

# Brassai Uncovers The Hidden Life

By A. D. COLEMAN

PICASSO has not often been noted for being incorrect in his evaluations of other artists, but he surely erred when, during the second World War, he said to Brassai, "Why did you give up drawing for the camera? You have a gold mine and instead you exploit a silver mine." For, interesting and effective though much of Brassai's work in other media may be—he has created films, drawings, sculptures and poems—his major creative contribution is unquestionably his photography. His photographs, unlike any of his other creations, are entirely and unmistakably his own; taken all together, his silver images form one of the most rewarding bodies of work in 20th-century photography.

Considering his stature—he is universally acknowledged to be among the masters, though he is too dynamic to be easily fitted into any niche—he receives scant attention here in this country. His three classic books ("Paris de Nuit," "Graffiti" and "Fiesta in Seville") are all out of print, leaving only the too-brief but valuable Museum of Modern Art monograph to turn to and exhibits of his prints come so few and far between that the current one at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, 825 Madison Avenue (through Oct. 14), has quite a gap to fill.

It succeeds admirably at that task and should not be missed, especially by collectors, for whom it represents an even rarer opportunity to purchase prints. (Those in the show are new prints, not made by the photographer but approved by him, signed, and numbered in editions of 30.) Almost 60 prints are included, spanning the years between 1932 and 1958. Among them are street scenes, portraits of other artists—Picasso, of course, and also Leger, Giacometti, Matisse, Braque—nighttime Paris vistas, documents of cabaret life, and one lone example of Brassai's "found" graffiti.

The benchmark of Brassai's vision is its joyful Gallic



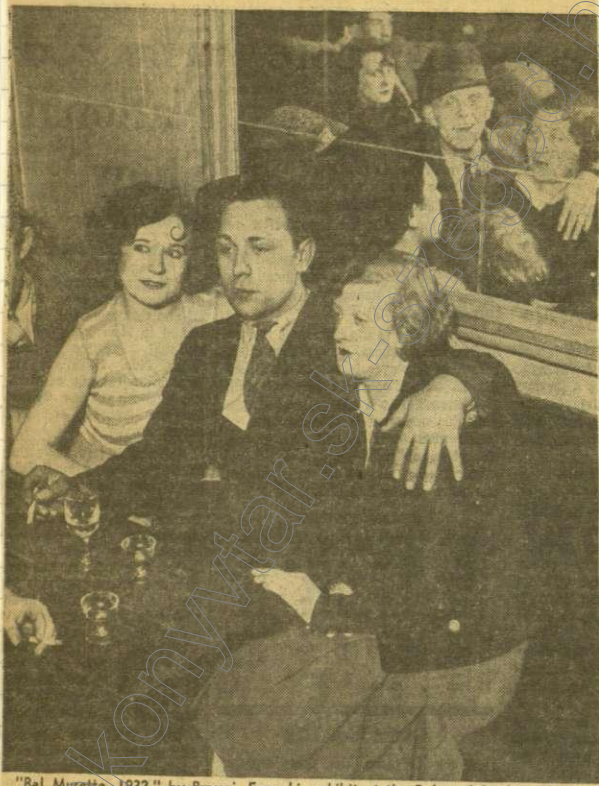
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blend of earthiness and sophistication, a robust tenderness which enables the photographer to appreciate not only the isolated visual coherence of an event but the human emotions it contains as well. If, occasionally, his images lack what used to be called "refinement," they thereby avoid any traces of preciousity and/or blandness; they have, in their own way, that fat man's gracefulness which Zero Mostel conjures up so brilliantly.

Brassai's odd combination of bluntness and tact introduces the viewer into any milieu, be it atelier or cabaret, with a minimum of cultural shock. And, by camouflaging his own artfulness, Brassai consistently directs us away from himself, propelling us through the viewfinder into the visual-emotional context of his world.

Thus it is only in retrospect that one realizes how much he loves mirrors and how well he uses their reflections to add levels of perception in mounting surprise. It is only as an afterthought that one recognizes the powerful sense of presence in his portraits, for the viewer's contact with each subject is so immediate and so strong that the image as such is forgotten. One can, of course, analyze these images and point out such stylistic factors as the Cubist influence apparent in "Escalier de Montmartre," but all that is truly beside the point. In speaking about photographing the facades of houses, Brassai once said something which I think is applicable to all his work: "... I should be able, by photographing it in a certain way, to render completely tangible the hidden life behind."

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"Bal Musette, 1932," by Brassai. From his exhibit at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery.  
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