

# The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 245-3200 Cable: Modernart

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Brassaï, whom Henry Miller once called the "eye of Paris," will have a retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art from October 29 through January 5, 1969. His photographs of the city at night, its cafe life, its people, its scribbled walls, and its famous artists and poets have been selected by John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, in this show of 75 works from 1932 to 1958. Simultaneously, the Museum will publish a profusely illustrated monograph on the Hungarian-born photographer with an introduction by Lawrence Durrell, his long-time friend.\*

"The most distinguishing characteristic of Brassai's work is its profound poise and naturalness, the sense of easy permanence," says Mr. Szarkowski. "Looking at his pictures, one is not aware of the act of photographing; it is rather as though the subject, through some agency of its own, reproduced itself. This unchallengeable authority is the measure of Brassai's genius - of his ability to recognize primordial form, and to present his vision with a simplicity that depends on a brilliant and wholly functional technique."

In general, most photographers discover the medium early, and few photographers of importance have come to it as adults. Brassai is one of the notable exceptions to this pattern; he was almost thirty and had studied painting in the art academies of Budapest and Berlin when he came to the medium through his friendship with the great photographer, and his fellow-Hungarian, André Kertész. For the adult Brassai, the camera was not a magic toy or a vehicle for experiment: it was the means by which he could describe clearly and objectively that which interested him, the reflection of his mature vision. Like Kertész, Brassai shows a taste for the strange, the ambiguous, and the bizarre.

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\*Brassai with an introduction by Lawrence Durrell; selected bibliography compiled by Bruce K. MacDonald. Paperbound \$2.95; hardbound \$5.95, distributed to the trade by New York Graphic Society Ltd.

His subjects are the transvestites, the demi-monde, the sleepingtramps, and the street scenes whose meaning or content is never entirely clear. Brassai's imagination, unlike Kertész's, is "blunt, unornamented, and muscular," Mr. Szarkowski says. "His technique responds perfectly to his seeing. His prints - at first glance primitive - prove with familiarity skillful and just. The forms and spaces and textures of his subjects are rendered with precision, completeness, and perfect plastic unity."

Durrell observes that Brassai is very much aware of the fusion of subject matter and technique. The photographer himself has said: "The photograph has a double destiny.... It is the daughter of the world of externals, of the living second, and as such will always keep something of the historic or scientific document about it; but it is also the daughter of the rectangle, a child of the beaux-arts, which requires one to fill up the space agreeably or harmoniously with black-and-white spots or colors." For example, his famous "Bijou" of Montmartre, included in the exhibition, is at once a quintessential rendering of the all-knowing woman of the night and an esthetically perfect work of art.

Brassai was born Gulya Halász in 1899 in the village of Brasso in Transylvania, from which he derived his professional name. He came to Paris in 1923, wrote and painted and made friends among the literary and artistic circle of the city, many of whose members he photographed. "Today there is hardly a poet or painter of that epoch whose mental image for us has not been touched by some characteristic Brassai portrait of him when young," writes Mr. Durrell. The same qualities of directness, of seizing the essential characteristics of things, appear throughout his work, whether in his street scenes or in his portraits. His famous 1932 rendering of Picasso is the artist, with his intense gaze and forceful presence. In the exhibition, too, are his portraits of Salvador Dali, Alberto Giacometti, and the young Jean Genet.

In the monograph, Durrell describes Brassai's deceptively simple working methods during a portrait session. "He had hardly any equipment at all, one very old camera with a cracked lens hood, a tripod which kept kneeling down like a camel - really amazing

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equipment, but as cherished as it was venerable." The photographer walked around, talked, observed, waited without shooting. "Yes, I only take one or two or three pictures of a subject," he told the writer. "I find it concentrates one to shoot less. 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 - if accident has a law. I prefer to try and if necessary fail. When I succeed, however, I am much happier than I would be if I shot a million pictures on the off-chance. I feel that I have really made it myself, that picture, not won it in a lottery."

Brassaï believes in conscious decisions and choices, and he is not interested in taking his subject off-guard. He said to Durrell: "I want my subject to be as fully conscious as possible - fully aware that he is taking part in an artistic event, an act." Durrell observes the fortunate consequence of this approach: "Brassaï does not 'interpret' but allows the subject to interpret itself on his film. His only task is to open the door, so to speak, on the experience, to choose his moment, and then to press the trigger."

Brassaï's work was first shown at The Museum of Modern Art in Beaumont Newhall's important exhibition in 1937, Photography 1839-1937. His work has been shown here many times since, most extensively in an exhibition of his Graffiti in 1956. After its New York showing, Brassaï will be on view at the participating institution, The City Art Museum, St. Louis, from February 12 through March 16, 1969. Most of the works included in the exhibition are in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, many of them acquired through the generosity of David H. McAlpin.

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Photographs and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, and Patricia Bauman, Coordinator, Press Services, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.

