

## THE EYE OF PARIS

FROM MIST-SHROUDED MONUMENTS TO GRITTY STREET SCENES, THE 20TH-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHER BRASSAI CREATED A COMPELLING PORTRAIT OF COSMOPOLITAN LIFE

By Avis Berman, *Smithsonian*, October 1999



For three decades, Brassai's penetrating eye—captured in French photographer Andre Villers's 1981 portrait—focused on the urban landscape of the City of Light.

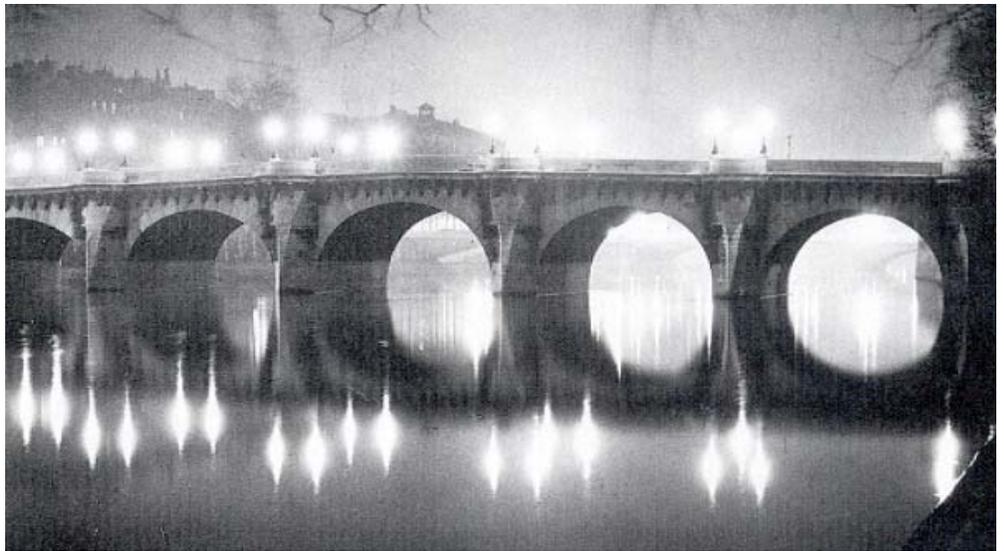
*Paris de nuit* established Brassai's place in photography immediately and irrevocably, but such a dominating achievement also tended to obscure his versatility. Brassai never restricted himself to one subject, theme or genre. For the next three decades, he pointed his lens at the whole spectrum of humanity across Europe and the United States, creating some of the most compelling images in 20th-century photography. The scenes of "Paris at night, however significant, represent only a fragment of a much greater vision that the artist pursued with deliberation," writes Anne Wilkes Tucker, curator of photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and organizer of "Brassai: The Eye of Paris," a retrospective exhibition celebrating the centenary of the artist's birth in 1899.

This view of Brassai—that he was a man who seized on a variety of things in the world and made them unforgettable—is the main premise of the show, which features some 140 photographs spotlighting such themes as dance, the demimonde, high society, artists, laborers and graffiti.

This unsurpassed chronicler of cosmopolitan life was born in a prosperous small town that was part of the fading Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of three sons of a professor of literature and his wife, Gyula Halasz was a social, artistic boy who had absorbed his father's love of France since he was a toddler. The family resided in Paris in 1903-04 while the senior Halasz took a sabbatical to study at the Sorbonne. One of Brassai's earliest memories was of pushing his toy boats around the pond in the Luxembourg Gardens with a long pole. As a mature artist he relived his boyhood through this image, taking pictures of children playing in the gardens.

After serving in the Austro-Hungarian cavalry, Brassai briefly attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest. Following World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was dismembered, and Hungary came under Soviet influence. Transylvania

Sixty-seven years ago, an epochal book of photographs appeared. Entitled *Paris de nuit* (*Paris by Night*), its pages lingered not only on the sights available to every pedestrian in the French capital—the misty beauties of parks, monuments and bridges—but also on the unsuspected face of the city's underworld. Men and women who made their living from pleasure, vice or crime went about their business before the camera, collaborating with its intrepid gaze. The author of the volume was a Hungarian artist named Gyula Halasz. He had settled in Paris in 1924 and later adopted the pseudonym Brassai, meaning "from Brasso," after his birthplace in Transylvania. After a bohemian youth, during which he experimented with drawing, painting and writing, Brassai focused on photography as the medium that would help him best express the spirit of his times.



His evocative 1949 view of the Pont Neuf, with its rhythmic reflections, suggests why he was dubbed the "poet of the night."

was taken from Hungary and given to Romania. These changes caused much of the Hungarian avant-garde, including Brassai, to flee. He wanted to go to Paris, but Hungary and France had been enemies during the war, so he made for Berlin.

