

Photos by Brassai

By Sam Tamashiro

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Picasso wanted to see more photographs, that was why he had come. I began bringing them out to show him, and he asked for still more and still more, seeming avid to know them all. I came at last to the last series I had done of the Paris underworld in 1923-33; pimps and their girls, petty gangsters, perverts, filthy dens of night spots, and their entertainers, rooms for opium smokers, bordellos.

Brassai in "Conversations With Picasso"

Go see the Brassai show at the Lunn Gallery at 3243 P St. NW in Georgetown. First of all, you may see some of the same photographs that fascinated Picasso. The 40 prints on display will also give you a good sampling of Brassai's work, with the exception of his graffiti series, which is not in the show.

Secondly, the Brassai exhibit highlights a new trend: people are buying photographs for pleasure and for "investment" in greater numbers. This was not true five years ago. The Brassai prints are selling from \$175 to \$250 each while the Man Ray photographs go from \$900 to \$1,500 each. Also showing at the Lunn Gallery are photos by Ansel Adams (\$200-\$250) and Walker Evans (\$100).

Galleries report that prints by the masters of photography are getting scarcer and scarcer. The Wall Street Journal reported a year ago that the Parke-Bernet noted an upsurge of interest in photo auctions, and that the Witkin Gallery in New York City grossed \$100,000 in its first 18 months of selling photographs by Louis Hine, Margaret Bourke-White and others. Lee D. Witkin, owner and founder, says that the prejudice against collecting photos is changing, particularly among the under-25 group that constitutes 70 per cent of its customers.

"Kids today don't want to be a great artist or writer," he says, "they want to be a great photographer."

The Lunn Gallery, Inc. started selling photographs 18 months ago. "We deal primarily in fine prints such as this \$4,000 print by Matisse on the floor here," says Harry H. Lunn, Jr. "but we plan eight exhibits per year and two of them will be photographic shows. We hope to have a Cartier-Bresson show in the near future. We may even publish a book."

Brassai, whose real name was Gyula Halasz, was born in Brosov, a Transylvanian town on the borders of Hungary and Romania. The pseudonym "Brassai" means "from Brasov."

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When Henry Miller first met the Transylvanian in 1930, Brassai had not yet established himself as a photographer. He was a painter living in Paris and writing for Hungarian newspapers.

"His eyes were unusual," Miller recalls, "not only in a physical sense for the impression they conveyed of an uncanny ability to take in everything at once. There was also a sly humor, which was at once critical and kindly."

Visual examples of this "malicious benevolence" of Brassai is present in his "Girl playing snooker in Montmartre" the overweight streetwalker photographed by the light from street lamps, and the exhausted passenger on the Rome-Naples express sound asleep with mouth wide open and probably snoring loudly.

Brassai's dazzling subjects were a heady mix of Picasso, Matisse, Sartre, Cocteau, Braque, Dali, Breton, Malaux, Maillol, Kertez, Genet, Man Ray, Max Jacob and scores of others in artistic experimentation.

When Picasso saw a portfolio of Brassai's drawings, his verdict: "You're a born draftsman. Why don't you go on with it? You own a gold mine, and you're exploiting a salt mine . . . And later, at every one of our meetings, the first question he put to me was always: 'And the drawing? Have you gone back to your drawing?'"





Brassaï's "Girl playing snooker in Montmartre," photographed in 1933.

Thanks to the stubbornness of the "Eye of Paris" — as Henry Miller called him and who later put him in "Tropic of Cancer" as the photographer who shows Miller Paris by night — we have memorable photographs of the artists at work and play.

We see Picasso clowning as a "professional" painter "painting" a huge figure of a reclining nude which he had just purchased from an antique dealer. Jean Marais, "the model," is stretched out on the floor in front of the huge painting in an utterly impossible reclining position, defying gravity.

In the next photograph Matisse, in white smock, looks stern, sullen and clinical as he scrutinizes a female nude model, who stands facing the camera a la Pent-

house magazine. "I'm always taken for a sad, sullen man," Matisse once confided to Brassai. "The truth is that I'm very happy by nature, even if my exterior gives a different impression."

Jean Genet, who must have just turned 40, stands looking you right in the eye seeking a response from you. He is casually neat with sleeves rolled up almost to his armpits, the end of his long belt tucked in, and sporting an understated monogram on his lower left shirt front.

There are night scenes of lovers eyeing each other of the Pont Neuf in which the time exposure was 10 minutes at F9 on his Voigtlander Bergheil camera on an unpredictable tripod that Lawrence Durrell says "kept kneeling down like a camel" during a fairly recent por-

trait session; an exquisite shot of a cat creating intricate lines, shapes, spaces and tensions; a breath-taking view of Paris in which a section of the Chartres is silhouetted on the left side of a vertical composition like the side of a sheer precipice from which a gargyle looks down on steaming and smoking chimneys and rooftops of houses squeezed together in a vast cauldron.

How do you explain the eternal vitality of Brassai or Kertez? "We should try," says Brassai, "to renew ourselves constantly by leaving our 'subjects' and even photography itself from time to time in order that we may come back to them with reawakened zest, with the virginal eye that is the most precious thing we can possess."

