

# **Brassai**

A True Artist

Hayo Baan

# Brassaï

(9 September 1899 – 8 July 1984)

Text © Hayo Baan

## 1 A True Artist

To state that Brassaï is an artist is an understatement. Not only a good draughtsman (Picasso once yelled at him “Why don’t you keep it up? You have a gold mine within you, and you insist on working in a salt pit!”), Brassaï was also an excellent sculptor and even as a filmmaker he has won some acclaim.

But Brassaï is perhaps most known for his photography. Photography that led Henry Miller (American novelist and painter) to describe him as follows: “Brassaï is a living eye ... his gaze pierces straight to the heart of truth in everything. Like a falcon, or a shark, we see him quiver, then plunge at reality.” Jean Paulhan (French writer) said it thusly: “this man has more than two eyes.”

From these two descriptions we must conclude Brassaï’s photography must show us something really special. In this essay we try to find some grounds for this.

## 2 Background

Brassaï was born as Gyula Halász in Brassó (Brassaï stands for “from Brassó”), Transylvania (now Braşov Romania) on 9 September 1899 from an Hungarian father (a professor of literature) and an Armenian mother. Before serving the cavalry in the Austro-Hungarian army in the first world war, Brassaï studied painting and sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest.

After the war, Brassaï resumed his studies at the Berlin-Charlottenburg Academy of Fine Arts, during which he also worked as a journalist. In Berlin Goethe became his spiritual master. Berlin never was his ultimate goal though, France was. In 1924 he finally went to Paris, where he lived till his death in 1984.

In Paris, he settled in the artists’ Mecca of Montparnasse. This also introduced him to the great artists and writers of that time. Matisse, Michaux, Dalí, Fargue, Prévert, Mac Orlan, Breton, Miller, Mann, and Eluard, to name just a few.

To earn a living, Brassaï sometimes wrote articles for the Hungarian press. This work, together with Brassaï’s love for the city life, often led to long wanderings late at night. Not seldom accompanied by fellow Hungarian and photography master André Kertész. The wanderings with Kertész led Brassaï to realise “that only photography could provide the intensity and expressive power” he needed to translate his vision of the beauty of ordinary life.

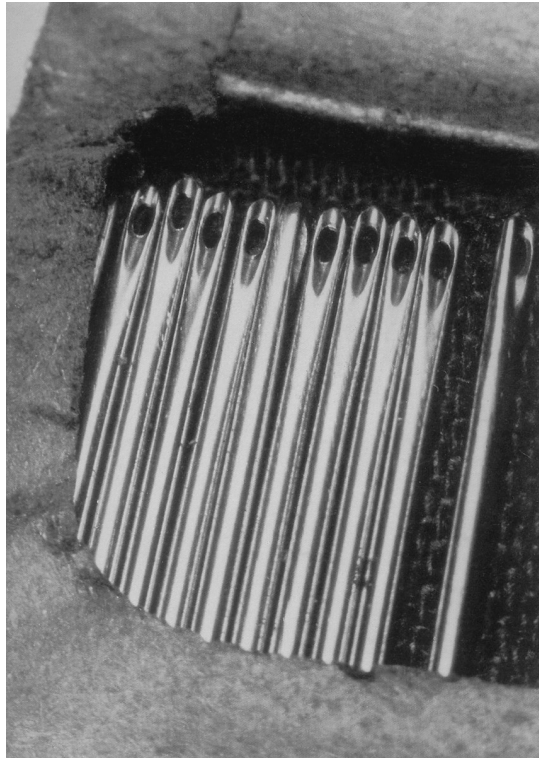
It took him till 1929 to take his first photographs, his efforts were soon to become very successful though...

### 3 Photographs re-Viewed

With Brassai's background in mind, we here take a closer look at some of his work.

#### 3.1 Surreal/Abstract Images

Perhaps not the first choice of photographs to try to "explain", but his surreal/abstract images of scaled-up objects and other non-straightforward things do show Brassai's different look (on photography).