Arriving in Germany in December 1920, Brassai embarked on a career as a journalist, writing articles for several Hungarian publications. At first he reported on subjects that he knew little about, but in time wrote increasingly on the arts. He also enrolled in the Berlin-Charlottenburg academy, but was a desultory student and showed up mainly to avoid being drafted into the Romanian Army. His long, unruly hair reinforced the image of a rebellious bohemian. The coiffure set off his heavy, tortoiselike eyes, which were the first thing people noticed. Brassai's unconventional appearance was matched by his capacity for witty ad-libbing. While in the company of a group of young Swedish women, he was asked where he was from. When he replied that he was "Armenian," they requested he teach them the language. Brassai related that he "responded willingly, making up some impossible words by combining the names of all the Armenian foods I knew."

In Berlin, he met many other artists, among them Lajos Tihanyi, a prominent Hungarian painter who would become one of his best friends, and such masters as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Kokoschka and Wassily Kandinsky. It was here, too, that Brassai first read Goethe, whose appreciation of commonplace objects and events would shape Brassai's approach to art. The young man's submergence in the life around him would serve him brilliantly as a photographer of people, particularly those scraping along on the edges of society and suspicious of outsiders. Henry Miller, who would nickname Brassai "the eye of Paris," remarked on his talent for endowing ordinary objects with "attributes of the marvelous." What Miller praised was in fact the fruit of his friend's apprenticeship to Goethe—he didn't judge his subjects but sought to portray them in their own light.



*Intrigued by Salvador Dali's "large moonstruck eyes," Brassai made the first of many portraits of the famed artist in 1933.*



By the spring of 1922, runaway inflation in Germany was eating into Brassai's income, and the time had come for him to leave. In early 1924, after an extended stay in Transylvania, Brassai arrived in Paris and took rooms in the heart of Montparnasse. Like so many other intoxicated newcomers, he spent much of his time in artists' haunts and on the pavement, wandering from district to district, drinking in the metropolis. Shortly after Brassai's arrival, Lajos Tihanyi wrote to a friend, "Halasz is here; he came two weeks ago. He is walking in the city without direction. I am through that period, but spring makes me start again." In his own letters, Brassai registered enthusiasm for "croissants, brioches, artichokes, extremely light meals, shop windows, [and] ravishing women."

"I stroll about the Louvre," he wrote, "stand agape before stones and people, watch the anglers by the Seine, the smokestacks as they bend their heads under the bridges, and the pigeons and parrots of the animal dealers."

*The provocative, irrepressible Kiki of Montparnasse became a symbol of the quarter's nonconformity. Brassai caught the model and singer at the Cabaret des Fleurs, c. 1932.*

Paris was not a museum to Brassai. He was consumed by how people lived and moved in the city's public spaces. This was the life he wanted to capture, but how best to do so? The young man justified to his parents his sleeping all day, his hanging out in the cafes and his nocturnal ramblings by proclaiming, "Could I have done anything wiser in the first few months than to do nothing? ... There is, indeed, an abundance of things that demand one's attention here, particularly for a person like me, who is intrigued by every particle of this living monster, its outside, its inside, the way it breathes, lives, and moves."

When he was not initiating himself in the "living monster's" intimacies, Brassai scrambled for assignments as a freelance writer. He established himself as a contributor to various German, French and English publications, but his income was erratic. A trip to the Riviera was supposed to pay off in articles and money, but neither materialized, and Brassai subsisted on discarded fruit that he fished out of garbage bins until a friend sent him a check. During these years, Brassai would later admit, he and his colleagues "manufactured fake interviews with world luminaries." Henry Miller reminisced that "each of us managed to find some odd jobs, including some rather unusual ones, such as retyping an old newspaper article and selling it to an editor as original work."

When things were slow, Brassai said, he and Miller would sit in cafes for hours, praying for someone to come along and pick up the tab.



Brassai shot this amusing take of a pedestrian passing a statue of Napoleon outside a New Orleans antiques shop in 1957.



His surrealistic *Shop Window, Paris* was taken c. 1931.

These raffish irregularities were at the source of the photographer's now-famous pseudonym. In 1924, he told his parents that he was signing his articles "Gyula Brassai" because he "had to create a separate being" responsible for the superficial opinions and trivial topics that he felt characterized his journalism. He planned to immortalize his family name by attaching "Halasz" to paintings and other works of genuine artistic value, while keeping "Brassai" for the jobs that circumstances forced him to take. But by the early 1930s he had dropped his first name, forgotten about his last and had become "Brassai" for good.

