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Photography

# Brassaï's Paris Is Slowly Vanishing

By GENE THORNTON

**T**HE last time I was in Paris, which was only a few weeks ago, I saw someone straight out of a photograph by Brassai, and the current exhibition of Brassai's work at the Witkin Gallery (to Aug. 19) made me think of her. She was an old *clocharde* camping out in an elegant doorway right in the heart of the aristocratic old Fauberg Saint Germain.

She was large, diseased and of an indeterminate age. She was surrounded by sacks and cartons of possessions—trash, most of it, I imagine—and one morning as I was walking from my hotel to the Louvre I saw her lift her skirts and relieve herself on the sidewalk, in full view of me, the hotel porters across the street, the passing traffic and, for all I know, the local police.

The old *clocharde* lived there in that elegant doorway for the full week I was in Paris. So far as I know neither the police nor anyone else ever disturbed her, and she may be there still. But she won't be there forever.

She is part of the old Paris that is vanishing behind high-rise office buildings, supermarkets, urban thoroughways and other developments of the affluent society. Where she and her kind used to live, under the bridges of the Seine, the traffic now rolls in great clouds of stinking exhaust fumes, and soon she will survive only in Brassai's marvelous pictures.

There are lots of other types who will only survive in Brassai's pictures, in old movies and in the works of writers of that period—like Hemingway and Henry Miller. For Brassai is the chronicler and poet of the Paris of the 30's, a Paris that already seems as remote and fabulous as the Belle Epoque or the Age of the Encyclopedists. Brassai came to Paris in 1924 as a journalist for Hungarian newspapers, but he did not begin photographing till 1929.

André Kertész was his teacher, and he learned fast. His first book, "Paris de Nuit," was an international success in the early 30's, though oddly enough, it contained mostly views and few of the pic-



atures of people for which he is now best known. He began working for editors as enlightened and innovative as Stefan Lorant, who published his photo essay, "Midnight in Paris," in the London Weekly Illustrated in 1934. Then in 1939 Alfred Steiglitz asked him to exhibit at An American Place.

During the Second World War Brassai resumed the drawing and painting that had been his first love, but after the war he was sent traveling by Carmel Snow, the enterprising editor of Harper's Bazaar whose contributions to creative photography have yet to receive due recognition. For her he photographed Morocco, Turkey and Spain, and he completed the series of portraits of artists and writers that he had begun during the thirties.

The current show at the Witkin Gallery is a small retrospective covering the more than 40 years of Brassai's work and is timed to coincide with the publication by Witkin-Berley Ltd. of a limited edition portfolio of classic Brassai images printed by the

photographer in his own darkroom to archival standards. (The portfolio includes 10 prints and sells for \$950 through July 31, \$1,150 thereafter.)

In addition to pictures of Paris in the 30's, there are his pioneering studies of graffiti, a selection of his portraits of Paris-based artists and writers, pictures done on his travels for Harper's Bazaar, and some recent color work. There is also a group of the sculptures with which he has occupied himself between photographic assignments, Brancusi-like bronzes and marbles of an ambiguous and equivocal sexuality.

It is, however, as a portraitist and poet-chronicler of a vanished Paris that Brassai has done his most original work. As a portraitist he has largely confined himself to sitters who are his personal friends, and perhaps for this reason there is a lack, even in his portraits of that great poseur Picasso, of the kind of public face that brings official portraiture into disrepute. The postwar portraits



of a younger generation are up to the level of the older ones, and two of them at least—a diffident, balding Jean Genet of 1950 and a set-mouthed, irascible Samuel Becket of 1951—are already classics.

The Paris pictures include so many classics that it is hard to know where to begin. There is "Bijou of Montmartre," the bedizened old prostitute at a cafe table, looking straight at the viewer with the hard but not inhuman eyes of a survivor. There is the "Female Couple," also at a cafe table, one woman almost as lovely as Ina Claire, the other dressed like a man and looking like a soft and beardless Edward G. Robinson. There is the tough, stocky, bobbed-haired "Streetwalker" waiting on an empty lamplit street.

There is also the heavily lipstick "Girl Playing Snooker," her breasts thrust forward not in seduction but in a kind of aggression matched by her fixed, level stare; the "Two Hoodlums" peering around the corner of a building in a mixture of furtive calculation and threat; the "Group in a Dance Hall," young men and women at a table, one pretty girl smiling, one laughing older man reflected in a mirror, and in the center, a sad young man with laborer's hands dressed up in coat and tie.

The Paris that Brassai depicts is the Paris a perceptive foreigner can see. It contains pictures of anonymous but characteristic by-ways as well as the famous monument freshly seen. But the people are all shown in public places where anyone can go. They are not seen among themselves at home as the people of, say, Lartigue's Paris are seen. Brassai's Paris is the great spectacle that Paris offered the foreigner between the wars, the

deadbeat, joyous, bittersweet Paris of those hectic and unhappy years when the world was holding its breath between two catastrophes.

It was not, perhaps, as happy a time even for the expatriate artist as it seems in retrospect. Certainly for Frenchmen it was not happy. Their country, already devastated by World War I, was sliding into the chaos that led to the even darker days of World War II and the Occupation. Yet in Brassai's photographs the pain and the bitterness exist only as a delicate flavor. He was a foreigner, and he approached Paris as a country boy approaches the city, fascinated by the lights, the monuments, the unfamiliar by-ways and the varied spectacle of her public life, not fully aware, perhaps, of what they concealed and what lay ahead. For a journalist this ignorance might be fatal, but Brassai was also a poet, and out of his cafe-table observations he created the last great poem to the poor but picturesque Paris that is slowly vanishing.

