

The photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson

Texts by Lincoln Kirstein and Beaumont Newhall

Author

Cartier-Bresson, Henri, 1908-2004

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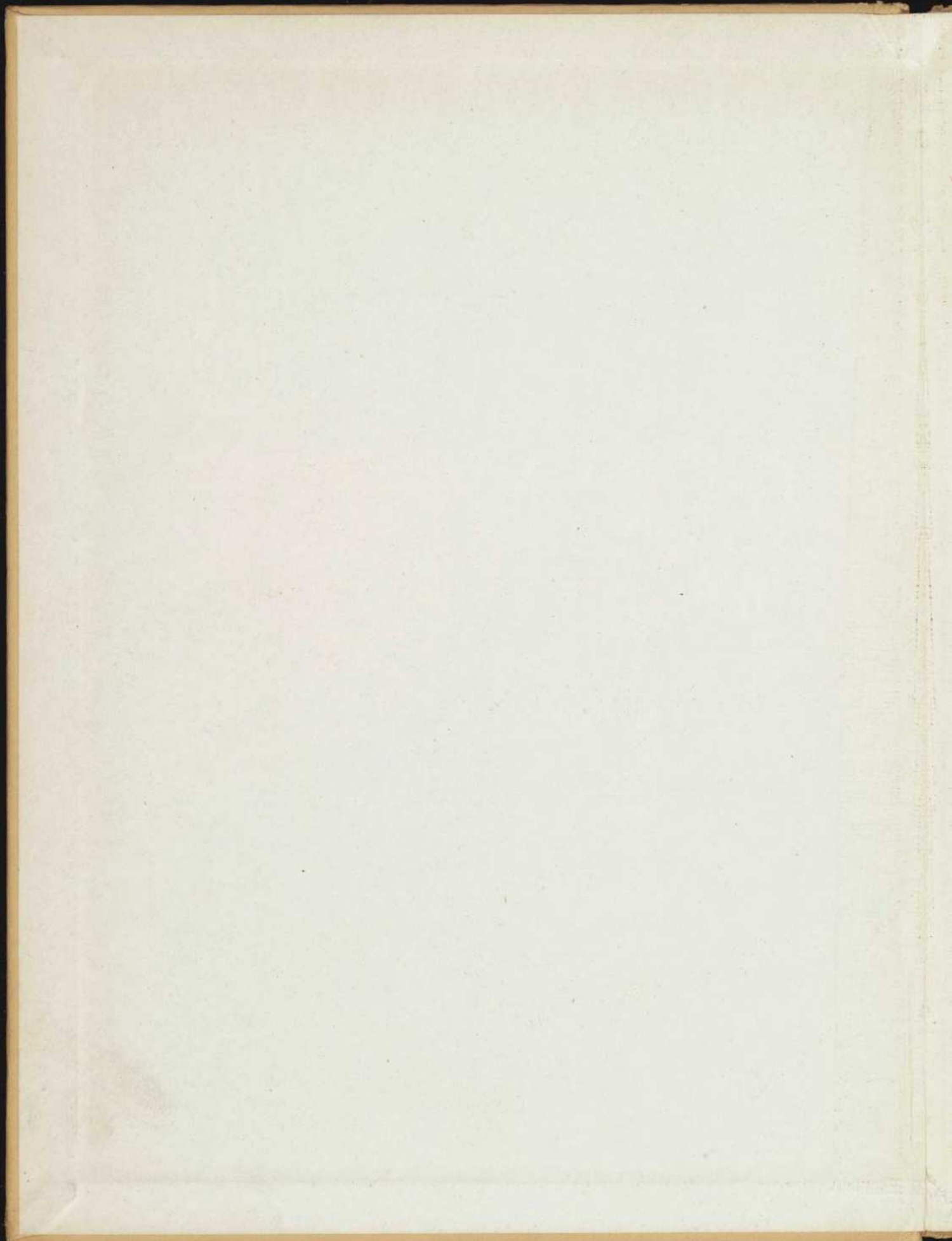
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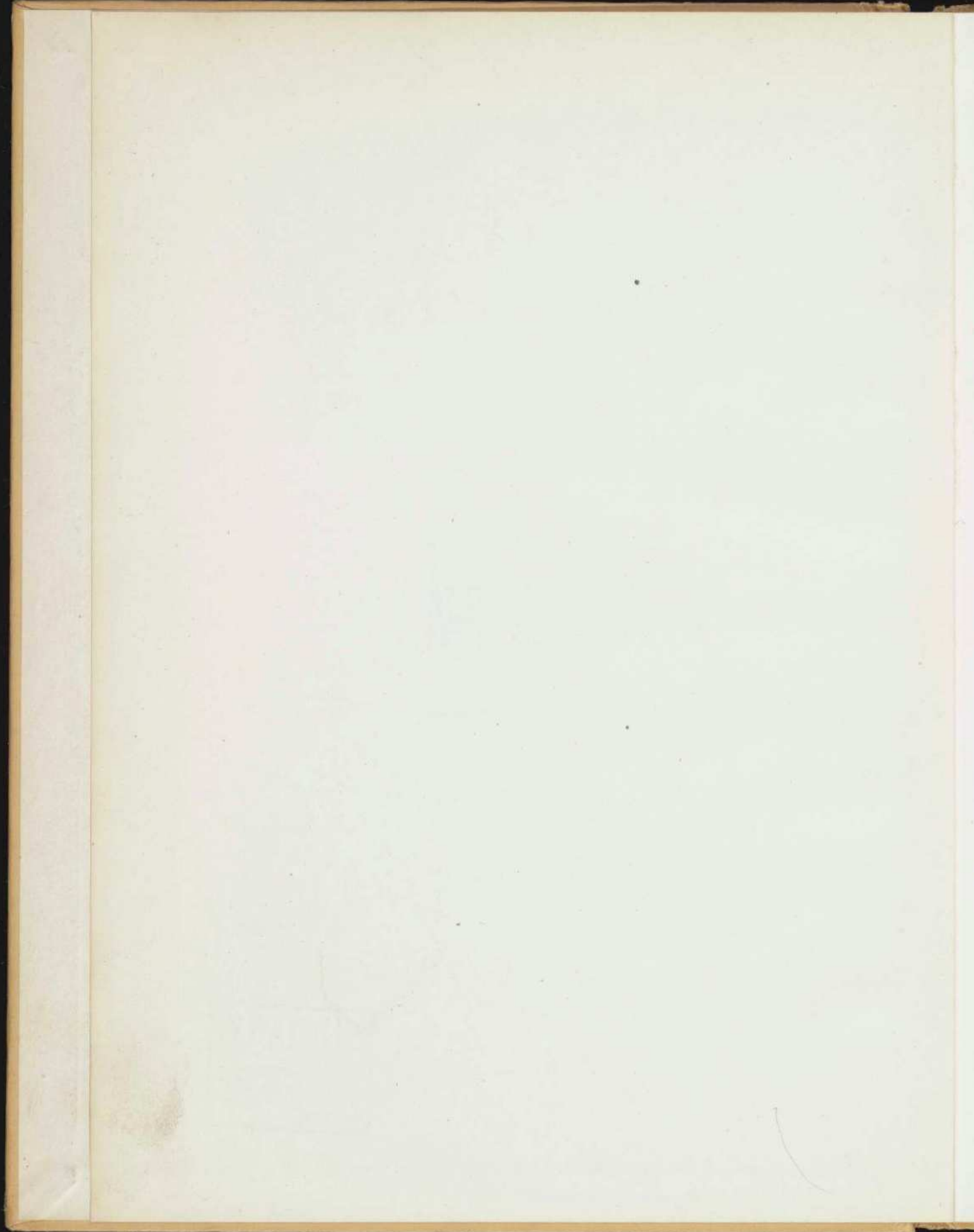
**HENRI
CARTIER-BRESSON**



