

The Boston Globe

Theater & art

Theater & art

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

City of Light, illuminated at Boston College

By **Mark Feeney** | GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 27, 2014



BRASSAI ESTATE

Brassai's "Avenue de l'Observatoire."

REPRINTS E-MAIL SHARE

Ernest Hemingway called his memoir of Paris in the '20s "A Moveable Feast." Think of "Paris Night & Day: Photography Between the

Wars,” the current exhibition at the McMullen Museum, at Boston College, as “A Photographable Feast.” It runs through June 8. Justifying that title aren’t just place and period (the ’30s are thrown in for good measure) but also gustatory accuracy of the visual sort: The offerings on display are that rich, that abundant.

For a century, Paris had been the world capital of painting. A strong argument can be made that during these two decades, it held the title in photography, too. Among those working there for at least some portion of this time were Eugène Atget, André Kertész, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, Ilse Bing, Lisette Model, Man Ray, Dora Maar, Bill Brandt, and Berenice Abbott. All but Abbott have work in “Paris Night & Day.” It’s worth noting that the only one of those photographers who didn’t come to Paris from somewhere else was Cartier-Bresson. (As it happens, most of his work in the show is of other places.)

The show comprises more than 100 photographs, which come from the collection of Michael Mattis and Judith Hochberg. Boston College professor Ash Anderson curated the show. There’s an additional selection of 19th-century photographs of Paris, serving as a kind of prelude.

It indicates the quality of “Paris Night & Day” that among those photographs are 19 by Cartier-Bresson, a dozen by Atget, nine by Kertész. Each man has a justifiable claim as the greatest photographer of the last century. Yet the two who define the show — because they engage with Paris so searchingly and innovatively — are Brassai, with two dozen photographs, and Bing, with 19.

How could photographers not be attracted to Paris? As God loves all his children, so the camera loves all Earth’s cities: their scale, their energy, their endless array of possibility. It’s just that some cities are loved more than others: New York, San Francisco, Prague, Paris — Paris supremely. And Paris during these years may have been the city at its most camera-ready. The Ancien Régime Paris so cherished by Atget, where neighborhoods that had escaped Baron Haussmann’s urban renewal could look nearly medieval, coexisted with a Deco city, sleekly up to the minute and electrically illuminated.

The illumination was no small thing, even in avant-garde circles, as the title of a 1930 Man Ray photogram here, “Electricité,” reminds us. So many of the images in “Paris Night & Day” present a beguiling visual balance, with a postwar newness and excitement enlivening the city’s elegant solidity. No image captures that balance better, or more spectacularly, than Brassai’s “Paris From Notre Dame.” A cathedral gargoyle crouches in the foreground. In the background, a literally electric city looks all but celestial. The presence among the 19th-century photographs of a similar view of Notre Dame by Édouard-Denis Baldus serves to underscore the transformation.

Technology of a different sort was also a factor. On display is a vintage Leica camera, a reminder of the impact of lightweight cameras. Which is more of a marvel in Bing’s “Self-Portrait With Leica,” from 1931: the intentness of her gaze or the compactness of her camera? The liberating effect such equipment had on photographers — and her, in particular — is evident in Bing’s other images here: how extensively she surveyed the city and from what intriguing angles, both literal and figurative.

What also made this period in Paris special was photography’s relationship to the other arts. The city may no longer have been undisputed cultural capital of the West. At the very least, it shared the title with pre-Hitler Berlin. But Paris remained a magnet for writers and artists. It was, for example, world Surrealism headquarters — and how the Surrealists cherished the power of photography to create incongruity with the blink of a lens.

Throughout the show you can see — you can feel — an aesthetic mutual attraction: in Man Ray’s two-minute abstract film, from 1923, “Le Retour à la Raison”; in his portraits (of Kiki of Montparnasse, who posed for so many painters and sculptors; of Maar, who

PARIS NIGHT & DAY: Photography Between the Wars

McMullen Museum of Art, Devlin Hall, Boston College, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, 617-552-8100. <http://www.bc.edu/gn-artmuseum>

Closing date: June 8

More

▪ **Photos: Paris in '20s and '30s**

was Picasso's lover; of the artist Meret Oppenheim); in Laure Albin-Guillot's portrait of Jean Cocteau; in Kertész's classic evocations of the painter Piet Mondrian, "Chez Mondrian" and "Mondrian's Pipe and Glasses."

Those two Kertész photographs are very famous. They're also interiors, as easily taken in Mondrian's native Netherlands or his later home, New York. Kertész, the most Mozartean of photographers, transcends any specific site, as music does. In fact, he did outstanding work in his native Hungary and, after leaving Paris, New York.

Kertész extended our idea of photography, as did Cartier-Bresson, in his very different way. What Brassai did was extend our idea of Paris. Readers had long been familiar with a darker, desperate, hidden Paris — "this other world, this fringe world," Brassai called it — one familiar from the pages of such novelists as Balzac, Hugo, Zola, and Brassai's friend Henry Miller. The photographer set out to show it rather than just describe it. "I wanted to know what went on inside," he wrote, "behind the walls, behind the facades, in the wings: bars, dives, night clubs, one-night hotels, bordellos, opium dens."

The passage of time has lent these images, which once appeared shocking and dangerous, an almost opulent allure. And dangerous they could be. The two mugs in "Street Toughs From Grand Albert's Gang" lifted Brassai's wallet after he took their picture. But that was then. Now these photographs seem as much touchstones of the City of Light as the Guermantes' ball in Proust or the sound of the Hot Club of Paris scenting the air. Of course that's one of the more mysterious properties of photographable feasts. Whatever is placed on the banquet table looks not just *délicieuse* but *très, très délicieuse*.

Mark Feeney can be reached at mfeeney@globe.com.
