

# “Photography Is a Mania”

*With a retrospective and a foundation dedicated to his achievements opening this month in Paris, Henri Cartier-Bresson looks back at a lifetime of exploration and discovery*

BY NICHOLAS FOX WEBER

**A**t age 93, Henri Cartier-Bresson is clearheaded, focused, and physically robust. He also very much likes to discuss his near-death encounters.

Shortly after greeting me at 11 A.M. in his airy apartment on the Rue de Rivoli, overlooking the Tuileries Gardens, the renowned photographer and draftsman asks his wife for a glass of white wine. He refuses, however, to clink glasses with me and toast good health, since all I am drinking is water. Then he smiles, with an expression of contentment reminiscent of the now-iconic look on the face of the streetwise boy he photographed holding a bottle of wine. He delights in memories of times when life was beyond his control and danger was exciting.

Contemplating upcoming events in Paris over the next few months—a career retrospective starting late this month at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the simultaneous opening of the Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Montparnasse, the relaunching of the Prix Cartier-Bresson, and the publication of *Henri Cartier-Bresson: the Man, the Image and the World* by Gallimard and by Thames & Hudson—he recalls with amusement how, in 1947, New York’s Museum of Modern Art planned a “posthumous” show of his pictures. It seems Nancy Newhall, the Modern’s photography curator at the time, presumed that he had died in the war.

But what obsesses him most this morning is his memory of the time in 1931 when he developed blackwater fever in Ivory Coast, and the end seemed certain. “I was dying with blackwater fever! You pee black!” he exclaims, “and you die, very quickly.” Villagers wanted to evacuate him and get him to a decent hospital, but he knew he would not survive the journey. “They wanted to take me back to France,” he relates. “I said no.” Cartier-Bresson’s wife, photographer Martine Franck, remembers that the villagers then sent someone for medicine, and the emissary came back with Enos Fruit Salts. “An old-fashioned medicine for a hangover,” Cartier-Bresson laughs. His own solution was to lie in bed waiting for the end and to read *Ulysses*, “a very good translation, by Valerie Labau

and Joyce himself.” He points to a copy of the book on a side table; Joyce’s text remains a constant in his life.

Cartier-Bresson explains that he was in his early 20s when he went to Ivory Coast, adding, “I was the only white person there.” He then utters a line he will repeat, with slight variations, eleven times in the course of our two hours together: “I can pass for white.” In truth, he has no African ancestors and no nonwhite blood. But when he reminisces about Africa or about the time he lived in Harlem, he implies that at heart he is black and that his white skin—now especially pale and nearly translucent—is a facade covering his real self.

John Szarkowski, for many years director of photography at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, wrote that Cartier-Bresson’s pictures “spring from a response to specific life; their formal eloquence is a tribute to their human meaning.” We see this in such disturbing images as a 1945 shot of men and women in a displaced-persons’ camp in Dessau, Germany, where, in the foreground, an inmate is exposing a Gestapo informer disguised as a refugee. It is also evident in the unequivocally joyful picture of a boy and girl sitting on a park bench near the Hoboken docks on the brink of a kiss. The boy’s arms are draped tenderly over the girl’s shoulders, and we glimpse her burgeoning smile, radiant in profile.

