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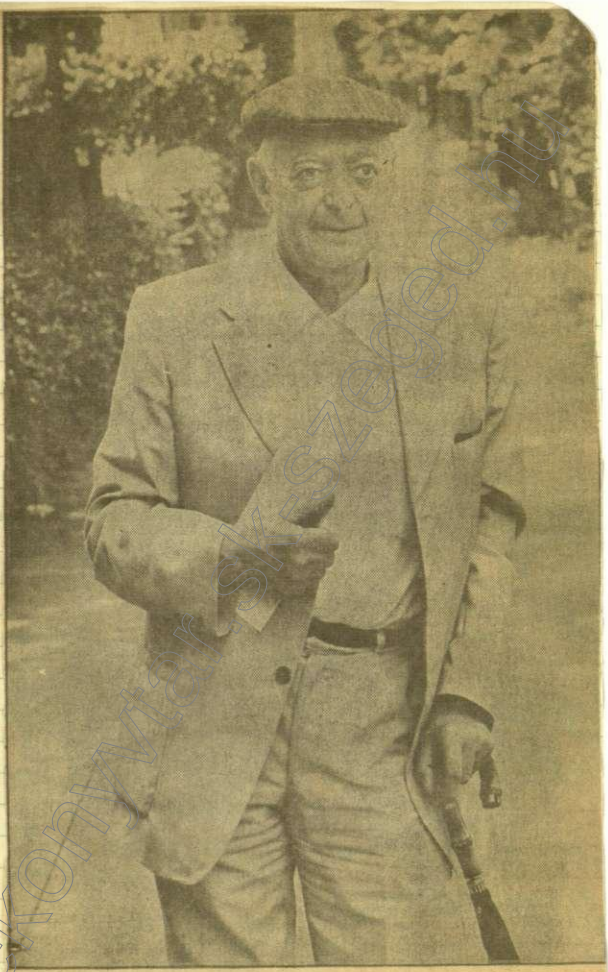


By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post

Brassai: "The aspects of the capital at night fired and excited me. How on earth, I asked myself, could I capture these powerful impressions? By what medium?"

Brassai: 'The Eye Of Paris'

By Paul Richard

It is Brassai's eyes you notice first, their peculiar moistness, their light-absorbing darkness, their roundness, their enormous size. They seem made for the night.

Something of the nighttime, a quietness, a softness, some hint of fogs and shadows and of business asleep, cushion the famous photographs of the French photographer Brassai. Scores of his pictures, most taken in the 1930s, went on view last night at the Corcoran Gallery of Art.

It takes a while in their presence before one senses the vision of a master, for the photographs of Brassai are so void of ego and so free of affectation that one easily forgets the photographer who took them. Nothing interrupts the communion they establish between the subject and the viewer. It is as if all those whores and pimps and peasants, those animals and well-known artists somehow photographed themselves.

That naturalness looks easy, but nothing is more difficult. Just think of other photographers who have become well known.

Karsh of Ottowa, for instance. His style is so heavy that the successful men he photographs—with their pensive gazes, their chins upon their hands and every hair just so—look a lot like Karsh of Ottowa, but not much like themselves. The pictures of Diane Arbus are marked by both the compositional austerity and the bizarreness of her subjects; those of Walker Evans by an ordering precision that locks everything in place, those of Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai's compatriot, by a strange dramatic tautness that makes the instant seem surreal.

But the photographs of Brassai are not like that at all. It is not his presence that one notices; it is his restraint.

His eyes miss nothing. He was in Washington the other day wandering through Georgetown, looking at the shadows on the sidewalk, the colors of the buildings, the signs within the windows, the costumes of the street. He talked about his past.

He was born Gyula Halasz in Brasso, in Hungarian Transylvania 74 years ago. Brassai is both his pen name (he has written a dozen books) and his lens name. "It means from Brasso. Like da Vinci," he explains.

It is as difficult to imagine Brassai in Hungary as it is to think of T.S. Eliot in Missouri, for his best-known photographs celebrate the air of Paris, its streets, its river mists, its cafes, its underworld, its night.

