

Henri Cartier-Bresson dies—a pioneer of modern photography

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“The intensive use of the photographs by the mass media lays ever fresh responsibilities upon the photographer.... We must take greater care than ever not to allow ourselves to be separated from the real world and humanity.”

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, who died in Paris on August 3, aged 95, penned these perceptive lines in a 1968 compilation of his work. While he is rightly regarded as one of the most important photographers of the twentieth century, the cultural and political source of his art is often ignored.

Cartier-Bresson was born August 22, 1908, in Chanteloup, just outside Paris, to a wealthy textile manufacturing family. As he came of age, the young man displayed little interest in the family business but was attracted to art and literature. With the encouragement and financial support of his father, he studied painting under Jean Cottenet, a family friend, and with portraitist Emile Blanche, who introduced him to Parisian artistic and literary circles.

After leaving high school in 1927, Cartier-Bresson worked for a year in the studio of Andre Lohte, an early Cubist painter and sculptor, and assimilated the movement’s elementary conceptions. He read widely—Dostoevsky, Thomas Hardy, Arthur Rimbaud, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Frederick Engels and Karl Marx—and attended Cambridge University from 1928-29 to study English literature.

The most significant influence on Cartier-Bresson was André Breton and the Surrealist movement. Breton had been inspired by the Russian Revolution and was a member of the French Communist Party in the 1920s before breaking with the organisation over the question of Stalinist bureaucracy. In the mid-1930s he supported the development of the Fourth International and collaborated for a period with Leon Trotsky. Breton’s artistic vision was anchored in socialist principles and a firm conviction that genuinely creative art had to challenge all forms of bourgeois authority.

These revolutionary conceptions had a powerful impact on Cartier-Bresson and his circle of friends, who were attracted as teenagers to the Surrealists and circulated in the periphery of the early movement. As he later told one interviewer: “I was marked, not by Surrealist painting, which I found too literal, but by the conceptions of Breton, [which] satisfied me a great deal: the role of spontaneous expression and of intuition and, above all the attitude of revolt ... in art, but also in life.”

Cartier-Bresson wanted to “paint and to change the world,” which, he said, “counted for more than everything in my life.” But the young man’s artistic efforts were not all that successful. Although he possessed a camera, it was not until after he returned from a year in West Africa in 1931, where he had worked as a game hunter, that he began to realise photography’s artistic potential.

No doubt the game-hunting had sharpened his reflexes, but his development as a serious photographer occurred against the background of enormous social and political upheavals: the 1930s Depression, the rise of fascism, and, most importantly, the widespread belief amongst millions

of ordinary people that human progress could only be developed in struggle against the old cultural values and political institutions.

At the same time, technical advances, in particular the development of the lightweight Leica camera and faster film, freed Cartier-Bresson and other photographers from the restrictions of large format tripod-bound cameras, and encouraged improvisation. While André Kertész, Robert Capa and others had used the new cameras to great effect, Cartier-Bresson introduced a unique artistic sensibility.

Over the next few years, Cartier-Bresson became a trailblazer, photographing the homeless and the poor in France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Spain. As he later remarked: “I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, determined to trap life—to preserve life in the act of living. Above all, I craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of a single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling before my eyes.”

Cartier-Bresson’s early work, the most powerful in his long career, is extraordinary and remains undiminished by the passage of time. The Spanish photographs—children in ruined buildings, poverty-stricken peasants, demonstrating workers, Republican fighters—and shots from Eastern Europe, particularly those from the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, are outstanding. Possessed by a brilliant sense of timing and often wry humour, his images are provocative and unexpected; always strikingly beautiful and deeply humane.

He rejected staged photographs, artificial lighting, including flashes, or anything that might place a barrier between him and his subject. A master of his camera, Cartier-Bresson also refused to allow any of his images to be cropped—the whole shot had to be presented in totality or not at all.

As one of his many helpful comments declared: “Thinking should be done before and after, not during photographing. Success depends on the extent of one’s general culture, one’s set of values, one’s clarity of mind, one’s vivacity. The thing to be feared most is the artificially contrived, the contrary to life.”

It is perhaps wrong to highlight any single image from this period, but for those unfamiliar with Cartier-Bresson’s photography, “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris” (1932) and “Madrid” (1933) are important examples.

“Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris” captures a man, mid-flight, vainly attempting to jump over a gigantic puddle. His shadow and other items in the puddle, including a ladder, form an arresting geometric pattern. The frozen leap is set against the background of an iron railroad fence and a poster of a dancer.

“Madrid” (1933) is a shot of 11 children playing in a small square. The children, who are in a diverse range of positions and emotional expressions, are framed against a wall peppered with different-sized windows. And, mid-shot, a pot-bellied middle-aged man walks across the square.

Critically acclaimed exhibitions in the US and Spain generated new projects for Cartier-Bresson. He travelled to Mexico in 1934, making

friends with left-wing Mexican photographers and intellectuals, and American writer Langston Hughes. Cartier-Bresson's photographs during this 12-month visit are remarkable. His shots of Mexican prostitutes are particularly memorable.

From Mexico, Cartier-Bresson moved to New York City and studied cinematography with photographer Paul Strand. He was infatuated with the city and spent hours in jazz clubs and discussing politics with Hughes and other members of the Harlem Renaissance. As his close friend and composer Nicolas Nabokov recalled: "We had long talks [in Harlem] mostly on morals and politics. But to Cartier-Bresson the Communist movement was the bearer of history, of mankind's future—especially in those years, when Hitler had saddled Germany and when a civil war was about to explode in Spain."