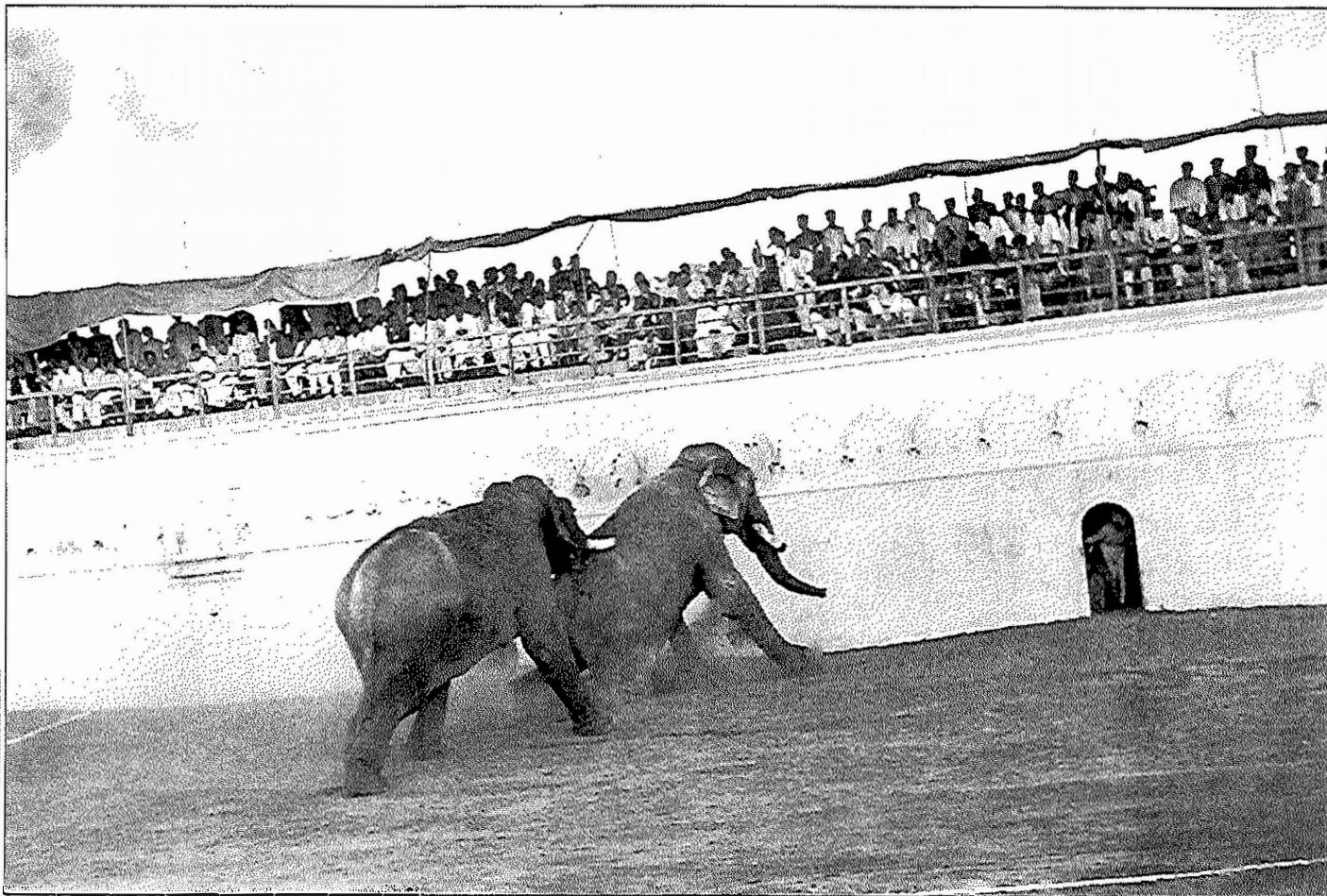
In his candor and directness and in the gentleness of his manner, Cartier-Bresson in person is the same as the man behind the lens. He is, as Szarkowski describes his pictures, possessed of “grace, balance, surprise, economy, tension, and visual wit: the qualities of a good gymnast or dancer.”

When asked why he went to Ivory Coast alone at such a young age he responds simply, “I was making my living hunting.” His



Cartier-Bresson with a picture of his mother, Marthe Leverdier, in a photograph taken by his wife, Martine Franck.

*Nicholas Fox Weber is executive director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation. His recent books include Balthus: A Biography and Patron Saints. He is currently writing a biography of Le Corbusier.*



In 1947 India, Cartier-Bresson captures an elephant fight in celebration of the 39th birthday of the Maharajah.

wife, however, suggests another motivation—a broken heart. But Cartier-Bresson dismisses that as “nobody’s business.” He went to Ivory Coast to work, he insists. “I didn’t want to play the game of going into business and all that stuff. In those days I knew René Crevel. Harry Crosby. Tristan Tzara had written his first book on ‘Art Nègre.’” After that introduction to black culture, Cartier-Bresson’s destination had become clear to him. Moreover, by the time he was finishing high school in Paris, he knew enough about firearms to become a hunter. “My father gave me the honor of cleaning his gun,” he remembers. “A great privilege. I knew how to take care of them, and it was always a promise in my childhood that when I passed the baccalaureate I would get a gun.

“I never passed,” he admits. “I tried three times. But I still got the gun.” Cartier-Bresson opines that it did not matter that he never got the degree that most of French society deems a prerequisite of success. “But it did to his family,” Franck interjects. Members of the French haute bourgeoisie—his father was an entrepreneur with a prosperous household in Normandy—they had certain social aspirations for their children.