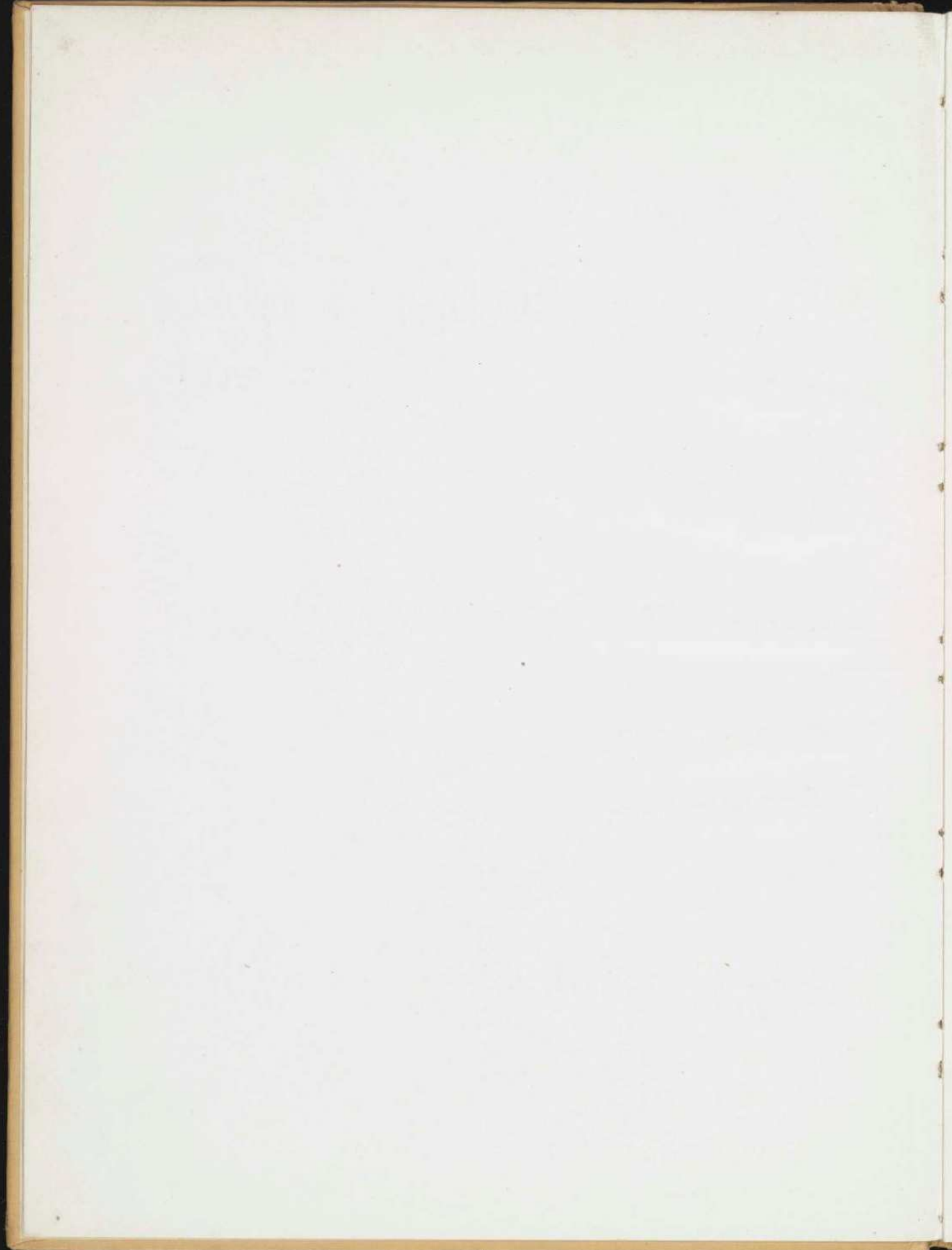
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THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF

HENRI
CARTIER-BRESSON

TEXTS BY LINCOLN KIRSTEIN AND BEAUMONT NEWHALL

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Henri-Matisse in Vence (Alpes Maritimes), 1944

HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: DOCUMENTARY HUMANIST

A number of contemporary photographers are united towards formulating a new approach to deliberate photography. Perhaps the leading European exponent of this direction is Henri Cartier-Bresson, who, by his denial of the academic "artistic" or salon taste of modern art-photography has taken sequences of pictures which in their freshness, elegance and truth remain works of art within their own radical esthetic.

