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## **New Barnes exhibit: Photos in conversation with painting**

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Ise Bing, "Self-Portrait in Mirrors," a 1931 image. Bing's work is part of the Barnes Foundation exhibit "Live and Life Will Give You Pictures," Oct. 8-Jan. 9.

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by **Thomas Hine**

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The two men stand, with utmost dignity, wearing dark dress suits with waistcoats and stovepipe hats. But they are, at the same time, literally unmoored.

They are hanging in a basket beneath a balloon we do not see, but their anchor in the foreground hangs free. These men, the Godard brothers



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eug%C3%A8ne\\_Godard](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eug%C3%A8ne_Godard)), famous balloonists who were photographed about 1890 by [Louis-Jean Delton](http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1647/louis-jean-delton-french-1807-1891/) (<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/1647/louis-jean-delton-french-1807-1891/>), are apparently ascending, achieving transcendence through technology.

**[New Barnes exhibit: Photos in conversation with painting](http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/20viewGallery=y)**  
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*The Brothers Godard*, an 1890 image by Jean Delton, is the earliest photograph in the new Barnes Found exhibit, "Live and Life Will Give You Pictures." Photo courtesy of the Barnes Foundation.

This is the earliest work in the Barnes Foundation's new exhibition, "[Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography, 1890-1950.](#)"

(<http://www.barnesfoundation.org/exhibitions/live-and-life-will-give-you-pictures>) which opened Saturday and runs through Jan. 9. The mood of the photo is Victorian and modern at the same time. It communicates a sense of what was changing in that turbulent era and what wasn't.

Like most special exhibitions at the Barnes, this one is intended to both stand on its own and cast a light on the Barnes' permanent collection. This photograph does not really look like anything in the collection, but it was made at the same time as many of the most famous paintings were.

The premise of the show seems obvious: The Barnes collection is dominated by French paintings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but although it contains hinges and African masks, it contains no photography. Photography was invented during this era, and you can argue that the impressionist and post-impressionist works in Albert C. Barnes (<http://www.barnesfoundation.org/about/history/albert/>)' collection were, in part, a reaction to this new method of image-making. Why not, then, do a show of photography that parallels the works in the permanent collection?

Still, though the idea might be obvious, it is not easy to realize. Most 19th-century photography looks more Victorian than modern, both because it was hemmed in by heavy, inflexible tools, and because it often reflected mainstream popular tastes. While painters were trying to explore new ways of depicting the world, photography seemed to show everything, and that was enough.

Only after 1900, once smaller cameras freed photographers to explore, and modernist aesthetics had become widespread, does photography show the influence of what painters had explored decades before.

Thus the creator of such a show has two choices. The tougher one is to document the interaction between artists and photography in the 19th century. The easier one is to show photography, most of it much later, that demonstrates the influence and shares the subject matter of the painters who dominate the Barnes collection. This exhibition, pulled together very quickly after another planned exhibition fell through, takes the second path.

It consists entirely of works from the collection of physicist Michael Mattis (<http://www.artnews.com/2004/02/01/the-top-25-photo-collectors/>) and his wife, Judy Hochberg (<http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2004/0607/228.html>). It is widely considered one of the most comprehensive and serious collections of photography in the country. It is not an idiosyncratic collection. According to Thom Collins (<http://www.barnesfoundation.org/about/press/coverage/the-interview-thom-collins-barnes-director>), executive director and president of the Barnes Foundation, it has been formed much as a museum collection would be, filled with the best and most representative works from the invention of photography onward.

It is an extremely attractive show, filled with excellent vintage prints of works by some of the biggest names in photography, including Eugène Atget (<http://www.atgetphotography.com/The-Photographers/Eugene-Atget.html>), Brassaï (<http://www.imaging-resource.com/news/2014/01/07/the-piercing-eye-of-brassai-a-brief-history-of-a-master-photographer>), Ilse Bing (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/ilse-bing-biography/>), and Henri Cartier-Bresson (<http://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/967>). You have probably seen many of these photographs before in books and in other exhibitions. Indeed, a somewhat smaller show featuring many of the same works was mounted at the Delaware Art Museum only three years ago (<http://www.delart.org/exhibits/french-twist-masterworks-of-photography-from-atget-to-man-ray/>).

Still, the subtitle of the show does not mislead. Among the 170 photographs on view are some truly great works. They are well worth seeing, even though the exhibition has little new or interesting to say about them.

The title "Live and Life Will Give You Pictures," adapted from a remark by Cartier-Bresson, implies a certain effortlessness, and a show like this invites the viewer to become like that much-discussed figure in 19th-century intellectual history, the flâneur (<http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/10/17/in-praise-of-the-flaneur/>). This is a fellow who wandered through the newly populous, sprawling, and industrializing cities of the era, seeking out the interesting, the odd, and, possibly, the meaningful. Be open, was Cartier-Bresson's message to photographers. Don't take photographs, he once advised. Let them take you.

The show is divided into a number of loose themes, such as street life, leisure, labor, and commerce, though scenes of prostitutes seem to turn up in every category. It's best just to follow your eye.

I kept being drawn to the work of Ilse Bing, probably because I had not seen so many of her works before. Her work is partly about glamour, especially her wonderful self-portrait with her camera, and her fashion and advertising work. But it is also about faded glamour, as when she photographs a poster of Greta Garbo (<https://www.sfmoma.org/artwork/ST1998.0062>), with the upper half of that famous face ripped away. And 40 years after Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (<http://www.toulouse-lautrec-foundation.org/>) immortalized the Moulin Rouge ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/At\\_the\\_Moulin\\_Rouge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/At_the_Moulin_Rouge)), Bing photographed the dancers, still canning away, in a soft but perhaps kind focus that somehow communicates the frenetic motions these women are going through.

Street photography is usually all about people - the faces they make, the way they walk. Brassai hung out with a street gang, and a couple of toughs glowered memorably at his camera before robbing him. Jacques-Henri Lartigue (<http://www.howardgreenberg.com/artists/jacques-henri-lartigue>) found a socialite walking in the park (<http://www.taftmuseum.org/media-images/lartigue-anna-la-pradvina-with-chichi-and-gogo>), dressed all in black, formidable as an ocean liner, with her little dogs, Chichi and Gogo, on their leashes.

But Atget, the pioneer of street photography, hardly ever seemed to meet anyone. His streets are quiet, survivors of an earlier time before Paris boomed. But sometimes, as in his photo of a corset shop (<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/286216>), the products on display represent the ideal figure of a woman in 1912.

I could go on, careering from picture to picture. If you go, you will probably do the same thing.

**Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography, 1890-1950** Through Jan. 9 at the Barnes Foundation, 2025 Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Monday, 6 to 9 on first Friday. **Admission:** Adults \$25; seniors (65 and over) \$23, students, and youths (6-18) \$10; children free. **Information:** 215-278-7000 or [barnesfoundation.org](http://www.barnesfoundation.org) (<http://www.barnesfoundation.org>).

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