

The Museum of Modern Art

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

This brief biographical note focuses on the early period treated in HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: THE EARLY WORK. It does not attempt a full account of Cartier-Bresson's long and extremely rich career.

Born in 1908 in Chanteloup, France, Henri Cartier-Bresson was raised in Paris, where his father directed a well-known textile concern. As a teenager Henri attended classes at the celebrated Lycée Condorcet, but his attention had already begun to turn toward the arts and away from the expected business career.

Cartier-Bresson began to study painting in the early twenties and in 1927, freed from the lycée at the age of nineteen, he entered the studio of André Lhote, the established pedagogue of Cubism. Cartier-Bresson spent the following year visiting a cousin at Cambridge, where he continued to paint. Upon his return from England in 1929 he began the obligatory year of military service at Le Bourget airfield near Paris.

By the time he turned twenty, Cartier-Bresson had acquired, as he puts it, "considerable cultural baggage." As a truant from school he had devoured modern literature, and through his acquaintance with the cosmopolite painter Jacques-Emile Blanche, the writers Max Jacob and René Crevel, the art historian Elie Faure, and the American expatriate gadflies Harry and Caresse Crosby, he had become intimately familiar with advanced contemporary culture. Above all, as an attentive listener at café meetings dominated by André Breton, he had absorbed Surrealism at the source.

Cartier-Bresson has described Surrealism as "a revolt in art but also in life." For him, in his early twenties, Surrealism meant personal rebellion;

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art mattered far less than adventure. He traveled to Africa in 1930; to Eastern Europe in 1931; through France, Italy, and Spain in 1932 and 1933; and to Mexico in 1934. Fleeing the comfort of his bourgeois upbringing, he identified with civilization's outsiders--the poor and the socially marginal, whose vitality he admired and soon began to describe in photographs.

Cartier-Bresson had experimented with photography as early as 1929. He began to pursue it seriously, indeed passionately, in 1932 when he acquired a hand-held Leica camera. The Leica allowed him to photograph without interrupting the adventure on which he had already embarked. The thrill of artistic invention was now added to the delight of uncharted experience. His early work expresses an unusually complete fusion between the two.

Cartier-Bresson continued to be nourished by his intimacy with the works and ideas and personalities of the avant-garde. But his photography prospered in a wholly separate realm of cheap hotels, poor neighborhoods, brothels, and open-air markets.

This pattern, to which we owe the great work presented in HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON:THE EARLY WORK, continued through his year-long stay in Mexico in 1934. It began to change in New York, where Cartier-Bresson spent most of 1935. He photographed much less than before and began to learn to direct films, a medium that had always interested him. When he returned to France, he began to work for the director Jean Renoir, whom he assisted on La Vie est à nous (Life is Ours) and Une Partie de campagne (A Day in the Country), in 1936, and La Règle du Jeu (Rules of the Game), in 1939. In 1937, assisted by Herbert Kline, he directed Victoire de la vie (Return to Life), a documentary on the medical relief program in Republican Spain.

In early 1937 Cartier-Bresson married Ratna Mohini, a Javanese dancer, and took his first regular job as a staff photographer for the communist evening daily Ce Soir. There he became friendly with photographers Robert Capa and David Seymour ("Chim"). The association was the germ of the photographers' cooperative Magnum, which soon after its inception in 1947 became an influential force in the new profession of photojournalism. Cartier-Bresson's life and work of the late 1930s--as a filmmaker, a photo-reporter, a husband--marks a change from his vagabond life and intensely independent artistic work of the early thirties. This change may be attributed in part to the pressure of external events. France's economic and political crisis and the rising menace of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco had created an atmosphere of deepening anxiety and urgency, in which private artistic experiment took second place.

Cartier-Bresson's experience of World War II further distanced him from the spirit of his early work. Captured early in the war, he spent nearly three years as a prisoner consigned to forced labor under the unsympathetic supervision of private German enterprise. On the third attempt to escape he succeeded and made his way to France to join a section of the underground comprised of, and devoted to the aid of, escaped prisoners of war.

At the end of the war, although only thirty-six years old, Cartier-Bresson had experienced a lifetime of enthusiasms, accomplishments, and defeats. In the adventurous spirit of his twenties he began again to travel and photograph, in the United States in 1946, then in the Far East where he spent the years 1947-50. Yet his youthful outlook had been tempered, and by his own account his work turned toward social concerns and thus away from the intensely personal artistic experiment of the early thirties. Magnum provided a

professional outlet for his work, whose force and originality greatly enriched the field of photojournalism. Cartier-Bresson created a body of work as rich in quantity as in quality--a complex achievement that awaits and will reward serious study. His work as a portraitist alone would place him among the greatest photographers.

Since the war his work has been constantly available in magazines and newspapers and, more importantly, in a great many exhibitions and books. Already by the mid-thirties the few who cared about advanced photography had recognized Cartier-Bresson's achievement. After the war that recognition began to receive delayed public expression.

In 1947 The Museum of Modern Art presented his first museum exhibition and catalog, The Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson. In 1952 Tériade's Editions Verve published Images à la sauvette, possibly the most beautiful and influential of all photography books. Titled The Decisive Moment in the American edition, it was followed by a long series of superb publications, of which the most recent are Henri Cartier-Bresson: Photographer (1979), Photoportraits (1985), and Henri Cartier-Bresson en Inde (1985).

Constantly seeking, as he expresses it, to put himself into question, Cartier-Bresson in the mid-1970s set aside his camera and returned to the challenge of painting and, especially, drawing. He lives in Paris with his wife, the photographer Martine Franck, and his daughter, Mélanie.