Since the discovery of photography, over a century ago, there has been recurrent confusion as to its function and effect. At first there was the giddy sense, amounting almost to fright, that the camera-lens had spoiled any future for representational painting, making any further realistic rendering by the hand and brush useless. At the same time and a little later, certain painters occupied with basic problems in the arrangement of form and light (Corot, Degas, Eakins) employed even the accidents of photography—lack of a sharpened focus, forced perspective—as new pictorial devices. Even the candid composition of the snapshot, with figures cut arbitrarily by the frame, was deftly used by Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec. And yet, historically speaking, it was Manet who had introduced the vision of an instantaneous accident, borrowed from the strips of Japanese woodcuts, sliced to fit on the slim posts of tea-houses.*

Afterwards, when it was realized that easel-painters had nothing to fear and even much to gain from the camera, and that the prestige of the painter could remain intact, a school of salon-photographers attempted to imitate or rival painterly compositions. From the first use of the camera, the line of salon-photographers was paralleled by men whose candor of vision accepted the mechanism for its unique services, and created something quite irreplaceable with it. Such were the prints of Nadar and Brady, and many anonymous daguerreotypists. But the salon-photographers occupied themselves with 'arrangement,' 'texture,' 'atmosphere' and 'quality.' The pictures they posed, however, except possibly for strictly documentary portraits of people or places, did not long satisfy as independent works of art. No matter how sagacious the photographer, the elements of composition, texture, atmosphere and quality could not be fused into an image with a continuous life of its own, equalling the synthesis made possible by the greatest painting. Photographs even failed to be convincing framed and glazed decorations and the addition of hand-painted tinting did not help. Photographs were at once post cards and simulacra of paint. Bad taste accompanied the more ambitious, and soon photography as a popular craft was expressed in the promiscuous anonymity of journalism. But in the masses of journalistic shots, every so often a few wonderful human images emerged, and, if

* See "The Photographic Eye," by A. Hyatt Mayor, Bulletin, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Summer 1946, pages 15-26.

this was usually accidental, the pictures were none the less effective for their unconscious appeal. And these images have never failed to excite and affect present-day easel-painters, who, like Vermeer and Manet before them, can always be moved by the miraculous accidents of light and the surprise of suddenly fixed frames.

Then certain artists, primarily interested in the use of the camera, who had been made aware of the naïve, or at least half-consciously formulated journalistic approach, began to use the frank attitude of the reporter-photographer, but now with deliberate design. They began to school the non-selective primitive eye, with all its piquant mishaps, to their own sophisticated program. It is also noteworthy that several of our best documentary humanists were also trained as painters. Cartier-Bresson and the American Walker Evans (who has quite a different style) have both painted, and were considerably influenced by the folk-cultures of Africa, the Caribbean and Polynesia. The photographer Brassai is a talented draughtsman. These photographers, and others of their school, are as familiar with the creative impulse as painters. They work with a different medium and a more mechanical process.

The decisive part of Cartier-Bresson's particular process takes place not in the mechanism in his hand but in the vision in his head; in that right eye which (he says) looks out onto the exterior world, and that left eye which looks inside to his personal world. The vision fuses on what he sees, where and when, and how he feels about it. His pictures are closer to the news-photo of a daily crime or a sporting event than to the naïve perfection of the still-life groups of the great chronicler of Paris in the early 1900s, Eugène Atget. But while a news-photo is brutal, factual and public or official, and the great human interest in Atget is more by implication from inanimate objects, Cartier-Bresson, with means as modest, gives us an intense and questioning image, not stripped of light and air, but close to the figures involved, to their private identities, their social origin and habits and the local site. And, while news-photographers specialize in catastrophe, the photo-finish or some aspect of shock, Cartier-Bresson's pictures are seized in the middle norm of a run of action, a specimen-slice or symbolic fragment, snapped from a series. His early shot of children (page 17) playing in ruins of plaster walls whose holes seem torn out of the paper on which they are printed was prophecy of an imminent decade of disaster. No image since has provided such a powerful report of fused innocence and destruction, of fun and fright.

Cartier-Bresson feels that an insistence on the direct and indirect documentation of human behavior by the camera offers an unlimited field of investigation for individual photographers, and of infinite differences of personal comment. There is no reason for anyone else to ape his particular eye or to attempt to recapture his set of lyric values, individually developed over a long time to suit his temperament; it would be possible only as dilution. There was only one Atget, despite the apparent anonymity of his plates, and his countless subsequent and careless imitators. The very real differences between Cartier-Bresson and the other documentary humanists—Brassai, Bill Brandt, Doisneau, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, Ben Shahn (as photographer, not painter), and Weegee, for example—show how many strongly personal styles may be developed within their program.

Cartier-Bresson's particular personality is Parisian and Norman. From Paris he gains his easy internationalism, his ability to pass in or out of any milieu however exotic, dangerous or boring, without wasting his time. He went off for a year in West Africa with no more equipment than a pair of his father's old pants, a new sun-helmet and a thousand-franc note. He embarked for Mexico without troubling to find out on whose responsibility or authority his vague expedition was based and, of course, it blew up. But he got to know Africa and Mexico as no well-outfitted tourist ever could. He never loses himself in mere nostalgic strangeness; the contrasts of new people and far places do not overwhelm him. He accepts whatever part of the exotic is essential in its integrity as another equally interesting phenomenon, but quite without travelogue romance or soft-focus brooding.

From Normandy comes his frugal elegance and peasant shrewdness, an independent chill or candor, and also a transparent dignity and pride in his own brand of technique, which is less a matter of taking pictures than of talking to people and getting along well with them so they will not shrink from him, or "pose" for him. He has an antagonism to gadgetry in his medium; the instruments are for use like a plane or a square, and his craftsmanship is less specialized than specific for his needs. He does not have much of a feeling for the dark room. Here he supervises the technician for, after all, what he has seen is already implicit in what appears in the negative and on the print. He has taken a sequence of trial shots, dancing about his subject on tip toe, like a boxer or fencer, until he chooses the ultimate frame and instance; then traps it in time. He considers his own assignments and the exploitation of his practical talents (which are considerable) as an ordinary workman does his labor. Should he be occupied with pictorial journalism, very well then, there are the usual conditions of his editors to be satisfied. He is not hampered by them. Peacetime is different from war, but not necessarily easier. The war in Spain is different from the war in France. The parlor of a wine-master of the Loire certainly differs from those of Bonnard or Rouault, and wherever he happens to work he spends the time as an agreeable and almost invisible guest.

There is a discreet Parisian lightness as well as a Norman rigor in his personality which he transfers to his prints. His cheeriness, his dispassionate curiosity, his stubborn attention and self-effacement: how unlike the usual conscientious or case-hardened reporter. He is sympathetic towards his sitters or assignments in the way of a good nurse with a fractious patient. Without allowing them to be aware of it—which might somehow remind them of their condition, or their habitual defenses—he puts them at ease, makes them quite comfortable, allays their vanities, involves them deeply in their own currents of action, takes his pictures, continues the conversation as if nothing had happened, with his follow-through in the entire process never cutting the ordinary flow of atmosphere by a self-conscious or unconscious flirtation with the camera on the part of the sitter or subject.

