

'Paris Night & Day' at the McMullen is radiant



Brassaï, "Avenue de l'Observatoire," c. 1937 Courtesy/McMullen Museum, Brassaï Estate



By Chris Bergeron
Daily News staff

Posted Feb. 23, 2014 @ 8:00 am

CHESTNUT HILL - Paris has never looked so brilliantly illuminated and teeming with life as in the vintage black-and-white photographs now displayed in the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College.

Opening a window on the two decades between the world wars, "Paris Night & Day" showcases more than a hundred masterpieces and lesser-known treasures by visionary artists who were reinventing the relatively new medium of photography in profound ways.

Skirts akimbo, cancan dancers twirl across the dance floor in the Moulin Rouge in Ilse Bing's memorable 1931 photo. Bill Brandt uses the dance of light and shadow to transform a mannequin in a flea market into an object of longing and desire.

Insulated in her furs and ridiculous hat, a leisured lady flounces through Bois de Boulogne Park unaware she's on the verge of extinction in Jacques-Henri Lartique's prescient 1911 photo.

Featuring far more than pretty pictures, this stunning show uses photos by the era's giants – Henri Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Andre Kertesz, Bing, Brandt and more – to convincingly argue that an international community of photographers who'd come to Paris for varied reasons knowingly redefined the art form to express a new vision of modern life after the mechanized horrors of World War I.

Perhaps not as well known to American viewers, the Hungarian photographer, sculptor and filmmaker who called himself Brassai emerges as the show's surprise star for his powerful mix of gritty images of the Parisian demimonde and his moody chiaroscuro shots of the nocturnal "City of Light."

Subtitled "Photography between the Wars," this is a must-see exhibit for anyone who loves photography or is thinking about buying a camera, has visited Paris or wants to or just wonders what visiting a French bordello would have been like.

Associate Professor Ash Anderson organized the exhibit from the collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg with assistance from 14 students in his art history class.

"This exhibition offers the rare opportunity to consider both the canonical and rarely seen photographs from this unusually rich period in the history of photography," he said. "These pictures illustrate a complex evolution in the ways photographers defined themselves in relation to art. We see them simultaneously looking to photography's past for inspiration and playfully testing the limits of their medium."

Museum Director Nancy Netzer said the Mattis-Hochberg collection "includes master prints [of some of] the best examples of well-known and celebrated 20th-century photographs."

Anderson said he was especially interested in exploring how the leading photographers of that time used a phenomenon he called "photographic seeing" – the fact that "cameras have a different vantage point than the human eye" – to capture life in a truer way than earlier "sentimental" artists who'd never challenged social and political inequities that had contributed to the devastation of World War I.

Anderson's students wrote much of the wall text that accompanies the exhibit.

Anderson acclimatizes visitors to the coming

changes in the exhibit's first section, "Setting the Stages," which reveals early photographers' progression from focusing on Paris' striking architecture and landmarks to creating visual narratives, like Eugene Atget's striking 1900 photo, "The Miserable Sleeper," of a forlorn man that imbues documentary realism with a jolt of personal alienation.

In an inspired move, Anderson organized the exhibit so photos of Paris by day are shown in the McMullen's roomier first-floor gallery while the grittier, racier nighttime images of bars, bordellos and street life are displayed in the lower galleries that are entered by descending a stairway as if descending into the underworld.

The exhibit has been organized into nine sections based on both on chronology and thematic presentations of the evolution of photography from pre-World War I pioneers to the medium's growing "ability to capture life on the fly" and the increased influence of the avant-garde and surrealists who made one another the subject of their photos and experimented with a newfound

ability to distort their images to reflect changes in consciousness.

For an exhibit that stresses photographers' different approaches to sunlit Parisian days and shadowy nights, exhibitions and collections manager and designer Diana Larsen painted the gallery walls in "six shades of grey" from the cool neutrality of Sherwin-Williams "Ponder" for the exhibit's earliest sections to "Purple Passage" which brings alive the smoky sensuality of Brassai's bordello scenes."

Even if your only camera is in your cellphone, most visitors will recognize signature photos by Cartier-Bresson whose pursuit of "the decisive moment" reflected his contemporaries' shared fascination with the theater of Parisian streets. His signature photos of a man leaping over a puddle, a French refugee recognizing her Gestapo informant or a well-fed family relaxing on the banks of the Marne still retain the magic of memorable moments frozen in time.

Born Gyula Halasz to an Armenian mother and Hungarian father, Brassai (who took his pseudonym from his Hungarian birthplace) did for Parisian nights what Cartier-Bresson did for the rest of the time.

A sequence of his photos in a dance hall precisely capture the bittersweet atmosphere of lovers, arguing couples and smiling courtesans like a pungent French version of Downtown Abbey.

Yet in the midst of the Depression, Brassai's 1933 night shot of "Cesspool Workers" used a sliver of glowing light and billowing clouds of smoke to transform nasty work into a mysterious scene.

Anderson urged visitors "get close to the prints" and study their surfaces to consider the "unique history" of how each photo was made.

"People should feel they have the power to enjoy the exhibition as they want. They could spend 20 minutes looking at one photo and be successful," he said. "They should trust their instincts and discover things on their own."

Just like the photographers they're looking at did a century ago.

Chris Bergeron is a Daily News staff writer.

Contact him at cbergeron@wickedlocal.com or 508-626-4448. Follow us on Twitter @WickedLocalArts and on Facebook.

"Paris Night & Day: Photography between the Wars"

WHEN: Through June 8

WHERE: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday-Friday; noon to 5 Saturday and Sunday. Closed Good Friday, Easter and Memorial Day.

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 617-552-8100; www.bc.edu/artmuseum