In later life Brassai maintained that he had initially disdained photography because he "looked upon it as something aside from true art." But the articles he turned out required illustration, and he would often call on photographers to take pictures for him. Tucker's research, as well as Brassai's letters from the mid-1920s, reveal that in September 1924 he started gathering photographs for stories and that as early as January 1925 a network of photographers were sending him images. Brassai, it seems, planned to master the camera himself for the purpose of providing his own pictures, but he did not actually begin to photograph until the end of 1929 because he could not afford to buy a camera. Instead, he hired others to record situations that he had set up himself, so by the time his financial position had improved, he had been thinking photographically for years. By then, however, he had lost all interest in pictures that would function solely as illustrations. Recognizing that photographs could be the most direct and comprehensive recorder of nocturnal Paris, which had mesmerized him since his earliest days in Montparnasse, he chose to create images for his own fulfillment. "I realized that photography was the only means by which I could achieve what I wanted," he said, "so I took it up seriously."

For months and months, Brassai spent his nights out shooting. He was so excited by his mission that he even climbed the darkened stairs of decaying houses, knocked on apartment doors and startled strangers awake to see the view from their windows. He always said that he did not invent: he observed and selected. He did not approach his subject randomly but had fully developed ideas and themes. He often chose to photograph the great set pieces of the city—the Place de la Concorde or the bridges along the Seine. He learned that the best results were achieved in damp weather, when fog

softened the harshness of electric lights. Yet their illumination bathed the deserted monuments, parks, churches, railroad stations, streets and sidewalks in a radiance that, especially in counterpoint to the patterns cast by shadows of dimly lit structures, heightened the sense of Paris as a dreamworld.



Blending realism and poetry, Brassai created memorable images of all walks of society, from a Parisian at an elegant ball, to a nun at the Hospital for the Poor.

After he had about a hundred pictures, Brassai showed them to two editors, and in November 1931 the second one gave him a book contract. Brassai made some additional images, and in late 1932 *Paris de nuit* was published to enormous acclaim, catapulting him onto photography's center stage. Exhibitions were offered, magazine assignments flowed in, and photographers from Bill Brandt in England to Weegee in the United States

could not have done without his example.

Although the bulk of the 64 pictures in *Paris de nuit* were exterior scenes, there were also interiors containing glimpses of people who had rarely been photographed. These inhabitants of hidden and clandestine Paris were the basis of Brassai's next exploration—the series that constitutes his boldest artistic feat. No other photographer had regarded the rituals and rogue sensuality of this fringe world as worthy of serious artistic consideration, or even of minor documentary value. That omission surprised the photographer, who felt that the underground society of prostitutes, hoodlums, ragpickers and clochards "represented Paris at its least cosmopolitan, at its most alive, its most authentic, that in these colorful faces ...there had been preserved, from age to age, almost without alteration, the folklore of its most remote past."

Brassai's eye was unblinking in its bluntness, illusionless in its acceptance of how life was lived, and insatiable in its desire to probe details customarily hidden from view. The photographer portrayed his subjects without pity or disapproval, which is one reason he was able to win access to a world closed to the uninitiated. His images, notes Tucker, are unposed yet composed—sometimes even staged. There was complicity between subject and artist. Brassai had to anticipate, calculate and win the trust of people who had every reason to remain anonymous. He bought them drinks, gave them prints and, if necessary, paid them. He could not become invisible, so he led his sitters to understand that he would be photographing them, but that they wouldn't know exactly when.

Mixing with the city's worst toughs was an ominous business. Any rapport was temporary, strained and necessarily expedient. One night Brassai's negatives were stolen; another time his camera was smashed. His wallet was lifted by the same crooks he had already paid for cooperation; once he was nearly murdered. But he endured these dangers and did not report any of the thefts to the police because, he rationalized, stealing was their profession. "Thievery for them, photographs for me," he wrote. "What they did was in character. To each his own."

Brassai's pictures of the demimonde were published in 1976 as *The Secret Paris of the 30's*, accompanied by a text written by the photographer. In describing the behavior codes of the poor and the down-and-out, he savored the similarities between the underworld and the most fashionable circles of French society. "Entry into both these exclusive societies, made up primarily of the idle," he wrote, "is not easy. Each has its regulations, its customs and usages, its moral code, its affairs of honor.... Even the languages are similar, both tainted with snobbery." Brassai was able to research this insight through Carmel Snow, the innovative editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. After *Paris de nuit* appeared, she hired Brassai to cover French culture and society. With *Bazaar* as his passport, he was able to shoot palaces, parties and people that might otherwise have been out of reach. Brassai also photographed the city by day, and these images of Paris in its waking hours, in which Brassai wanders among balloon vendors, lovers, dogs, cats and schoolchildren, are some of the fresher pleasures of the retrospective.