Sometimes and somehow, almost out of a superior craftsman's good manners, he seems able to leave his lens out of the picture. His portrait subjects are not shot; they get themselves taken at tactful intervals, by eavesdropping or absorption. His pictures are not generally cropped down after printing. He does not have to try to save a composition by eliminating a

band or an edge, here or there. His finest shots are discovered rather than contrived, and he does not go in for the systematic disruption or rearrangement of an interior, for example, to render it more "picturesque" or "characteristic." That is why his recent series of eminent French writers and painters is so valuable. By avoiding any factitious formal effects, even those recently developed in the mode of the "candid" camera, by having an almost tacit understanding between himself and his sitters that they will, together, defeat the clichés of photography, by not attempting the maximum the camera can do with light and lens, by rejecting most of what usually counts for sensitive arrangement and clever illumination, by coming humbly to his subject with the preoccupied intensity of a fisherman playing to land a big catch or a boxer landing a knockout, he achieves his pure biographical accuracy. Perhaps no illustrious group has ever been portrayed with so much penetration and psychological illumination, unless it was by Nadar. Perhaps it is this very intensity, this spasm at the instant of clicking that exhausts his energy and renders Cartier-Bresson relatively indifferent to the subsequent processes necessary for the public to see his pictures. Up to the click, there has been nothing really mechanical; notch by notch the various accidents and incidents group themselves in space and time for the focal second when he springs his trap. Afterwards, the developing, the printing and the promulgation require a different sort of energy, and one which he dutifully if indifferently spends.

The series on the painter Bonnard (page 49) is suffused with that intimate sunny light of French domestic life, that constant reference to the family symbols of the white cloth, the brown loaf and red wine which have made Bonnard so representative of a national habit of life. The face of Paul Claudel (page 48), flanked by the peasant's black and silver hearse, is a unique synthetic image of the poet whose incomparable diction has fused medieval homily and baroque splendor into the language of a lively faith. Here too, with equal simplicity and sense, we have the faintly sinister intellectual surliness of Jean-Paul Sartre (page 47), the puckered old clown's wisdom of Rouault (page 52), and the bold elaboration of Matisse's domestic décor, a combination of an aviary and an oriental restaurant (page 50).

What could be more British than the absurd dignity and shabby tribal complacency of his Coronation series? (pages 33-35) Cartier-Bresson turns his back on the majesty of the processions, the brilliance of colonial deputations, the ancient London streets, however appealing and pictorial, to devote himself to the fierce loyalties of the rapt mass. Looking at those traditional faces we are all the more conscious of the truth in John Strachey's *mot*: "Remember, gentlemen, when the time comes, it will be *His Majesty's* Communist Government."

Instead of developing an interest in the rendition of surface or tonal values as such, which in some photographers leads them to present human skin as oiled leather, with every pore a pit and every hair a stroke of engraved penmanship, Cartier-Bresson has rather preferred to whet his historical and moral perceptions. With a kind of bland abnegation he manages to avoid the intrusion of idiosyncrasy, of his own accidental personality, of his individual background. But the more he effaces himself, the more he ignores his particular Frenchness or contemporaneity, the more he becomes the crystal eye, the more his pictures sign themselves. For his

sight, divested of superficial prejudice or preference, focussing itself on what is most essential in his subject also reflects what is most essential in himself.

Some of the drama in his still photographs may have come from his experience with films, either assisting Jean Renoir or by himself, as in the documentary covering the Republican hospitals of Madrid, Valencia and Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, or recently in *Le Retour*, made through the United States Office of War Information, but released, unfortunately, only in France.*

Cartier-Bresson was captured at the time of the Armistice of 1940 with his photo-unit in the Vosges mountains. He spent thirty-five months in prisoner of war camps in Germany, from which he twice attempted to escape but was each time recaptured and sent back to confinement. On his third try, he managed to reach France. Hence it is not surprising that he has known so well how to film some of the most bitterly moving or exhilarating scenes of the war. Many American soldiers recall (how faintly now) that rapture of freedom and friendship in overrunning the prison camps for forced workers, prisoners of war, deportees and hostages. For a few insanely happy minutes it seemed to all of us that the whole war had been won here and now, with our tangible, ferocious victory; that the men we helped to liberate, who had endured so much for the cause that was then not allied with, but indistinguishable from our own, were the point of our war, and we had been lucky enough to be in at this ecstatic climax. Cartier-Bresson, who had been one of them, took their pictures and followed them home, all the interminable way, to the huge centers of repatriation in the vast deserted railway-sheds, and then finally back to their own farms and foyers. And much of the anguish in this film's almost insupportable emotion is clear in his still photographs of the denunciation of traitors and informers by the released French prisoners (page 40).

The camera is still a seductive and ambiguous instrument. If today it seldom suffers from soft-focus sentimentality it has the even worse disease of being capitalized upon for a kind of false realism, in staged "true-story" treatments, in prearranged publicity stunt shots, in rearrangements towards the purveyance of an artificial truth. It has taken us too long a time to discover that the most impressive and lasting achievements of the camera are in pictures, snapped from impartial history, which could not have been realized in any other medium. Cartier-Bresson's best shots could not have been drawn or painted, but only photographed. Some of these are among the most memorable documentation of our epoch. And in looking over the range of his fifteen years of work, we realize the great service of photography, in hands as responsible as his, and the discoveries from which even painters have profited, new discoveries in the realm of space, the nostalgia of distance, the pathos of empty enclosures prophesied by de Chirico, and which have had re-echoes of influence in many easel-painters. In an age of predominantly decorative or plastic values in painting, it has been the camera, supervised by such eyes as Cartier-Bresson's, which has kept the fascination of independent reality alive for the reinvestigation of the new humanism whose first indications are already felt.

LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

* To be shown in a series of documentary films by the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art, October, 1947.

