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Delaware museum says yes to vintage French prints

DELAWARE MUSEUM SAYS YES TO VINTAGE FRENCH PRINTS

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WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — An interlude of peace and prosperity, the Belle Epoque, or "beautiful era," in Paris gave working artists enough room to breathe to find their collective voice.

Rather than train their lenses on glorious monuments, coronation ceremonies or the Moulin Rouge cabaret, a group of heavyweight photographers preferred to focus on a range of objects and people that generally fell into the category of nothing special.

These were the crumbling storefronts that defied modernization, the creatures of the night lurking in bordellos, opium dens and cesspools, and the bollards that appeared almost elegant in their strict utilitarianism. A celebrated ballerina hoisted her leg - her moneymaker - on a counter in a very unladylike manner.

In this golden age of French photography, from 1910 to 1940, the familiar became foreign. The ordinary became extraordinary.

Starting tomorrow, a collection of 100 prints from the era will be on view at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington. "French Twist: Masterworks of Photography from Atget to Man Ray," features Eugene Atget's deserted alleyways, Man Ray's surrealist nudes and Henri Cartier-Bresson's legendary photojournalism. Other works on display are by Ilse Bing, Brassai, Jacques Henri Lartigue and Andre Kertesz. The traveling exhibition, culled from a New York couple's private collection, concludes Sept. 15.

The prints are considered vintage, because they were created very close to the time when the actual work was produced. They belong to Michael Mattis, a former Los Alamos lab physicist and his collector in crime, wife Judith Hochberg. The couple began amassing the photographs while they were graduate students at Stanford University. The collection was valued at more than $5 million in 2004, according to a Forbes article.

Planned several years ago, French Twist serendipitously comes on the heels of Roaring Twenties fervor over the "The Great Gatsby" movie release, says the museum's American art curator Heather Campbell Coyle.

"Part of the richness of the period is the people," says Coyle, who likens the cultural hotbed in Paris to early 20th century Greenwich Village. "They're all talking to each other."

That cross-pollination in the Surrealist, Modernist and New Reportage movements encouraged experimentation. Hungarian photographer Brassai learned to etch a photographic negative from Picasso. Picasso's girlfriend at the time, photographer Dora Maar, was also Man Ray's muse. Man Ray, who pioneered the "rayograph" technique of creating a negative without a camera, counted among his close associates Gertrude Stein, James Joyce and Max Ernst.

When the Eiffel Tower is pictured, such as in German immigrant Ilse Bing's "Champs-de-Mars from the Eiffel Tower," it is a barely recognizable triangle.

Bing and other photographers at the time played with perspective, observing the same street from top-up or top-down vantage points, during different seasons and times of day. Bing was known as

the "Queen of the Leica" based on her affection for the miniature 35 mm camera. She later became a successful dog groomer.

The exhibition is divided thematically (street scenes, entertainment, the underclass, Paris by night, subversive portraits) and by individual artist.

It opens with Atget, known as the accidental surrealist because he wasn't familiar with the term. Considered the founding father of photojournalists, landscape photographers and social documentarians, he discovered photography later in life, selling architectural photographs of old Paris to the Department of Historical Monuments. Long after others had adopted film, Atget used glass-plate negatives to create a blurred, eerie effect. Man Ray, his neighbor, strongly advocated for his work, which received due credit posthumously.

Celebrated Frenchman Henri Cartier-Bresson, master of the "decisive moment," was determined to trap the essence of life in a single shot. He took some of his most famous photographs abroad, and co-founded the first photographer cooperative, the Magnum photo agency, after World War II. Cartier-Bresson was presumed dead after spending nearly three years in prisoner-of-war camps during the war. Prematurely, New York's Museum of Modern Art planned a posthumous tribute. After he was found to be alive, it became a retrospective.

While Surrealist photographers appeared to be smirking behind the camera while capturing odd juxtapositions, Cartier-Bresson tackled serious topics. He had his camera ready at the moment an enraged refugee exposes a Gestapo informant in a displaced persons camp. Eyes downcast, the informant's body appears to collapse into itself like a potato chip bag.

He also covered the coronation of King George VI, who assumed the throne after his brother, Edward VIII, abdicated to marry the American Wallis Simpson.

Rather than go the obvious royal route, Cartier-Bresson focused on the crowd of people had camped out all night in London's Trafalgar Square. One gentleman continued to snooze on a pile of newspapers during the ceremony.

While Cartier-Bresson's images appeared in "Life" magazine, Man Ray shot abstract nudes for the power company.

Strongly influenced by Cubists and Dadaists, Man Ray did a series of erotic photographs of Lee Miller, one of the only embedded female photojournalists during wartime.

Fascinated by Miller's lips, Man Ray captures them nearly grazing those of another woman. The print is one of two known to exist. The other belongs to Madonna.

Brassai, meanwhile, was drawn to the beauty of evil. His "Street Toughs from Grand Albert's Gang" depicts two young thugs who seem to emerge from a dark wall wearing newsboy hats over narrowed eyes. The wall, it turns out, was manufactured by Brassai using exposed photographic paper.

Although he paid the young men handsomely for their time, they still tried to lift his wallet one day. Brassai never filed a complaint.

"Thievery for them, photographs for me," he said. "What they did was in character. To each his own."

Information from: The News Journal of Wilmington, Del., http://www.delawareonline.com