Art and artists were an integral part of Brassai's day-to-day life, and in 1932 *Le Minotaure*, a review associated with the Surrealists, invited him to photograph Picasso's sculpture, which was then largely unknown. The assignment sparked an acquaintance that would grow into a treasured friendship and provide Brassai with entree into the studios of the greatest artists in Europe. For *Le Minotaure* (and later, *Verve* and *Harper's Bazaar*), he photographed, among others, Bonnard, Braque, Dali, Giacometti, Le Corbusier, Leger, Maillol and Matisse.

Brassai set these artists in their creative milieus and avoided photographing fleeting or affected expressions by waiting until they were absorbed in their work or had lapsed into thought. He normally took two or three exposures. "I find it concentrates one more to shoot less," he told the writer Lawrence Durrell. "Of course it's chancy; when you shoot a lot you stand a better chance, but then you are subjecting yourself to the law of accident.... When I succeed...I feel that I have really made [the picture] myself...not won it in a lottery."

Brassai's method kept him focused on essentials. In one image, Salvador Dali and his wife, Gala, who controlled his life and art, are entwined; in another, Dali's hallucinatory eyes sparkle and his jet-black hair gleams. The intensity so apparent in Brassai's portraits of Matisse in his studio coalesce with the artist's words on the necessity of overcoming modesty in order to attain one's ambition. "It's not enough to have artistic talent," Matisse told him. "You also need another kind of talent to make yourself felt."

But the ruling icon in Brassai's life was Picasso, particularly during World War II. The City of Light was blacked out every night, and Brassai took care to document this melancholy predicament. But paper and film were in short supply, and after France fell in 1940, he had to receive authorization from the Nazis in order to work. Getting a permit would have meant agreeing to collaborate with the Germans, which he refused to do. In a Paris of rationing, curfews, propaganda, arrests and executions, those who remained endured privations together and looked to each other for courage. Picasso's resolve bolstered Brassai's own. Because Brassai had no magazine jobs, his money was vanishing. (At one point he was forced into hiding because, as a Romanian citizen, he was subject to conscription by the Germans. "I preferred desertion," he declared.) Picasso came to the rescue in 1943 by asking him to photograph his sculpture for an intended book. Brassai labored in the artist's unheated studio in an overcoat, scarf and hat; the winter was so cold that Brassai's pet fish froze in its bowl. After his sessions with Picasso, the photographer wrote up their conversations. The notes became the basis of *Picasso and Company*, a book that has become a classic. Picasso gained from these meetings, too. He respected Brassai as an insightful analyst of his creative process. "Through your photographs," the artist said, "I can judge my sculptures. When I look at the pictures, I see the work with new 'eyes.'"



Brassai sought out scenes that conveyed the special character or atmosphere of a place. *Porter at Les Halles Market (1935)*.

Thanks to Picasso, Brassai's life changed in another way. In April 1945, a magazine asked Brassai for a print of one of the sculptures. Instead of the regular messenger, the editor sent Gilberte-Mercedes Boyer, a beautiful young French woman. Brassai showed her his photographs and drawings and, as Gilberte later said, "I never left." The two were wed in 1948, and their union lasted until his death in 1984. During that time, their small Paris apartment became increasingly crammed with all sorts of objects that Brassai had happened on and saved. His study was a jumble of snapshots, primitive paintings, bones, dolls, masks and finds from the flea market. One photograph in this vein was of a loaf of bread shaped like a face: "It is the spitting image of French life," he contended, "optimistic in spite of it all, limited to immediate pleasures, egocentric, gourmand."

Nowhere was Brassai's statement that his "ambition was always to see an aspect of everyday life as if discovering it for the first time" more evident than in his studies of graffiti. He first noticed the markings on the walls of working-class districts of Paris when he was recording the demimonde. He kept track of these markings and returned over the years to document their modifications. He also looked for vigorous new examples. "The wall gives its voice to that part of man which, without it, would be condemned to silence," he wrote.

Brassai's 1961 publication of a book on graffiti marked the diminution of his interest in the still camera. He made a film about animals that won a prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and turned his attention to drawing, sculpting and especially writing. To the end, he continued to chronicle the place and the age in which he lived, "to breathe it in," and "probe it with eyes and hands."

~~~~~

BY AVIS BERMAN

Writer Avis Berman met Brassai in 1983. Her interview with the photographer is included in the catalogue for the Brassai exhibition.



*Chartres Cathedral in Winter (1946).*