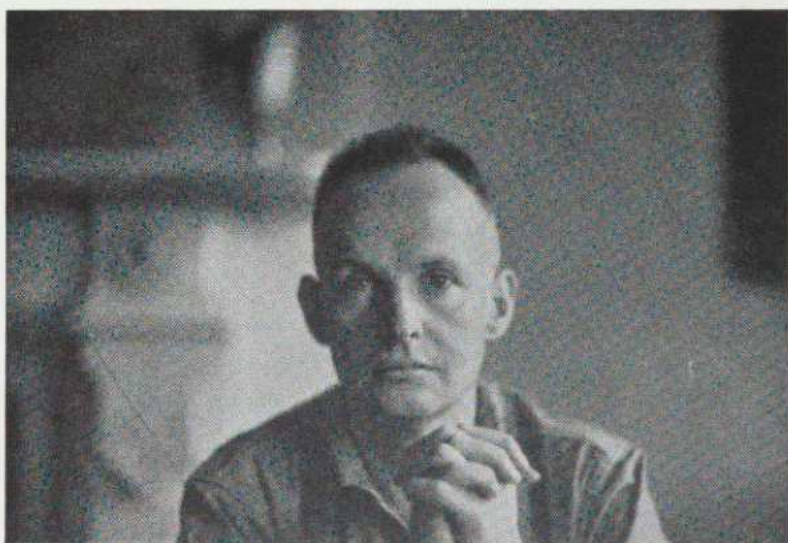
CARTIER-BRESSON'S PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUE

Cartier-Bresson's photographic technique is simple and straightforward. He uses a miniature camera with an apparently effortless reflex action. When a subject presents visual possibilities, he seeks the most revealing camera position rapidly. At the split-second when the lighting, the form and the expression are one, he releases the shutter. The precise composition of the final print is determined at this peak of emotional intensity. So definite is this instantaneous reaction that the entire negative is used for the final print. He does not select a portion of the image for enlargement, or otherwise alter the original composition. Like Edward Weston, he feels that to crop or trim the image as captured at the moment of exposure is not only inefficient, but is an admission of failure to see in a creative way. There is nothing accidental or unforeseen in his photography. On the contrary, elements which are essential to the picture extend to the very limits of the negative.

He will tell you that he likes his photographs sharp, *aigu*. By this he is referring not so much to the quality of the optical image as to the precision of plastic organization and the intensity of content. The problem of arrangement of form within the rectangle of the negative concerns him more than the mechanics of his medium. He feels that so much attention has been paid by photographers to mechanical technique alone, that style has been overlooked. He has for years painted, not for the public eye, but for his own enjoyment. A by-product of this avocation has been the development of a keen sense of plastic organization. He avidly studies the old masters of painting and of photography as a means of developing an appreciation of space and form. This training is important, he feels, for the mind thus visually quickened can more readily recognize that all-important moment when a camera exposure will result in more than an empty record. He never imposes on his pictures compositional devices lifted from paintings, and he avoids studied arrangements which lack spontaneity and directness. The important thing is not only to grasp at once the significance of the subject, but to be able to recognize form when it suddenly and magically presents itself.

Cartier-Bresson has compared his activity in painting, photography and the moving pictures to the gear shift of an automobile, for the fields are mutually separated yet closely interrelated. Work in each medium strengthens the others by stimulating and training visual observation. The photographer, he often points out, must learn to see actively, rapidly and completely, in order to develop an acute awareness of the visual possibilities of his surroundings.

He has a great respect for the subject, and has developed a way of working without intrusion, silently, almost on tiptoe. He has never had a studio. He does not create artificial settings with special lighting for the purpose of photography. Indeed his only use of artificial light is its occasional aid to boost the level of normal interior illumination to that threshold where instantaneous photography can be accomplished. And this is done so subtly, by directing



Henri Cartier-Bresson, 1946. Photograph by Beaumont Newhall

the added light source to the ceiling, that the original lighting arrangements of the room are not disturbed. He dislikes flashlight not only because it ruthlessly intrudes and tends to be harsh and unmanageable, but more particularly because without general illumination he says he cannot foresee how the light will fall upon the subject at the precise moment of time which is to be arrested by his camera. In portraiture, a field in which he is currently much occupied, he does not pose nor does he direct his sitters, but unobtrusively observes them in their familiar surroundings, waiting for the character to be fully revealed. By this rigid respect for the subject, he imparts to his work that sense of authenticity which ever since the invention of photography has been remarked as one of its most striking potentials.

To realize this approach, Cartier-Bresson pushes photography to its very limit, using, with no margin of safety, every available improvement in the design of lenses and the sensitivity of film, even to the point of defying the recommendations of the manufacturers. He finds the Leica and the Contax such ideal tools for his purpose that he uses no other cameras.

These precision miniature cameras allow thirty-six negatives, each approximately $1 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in size, to be taken on a single loading of film. The small negative not only makes it possible to take many exposures in rapid succession but, of even more importance, lenses of large diameter, and consequently of great light-gathering power, may be used. These cameras are operated in a way which makes them almost extensions of the eye. The photographer has but to raise the camera to his eye, frame the subject in the finder, focus with an optical rangefinder, and press the shutter release. A twist of a knob cocks the shutter and brings fresh film in readiness for a second exposure. The camera is mobile and inconspicuous.

The frame is not static. Because these cameras permit a variety of lenses to be rapidly interchanged, the extent of the field of view is not fixed. A wide-angle lens embraces a large area; telephoto lenses allow the photographer to isolate details from a distant camera position. Each lens has its special characteristics and demands a different approach. The optical quality of the images formed by large diameter lenses is of a special character: the depth of field is limited. When focussed on near objects those at a distance are rendered indistinctly; if the focus is altered to bring sharpness in the distance, then the foreground is blurred. The degree of sharpness or lack of sharpness varies according to the distance, the focal length of the lens and the diameter of the aperture or "stop" at which it is used. Instead of finding this limitation troublesome, Cartier-Bresson accepts it as a challenge, and uses it as a plastic control. Experience alone guides him, for everything appears deceptively sharp through the viewfinder, and the degree of unsharpness of the hidden image must be judged. It is essential, he warns, that the shapes and tonal values of the blurred elements be most carefully planned, for if they do not contribute to the basic framework of the picture, they distract the attention of the onlooker, who unconsciously demands an explanation of what they represent.

Because Cartier-Bresson has developed technique to the point of almost instinctive reaction, he cannot tell you the film, lens and shutter settings, and other technical minutiae of each photograph he has made. In judging the exposure which is to be given he uses the film speed recommended by the expert laboratory technicians who develop his film. In this way maximum quality of shadow detail, contrast, and fineness of grain is assured. When it comes to making the final print he works in the darkroom. He alone is able to recreate the tonal values which he visualized at the time of exposure. He is fond of prints which display a rich range of middle grays with accents of black and white, and he prefers the softer quality of semi-mat paper to the brilliance of a glossy surface. The final prints are made under his personal supervision. They are direct enlargements, unretouched and unmanipulated.

