—Star-News photographer Francis Rou

Brassaï: Like his camera, he has seen everything.

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# The Eye of Paris

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Brassai moved among his photographs, tapping his cane on the gallery floor, telling stories about each one. They are moments from his life, laid out before him in black and white as few men of 74 can see them, frozen forever in the eyes of the bargirls of Paris and the artists and dogs he has known.

He is perhaps the best-known living photographer of Paris, and he is now in Washington to open his own exhibition of his work at the Corcoran Gallery tomorrow. But one morning this week his pictures were leaning against the walls of the Lunn Gallery in Georgetown, and Brassai was shuffling through them, showing them off like the pages of a scrapbook.

He is a short man but quick, proud and warm, with the enormous damp eyes of a child who doesn't want to miss anything. Like his camera, he has seen everything, and has been moved but not shaken by it.

**HE CAME TO PARIS** from Transylvania at 24, bearing the name Gyula Halasz. He had studied painting, but he found it hard to paint in Paris in the 20s. "Life was too beautiful to stay inside alone and work," he said. "I preferred to be in the cafes, to talk with my friends, to watch people, and chase women. I especially loved the nights in Paris. I loved the fog. I loved the shadows. They spoke to me and I needed a way to keep them.

"A woman lent me a camera and I began to photograph the night. See this picture of the Pont Neuf, and this man standing alone by a kiosk. The night is a personage."

He heard of a man who wanted to publish a book of photos of night-time Paris. "Of course," he said, "I was the only one with such photos." The book was published and Halasz took the name Brassai, after his hometown of Brasso.

It was then that he began his "underground" phase — the dark and shadowy portraits of streetwalkers, lesbians, bored and loving couples. "Imagine being held in the arms of that enormous woman!" he said of "Streetwalker, 1932." Pointing to "Bijou of Montmartre," he said: "I found this woman in a cafe. She was a relic of a past aristocracy. Once she had houses and servants; now she has only her jewels.

"Many women," he said, "wore these curious curls stuck to their foreheads. They were called 'accroche-coeurs' because they hooked the hearts of men. There are more underground pictures, but I will not show them for awhile because some of the people in them are still alive."

**IN 1932, BRASSAI** met Picasso and the two began a lifetime friendship that also served to introduce Brassai into the artistic circles of Paris. One picture of Picasso was used in Life magazine, another shows Picasso in 1932 with a certain amount of hair and a certain madness in his eyes. "Notice the stains on his suit?" asked Brassai. "He always wore gray suits because he said he worked in dust, and with dust and it never showed up."

There is a portrait of the playwright Jean Genet with a prison haircut and a monogrammed shirt. "He was always

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in and out of prison for stealing," Brassai said. "When he was out he was a real snob and wore monogrammed shirts. When he saw this picture, he said he didn't know he was so good-looking."

There are portraits of his friends Matisse, Braque, Dali, Giacometti, and Pierre Bonnard. There is a picture of Henry Miller in a trench coat and a slouch hat, peering around a doorway.

"He came to wake me up like that one day, and I said, 'Wait until I get my camera.' He was poor then. He slept here and there."

**AMONG** Brassai's humbler subjects is a dog peering out of a concierge's window, with a sign above him indicating that the police department is upstairs. "I wanted to talk to the concierge, but the dog came to the window instead. Years later the picture was shown on a television program about me. I got a letter from the concierge, whom I hadn't met, saying how the show was a beautiful, sad experience for her. Her dog had died three years before and was very much missed."

There is a picture of an old man dressed as a shepherd at a Christmas mass in Provence, holding a lamb as an offering. "The man was old, the lamb was crying. It was a poem."

Brassai still lives in Paris, with his wife, and keeps a house between Nice and Monte Carlo for the summers. They have no children. He doesn't take pictures much anymore, preferring to do sculpture at this point in his life.

"I write, too," he said. "I wrote a book called 'Conversations with Picasso' about the artist as a person, as a man. In America, they changed the title to 'Picasso and Co.' I didn't like that."

**THOUGH** those golden days of Paris are gone, Brassai views their passing without regret. For him, the parade goes on; the big Brassai eyes are still easily captured by the people of the "underground" and their monuments.

Driving through Washington one night this week his fancy was captured by the Gayety Theater on 9th St. NW. It was being torn down. He insisted that his friend Harry Lunn take him back early the next morning to photograph what was left.

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"La Fille aux Billard" (circa 1932)