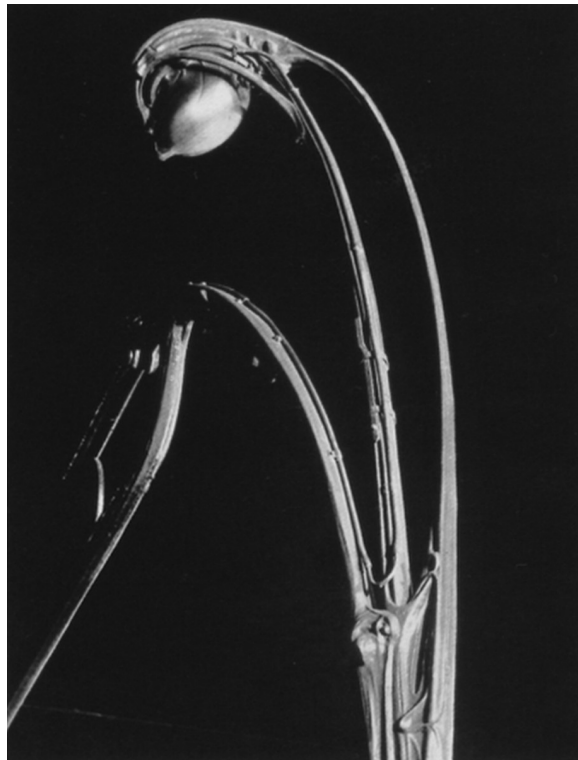
*Photo 1: Scaled up, these little needles look like an organ*

A good example of Brassai's eye for detail. What to one person would have been just an open matchbook (?) of sewing needles was to Brassai (and now to the viewer) more than that; it was a little organ, with the needles acting as the organ pipes.



*Photo 2: Involuntary Sculptures – Crumpled Bus Ticket, 1932*

Again, a piece of junk to one, a beautiful sculpture to Brassai. Is it perhaps due to his background as sculptor he sees these things?



*Photo 3: This is one more metallic avatar of Millet's "Angelus", 1933*

Jean-François Millet painted "The Angelus" in 1865, being inspired by a childhood memory of his grandmother reciting "the Angelus" whenever she heard the church bells ring while working in the field. If you take a look at the painting and then at Brassai's photograph, you indeed see an uncanny resemblance between the lamp post (?) and the stance of the woman in the painting.

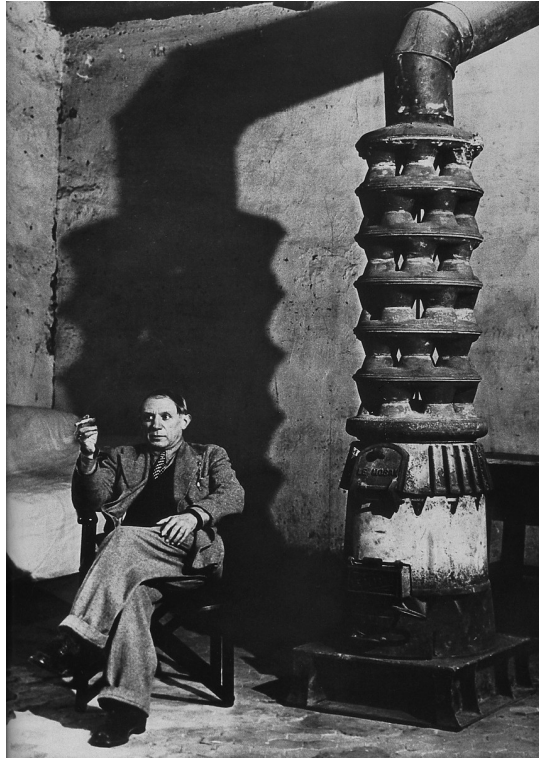


*Photo 4: Fake Sky, 1934-1935*

The small print here doesn't do the image justice. But you should still be able to see that Brassai here succeeds in fooling you quite a bit as both the foreground and sky are composed of a naked human body, something you don't really notice at a first glance.

