

FROM PAINTING TO PHOTOGRAPHY AND BACK AGAIN

BY JENNY MONTGOMERY

Henri Cartier-Bresson was born on August 22, 1908, and died on August 3, 2004. You're probably already familiar with his candid, well-timed black-and-white images and the influence of his book *The Decisive Moment*, first published in 1952. (Fun fact: the book's cover was created by visual artist Henri Matisse.)

But did you know that this famous pioneer of street photography started out as a painter? Cartier-Bresson attended art school and spent time hanging out in Paris cafés with the founders of the Surrealist movement. He studied art, English and literature at the University of Cambridge. An avid reader of authors like James Joyce, Dostoevsky, Proust and many others that most of us begrudgingly read in literature classes (if we've read them at all!), Cartier-Bresson said he spent his conscription time in the French Army carrying around both Joyce and his rifle.

Cartier-Bresson eventually found his way to photography after American ex-pat Harry Crosby gave him a camera. A difficult period of life followed, leading the artist to flee to the Ivory Coast—a choice inspired by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. There he hunted to survive. The shooting techniques he developed during this time later influenced his

photographic approach. After almost dying from blackwater fever, Cartier-Bresson returned to France. It was then that he moved away from visual art and pursued photography. His career took off; he travelled extensively and had international exhibitions.

When the Second World War began in September 1939, Cartier-Bresson joined the French Army. A Corporal in the Film and Photo unit, he was captured by the Nazis in 1940 in the Vosges Mountains and held as a prisoner of war. Three years later, his third escape attempt was successful. In 1943, he returned to Vosges and dug up the Leica he had buried on a farm. Once he acquired false identification papers, Cartier-Bresson worked for the underground helping escapees. He also collaborated with other photographers to document France's occupation and liberation.

***The Decisive Moment*
Photographs by
Henri Cartier-Bresson
Steidl, \$150
Hardcover
with slipcase.**



Meanwhile, news that Cartier-Bresson had died in the war had reached the United States, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City was planning to honour him with posthumous exhibition. That show became a retrospective once the release of a new film by Cartier-Bresson made it clear that he was indeed alive. In conjunction with the exhibition, the museum also published his first book, *The Photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson*. That year—1947—was the same year he founded Magnum Photos with Robert Capa, George Rodger, David Seymour and William Vandivert.

Cartier-Bresson preferred a discreet approach to his work. He painted the shiny parts of his camera black to make them less noticeable, and he felt flash was impolite. He believed in printing his images full frame without any darkroom manipulation. And even though his photography work took him and his Leica 35-mm rangefinder around the world documenting historic moments and figures of the 20th century, perhaps it's his candid images that are most loved.

In 1968, Cartier-Bresson withdrew from Magnum. The artist returned to painting and drawing and retired from his long, successful career in photography. ■