

Cartier-Bresson 1908 - 2004

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1908 – Born 22 August in Chanteloup (Seine et Marne) son of prosperous cotton manufacturer (Cartier-Bresson thread was a staple of French sewing and knitting in the 1920's and 30's). Brought up on the rue de Lisbonne near Parc Monceau in Paris. Studies at Ecole Fénelon and the Lycée Condorcet. Taught English by governess and as child and youth frequents museums, exhibitions and concerts. Spends hours drawing encouraged by his uncle the academic painter Louis Cartier-Bresson and by family friend, the portraitist Jacques-Emile Blanche.

1926 – After several failed attempts at the Baccalauréat enrolls in the art academy of former Cubist painter André Lhote where he will study until 1928. At this time he comes into contact with the Surrealist group and befriends the young dandy and poet René Crevel.

1928-29 - Studies briefly at Magdalen College, Oxford.

1929 – Stationed for his military service at Bourget airport north of Paris. Befriends American neighbors in Ermenonville Harry and Caresse Crosby, wealthy Americans and founders of the famous Black Sun Press (publishers of Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Hemingway, Pound). Meets Max Ernst, Salvador Dali and Julien Levy future Surrealist art dealer in New York. Levy introduces him to modern photography, which he is busily buying at the time: Atget, Man Ray, Kertész, Eli Lotar, Mohloly-Nage, Lee Miller. He is encouraged to experiment in photography by another couple of American friends and amateur photographers Gretchen and Peter Powell. His first photos are geometric and architectural and conform to the constructivist aesthetic of the period.

1930 – Travels to Africa, will settle for a year in the Ivory Coast doing various odd jobs. He hunts and takes photos.

1931 – Returns to France. Sees a photograph by Marin Muckacsi of 3 African boys running into the waves of lake Tanganyika in a review and is balled over by its energy and spontaneity contained by a sophisticated, structured composition. This experience is the catalyst that will convince him to become a photographer. He destroys many of his paintings and declares his new vocation to his father. Travels through central and Eastern Europe taking photos.

1932 – Buys his first Leica, a light, discreet German camera with a 50mm aperture (the closest to human vision) which will become his fetish instrument for capturing the “decisive moment” without being noticed.

1933 – Sets off for Italy in 2nd hand Buick with Surrealist friends Pieyre de Mandiargues and Leonor Fini. Continues through the south of France to Spain. His first one-man show opens at the Julien Levy gallery in New York. His spontaneous, sometimes, unfocussed photography stands out among the perfectly controlled specimens by the Americans Steichen, Stieglitz and Sheeler.

1934 – Leaves for Latin America. After a short stop in Havana will reach Mexico. Settles in popular neighborhood of La Candelaria de los Patos in Mexico City. Makes a meager living by photographing for local newspapers. Befriends the Mexican photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo. Exhibits in Club Ateneo in Madrid.

1935 – Leaves for New York. Show with Alvarez Bravo in Mexico City, 2nd show at Julien Levy's in New York, in group

show at Galerie de la Pléiade in Paris. Publishes in all the great illustrated magazines of the period: Vu, Voilà,

Regards, Ce soir and art reviews, Verve, Arts et métiers graphiques. In New York he will become involved with movie making and works for documentary maker Paul Strand in the left wing Nykino movement.

1936 – Back in Paris he will work for the great filmmaker Jean Renoir on the Communist propaganda film La Vie est à nous and later on Partie de campagne and la Règle du jeu (1939).

1937 – Marries Javanese dancer Ratna Mohini. Offered position as salaried journalist by Communist Surrealist poet

Louis Aragon at Ce soir newspaper. Though a sympathizer like many artists and writers of the 1930's, he never

actually

joined the party.

1939 ‐ At the outbreak of war C-B is called up to serve in cinema unit of 3rd French Army.

1940 ‐ Made war prisoner in the Vosges and removed for next 3 years to Ludwigsburg in Germany where he works as forced laborer.

1943 ‐ Escapes camp (third attempt) and returns to Paris where he assumes false identity and works again as photographer.

1944 ‐ Photographs ruins of Oradour-sur-Glane, village destroyed by Germans on their retreat and also the Liberation of Paris in August. Follows allied troops into Germany as war correspondent.

1945 ‐ His film, *Le Retour*, documents the return of war prisoners to France.

1947 ‐ Retrospective exhibition at MOMA in New York will seal his international reputation. Travels through USA with young writer John Malcolm Brinnin. During trip meets Faulkner, Flaherty, Henry Miller, F Lloyd Wright and Ernst. Illustrated book project with Brinnin was, however, never realized as the two did not really get on.

Founding with Robert Capa, David Seymour, George Rodger and William Vandivert of the Magnum Photo Agency as a photographers' cooperative to produce, manage and distribute high quality reportage photos for magazines and newspapers. From now on Cartier Bresson will function as a professional photojournalist and reporter rather than an artistic or surrealist photographer. The photographers divide up the world into regions for which they are responsible, C-B choosing Asia. At the end of the year he arrives with his wife in Bombay to cover Indian independence.

1948 ‐ C-B photographs Mahatma Gandhi on the day before his assassination. Stays on to cover the funeral. His images are sold all over the world. Goes on to Indonesia and China where he records the collapse of the nationalist regime under attack from Mao Zedong's Communists.

1949 ‐ His Chinese photos published by a new French magazine, *Paris Match*.

1952 ‐ Publication of his most celebrated book of photos, *Images à la Sauvette* by the art publisher Tériade, with a cover designed by Matisse. The American edition by Simon Schuster is entitled *The Decisive Moment*. Meets

publisher Robert Delpire with whom he will produce another 10 books between 1955 and 2003.

1954 ‐ He is the first Western photographer to be allowed into the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin in 1953. His photos of Soviet daily life will be published by *Paris Match* and *Life*.

1967 ‐ Death of his wife, Ratna Mohini.

1968 -70 ‐ Commissioned to produce a photographic portrait of France by French Reader's Digest, he travels through the country for 20 months. *Vive la France* will turn out to be a disappointment, with poor sequencing, mediocre typography and pompous statements by famous writers. It also took no account of the momentous changes brought on by the rebellions of 1968. In 1970 he marries Belgian photographer Martine Frank founder of the *Viva* photo agency.

1972 ‐ Only photographer to be included among the great artists of history in E. H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*. In the 1970's C-B will be true institutionalized as a "living genius" and "national treasure" attracting the contempt and criticism of the younger generation of photographers who rebel against the principles of the "decisive moment" and his interdiction of cropping the original photographic image.

1974 ‐ Resigns from Magnum which he accuses of having become corporate and commercial. Magnum continues, however, to handle commercial rights and distribution of his pictures in their archive. Abandons photojournalism.

1981 ‐ Exceptionally accepts to photograph the investiture of socialist French president F. Mitterand.

1988 ‐ Great retrospective exhibition at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris attended by president Mitterand. Photographs less and less, spends more time authenticating, signing and selling his old prints. He also goes back to his childhood passion of drawing.

2003 ‐ Founding with Martine Franck of the Cartier-Bresson foundation housed in 1910 building in Montparnasse.

The foundation keeps an eye on the use and publication of C-B's photographs upholding his principles and reputation. It also organizes exhibitions of his and younger photographers' work.

2004 – C-B dies on 3 August in the south of France.