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BRASSAI : Photographs

October 29, 1968-January 5, 1969

## CHECKLIST

1. Kiki Singing in a Montparnasse Cabaret, 1933
2. Brothel, 1932
3. Seville, Spain, c. 1952
4. Pimp and Girl, 1933
5. Graffiti, no date
6. The Poet Léon-Paul Fargue, 1933
7. Chartres in winter, 1946
8. Graffiti, no date
9. Graffiti, no date
10. Graffiti, no date
11. Picasso, Rue de la Boetie, 1932
12. Ambrose Vollard, c. 1932
13. Female Couple, 1932
14. Man Sleeping Along the Seine, 1932
15. Woman at Le Monocle, Montparnasse, 1933
16. Vine Stock in a Wine Cellar, 1955
17. Giacometti, 1934
18. Boulevard Rochochouart, 1938
19. Pierre Bonnard, 1952
20. Brothel, rue Quinquempoix, 1933
21. Quarrel, 1932
22. Bal Tabarin, 1932
23. Rue Quinquempoix, 1932
24. Bal de la Horde, Montparnasse, 1933
25. The Assistant Madame, 1932
26. Street Fair, 1933
27. Prison Wall at La Santé, 1938
28. Folies Bergères, 1932
29. The Lovers at a Street Corner, c. 1932
30. Streetwalker, 1933
31. Avenue de l'Observatoire, 1932
32. Tramp in Marseille, 1937
33. Avenue de l'Observatoire, 1934
34. Buttress of the Elevated, 1938
35. "Lulu de Montparnasse" with a Woman at Le Monocle, Montparnasse, 1933

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- 36. "Père la Flûte" in the Metro, 1938
- 37. "The Panther" at the Bal de la Horde, Montparnasse, 1933
- 38. Nuit de Longchamps, 1936
- 39. Rue de Rivoli, 1937
- 40. Balearic Islands, 1953
- 41. Madame Marianne D.-B., 1936
- 42. Graffiti, no date
- 43. Girl in Montmartre at Snooker, 1933
- 44. Graffiti, no date
- 45. Henry Miller, 1932
- 46. The Painter Mlle. Sabourdy, 1950
- 47. Place de la Concorde, 1945
- 48. Jean Genet, 1955
- 49. Gate of the Jardin du Luxembourg, 1932
- 50. A Park in Seville, Spain, c. 1952
- 51. Prostitute, 1932
- 52. Graffiti, no date
- 53. Two Hoodlums, 1932
- 54. Graffiti, no date
- 55. Salvador Dali, 1933
- 56. Plane tree, Paris, 1938
- 57. Vallauris, 1948
- 58. Man Sleeping, 1932
- 59. Three Masked Women, 1935
- 60. Group in a Dance Hall, 1932
- 61. Soirée at Maxim's, c. 1946
- 62. Parc Montsouris, 1931
- 63. "Bijou" of Montmartre, c. 1932
- 64. The Sculptor, Germaine Richier, 1958
- 65. Le Pont des Arts, 1934
- 66. The Royal Show, England, 1959
- 67. Rome-Naples Express, 1955
- 68. Brothel, c. 1933
- 69. Le Pont Neuf, 1949
- 70. Dance Hall, Rue de Lape, 1932
- 71. Graffiti, no date

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## BRASSAI: Photographs

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### Wall Label

Proverbially, a photographer gets his first camera while he still has his baby teeth, and learns to see the world not with two eyes but one, through the rectangle of his camera's viewing frame. To a surprising degree, this notion is true; few photographers of importance have come to the medium as adults.

Brassai--like Eugène Atget--is a conspicuous exception. He, like Atget, came to photography as a man of broad experience and mature intellect. His artistic perspective had been formed by his studies in the academies of Budapest and Berlin. After coming to Paris in 1923 he worked seriously in drawing, sculpture, and writing--media which continued to be vital aspects of his creative life. The potentials of photography were revealed to him about 1926, through the work and person of André Kertész. Thus the adult Brassai adopted the camera not as a magic toy to be explored in a spirit of play, but as a tool, the use of which--though demanding--was simple in principle. Photography could describe clearly and objectively those facts that interested him.

His sure and confident knowledge of his own values--of what was useful to his own sensibility--reflected itself in a photographic style as plain and elemental as that of the graffiti that he discovered on anonymous walls.

Brassai's work suggests that of his mentor, predecessor, and fellow-Hungarian Kertész. Both men show a taste for the strange, the ambiguous, and the bizarre. But in contrast to the poetic and almost feminine indirection of Kertész's imagination, that of Brassai is blunt, unornamented, and muscular. His technique responds perfectly to his seeing. His prints--at first glance primitive--prove with familiarity to/<sup>be</sup>skillful and just. The forms and spaces and textures of his subjects are rendered with precision,

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completeness, and perfect plastic unity.

Brassai's photographs are not "experimental." They are free of gratuitous refinement, and free of infatuation with photography itself. They do not recall the act of making the picture; it is rather as though the subject, through some agency of its own, reproduced itself. This profound poise and authority is the measure of Brassai's genius. His pictures reveal that permanence of form which is the visual embodiment of primal meaning.

John Szarkowski