

Gallic delights: Intriguing French photography dominates museum exhibition

By Donald Miller – Special to the Daily News

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Paris is known as the city of light. But its shadowy world is beautifully explored in “French Twist: Masterworks of Photography from Atget to Man Ray,” a collection of 87 early 20th-century black and white studies in the first floor galleries of the Patty & Jay Baker Naples Museum of Art.

Although some of the photographers, such as Brassai, Andre Kertesz, Man Ray and Ilse Bing, were not French, their work contains an unmistakable finesse in processing silver gelatin and albumin prints in these studies of street life and its sordid pleasures.

Gelatin silver prints dominated fine photography from the 1880s to the 1960s when color photography eclipsed them. Basically, silver halide crystals, sensitive to light, are exposed briefly, creating a latent image on paper treated with a gelatin. A developing solution makes the image visible. Then the paper is washed in water to remove the fixing agent, leaving the finished print to dry.

This collection is from the extensive photographic holdings of physicist Michael Mattis and his wife, Judith Hochberg, a former editor of ARTnews magazine. Made available by Art2Art Circulating Exhibitions, the show will please anyone who enjoys period photography and it also offers some discoveries. Installed in black frames on off-white walls, the show is cleverly highlighted by black wall titles identifying each section in French and English.

Besides important names like Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jacques-Henri Lartigue the show includes talents better known for other activities. One surprise is Franco-Croatian artist Dora Maar (1907-97), remembered as Pablo Picasso’s lover, whom Picasso painted as the “weeping woman,” when he left her for Marie-Therese Walter. Not a complete cad, Picasso gave Maar an old stone mansion in Provence, now open to stays by mid-career artists and writers.

Maar turned her dark exposure of a stone ceiling at Versailles upside down to suggest a wooded landscape. In another, she photographed a nude woman’s back and gave the silver gelatin emulsion a pebbled texture, recalling pointillism. Excellent.

Another surprise: Lartigue (1894-1986) is famous for his Belle Epoque city scenes and racing shots. He photographed the first airplane in flight in France when he was nine, but his best work was completed by age 16. The prints lay buried in his wealthy

family's albums until the 1960s when the late American photographer Richard Avedon discovered them. This led to a Lartique exhibition at MoMA and his name on a Paris Metro stop.

If you are familiar with French photography, you probably know that American photographer Berenice Abbott, known for her New York scenes, saved many of the more than 10,000 glass negatives and prints Eugene Atget (1854-1927) left at his death. Often called the father of modern street photography, Atget captured views of old Paris, many long removed, choosing curious subjects not usually photographed before his time. With his head inside the hood of his bellows camera with fixed lens, he did studies of old shop windows with their dated mannequins that influenced the surrealists.

He is also known for long exposures of exquisite views of Versailles, its lawns and ponds in dreamy vistas. Holding onto her cache for 40 years, Springfield, Ohio, native Abbott (1898-1991) sold them to the Museum of Modern Art, where they were exhibited in four exhibitions, catalogs and a later display.

Another discovery in this exhibition is German-born Ilse Bing (1899-1998), who left Germany to find her milieu in Paris in 1930. Using a small camera, she was called the "queen of the Leica." She had high sensitivity to such simple views as a puddle in the street, taken in 1932. Her best work here is a silhouetted ballet stage scene that George Balanchine choreographed in 1933. But Bing also photographed cancan dancers at the Moulin Rouge as well as fashion diva Elsa Schiaparelli and editor Carmel Snow, who brought her to Harper's Bazaar.

A Jew, Bing moved to Vichy in 1940, escaping the Nazis, then to the United States, where she experimented with larger cameras. Eventually putting her work aside, Bing became a dog groomer. Her photography was forgotten for 50 years.

Perhaps the most famous photographer in the nighttime genre was Brassai, a Transylvanian who came to Paris and delighted in turning its low-life into a collection of unforgettable images, whether belles of the evening and their johns or lovers lost in each other's arms in shady bistros. His portrait of a young woman with bobbed hair and bold eyes at a billiards table is among the best of his galaxy. Another of a stout prostitute catches the stylized look of the time in a sculptural way. "Bijoux, at a Place Pigalle Bar," an alcoholic woman dripping jewelry, is his most famous portrait, but is not included; it may be found on the Internet.

I would like to have seen more work of Man Ray (Philadelphia-born Emmanuel Raditzky, 1890-1976), who in many creative ways was an American equivalent of Marcel Duchamp. Ray's experiments, such as his simply exposed rayographs, named for himself and turning found objects into art, made a lasting impression on the avant-garde art. But Ray's beautiful models and lovers, Kiki of Montparnasse and Lee Miller, remain forever young and erotically desirable here.

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