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‘Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography, 1890-1950’ Review

The collectors have a reputation for getting the finest iteration of each particular image they acquire.



Ilse Bing's 'Self-Portrait With Leica' (1931) PHOTO: ESTATE OF ILSE BING

By **WILLIAM MEYERS**

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Philadelphia

A visit to the Barnes Foundation brings you nose to nose with 181 Renoirs, 69 Cézannes, 59 Matisses, 46 Picassos, 16 Modiglianis, seven Van Goghs, and Dr. Albert Barnes (1872-1951), the entrepreneur, collector and educator responsible for it all. The Foundation's

new building replicates his hanging of the works exactly as they were in its original building, but also includes space for temporary exhibitions. What constitutes an appropriate temporary exhibition for this institution is a challenge; Thom Collins, who became executive director and president last year, began his career working with John Szarkowski, the director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, and returned to his first love to curate “Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography, 1890-1950.” The over 170 pictures in the show date from 1895 until 1950 and reflect on concerns contemporaneous with the paintings; their presence at the Foundation is fitting as well because of their exceptional high quality and because of the collectors who lent them, Michael Mattis and Judy Hochberg.

**Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography,
1890-1950**

*The Barnes Foundation
Through Jan. 9, 2017*

The prints Mr. Collins chose from the Mattis-Hochberg collection include 15 by Eugène Atget, 31 by Ilse Bing, 36 by Brassai, 36 by Henri Cartier-Bresson, eight by André Kertész and 13 by Man Ray. Many of them are among the photographers’ best-known images—for instance, Cartier-Bresson’s picture of a man leaping over a puddle, “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris” (1932), or Brassai’s sadly bedecked “Madame Bijou in the Bar de la Lune, Montmartre” (c. 1932). Mr. Mattis and Ms. Hochberg have a reputation for acquiring the very best iteration of each particular picture they collect, so the print of Kertész’s “Chez Mondrian” (1926) seems to have been made with special care; the handling of tones in its different sections creates a delicate balance analogous with Mondrian’s poised abstractions.

The exhibition is divided into eight sections, each with its own theme and references to works in the Barnes collection. The wall text of the Leisure section mentions Renoir’s “Luncheon” (1875) and a study Georges Seurat made for “A Sunday on La Grande Jatte” (1884-85). The Leisure photographs include Brassai’s nighttime meanderings to a “Café, rue de Lappe,” the “Couple at the Bar of a Bistrot,” the “Lovers, Bal Musette des Quatre Saisons, rue de Lappe” (all Paris, c. 1932). It includes four pictures from 1931 by Bing of Cancan Dancers at the Moulin Rouge, Cartier-Bresson’s two working-class families picnicking, “Sunday on the Banks of the Marne” (1938); three pictures by Jacques-Henri Lartigue of the haute bourgeoisie frolicking; and Lisette Model’s creepy “French Gambler, promenade des Anglais, Nice” (1934).

Vincent van Gogh's "Houses and Figure" (1890) keys the section on Labor. Atget's "Reaper, Picardie" (c. 1910) is similarly pastoral, but Brassai's five pictures of prostitutes are resolutely urban; the "Prostitute Playing Snooker, boulevard Rochechouart, Montmartre" (1932-33) is a city girl, and a tough one at that. The voyeuristic "At Suzy's, introductions" (1932) is a naked woman standing and being embraced by a man in a suit. Brassai valorized the "Cesspool Workers, Paris" (c. 1933) he photographed at night intent on their necessary but unappealing work. "Street Sweepers, Paris" (1947), with their brooms, intrigued Bing, who took two pictures of them looking down from above, and Dora Maar's "Man Looking inside a Sidewalk Inspection Door, London" (c. 1935) is on his knees with his head buried out of sight.

The 10 pictures by Atget in the Paris & Environs section include "Fountain, rue de Sèvres" (c. 1900), "Grand Trianon, Versailles" (1924-25), "Water Lilies, Versailles" (c. 1910) and "Ruelle des Gobelins, Paris" (1899). The gargoyles in Brassai's nighttime "Paris From Notre-Dame" (c. 1933) brood over the darkened city below, and Bing's "Thunderstorm Over Paris, the Last Bastille Day Before the War" (1939) is appropriately ominous; the Eiffel Tower stands at solitary attention under the gathering clouds.

Ilse Bing was known as the Queen of the Leica, so it is not surprising that her double "Self-Portrait With Leica" (1931), shot in a mirror, is in the Celebrity section. A picture of "Stéphane Mallarmé and Auguste Renoir" (1895) taken by Edgar Degas, who dabbled with photography, is in the section, as is Man Ray's portrait of the famous artists' model "Kiki de Montparnasse" (1923). Cartier-Bresson was an incisive portraitist, and Mr. Collins has up his studies of Albert Camus, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse and Simone de Beauvoir. The title of the show, by the way, is a quote from Cartier-Bresson.

This is a stunning exhibition. Knowledgeable people will recognize many pictures and be amazed they all came from the one collection, that of Mr. Mattis and Ms. Hochberg. Mr. Collins had trepidation about a show at the Barnes devoted exclusively to photographs, but the galleries have been crowded and, he says, millennials especially stand rapt before images so superior to what they have on their iPhones. Albert Barnes was right: great art endures.

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at www.williammeyersphotography.com.