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ART VIEW

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Brassai—The High Art of Photographing Low-Life in Paris

There is a Paris most of us have never seen but that remains nevertheless fixed in our minds more vividly than many things we have observed at first-hand—an image compounded of poetry and old movies, of certain novels and paintings and what, in that distant era before pornography entered the college curriculum as a course of solemn study, were known as dirty postcards. "It is not a city, it is a world," Corbière declared in his poem "Paris Nocturne"—this Parisian world, or underworld, now as mythical as the Styx to which Corbière compared it, that we glimpse in Baudelaire, and Maupassant, in Degas's brothel scenes and the young Picasso, and in those movies in which a malevolent and unjust fate is about to overtake Jean Gabin or Michel Simon in seedy circumstances.

It is a world bounded by the illicit and the nocturnal—tawdry, erotic, criminal, gay, desperate, lonely and often ugly, the obverse in every respect but one of the bourgeois ideal of respectability: for it is, in its way, also a hard-hearted world of business.

The great photographer of this lost world was Brassaï, who inhabited it with an unmistakable relish and yet observed it with that special combination of detachment, excitement and empathy we feel in an artist who has discovered his true métier. His pictures of Parisian nightlife in the 1930's—now the subject of a large exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery, 40 West 57th Street (through Oct. 16)—are remarkable in many respects, but most remarkable, perhaps, for their complete lack of anything resembling sentimentality. Often humorous, frequently stark, always shrouded in the atmosphere of the surreptitious, Brassaï's pictures of whores and hoodlums and homosexual hangouts, of bars and cabarets and opium dens and street life, are never merely picturesque. Shunning all temptations to romance, they give us an unforgettable account of the mundane

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routine in lives given over to low-life vocations and pastimes. In some of these pictures, indeed, especially the brothel scenes, the only discernible emotion is that of boredom, and beauty is remarkable for its scarcity. Yet this is clearly a world that Brassaï adored, and it is in this curious mixture of love and benign detachment that these pictures have their peculiar power.

Brassaï, born Gyula Halász in the town of Brassov, in Transylvania, in 1899—he adopted the name of his birthplace as his own—had originally intended to become a painter. Even before going to Paris in 1924, he had known Kandinsky in Berlin and frequented that city's avant-garde milieu. In Paris he worked as a journalist, writing for Hungarian papers, and it was not until 1929, when he was 30, that he took up photography at the suggestion of his friend, André Kertész.

He was in his 30's, then, when he entered upon his special mission as a photographer, gaining access to a society suspicious of outsiders, and becoming something of an insider himself. In the book that Brassaï has now written about this period—"The Secret Paris of the 30's" (Pantheon, $17.95), published to coincide with the exhibition—he draws a wonderful comparison between this underworld and the more glamorous and respectable *beau monde*. "There are many similarities between what we call the 'underworld' and the 'fashionable world,'" he writes. "Entry into both these exclusive societies, made up primarily of the idle, is not easy. Each has its regulations, its customs and usages, its moral code, its affairs of honor, whether its members settle them with sabers, pistols, or knives. If entry into 'high society' requires family crests, titles, diplomas from the best schools, wealth and fame, entry into the underworld requires widespread criminal activity, a police record full of arrests, and, of course, an illegitimate background, suspicious forebears, closely supervised training. Even the languages are similar, both tainted with snobbery. Just as the polished speech of men of the world is, at least in France, full of Anglicisms and fashionable catch phrases, so criminal slang, continually changing, is full of words newly coined from the streets of Paris. I even noticed that in the underworld some of the guys, out of pure snobbery, spoke a slang so hermetic that even their pals couldn't understand them. They had to translate their ideas into French to make themselves understood."

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Brassaï goes on, in this passage, to talk about the inventiveness of this underworld language. "There is a plethora of synonyms for every kind of person, idea, or thing that touches the underworld. I've counted some of them: 20 expressions for the verb 'to love,' some 30 for 'to kiss,' a dozen for sexual arousal, the same number for ejaculation, more than 70 words—a record!—for the act of love. There are 50 words for the male sex organ, 15 for the testicles, 20 or so for the female organ," and so on. Brassaï, as anyone can see, is a wonderful writer, and his book, though well illustrated with his photographs of the period, is something more than the usual appendage to an exhibition. It is a beautiful memoir of the age and the society that is documented in the pictures, written with humor, precision and the narrative ease of a good novel.

Of course the writer, now in his 70's, is not quite the same man who took these photographs 40 years ago. The author of "The Secret Paris of the 30's," though no senti-

mentalist, takes a somewhat mellower view of his old milieu than the one we find in the pictures. But we are given an important clue to the pictures, I think, in the passage I have quoted above, for just as Brassaï had the wit to grasp the special snobbery of the underworld and to catalogue the linguistic inventions that gave it expression, he had an eye for the multitude of types that inhabited this world. He set up his camera in some curious places—the scene of a prostitute sitting on a bidet while her customer gets himself dressed is not everyone's idea of a great subject for a photograph—but each of his pictures distinguishes something very individual, and together they give us a view of the human comedy not to be seen in anything like the same concreteness and variety elsewhere. Brassaï, we soon realize, is cataloguing his whores and their clients with the same patience and curiosity he brought to noting down 70 new words for the act of love.

"To the present generation," Brassaï writes, "some of these pictures seem as exotic as if they were of pygmies or Zulus. Even more so." And so, indeed, they do. But no more so than Brassaï's own easy conscience about intruding his camera on this "forbidden" world. "Rightly or wrongly, I felt at the time," he writes, "that this underground world represented Paris at its least cosmopolitan, at its most alive, its most authentic, that in these colorful faces of its underworld there had been preserved, from age to age, almost without alteration, the folklore of its most remote past."

So it was in Paris, in the third decade of the 20th century, that the photographer re-enacted that quest for the primitive that had for so long been one of the abiding imperatives of modern culture. But the camera, I think, gives us something a little different: the chronicle of a "folk" still very much tethered to the society of the time. Forty years later, Brassaï the writer sounds at times like a wise and retired ethnographer, musing over tribal myths and customs, whereas Brassaï the photographer was always the disabused realist—wise, above all, about the workaday world.

"Brassaï: The Secret Paris of the 30's" at the Marlborough Gallery, 40 West 57th Street, through Oct. 16. Open 10 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. Tuesday through Saturday; closed Sunday and Monday.

"Brassaï: The Secret Paris of the 30's" published by Pantheon ($17.95).