In late 1935 Cartier-Bresson returned to France, became an assistant to film director Jean Renoir and moved closer to the French Communist Party (PCF). But the PCF was championing an electoral alliance with so-called progressive elements of the capitalist class—the bourgeois Radical Party and the Socialist Party—who were defined as a "lesser evil" to the fascist forces.

This perspective, known as the Popular Front, was adopted by all sections of the Stalinist-controlled Communist International, with dire consequences in Spain and France. It politically paralysed the working class and in Spain ensured the victory of Franco's fascist forces. In France, when the proletariat began mass strike action in June and July 1936 following the Popular Front's electoral victory, the PCF dissipated the movement, declaring that it was undermining the new government. This created tremendous confusion and strengthened the extreme right-wing forces.

Against the perspectives of the Stalinists, Leon Trotsky insisted that the roots of fascism lay in capitalist society and that only the mobilisation of the working class on its own independent banner—a revolutionary socialist program—could stop fascism.

In the lead-up to the May 1936 elections, which brought the Popular Front to power, Cartier-Bresson produced *La Vie est à nous* (Life Is Ours), a PCF election film. He followed this with the film *Victoire de la vie* (Return to Life), on the Spanish Civil War, and was a second assistant director on Renoir's *Une Partie de campagne* (A Day in the Country) and involved in his *La Règle du jeu* (The Rules of the Game). He also worked as a photographer for the PCF newspaper, *Ce Soir*.

Whether Cartier-Bresson understood the full significance of the PCF's betrayals is not clear, but his experiences with the organisation stunted his political development, and this became a factor limiting his later artistic work.

When war broke out, Cartier-Bresson joined the French army, but was captured in June 1940 and transported to a German prison camp. He escaped on his third attempt and made his way back to France, where he became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance.

Unable to work openly, he took portraits, including famous shots of artists George Braque, Henri Matisse, Pierre Bonnard, and recorded the liberation of Paris in 1945. One of his most iconic photos was of an angry confrontation between a Resistance fighter and Nazi collaborator. He also directed *Le Retour* (The Return), a documentary about returning French POWs.

Cartier-Bresson had been so deeply embedded in the anti-fascist resistance that the Museum of Modern Art in New York thought he had been killed in the war and began organising a "posthumous" retrospective of his work.

The exhibition was finally held in 1947 with Cartier-Bresson in attendance, the same year that he co-founded Magnum Photos with Robert Capa, David "Chim" Seymour and George Rodgers. The organisation, which grew to become the most respected international photo agency in history, ensured that members maintained ownership and copyright

control of their photographic negatives and pictures, a radical conception at that time.

Cartier-Bresson decided, after his 1947 exhibition and on the advice of Capa, to concentrate on the photojournalistic, rather than the "abstract" side of his work and was assigned to Asia, where he lived from 1948 to 1950. He covered the partition of India, Ghandi's funeral, the victory of the Indonesian nationalist movement, Mao Zedong's victory over Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang and other key events.

In 1952, along with the growing success of his photojournalism, Cartier-Bresson published *The Decisive Moment* (first published in French as *Images à la sauvette*), a collection of photographs and a short but seminal essay on his artistic vision.

"Photography," he explained, was an "instantaneous operation, both sensory and intellectual—an expression of the world in visual terms, and also a perpetual quest and interrogation. It is at one and the same time the recognition of a fact in a fraction of a second and the rigorous arrangement of the forms visually perceived which give to that fact expression and significance.... The chief requirement is to be fully involved in this reality which we delineate in the viewfinder."

These insightful remarks not only summarised the intellectual mechanics of modern photography but also demonstrated that photography had arrived as an instrument of aesthetic expression. Cartier-Bresson's conceptions became a credo for countless photographers around the world. In 1954 he became the first photographer to have an exhibition at the Louvre museum in Paris.

Over the next two-and-a-half decades Cartier-Bresson worked in several other countries—he was one of the first western photographers allowed to photograph in post-WWII Soviet Union. He published numerous books and organised large-scale exhibitions of his work that travelled extensively throughout the world during the 1960s and 70s. But even as his popularity grew and he reached wider audiences, subtle changes began to occur in his work.

Lacking a scientific socialist outlook, and therefore unable to understand the deeper social processes at work, Cartier-Bresson began to accommodate himself to the political confusions and difficulties created by the post-war boom. While his subject matter always remained the working class and the most oppressed layers, a sense of resignation crept into his photography. He turned to eastern mysticism, and the sharp social commentary that infused his pre-war work began to diminish.

In 1931, after he had returned from Africa, Cartier-Bresson decided to become a photographer because he "felt obliged to testify with a quicker instrument than a brush to the scars of world." During the early 1970s, however, this determination had waned and a certain creative exhaustion set in. By 1975 he decided to put down his camera and return to sketching and painting. As he later remarked: "All I care about these days is painting—photography has never been more than a way into painting, a sort of instant drawing."

Notwithstanding the weaknesses in his later work, Cartier-Bresson's contribution to contemporary photography is indelible. A quiet man who deeply valued his private life, he continued organising exhibitions right up until his death.

In 1998, to coincide with his 90th birthday, Cartier-Bresson held two exhibitions in London and last year a major retrospective at the French National Library. He also established the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, to ensure that his work, and that of other great photographers, would be properly preserved and accessible to wide audiences. The foundation contains his entire personal collection.

Much has been written about the advent of digital photography and the creative possibilities and challenges it poses in the twenty-first century. But a vital starting point for any advance in contemporary creative photography requires a detailed study of Cartier-Bresson's early work and its cultural and political roots. Such an examination will reveal that his

greatest photos were connected to his deep-going commitment to the establishment of a genuinely humane and enlightened society.



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