BEAUMONT NEWHALL

CHRONOLOGY

- 1908 Born Chanteloup, France. Norman mother, Parisian father. Only interest at school was painting.
- 1928 Decided against entering family business. Studied painting with André Lhôte.
- 1929 Eight months in Cambridge, England. Painted and attended literature courses.
- 1930 Military service at Le Bourget. Continued painting in spare time and began to photograph with Gretchen and Peter Powell. Met artists and writers through Caresse and Henry Crosby.
- 1931 Traveled in Africa, lived in native village on French Ivory Coast. Contracted blackwater fever.
- 1932 Traveled in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Germany and Italy. Returned to Marseilles, France. Began first serious photography with Leica. Never studied technique, used camera to record what he saw.
- 1933 Traveled in Italy and Spain. Exhibition at Atheneo Club, Madrid. Prints shown in New York, Julien Levy Gallery.
- 1934 Mexico: exhibition at Palacio Bellas Artes (with Alvarez-Bravo).
- 1935 New York: exhibition (with Walker Evans) Julien Levy Gallery.
- 1936 Returned to France. First moving pictures for Jean Renoir as Assistant Director with Jacques Becker.
- 1937 Married Ratna Mohini, Javanese dancer. Documentary film, *Return to Life*, history of medical aid to Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia hospitals during Spanish Civil War. Music by Charles Koechlin. In France photographed with Capa and Chim.
- 1938 Coronation pictures in London. Continued work with Jean Renoir.
- 1939 Assistant to Jean Renoir in his last French film, *La Règle du Jeu*. London: Hyde Park Series (while wife gave dance recitals). September, outbreak of war, drafted into army.
- 1940 Corporal in Film and Photo Unit of French Army. Captured on Armistice Day, June 1940, by Germans at Saint Dié, Vosges. Thirty-six months in prisoner of war camps in Wurttemberg, Germany. After third attempt escaped to France.
- 1943 May, worked on farm, Touraine. Got false papers, moved to Paris and worked for ex-prisoner of war underground organization. Made portraits of artists for Pierre Braun publications.
- 1944 Organized underground photography units to document German occupation and retreat.
- 1945 Series in England for *Harper's Bazaar*. Worked on O.W.I. film, *Le Retour*, showing return to France of war prisoners and deportees.
- 1946 To United States to prepare exhibition at Museum of Modern Art. Sent to New Orleans by *Harper's Bazaar*. Continues to paint in free time.