### 3.2 Portraits

Living in the artists' mecca in Paris, Brassai had quite a few famous artists as friends. These friends and their work must have been a tremendous source of inspiration to him. It also gave him new photographic opportunities (he was, for instance, the first to photograph Picasso's sculptures). As they were part of his life, and he photographed everything that was part of his life, Brassai took a portrait of a number of his artist friends. Here, a number of them are shown and commented upon.



*Photo 5: Picasso, Rue des Grands-Augustins, Paris 6<sup>e</sup>, 1939*

In this image we see Picasso in a chair next to a gigantic stove “Le Mosan” (made by *Les Fonderies de la Meuse*). The strangely grotesque form of the stove may be a reference to Picasso's style of painting. The dark shadow the stove casts behind Picasso could be an omen of e.g., dark times, or doom (there was the pre-war depression after all), or just a way for Brassai to make Picasso stand out better on the photo. This latter explanation probably more likely. As this is a relatively early image of Picasso, he still has hair. Picasso's bulging eyes stand out and it looks as if he is having a playful thought. He clearly has been sitting patiently for a while to give Brassai time to take the photo; there is a long tip of ash on his cigarette.



*Photo 6: Le Corbusier at his Desk, Rue Jacob, Paris 6<sup>e</sup>,  
1931*

This man, Le Corbusier (architect, designer, painter, writer), clearly works best in chaos, surrounded by his objects of work. Apart from a tiny work area, almost every possible space is filled. The open ink bottle seems to suggest Le Corbusier did not pose for the picture, but was actually at work, writing.



*Photo 7: Jean-Paul Sartre at the “Café de  
Flore”, Paris 6<sup>e</sup>, 1944*

Paris must have been a heaven for artists as Brassai’s images show many many (even now, still) famous ones. Here we see Jean-Paul Sartre (writer, philosopher, political activist, etc.) sitting at a corner table in a café at the end of the war. While lighting his cigarette, Sartre is looking at the writing (his own?) in front of him. Perhaps he is revising it and he found something wrong? The

small booklet on top of the pages is probably the matchbook from which he just lit a match. Perhaps due to the war, the café is completely free of frills and in fact looks quite modernistic/minimalistic. While it seems milk is available, sugar is remarkably absent as part of the coffee (?) being served. But again, this is probably due to the general lack of supplies during the war.



*Photo 8: Simone de Beauvoir at the "Café de Flore", Paris 6<sup>e</sup>, 1944*

Simone de Beauvoir is looking pensive and a bit stoical in this image. She could be thinking about what she is writing, but this is unlikely, because as you look closer, you see the page is already full. More probable is that she is in fact posing for Brassäi, and the look she is giving is purely for the dramatic effect. One wonders about the garment hanging nonchalantly behind her. Did she perhaps use it as a sort of cushion, or is it to hide something else? The coffee set looks exactly like the one in the picture of Jean-Paul Sartre. Were both of these images perhaps taken one after another (they do have the same year of production after all...)?



### 3.3 Night Photography

Night Photography is perhaps what Brassai is most famous for. Being a lover of (Paris') city life, he frequented it late at night and early in the morning a lot. This led him to a "hidden" part of life in the city. Photography enabled him to capture it and show it to the people. In this, he did not shy away from showing the public the more ugly and secret parts of life either. Prostitution, hard labour, and poverty, were all equally part of his photography. Depicting life, its hardship and unfairness had been done before, for instance by George Grosz in the 1920's. Compared to his caricatural paintings, however, Brassai has chosen a much milder way of showing the message of life, its hardships and unfairness.



