand with carmine nails holding a copy of Anne Carson's "Red Doc." A pair of Illestevs resting on the edge of a Café Gitane plate, beneath it a new issue of The Journal. "The arrangement was the meaning," Joan Didion writes in "Blue Nights." The same is as true of objects as of words, and the small compositions of personal belongings so recognizable as "Instagram" are, simply, selfies without a face.

Similar compositions can also represent others. One of my favorite recent Instagrams, by the Los Angeles artist David Kitz, is of bandages, Motrin and other supplies for an injury from CVS, all heaped together on a plain white bedspread; the tag is #anklesprain, the caption is "Got the best girl in the world," and the heart melts. This is my kind of lifestyle envy. For the more aspirational, there is Amanda Brooks, the American socialite who now lives in Oxfordshire, England, with two kids and a million horses. In lieu of a family portrait, Brooks will Instagram four pairs of kayaking sandals on a dock. Instead of photographing her scads of friends, she 'grams a plate heaped high with packets of quince paste, which she has made to give as gifts. In the comments, a stranger asks her for the recipe.

Belongings being so easily conflated with belonging, Instagram induces a longing to be on a scene, *the scene*, the next one, a better one. Some hours you can scroll without end as a long block of squares lights up in unison, every frame swinging open to a new angle on the same scene: the same Jay Z performance at Pace Gallery in Chelsea, the same Delfina Delettrez presentation in Paris, the same Ken Okiishi paint-balling robots at the Frieze Art Fair in London.

"There it was," says the kid in the Willa Cather story "Paul's Case," looking up at a wonderland of glowing panes, "what he wanted — tangibly before him, like the fairy world of a Christmas pantomime." Close observers of Instagram may have noticed the recent rise of a conscious-or-not homage to Walter Benjamin, a snap of the modern flâneur: taken alone on the street, while looking through a store window — the most reflexive of surfaces — at oneself. ■