

Presented by the Auckland City
Art Gallery in association with
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York.

BRASSAI

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A retrospective of 71 photographs by Brassai made between 1932-58 will be on view at the Auckland City Art Gallery from 17 May – 13 June 1971. The exhibition will also be shown in the National Art Gallery, Wellington (21 June – 16 July) and the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (26 July – 9 August).

Originally shown at The Museum of Modern Art in New York, the exhibition was selected by John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography. It is being circulated abroad under the auspices of the Museum's International Council.

Once dubbed the "eye of Paris" by writer Henry Miller, Brassai was fascinated by Paris at night, its café life, its people, its scribbled walls and its famous artists and poets. According to Mr. Szarkowski, "the most distinguishing characteristic of Brassai's work is its profound poise and naturalness, the sense of easy permanence. 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 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. His subjects are the transvestites, the demi-monde, the sleeping tramps, 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".

Coinciding with the opening in New York in 1968, The Museum of Modern Art published a profusely illustrated monograph on the famed photographer with an introduction by Lawrence Durrell, the English author. 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 colours." 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 aesthetically perfect work of art.

Brassai was born Gyula 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 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."

Brassai 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: "Brassai 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."

Most of the works included in the exhibition are in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art, many of them acquired through the generosity of David H. McAlpin, distinguished collector and patron of the museum.



CATALOGUE

All dimensions given in inches height before width.

- 1 Tramp in Marseille 1937
Gift of James Johnson Sweeney
9 x 6 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 2 Prostitute 1932
15 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 11
- 3 Man Sleeping 1932
9 x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 4 Dance Hall, Rue de Lape 1932
8 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 5 Group in a Dance Hall 1932
9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 6 The Assistant Madame 1932
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 7 Man Sleeping Along the Seine
1932
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 8 Two Hoodlums 1932
12 x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 9 Dance Hall 1932
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 10 "Bijou" of Montmartre 1932
or 1933
11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 11 Female Couple 1932
11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 12 Prison Wall at La Sante 1938
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{5}{8}$

- 13 The Lovers at a Street Corner
1932 or 1933
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{8}$
- 14 Picasso, Rue de la Boetie 1932
15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12
- 15 Ambrose Vollard 1932 or 1933
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 16 Brothel 1933
15 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 17 Woman at Le Monocle,
Montparnasse 1933
12 x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 18 Bal de la Horde, Montparnasse
1933
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 19 "Lulu de Montparnasse" with a
Woman at Le Monocle,
Montparnasse 1933
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 20 "The Panther" at the Bal de la
Horde, Montparnasse 1933
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 21 Girl in Montmartre at Snooker
1933
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 22 Streetwalker c1933
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 23 Street Fair, 1933
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$

- 24 The Poet Leon-Paul Fargue 1933
19 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 25 Salvador Dali 1933
19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 26 Pimp and Girl 1933
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 27 Brothel c1933
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 28 Kiki Singing in a Montparnasse
Cabaret 1933
15 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 29 Le Pont des Arts 1934
19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 16
- 30 Avenue de l'Observatoire 1934
15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 19 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 31 Three Masked Women 1935
9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 32 Soirée at Maxim's c1946
19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 33 Nuit de Longchamps 1936
19 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 16
- 34 Buttress of the Elevated 1938
15 x 19 $\frac{1}{4}$
- 35 Boulevard Rochochouart 1938
19 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 16
- 36 The Painter Mlle. Sabourdy 1950
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 37 Pierre Bonnard 1952
19 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 38 Pigeons in a Park in Seville,
Spain 1952 or 1953
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 39 Jean Genet 1955
15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 40 Vine Stock in a Wine Cellar 1955
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 41 The Sculptor, Germaine Richier
1958
19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15.3

The following works belong to the photographer:

- 42 Avenue de l'Observatoire 1932
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 43 Bal Tabarin 1932
19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 14 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 44 Brothel, rue Quinquempoix 1933
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9
- 45 Chartres in Winter 1946
19 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 46 Folies Bergeres 1932
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$

- 47 Gate of the Jardin du
Luxembourg 1932
15 x 11 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 48 Giacometti 1934
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 49 Graffiti
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 50 Graffiti
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 51 Graffiti
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 52 Graffiti
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 53 Graffiti
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 54 Graffiti
11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 55 Graffiti
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 56 Graffiti
15 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 57 Graffiti
15 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 58 Henry Miller 1932
15 x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 59 Le Pont Neuf 1949
8 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 60 Madame Marianne D.-B. 1936
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 61 Parc Montsouris 1931
19 x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$
- 62 "Pere la Flute" in the Metro 1938
11 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$
- 63 Place de la Concorde 1945
10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 15 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 64 Plane tree, Paris 1938
17 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 13 $\frac{3}{8}$
- 65 Rome-Naples Express 1955
15 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{8}$
- 66 The Royal Show, England 1959
14 x 11 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 67 Rue de Rivoli 1937
19 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 15
- 68 Rue Quinquempoix 1932
10 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{8}$
- 69 Seville, Spain c1952
14 x 10 $\frac{5}{8}$
- 70 Vallauris 1948
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{4}$
- 71 Balearic Islands 1953
11 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 9 $\frac{1}{8}$