

Pictures Perfect At The Barnes



Eugène Atget "Boulevard de Strasbourg, Corsets, Paris"

By Dea Adria Mallin • Wed, Nov 30, 2016

We could start in the birthplace of photography, in Paris, where, by 1890 there was the spectacle of modernity: huge department stores, wide and crowded boulevards, the street life and night life of industrialization and urbanization. Or with the advent of the portable, hand-held camera—the Kodak and then the Leica—mastered by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eugène Atget, Brassai, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, André Kertész, Man Ray, Ilse Bing, and others.

Or we could begin much later with Michael Mattis, a nuclear physicist at the distinguished Los Alamos Laboratories in New Mexico and his wife, linguist Judy Hochberg, as they start in the 1980's to collect the photographs that became their passion and that now form an extraordinary and vast collection with deep scholarly rigor. "We live surrounded by thousands of images, framed, unframed, matted, in boxes..." says Mattis.

It is from this collection that 171 photographs have been culled (one-third never before exhibited) for the very special exhibition at the Barnes Foundation, on the Parkway, through January 9, 2017. It is the first exhibition here of photographs, brilliantly curated by Mattis himself, and titled, *Live and Life Will Give You Pictures: Masterworks of French Photography, 1890-1950*.

The title comes from an observation by French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson who, Leica in hand, never stopped telling stories with his camera. The themes here—Paris, street life, commerce, labor, leisure, celebrity, reportage, and art for art's sake—reverberate well into the 20th century. They invigorated the Impressionists in the 1860's and hit photography later as the old daguerreotype was replaced in 1888 by the portable Kodak, flexible roll film, shorter exposure times, and then, in 1932, the Leica.

The Paris theme is the story of a city exploding. Georges-Eugène Haussmann, prefect of the Seine, oversaw the creation of wide boulevards, uniform limestone buildings, vast public parks, and a sewer system, even as the early photographer Eugène Atget set his camera the task of documenting the old before it disappeared entirely.

In the Street Life and Labor sections, remember that the population of Paris quadrupled and quintupled in the late 19th century, creating not only nostalgia for a simpler past but a fascination with the new. From the homeless, the streetwalkers, the street performers, the vagrants by the Seine, the shop and factory workers and the laborers to businessmen and aristocrats—all attracted painters and photographers.

And the new middle class led to a surge in commodity culture. In the Commerce section, photographers, like the populace, were obsessed with department store windows and reflections in shop windows and the advertising possibilities. Atget captures an array of women's corsets in a shop window while Ilse Bing, who arrived from Germany in 1930, gives up a career in medicine to become a fashion photographer, replacing hand illustrations by artists for Paris' *Vogue* and then for Harper's *Bazaar*. Dubbed "the Queen of the Leica," Bing's photos of Paris, particularly the Eiffel Tower, are not to be missed. Later, Bing escaped from a Nazi work camp, came to the U.S. to

photograph high fashion for fifteen years and then turned in her camera for a bicycle to make house calls as a dog groomer. She died in 1991, the last living remnant of the group of photographers who started it all.

The room dedicated to Leisure gives us the dance halls, the seedy bars, and the accidental and intentional lovers of Paris. And where Toulouse-Lautrec gave us Le Moulin Rouge dancers on canvas, Ilse Bing gives us a wall of photos of the Cancan dancers at Le Moulin Rouge.

The large area given over to Celebrity reminds us that modern celebrity was, in fact, made possible by photography! And that the photographer could be just as fastidious as the painter in selecting pose, facial expression, props, and settings. Photographs made fictive identities for nearly instant mass consumption—something the 21st century teenager does as second nature with the camera when creating a Facebook identity or selfies.

Among the celebrities is a young woman who saved her family from poverty by becoming a nude model, a cabaret singer, an actress, and her photographer's lover. In the 1923 photographic vision of Man Ray, the symbol of Parisian bohemia was his Kiki de Montparnasse. (Note that Man Ray began life in South Philly as Emmanuel Radnitzky.)

In this section, it is revelatory to view Degas as a photographer using reflections in a mirror of Renoir and Mallarmé, and to know that Degas experimented with dozens of photographs in the 1890's, though he never exhibited them.

In 1945, Cartier-Bresson posed Simone de Beauvoir near Saint-Germain des Près, and posed Albert Camus in 1944 in Paris. In the portrait of Camus, the existentialist is deeply introspective and alone in sharp focus against the blurred backdrop of an empty Paris street, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. (Eighteen years later, every Parisian male I knew in Paris looked like this portrait of Camus.) The Mattis and Hochberg collection of Cartier-Bresson includes artist Georges Braque in Paris in the 1940's with white hair and the inevitable cigarette, Picasso, sans shirt, at home in Paris on the rue des Grands-Augustins in 1944, and several photos of Matisse in Vence, in the south of France.

Cartier-Bresson had purchased a Leica in 1932, allowing him to take pictures "on the fly." "To me," he said, "photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." Witness his photo of a man in line all night to see the 1937 coronation of King George VI from the perfect perch, but at the event itself, he is fast asleep on discarded newspapers. Cartier-Bresson traveled the world—Spain, Brussels, Indonesia, Peking, India on the eve of Gandhi's assassination, Budapest, Mexico City, even Harlem and the Boston Common—for these decisive moments.

Michael Mattis notes that the photographers born in France often chose to work outside Paris and France, while the foreign-born photographers loved to cover Paris. Look at the intensity of the relation of Hungarian-born André Kertesz to his photos of Paris. Or German-born Ilse Bing to her photos of Paris.

Artists react creatively to societal change, and the themes of industrialization and urbanization, the changes in labor and recreation, sexual mores, the burgeoning middle class, and a culture market with celebrities—these themes pervade both painting and photography between 1890 and 1950. And discovering the differences and resonances in Albert Barnes' art collection and in this photography exhibition is genuinely challenging—and fun.