

The Museum of Modern Art

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HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: THE EARLY WORK

September 10 - November 29, 1987

I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung up, ready to pounce, determined to "trap" life--to preserve life in the act of living.

--Henri Cartier-Bresson, in The Decisive Moment (1952)
on his work of the early 1930s

The first exhibition to focus exclusively on the early work of French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson (b. 1908) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on September 10, 1987. Organized by Peter Galassi, Curator, Department of Photography, HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: THE EARLY WORK presents the early thirties as a distinct episode, different in spirit and style from Cartier-Bresson's later work as a photojournalist.

Consisting of ninety black-and-white photographs, most of them made between 1932 and 1934, the exhibition brings together the justly famous pictures of the period with many others that are unfamiliar or previously unknown. Four early paintings and a collage, also unknown to the American public, are included.

On view through November 29, HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: THE EARLY WORK has been made possible by grants from Champagne Taittinger, as part of its program in support of the arts, and from the International Herald Tribune, in celebration of its 100th anniversary. After its New York premiere, the exhibition will travel through the United States and Canada.

Cartier-Bresson studied painting in the mid-twenties and in 1929 began to experiment with photography. At first art mattered far less than adventure. But in 1932, when he acquired a hand-held Leica camera, Cartier-Bresson's

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previously casual interest in photography became a passion. Over the next three years, he created one of the most original and influential bodies of work in the history of photography.

In 1929 Cartier-Bresson began to travel, first to Africa, then to Eastern Europe, through Italy and Spain, and finally to Mexico in 1934. Eager to escape his comfortable bourgeois upbringing, and inspired by the rebellious spirit of Surrealism, he embraced the world of the marginal, the illicit, and the dispossessed. In the early photographs no sign of authority or untouched nature intrudes upon Cartier-Bresson's lively theater of peasants, workers, prostitutes, and bums.

Cartier-Bresson's early work is an essential part of an enormously inventive period in photography, a period marked by the lessons of modern art and literature, and by an experimental approach to plain photographic description. This approach was served by new hand cameras, such as the Leica, which allowed the photographer to follow the action as it unfolded and thus to discover unexpected, unpredictable pictures.

Cartier-Bresson brought to this opportunity, Galassi writes, "an original talent for graphic concision, which lent rigor to his fleeting perceptions, and an unusual openness to life, which invested his work with a surprising psychological intensity." His work of the early thirties established a new vocabulary for photography and suggested a new, fluid relationship between art and personal experience.

In the late thirties Cartier-Bresson devoted much of his energy to filmmaking. Soon after World War II he became a leader in the new profession of photojournalism. His fame as a photojournalist has tended to obscure the special qualities of his early work, a private artistic experiment conducted without thought of publication. The present exhibition attempts to recapture

the coherence of the early work, which insistently and quite inventively subverts the narrative expectations upon which photojournalism depends.

Despite Cartier-Bresson's long-standing fame, his work has received little sustained critical attention. In the catalog of the exhibition Galassi provides a richly detailed account of the photographer's early life and an extensive analysis of the pictures and of the cultural environment to which they belong. The catalog reproduces eighty-seven photographs as full-page duotone plates and forty-two works by Cartier-Bresson and others as supplementary illustrations, four of them in color.

After its New York showing, the exhibition travels to The Detroit Institute of Arts (December 15, 1987 - February 7, 1988); The Art Institute of Chicago (February 27 - April 16, 1988); The Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego (May 10 - June 26, 1988); The Danforth Museum of Art, Framingham, Massachusetts (July 17 - September 11, 1988); The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (December 17, 1988 - February 26, 1989); and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (March 31 - May 28, 1989).

Since the mid-seventies Henri Cartier-Bresson has devoted much of his time to drawing. From September 10 to October 17, 1987, a selection of this work, THE DRAWINGS OF HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON, is on view at Arnold Herstand & Co., 24 West 57 Street, New York.

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Catalog: Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work by Peter Galassi. 4 color and 125 black-and white illustrations. 152 pages. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Clothbound, distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston, \$35.00; paperbound, available in the Museum Store, \$17.50.

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