Cartier-Bresson thrills now at these rec-

ollections of over 70 years ago. “I was on a cargo freighter that went to Duala. In ports, in order to earn some money to pay for what I ate, I worked a bit by using a sledge hammer to break up rust that had formed on steel structures.” He quickly pantomimes that labor. He uses his hands a lot. Demonstrating a big wave at sea off Ivory Coast, he puts his hands in front of him and, almost in the manner of an orchestra conductor, simulates the action of the cresting sea. “Then I jumped the boat in a very small village. I went inland afterwards, and I remained there. I jumped because I didn’t want to return to Europe.”

He continues animatedly. “I was making my living hunting. At night, with a headlamp,” he says. “I remember the most nasty thing I had to do. The village people called me. A hippopotamus was in a trap. I didn’t know what to do. I had to shoot. It was very unpleasant. I used to buy my ammunition in Liberia, which meant crossing the border—the river frontier—and using it in Ivory Coast.” His new book includes photographs from this early trip to Africa. This was where he began to shoot with a camera as well as with a gun.

“I was in a house on *pilotis*. Stilts,” he explains. He extends his hands, lines up his pointed fingers tight against one another,



PRIVATE COLLECTION, PARIS; COURTESY THAMES & HUDSON, NEW YORK

Among the photographer’s many drawings is *La Madeleine* from 1978.



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

At Dessau in 1945, Cartier-Bresson photographed the moment when a Belgian Gestapo informer was identified.

and with palms facing, moves them up and down rapidly to indicate the *pilotis*. "On poles. They were round so that rats could not climb up. You spend too much time taking out the little insects. Under your nails, and in your feet. The little black things. And then I got black-water fever."

With each revision he opens the door a crack farther. It is a process much like focusing a camera, making minute adjustments to reduce blur and produce clarity. The picture Cartier-Bresson paints now of his survival is more nuanced and vivid. "As I was dying, the regional governor sent a pirogue with four or five men paddling, on the River Cavalier. I felt so bad I said, 'Let's turn back.' I wanted to die there." But then, he says, "a woman who practiced witchcraft" saved his life.

Cartier-Bresson walks over to a shelf and picks up a wooden statue that he says was part of the cure. But when I inquire about the specifics of the treatment, he is less forthcoming. "I don't remember. I lost consciousness," he responds. I feel my gracious interviewee becoming impatient with my queries, with my apparent insistence on logical explanations for events.

Then, for about two minutes, Cartier-Bresson sits in utter silence. He is grinning. Before the visit, I had been alerted that this is his habit and that it would be best to say nothing during the prolonged silences, because, rather

than suggesting a void waiting to be filled, these pauses indicate that there is something brewing in his mind. Sitting there, elegant in his gray trousers, blue cardigan, and string tie with its turquoise clasp (presumably a Native American artifact), the photographer resembles a schoolboy trying to conjure the answer for an exam question.

Indeed, he was formulating a thought of major importance, one that connected the witch-doctor experience with his approach to photography. "Anarchy," he says, "is the natural order; it flows from the nature of things." I try to get him to be more precise about what he means by anarchy. But Cartier-Bresson replies that there is confusion if one thinks that anarchy is the same as disorder. He goes on to declare his belief in "the discipline of nature as opposed to the discipline of man. The natural order. Anarchy is an ethic," he proclaims.

This in turn leads us to another favorite subject: geometry. "Zero is a problem. The number nine." Nine, he explains is wonderful—three times three, with all its implications.

**R**egardless of Cartier-Bresson's fame as a photographer, painting and drawing are the art forms that matter most to him—or so he says: "Photography is a mania. Drawing is not a mania; it's an observation—it is linked with your three fingers. Tom,



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

Martine Franck and Cartier-Bresson, in 1992, examine photographs from a show at the Publifoto in Milan.

