

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS ONE-MAN EXHIBITION

OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

A front-rank photographer who has never had a studio; who paints for pleasure; who seems to disregard the alphabet of technique but whose pictures speak volumes; who escaped three times from German prison camps and was twice recaptured; who was so busy organizing underground photographers to record the great day of liberation that when it came he had time only to direct these men to strategic points in and around Paris, with no opportunity to take even one picture himself--this is Henri Cartier-Bresson, a Frenchman whose photographs are human documents in the modern idiom, but in the great tradition of Brady, Nadar, Atget, Stieglitz.

On Wednesday, February 5, the Museum of Modern Art will open a large one-man exhibition of Cartier-Bresson's photographs. More than 150 will be shown and in their subject matter will reflect the international range of his camera: scenes and people of France, England, Spain, Poland, Italy, Greece, Mexico and the United States.

Simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition, the Museum will publish a book on Cartier-Bresson with articles by Lincoln Kirstein and Beaumont Newhall. The exhibition, which will remain on view through April 6, has been directed by Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions, with the help of Ann Armstrong, Assistant in charge of the Photography Department.

In his biographical essay Lincoln Kirstein writes:

"A number of contemporary photographers are united toward formulating a new approach to photography. Perhaps the leading European exponent of this direction is Henri Cartier-Bresson, who, by his denial of the academic 'artistic' or salon taste of modern art-photography has taken sequences of pictures which in their freshness, elegance and truth remain works of art within their own radical esthetic.

"The decisive part of Cartier-Bresson's particular process takes place not in the mechanism in his hand but in the vision in his head; in that right eye which (he says) looks out onto the exterior world, and that left eye which looks inside his personal world. The vision fuses on what he sees, where and when, and how he feels about it....Cartier-Bresson gives us an intense and questioning image, not stripped of light and air, but close to the figures involved, to their private identities, their social origin and habits and the local site....

"Instead of developing an interest in the rendition of surface or touch values as such, which in some photographers leads them to present human skin as oiled leather, with every pore a pit and every hair a stroke of engraved penmanship, Cartier-Bresson has rather preferred to whet his historical and moral perceptions. With a kind of bland abnegation he manages to avoid the intrusion of idiosyncrasy, of his own accidental personality, of his individual background. But the more he effaces himself, the more he

becomes the crystal eye, the more his pictures sign themselves." 116

Cartier-Bresson's interest in the visual arts is threefold. Painting was his earliest love. Born in Chanteloup, France, of a Norman mother and a Parisian father, his only interest at school was painting. When he was twenty he decided against entering the family business and, instead, studied painting with André Lhôte. In 1929 his eight months in Cambridge, England, were devoted chiefly to painting and to courses in English literature. Even during his year of military service at Le Bourget in 1930 he continued painting in his spare time. It was in that year that he took up his second, and at present predominant, activity: photography. Not until two years later, however, did he begin, with a Leica, his first serious photography. He never consciously studied technique but used the camera almost as a diary to record what he saw.

After traveling with his camera in Italy and in Spain he had an exhibition of photographs in Madrid in 1933 and later that year in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery. In 1934 he had a joint exhibition with Alvarez-Bravo, one of Mexico's leading photographers, at the Palacio Bellas Artes in Mexico City. The next year the Julien Levy Gallery gave him a joint photographic exhibition with Walker Evans.

On his return to France in 1936 he began the third phase of his work, as assistant director with Jacques Becker of a Jean Renoir film. The next year he was in Spain directing a documentary film "Return to Life," the history of medical aid to Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia hospitals during the Spanish Civil War. In France the same year he photographed with Capa and Chim.

In 1937 Cartier-Bresson made his great series of Coronation pictures in London. True to his paradoxical nature, he turned his back on the royal processions, ignored the gauds and glories of Empire in review to photograph the comic and touching faces of the watching crowds. He continued to work with Jean Renoir in 1938, and in 1939 was assistant to Renoir in his last French film "La Regle du Jeu."

In 1937 Cartier-Bresson married Ratna Mohini, Javanese dancer, and in 1939, while she was giving dance recitals in London, Cartier-Bresson made some of his Hyde Park series of photographs there.

At the outbreak of war he was drafted and became a corporal in the Film and Photo Unit of the French Army. In June 1940, on the day of the French Armistice, he was captured with his Photo Unit in the Vosges Mountains. He spent nearly three years as a prisoner in German camps, escaping twice only to be recaptured and each time sent to a more severe camp. He made good his third escape and reached France, where he got false papers and went on to Paris to work in an underground organization, at the same time pursuing the legitimate business of photographing artists for a Paris publication. The next year he was active in organizing

underground photographic units to document the German occupation and retreat.

After the war Cartier-Bresson made a series of photographs in England and worked in France as a director of the Office of War Information film, "Le Retour," which shows the return to France of war prisoners and deportees. He came to New York in April 1946 to help in the preparation of his one-man exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and to work on several photographic assignments. Since his stay in this country he has made a series of photographs of New Orleans, Coney Island, etc.

In his essay on Cartier-Bresson's photographic technique Beaumont Newhall writes in part:

"Cartier-Bresson has compared his activity in painting, photography and the moving pictures to the gear shift of an automobile, for the fields are mutually separated yet closely interrelated. Work in each medium strengthens the others by stimulating and training visual observation. The photographer, he often points out, must learn to see actively, rapidly and completely, in order to develop an acute awareness of the visual possibilities of his surroundings.

"His photographic technique is simple and straightforward. He uses a miniature camera with an apparently effortless reflex action. When a subject presents visual possibilities, he seeks the most revealing camera position rapidly. At the split-second when the lighting, the form and the expression are one, he releases the shutter. The precise composition of the final print is determined at this peak of emotional intensity. So definite is this instantaneous reaction that the entire negative is used for the final print....There is nothing accidental or unforeseen in his photography. On the contrary, elements which are essential to the picture extend to the very limits of the negative.

"Cartier-Bresson pushes photography to its very limit, using, with no margin of safety, every available improvement in the design of lenses and the sensitivity of film, even to the point of defying the recommendations of the manufacturers. He finds the Leica and the Contax such ideal tools for his purpose that he uses no other cameras.

"Because Cartier-Bresson has developed technique to the point of almost instinctive reaction, he cannot tell you the film, lens and shutter settings, and other technical minutiae of each photograph he has made. The final prints are made under his personal supervision. They are direct enlargements, unretouched and unmanipulated."

When the exhibition closes April 6 it will be circulated to other museums and galleries throughout the country.