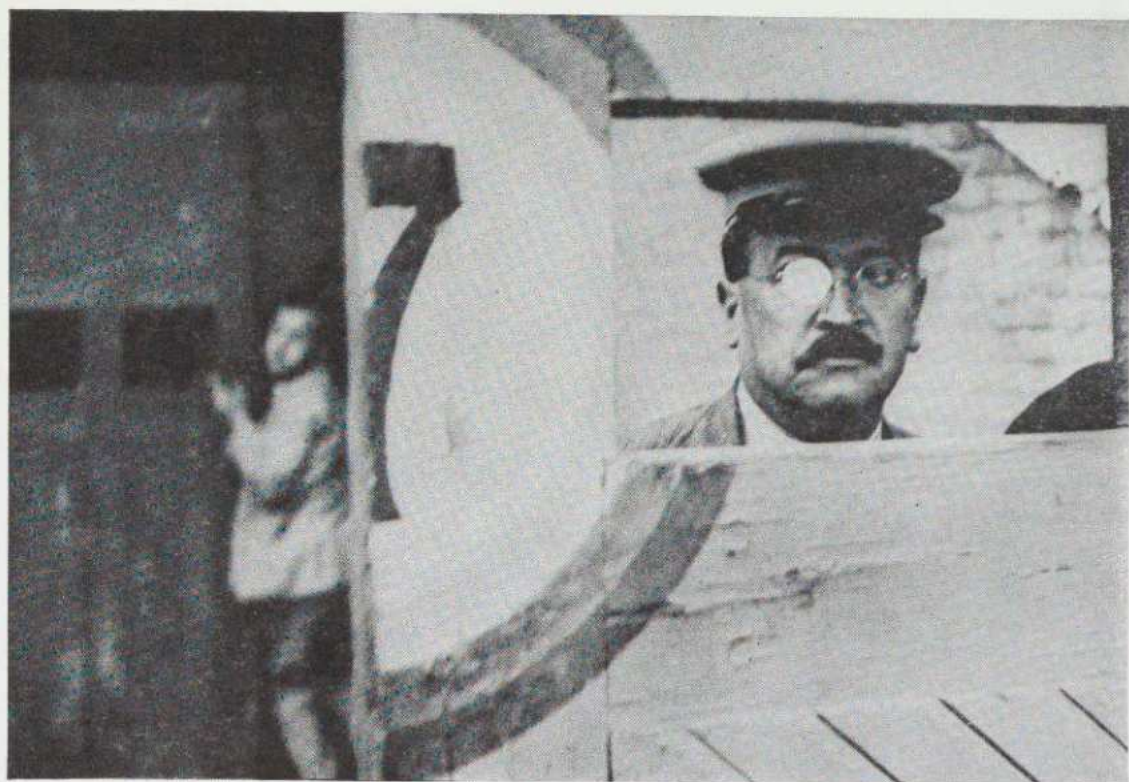
Child in Valencia, Spain, 1933



Children in Seville, Spain, 1933



Cordova, Spain, 1933



At a bullfight in Valencia, Spain, 1933



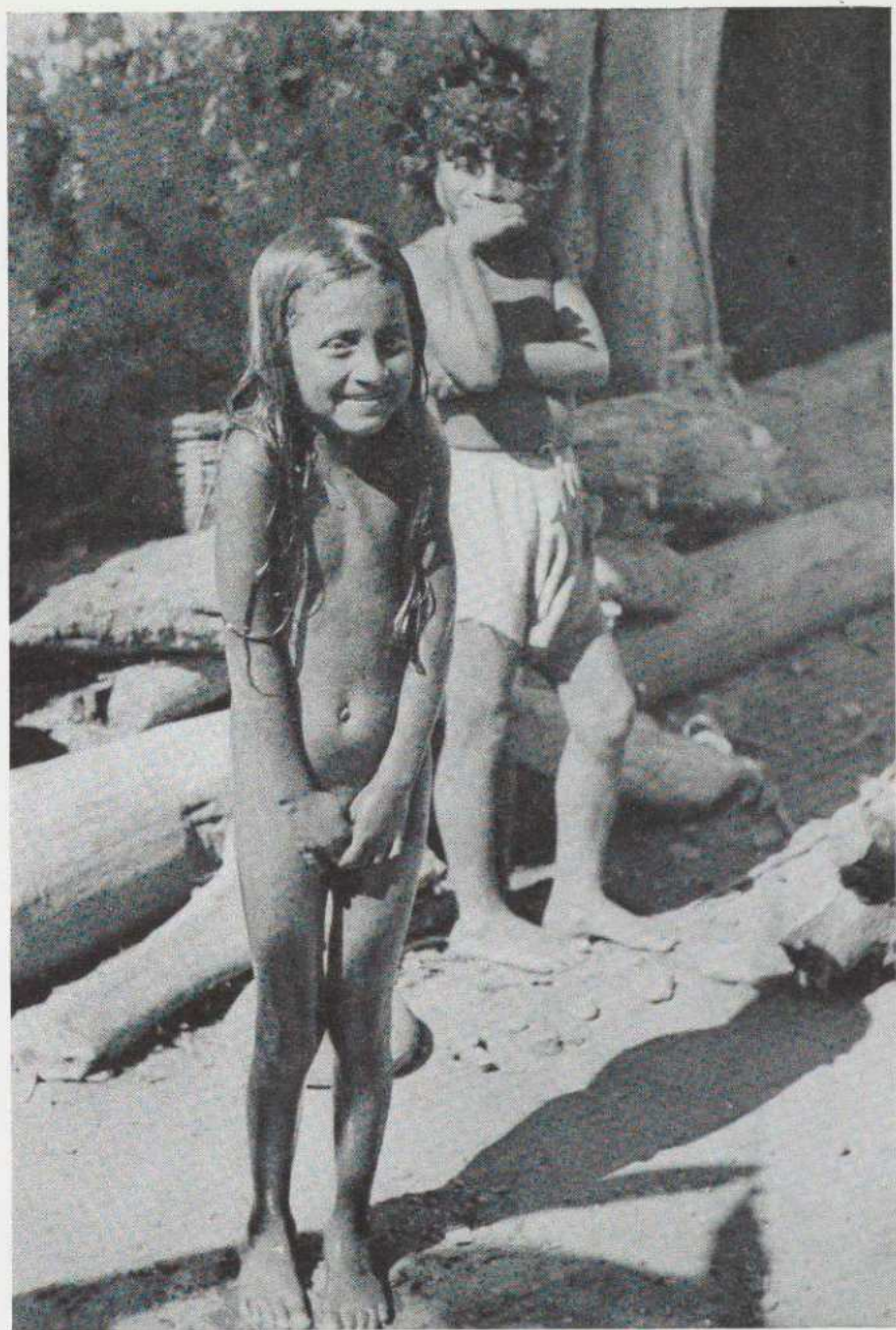
Juchitan, Mexico, 1934



Arsila, Spanish Morocco, 1933