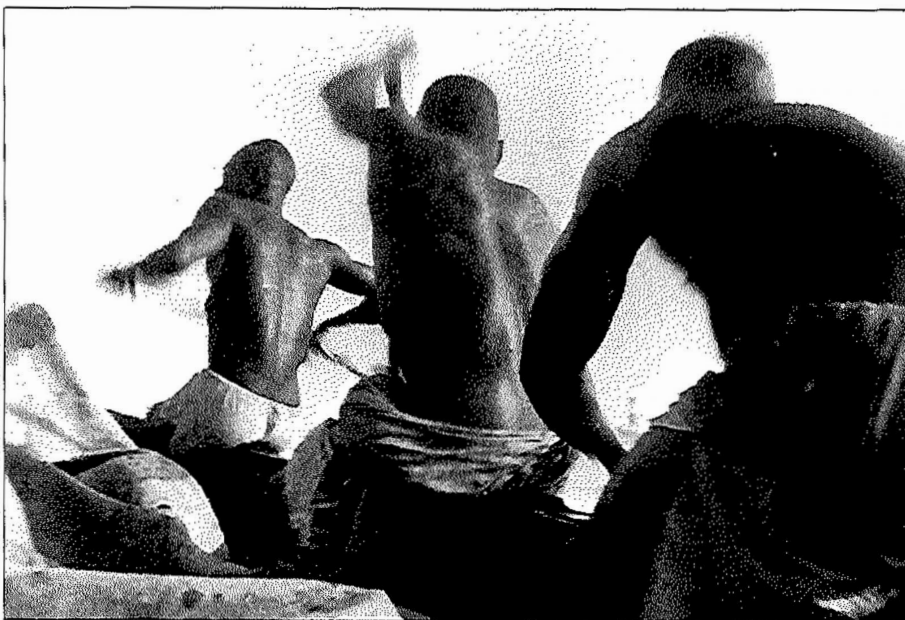
Dick, and Harry can be photographers," he points out.

His drawing is going particularly well at the moment because he has a good model. And, as he explains, "a good model opens the appetite—the appetite to draw."

The drawings, indeed, are impressive: more somber in tone than the photography and absent the rich details of setting, but they are wonderfully concentrated and reveal considerable competence with their fluid lines and animated crosshatching.

In writing about these works, E. H. Gombrich observed that Cartier-Bresson's "drawings in pencil, crayon, and pen prove him to be an eager explorer of the varied landscape of the human face. As a photographer he is confined to a medium which objectively records and arrests the movements of the face—freezes them as it were—and this deadening accuracy surely renders the task of conveying a person's character more difficult than it is in other more flexible media."

That said, however, Cartier-Bresson rose to this task with staggering success. Since 1933, when he bought his first Leica and had his first show in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery, his photographs have been notable for both their psychological power and their stunning formal qualities. In his *History of Photography*, Beaumont Newhall singles out the photographs for their "timeless harmony of form, expression and content." The



An Ivory Coast image, shot in 1931, during Cartier-Bresson's formative, yearlong sojourn there.

artist's photo portraits, while, contradictorily, seeming to be the snapshots of a moment and compositions organized with a surfeit of balance and rhythm, contribute to our feelings that we actually know so many of the major personalities of the last century.

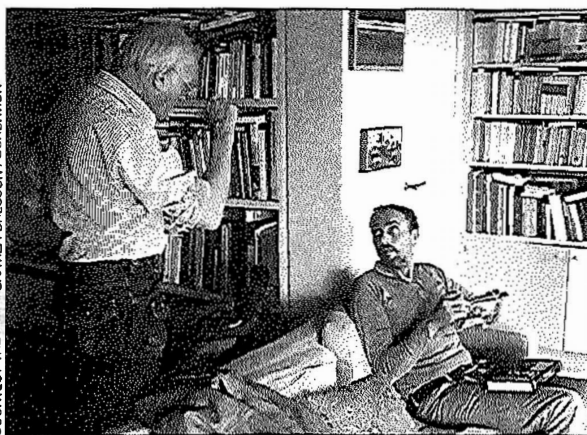
We see in Cartier-Bresson's versions of the almost fiendish Ezra Pound, the piercingly intelligent William Faulkner, the robust and inventive Alexander Calder, and Pablo Picasso in a rare moment when his face registered sheer terror. Jean Renoir appears with characteristic humor, Arthur Miller with intensity, and Truman

## Preserving Cartier-Bresson's Legacy

This month the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation opens in Paris's Montparnasse quarter as a center dedicated both to protecting the legacy of Cartier-Bresson and to promoting contemporary photography. Housed in a five-story former atelier, the foundation will host exhibitions, sponsor lecture series and educational programs, and make Cartier-Bresson's archive—original prints, contact sheets, drawings, books—available for researchers.

Robert Delpire, former director of the French National Center for Photography and Cartier-Bresson's longtime friend and publisher, has been appointed director. Delpire and Cartier-Bresson have known each other "for a half-century—yes, yes, 50 years," Delpire says. "We've worked together on a number of exhibitions and books. To work at the foundation is an honor and a pleasure."