*Photo 9: Statue of Marshal Ney in the Fog,  
Paris 1932*

Michel Ney was Napoleon's right hand man, nicknamed "Bravest of the Brave". A title he lived up to until his death by a firing squad after Napoleon was defeated for the second time. Not only did he refuse to wear a blindfold, he actually gave the firing squad the order to shoot himself:

*"Soldiers, when I give the command to fire, fire straight at my heart. Wait for the order. It will be my last to you. I protest against my condemnation. I have fought a hundred battles for France, and not one against her ... Soldiers, Fire!"*

In this photograph Brassai, again shows his eye for composition and detail. The fog gives the scene an eerie atmosphere, making the statue look almost as if it was a real man standing there. The neon letters of a hotel in the background, apart from balancing the composition, make a strange contrast.



*Photo 10: Milkman in the Rue Nationale,  
Paris 14<sup>e</sup>, 1932*

A scene hidden from most Parisians as they would still be asleep: a milkman on his route early in the morning. Even though milk was first delivered in bottles on 11 January 1878 (something that is still celebrated as “Milk Day” in many places), this milkman still brings his milk in the, then common, metal jugs. The cart is most likely drawn by a horse.



*Photo 11: Rail Polishers, Paris 1930–1932*

Another scene you would not likely have seen: workmen polishing the rails of the metro system. The building in the background is most likely a metro station as the, hardly visible, sign seems to read metro. The bigger space below it is probably the map of the metro system. The first line of the Paris metro system opened on 19 July 1900 as part of the world fair “Exposition Universelle”. Strangely enough the opening was performed without any ceremony. Perhaps this was because the line was delivered late and there were already many other buildings delivered as part of the fair (e.g., Gare de Lyon, Gare d'Orsay (now the Musée d'Orsay), Pont Alexandre III, etc.). Paris wasn't the first city in the world to have a metro either, that honour goes to the Brits almost 40 years earlier (London, 1863 to be precise).



*Photo 12: Two lovers on a Public Bench  
and a Tramp, Paris 14<sup>e</sup>, ±1932*

A young couple kissing intimately, oblivious to the world around them. They share the bench with a tramp fast asleep under a blanket. A pretty ironic situation, not? In the background you see a man looking at the scene as he passes by. Perhaps it was the camera that triggered him to pause and look because kissing couples must have been pretty common at that time.



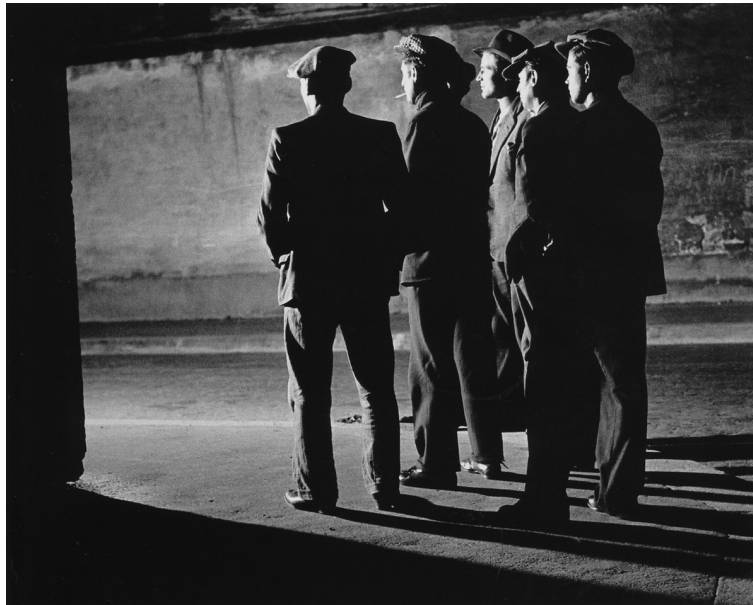
*Photo 13: Tramps at the Bourse du Commerce, Paris 1<sup>er</sup>, 1930-1932*

As mentioned, Brassai photographed everything that was part of his life and did not shy away from the hard reality. Here you see a couple of tramps sleeping at the Bourse du Commerce, the French commodities exchange. A bigger contrast between rich and poor is hard to imagine... But even here, Brassai takes note of composition and form to make even this harsh scene into a visually pleasing image.



