

The Museum of Modern Art

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E. J. BELLOCQ: STORYVILLE PORTRAITS, an exhibition of 34 photographs of Storyville prostitutes by E. J. Bellocq, a little-known commercial photographer who worked in New Orleans before and after World War I, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from November 10 to January 30.

These portraits of women in Storyville, the red-light district of New Orleans, were made about 1912 and were brought to light by photographer Lee Friedlander who first saw the original Bellocq plates in 1958. Bellocq's working life extended from about 1895 through the first four decades of this century and the pictures shown here are selected from a group of eighty-nine plates discovered in Bellocq's desk after his death. As far as is known, they constitute the only fragment of his work to have survived. The pictures exhibited are a set of modern prints Friedlander made from the original glass plates after he purchased them in 1966.

John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, selected the photographs in the exhibition and edited the text for the accompanying Museum publication in which all 34 portraits shown will be reproduced. It is possible, he says, that the Storyville pictures were done as a commercial assignment--perhaps, as an equivalent of the standard theatrical publicity portrait useful to the subject in seeking a position in a better house, or to the house in making its staff known to their potential customers.

"But the pictures themselves suggest that they were not made on assignment but as a personal adventure," Mr. Szarkowski adds. "They possess a sense of leisure in the making, and a variety of conception not typical of photographic jobs done at the customer's request. It is more likely that Bellocq photographed the women of Storyville because he found them irresistibly compelling."

Probing further into Bellocq's probable motivation for making these portraits and his relationship to the women who were his subjects, Mr. Szarkowski says:

The individuality of the portraits is remarkable. It is the subject's personal identity, not merely her role, that we seem to see. Perhaps

it was the women themselves who defined that identity with Bellocq's help. Lee Friedlander observed that "He seems to have gathered their confidence enough to allow them to be exactly what they felt they were." The portraits were perhaps Bellocq's only way of knowing the Storyville women. The appetite of his eyes was the engine that gave his skill a use, and his skill in turn dignified his appetite, by making of it a picture that had a life independent of his own.

Unable to use his conventional method of printing, Friedlander was led through research to a printing technique popular around the turn of the century called P.O.P. (Printing Out Paper). In this method the prints were exposed by indirect daylight for anywhere from three hours to seven days, depending on the plate's density and the quality of the daylight. Then the paper was given a toning bath of the gold chloride type. Fixing and washing were done in the usual manner but with greater care since the P.O.P. emulsion is especially fragile.

Since none of Bellocq's prints exist to serve as models, the result might be regarded as a collaborative work. Friedlander says:

This method, pursued with patience and elbow grease, provided me with a full set of eighty-nine prints which satisfied my idea of what the prints should look like. Since I have never seen any prints made by Bellocq himself, I was forced to use my own taste in printing, which I hope has not perverted Bellocq's intentions.

In the publication connected with the exhibition, titled BELLOCQ: STORYVILLE PORTRAITS, Mr. Szarkowski's text takes the form of a discussion among Bellocq's former associates and acquaintances, accompanied by the editor's comments. The dialogue never actually took place as printed, but is rather a synthesis of four long interviews recorded by Lee Friedlander in 1969 plus excerpts from a letter written to him in 1968. Mr. Szarkowski edited, intermixed and rearranged the source materials with a view toward accurately preserving the participants' meanings. The hardbound volume, which will be published by the Museum this fall, has 96 pages, 34 illustrations and will retail for \$12.50.

Additional information and photographs available from Diana Goldin, Coordinator of Press Services, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. (212) 956-7297, 7501.