The idea for the foundation, Delpire notes, "came most of all from Martine Franck. She was the motor of the opera-



Robert Delpire (seated), director of the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, talking to the photographer, his longtime friend.

tion . . . with it, she pays homage to the man of her life." Franck, also a photographer, and Cartier-Bresson have been married since 1970, and will continue to be involved with the foundation—Franck as vice chair, and Cartier-Bresson as chair. It was Cartier-Bresson who selected the work for the inaugural show, "Les Choix de Cartier-Bresson," which includes photographs by such

artists as Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, David Seymour, René Burri, Seydou Keita, and Wu Jialin. Future exhibitions will show early, modern, and contemporary photography, as well as Cartier-Bresson's rarely seen paintings, drawings, and films.

The foundation is also relaunching the Henri Cartier-Bresson Prize, worth €30,000 (\$32,000), to fund a photography project and a show of the winner's work at the Paris foundation. Established in 1988, the award has been granted twice before (to Chris Killip in 1989 and to Josef Koudelka in 1991). Now funded by the French bank NSMD NSM-Vie, it will be given biennially.

To celebrate the opening, an exhibition of Cartier-Bresson's major works, curated by Delpire, will be on view at the François Mitterrand French National Library in Paris from the 29th of this month through July 27.

—Melissa Gronlund



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON/MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Cartier-Bresson's 1947 image of writer William Faulkner at his home in Oxford, Mississippi.**

Capote with pure naughtiness. Henri Matisse is reticent, Somerset Maugham sneering, Jean-Paul Sartre all-knowing, Edith Piaf ever sorrowful, Martin Luther King overwhelmed and determined, Marilyn Monroe fragile and beautiful, the duke and duchess of Windsor vain, and Carl Gustav Jung mystical and insightful. Through Cartier-Bresson's lens, these giants appear at their quintessential moments—as human as they are great.

I ask about the African American poet Langston Hughes. "Langston Hughes was like a brother for me," Cartier-Bresson says. "I pass for white, but I'm not. His aunt was my aunt. Aunt Toy." Aunt Toy was a seamstress who lived on St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, and her husband, the photographer recalls, was a jazzman. She may not have been Hughes's actual aunt, either, but she was an influential, guiding figure for both men. "I used to live in Harlem," says Cartier-Bresson. "On Eighth Avenue. I've moved around quite a lot," he continues. "There were not many white people living there in those days," which he refers to as the "very elegant period." It was the mid-1940s—a time of great music, lots of jazz.

He reminisces about Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk, and talks about how he believes Langston Hughes's poetry will live on. Then he hands me a photocopy of an old-fashioned typescript containing a brief text Hughes wrote about his work. It reads: "Very few photographers can make their prints not only reproductions of the people taken, but a comment upon them—or more, a comment upon their lives—or more still, a comment upon the social order that creates these lives."

For Cartier-Bresson is, almost more than any other artist of his importance, more interested in others than he is in himself. The new foundation, situated in a landmark building that is being renovated on Impasse Lebourg, will open with an exhibition devoted not to his work but to some 80 photographs he has selected by people like Walker Evans, Lewis Hine, and René Burri. And while it will house archives and offices devoted to Cartier-Bresson's own art, part of its function will be to present the work of lesser-known artists.

Helping them, too, is the €30,000 (\$32,000), biennial Cartier-Bresson Prize. When I suggest to the artist that this is very generous on his part, he rebuffs me: this is simply normal. As for the exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale, curated by Robert Delpire, it will be vast and comprehensive, including images never before shown. And the new book will have texts by, among others, Jean Leymarie, Peter Galassi, Jean Clair, and Delpire, and will feature 593 black-and-white photos and 37 images in color.

In 1955, when Cartier-Bresson was the first photographer in France to have a solo exhibition at a national museum as 400 of his pictures were shown at the Louvre, Janet Flanner wrote in the *New Yorker*, "The French are not born travelers; Cartier-Bresson has traveled for them, bringing back to the walls of the Louvre what he calls 'the decisive moment' of varied national existences, when thousands of people, singly or grouped, unconsciously furnished him, if only for an instant, with those perfect physical compositions which make great pictorial art, and which, with an artist's eye, he seized, and in that instant made permanent." I comment to Cartier-Bresson that he has certainly traveled a lot. He replies, "I don't like traveling. I've lived." ■



**Harlem Easter Sunday, 1946. Cartier-Bresson lived in—and loved—New York's Harlem in the mid-1940s.**