*Photo 14: Police Raid in Montmartre, Paris 18<sup>e</sup>, 1932*

Policemen were known as “hirondelles” (swallows) because of the way they looked with their dark cloaks flying behind them when racing around the city on their bikes, blowing their whistle every now and then. Here we see a couple of them at a police raid. The non-uniformed people could have been innocent by-standers taking a gloat, or perhaps even informants.



*Photo 15: Big Albert's Gang, Quartier Italie, Paris 13<sup>e</sup>,  
±1931-1932*

Gangs were part of city life, and hence of Brassai's life, so they had to be photographed as well. Here we see a couple of thugs from “Big Albert's Gang” which may have been quite a notorious gang in its time. The use of light in this image gives it a dramatic atmosphere and certainly makes you wonder what the group is looking at. Perhaps some beating, or another illicit gang activity?



*Photo 16: Two Thugs from Big Albert's Gang, Paris, 1931-1932*

Another image of the thugs of “Big Albert’s Gang.” Again the image uses a strong contrast of dark and light to create an, almost voyeuristic, aura of menace. Even though, it looks like the thug on the right is standing behind a wall, it is actually the photograph’s frame; Brassai printed only half of the image, leaving the rest black. If he did this in anticipation of its dramatic impact on the page, he succeeded very well indeed...



*Photo 17: The Bal de la Horde at the “Bullier”, Montparnasse, Paris, ±1932*

Scantly clad women performing on stage were (and still are) part of Paris' night life. So would have been natural for Brassai too. In this image we see a group of women performers in conversation in a smokey environment. Three men are looking very intently at the women, almost as if they haven't seen a naked lady before. A fourth is not particularly interested and looks straight ahead. The woman just behind the group must have spotted Brassai and looks straight into the lens.



*Photo 18: Prostitute at Rue Quincampoix,  
Paris 4<sup>e</sup>, 1932*

Prostitutes and brothels are as much part of (Paris) life as anything else. In his introduction for the book "Paris de Nuit" (photography by Brassai), Paul Morand comments on prostitutes as being watchers with territorial interests and regular habits. Looking at this prostitute at the corner of Rue de Quincampoix and Boulevard de Sébastopol, one can understand how Morand came to make his remark; she indeed looks like a watcher standing there, awaiting clientele and at the same time making sure no other prostitute tries to solicit too near her spot. As for all of Brassai's work, lighting adds to the dramatic almost surreal atmosphere of the scene.



*Photo 19: Homosexual Couples at the Montagne Sainte-Geneviève Dance, Paris 5<sup>e</sup>, 1932*

Though homosexuality certainly must have been forbidden at that time, Brassai here shows it as something normal and part of everyday life. A view certainly not shared with (most) of the rest of the populous. But then again, artists have always been known for their more progressive views on the world and its affairs...

While seemingly not posing, the couples on the photograph are certainly aware of being photographed and all look straight at the camera, smiling.



## 4 Conclusion

With this small selection of Brassai's work, we have seen some excellent compositions as well as gotten some insight in life (in Paris) at that time. Of the aspects of life, Brassai has not shunned any, not even the seedier and grimmer ones. Nor was he void of stating a message, albeit done very subtly.

If think we can indeed conclude that "Brassai is a living eye ... his gaze pierces straight to the heart of truth in everything. Like a falcon, or a shark, we see him quiver, then plunge at reality" as Miller put it...

## Appendix A Sources

The following sources have been used for the writing of this essay:

- Brassai Paris – Jean-Claude Gautrand, Taschen, 2008
- How to Read a Photograph – Ian Jeffrey, Thames & Hudson, 2008
- Wikipedia – <http://www.wikipedia.org>
- Musée d'Orsay – <http://www.musee-orsay.fr>
- and various other internet sites for additional (background) information.

All images in this essay have been taken from the book "Brassai Paris."