When Brassai came to Paris in 1923 he thought himself a painter. He had been trained in the academies of Budapest and Berlin. He had never held a camera. Photography, in those days, did not interest him at all.

He says the city soon seduced him. He gradually grew bored with spending endless hours before the easel in a daylit studio and began to prowl the streets at night instead.

To earn his living he began submitting articles and essays to German magazines. Because most magazines wanted not just words, but pictures, Brassai, took a photographer along on assignments.

The photographer was Andre Kertesz, a fellow Hungarian, a fine photographer and a friend. "I came late to photography," writes Brassai. "Until my 30th year I knew nothing about it—indeed, I rather despised it . . . It all came about because I am a noctambulist; and the aspects of the capital at night fired and excited me. How on earth, I asked myself, could I capture and fix these powerful impressions? By what medium? I had been haunted for years by these fugitive images. My friend, Andre Kertesz, broke the spell by lending me a camera. I followed his advice and his example."

By 1933, the year Brassai published "Paris by Night," his pictures looked like no one else's. In "Tropic of Cancer," Henry Miller writes of the photographer who showed him nighttime Paris, its all-night cafes, its glistering streets, its hoodlums and its whores. That photographer was Brassai. Miller calls him "the eye of Paris."

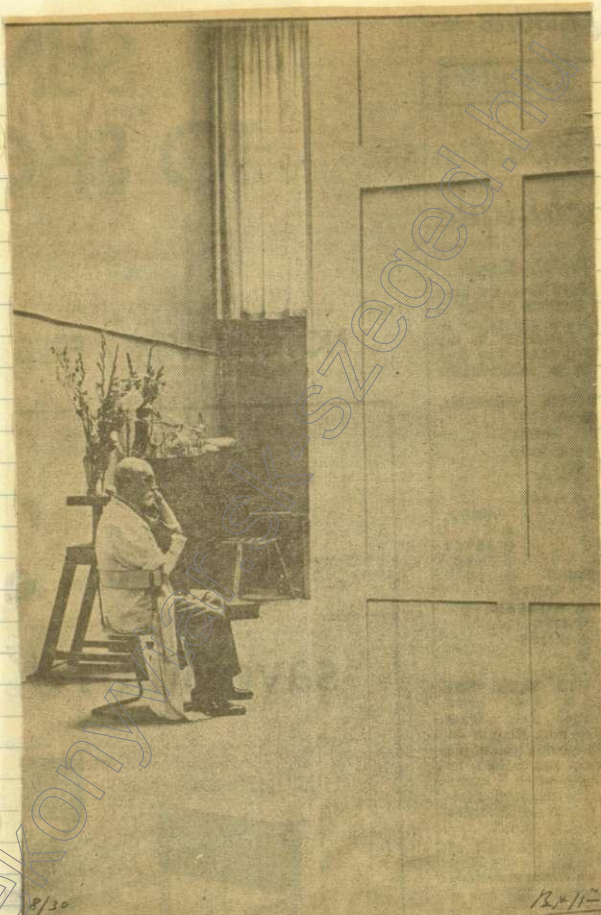
Brassai's Paris pictures look so poised and so unforced in part because his subjects knew Brassai so well. They are not posing for the camera. Their faces are not frozen. Unlike shotgun photographers who take a hundred pictures hoping for a good one, Brassai shoots only once or twice; then, returning to his drink, he puts his camera away.

Paris by night is only one of Brassai's many subjects. Himself a painter, sculptor, a set designer and engraver, he took portraits, too, of artists: Matisse, Giacometti, the old Bonnard and the young Picasso, who remained a lifelong friend. And of writers: Henry Miller, Jean Genet. And of animals: city cats and dogs and horses with braided tails at an English horse show. Thirteen years ago he published a book of photographs of graffiti, images of faces, hanged men and lovers' hearts, scratched into city walls.

"I've always had a horror of specialization," says Brassai.

No subject dominates his pictures, but an honesty, a lack of affection, permeates them all.

Brassaï's "'Bijou' of Montmartre" (1932).



Brassaï's portrait of Henri Matisse.