BRASSAÏ

1976

Two Visionaries

The galleries and museums in New York this fall are filled with photographs of every genre, esthetic persuasion and period in time: Alfred Eisenstaedt, the great photojournalist, is at the prestigious Knoedler gallery; Andreas Feininger is enjoying a retrospective at the International Center of Photography, and the work of conceptual and "story" artists who use the photograph for their own highly personal ends is at the vanguard John Gibson gallery in SoHo. Next week, the Sidney Janis Gallery is unveiling a large retrospective of pictures by the influential Duane Michals. But unquestionably the shining star of the season is the legendary, Transylvanian-born photographer Brassaï, whose notorious nocturnal photographs of Paris in the 1930s are on view at the Marlborough Gallery.

Artists and photographers, who have always been Brassaï's strongest supporters, flocked to the show the moment Marlborough unveiled these rarely seen pictures of "night people"—prostitutes and their clients, homosexuals, Folies girls, opium smokers and ordinary lovers. Soon after, they were followed by buyers and the press from everywhere—even from France, where Brassaï has lived for years with surprisingly little recognition. At the same time Pantheon Books has reproduced most of the exhibit in "The Secret Paris of the 30's" ($17.95), which, with a text by the photographer himself, will surely become a classic among photography books. For an artist who was once scorned as a "photo illustrator," such attention is long overdue.

Brassaï cannot resist a smile of pleasure as he thinks about it. "I had three problems to conquer in photographing the night people," he said last week. "First, I was poor. I couldn't af-

Photos by Brassaï from "The Secret Paris of the 30's"

Brassaï's lovers: Remembrance of things past but not lost

lord to go to the most expensive brothels or pay my subjects. Second, it was technically awkward to use the camera at night in the '30s—my exposures lasted five minutes, ten minutes. Last, the pimps and the whores were afraid of being photographed and revealed to the public." That is why he has waited so long to exhibit all of these pictures: now he is 77, the night people are beyond harm, and the Paris in his pictures dead, a memory. "I lived at night with these people," he says. "I slept with them when I had to. I took the madams to the opera. Now, when I look at these pictures, I think of a pun on Proust: *A la*

Paris streetwalker: Beyond harm

recherche du temps passé—remembrance of things past but not lost, because of the camera."

Brassaï laughs, but he knows it is more wit than fact. He knows that what is preserved at Marlborough is the vision of Brassaï rather than the history of Paris. A wise critic once observed of him that he photographs himself, not other people. Whether it is the couple snatching a furtive kiss in front of a café mirror, a hulking whore standing stolid in the street or the bejeweled, aging "La Môme Bijou," sitting implacably alone in a bar, Brassaï's vision dominates the picture. This vision is ruthlessly clear, simple and centralized. A hole could be made in almost any of the Marlborough pictures, showing precisely where Brassaï meant for the eye to rest. This is true even in the gloriously articulated photographs that employ mirrors large and small—where whole groups of lovers, talkers, pimps and hookers reflect back on themselves.

Robert R. McElroy—Newsweek

Brassaï: A quick, unsentimental mind

In these pictures, there is always a single face that the viewer's gaze finally rests upon, the face in the center of a crowd, seen front and back, with intensely glowing eyes.

In these images, Brassaï is a completely realized artist. His eye, his method and his content are inextricably fused. He knew from the start what he wanted. The old, heavy German camera he used in the '30s, along with bulky glass plates, forced him to look and think first, then press the button. He still works that way: he studied Picasso for months, then snapped one picture, now a masterpiece. "When I look at something," he says, "I don't look only at it. I think about how the camera will transform it." But Brassaï's pictures are distinguished by much more than his sensitivity to form and his agile technique. There is his obsession in the '30s with the haunted—and haunting—world he explored so thoroughly in a way that anticipates the work of Diane Arbus in the '60s. Within it are "society's" outcasts, each one standing resolute, without tears, before the camera, and the quick, unsentimental mind behind it.

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