

The 'Eye of Paris' Looks Inward

By MICHAEL PEPIATT

PARIS

Braissai has just turned 77, but a stroll with him around his beloved Montparnasse quickly reveals that his visual sense is as sharp as ever. He frequently urges you to savor some chance composition—such as a hand (dark, male and hairy) abandoned on a female bottom—with the obsessive glee of a man whose eyes have not stopped photographing the streets of Paris for half a century. His sense of fun and evident enjoyment of life make him astonishingly young. Yet he becomes above all someone who has lived through and recorded an epoch that already belongs to history.

Brassai arrived in Paris in 1924, when he himself was 24 years old. He had left his native Transylvania (then Hungarian, now part of Rumania) with little more than a romantically artistic mien and a desire to become a painter in the great center of the arts. He plumped right away for Montparnasse and was quickly caught up

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in its effervescence of new ideas and attitudes. He was also lured away from painting. "With so many fascinating people around, from all over the world, how could I stay shut up alone in a studio with a canvas?" he puts it to you with his gregarious smile.

So he went out, and generally stayed out, moving from one cafe to the next, and meeting everyone—the new writers and painters, their girl friends and such legendary Montparnasse ladies as Kiki and Lily, the opium addicts. "I used to end up around four or five in the morning with coffee and croissants and the new day's paper," Brassai recalls with relish. "Then I'd go back to my little hotel, and when I woke up and it was dark outside I never knew whether it was the same night or the next one."

Although Brassai had actively disliked the idea of photography, he came to see it as the ideal medium for recording the spectacle of Paris, picturesque and poignant by turns, which riveted him each night. "I wanted to record the life in the streets" around

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me, as Rembrandt and Goya, Daumier and Degas—I'm not making comparisons!—had done. And I realized that photography was truly an art of our time and the best way of capturing all the fleeting impressions which excited me."

From an observant *noctambule*, he turned into an eye, the "eye of Paris," as his friend Henry Miller was to call him. He seems, what's more, to have made himself invisible, so as to creep up on the seamier side of Paris and catch it unawares. Pimps, prostitutes, drug addicts, thieves, homosexuals, lesbians, tramps—every kind of social outcast—became his camera's favorite prey.

Brassaï's natural affability plus whatever he could give in tips helped him get near these frequently thin-skinned and dangerous birds of the night. "In some of the bars where the pimps and gangsters hung out, you could never be sure when someone might turn nasty," he explains. Several times he had his camera smashed, and

once one of his subjects came at him with a knife swearing he would kill him (fortunately, he was persuaded to settle for cash). "I was very lucky to have got away with some of those shots. The only thing I regret, in fact, is not having photographed the really classy brothels of the day. You wouldn't believe how lavish and kinky they were!

"I loved that whole side of Paris at night—it was part of the reality of the city. I never went after subjects just because they were extraordinary. What interested me was their reality—even, in a way, their banality. That's why I never fully agreed with the Surrealists, who adored everything exotic and strange. I've always loved the ordinary, the everyday—because I think that, if you really look at them, they are so often the most astonishing things of all."

When he was not prowling around the red-light districts or recording an effect of mist and street lamps over the Seine, Brassaï was photographing his writer and artist friends. Looking at

mine!" More recently, he turned his hand to carving, and he has transformed large pebbles picked up on the beach into voluptuous female forms. "I hate specialization," he says, handing you one of the well-rounded stones to feel. "It seems ridiculous to me to do just this or just that if you feel you can do several things. What interests me most of all at the moment is writing. I've written several books over the years—the last two were 'Picasso and Co' and 'Henry Miller Lifestyle'—and I feel I have several more to write.

them today, one realizes with a start that one's mental picture of people like Picasso and Miller, Genet and Giacometti is sometimes based on a Brassaï portrait. As with his less well-known subjects, Brassaï has caught their most naked, everyday and undisguised selves.

Friendship has undoubtedly been one of Brassaï's talents in life. Of the thousands of volumes that line the apartment behind Montparnasse where he has lived since 1935, he visibly values above all the couple that contain scores of notes and letters to him from virtually all the major artistic figures of the time. He himself still bubbles with enthusiasm and laughter when he comes on a quip from Dalí or a polished apology from Malraux.

His other talents, which include drawing, sculpture and writing, are no less evident. "When Picasso saw my drawings, he said to me, 'You should draw rather than photograph. You've got a gold mine in your drawings and yet you go on working a salt

"I still adore photography, and I've got masses of unpublished photos. Some of them aren't even developed! I do my own developing still, you see, and at the moment, with this new show in New York and the very latest book, 'The Secret Paris of the Thirties,' that's coming out with it, there's just too much else to do. But I'll get around to it, I can wait. I think photographers don't wait long enough nowadays. They publish too much too soon, and their bad photos spoil the good ones. Time makes a selection for you. The nice thing about having lived as long as I have is that you can see much more clearly what's good — which photos you can show and which ones you'd do better to throw away."