Mexico, D. F., 1934



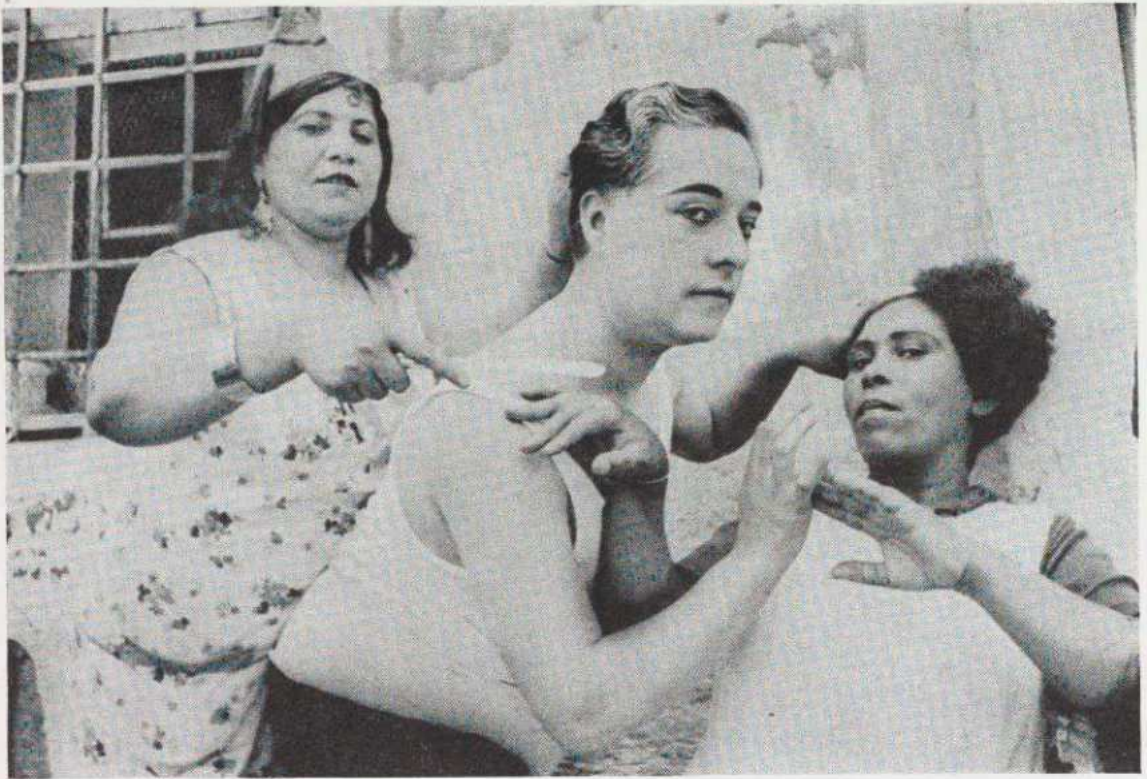
Juchitan, Mexico, 1934



Gare St. Lazare, Paris, 1932



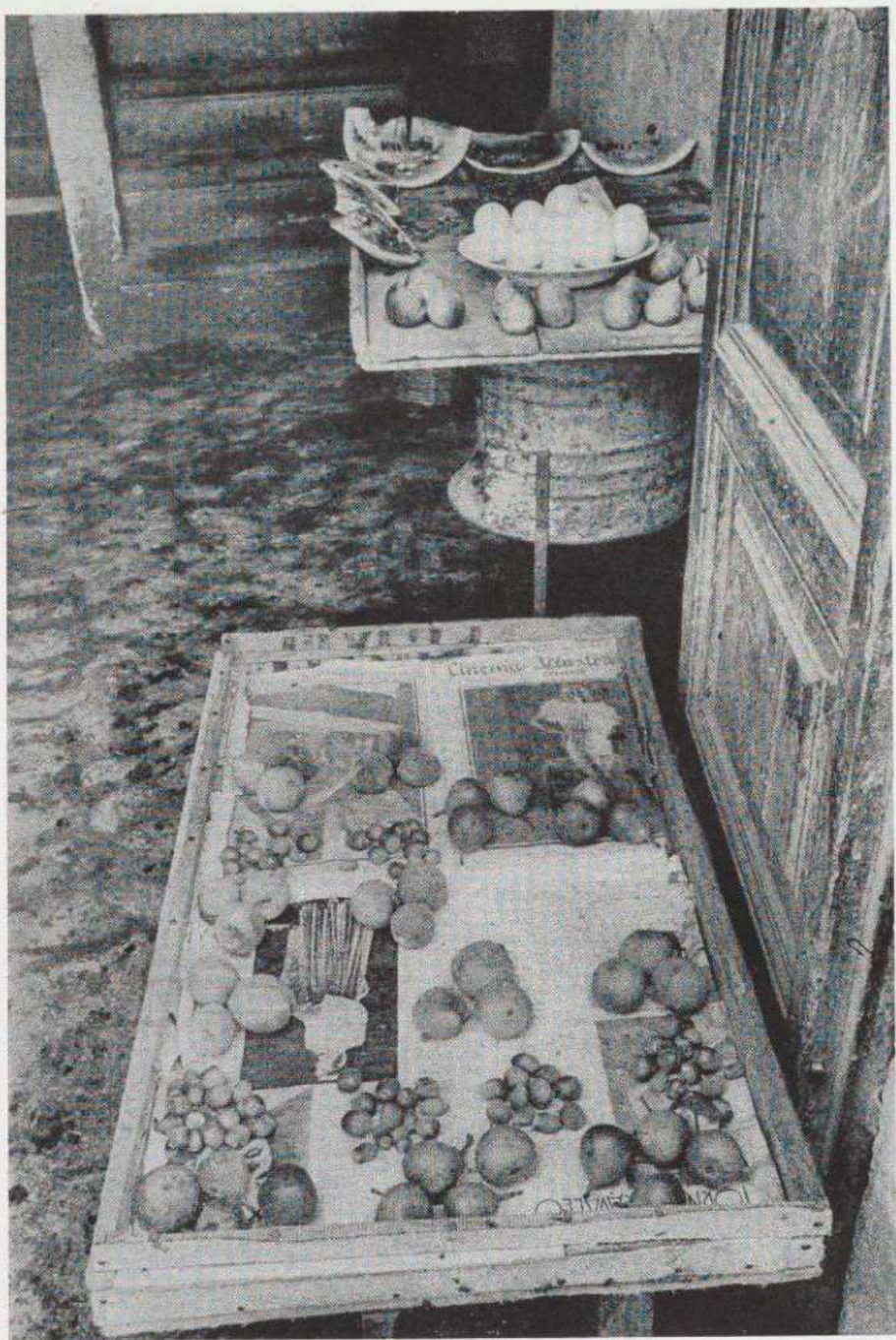
Hyères, France, 1932



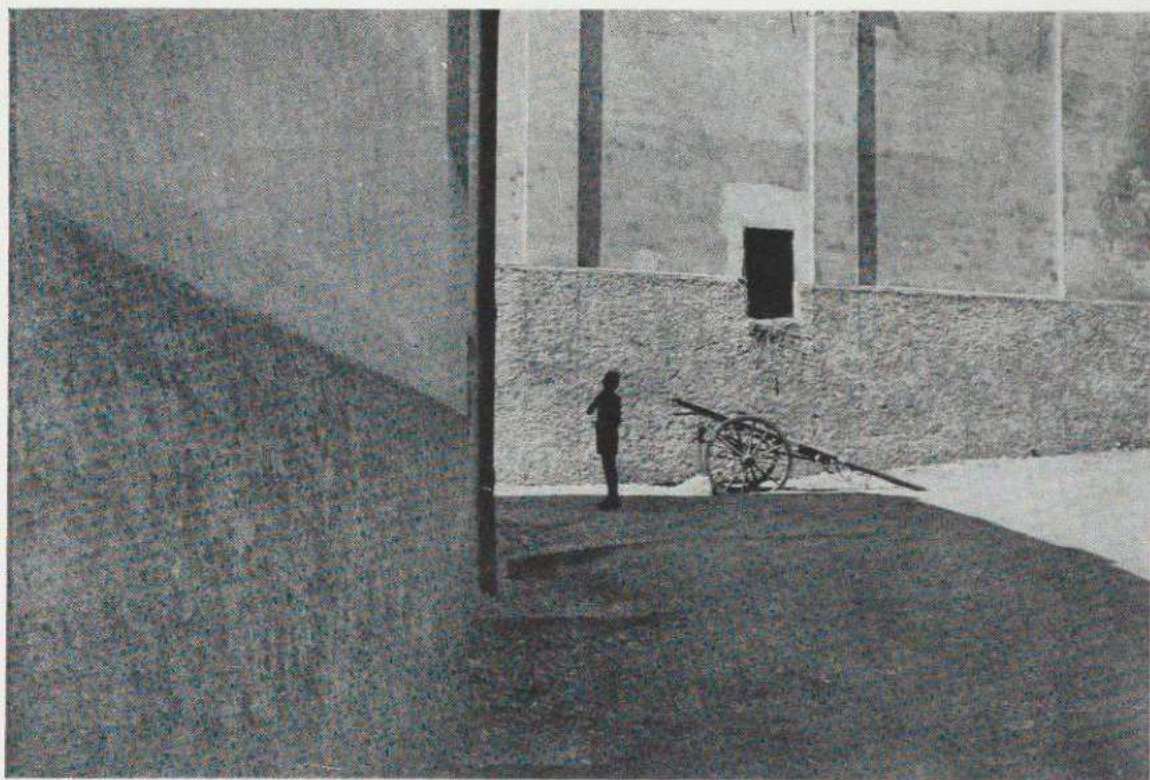
Alicante, Spain, 1933



Mexico, D. F., 1934



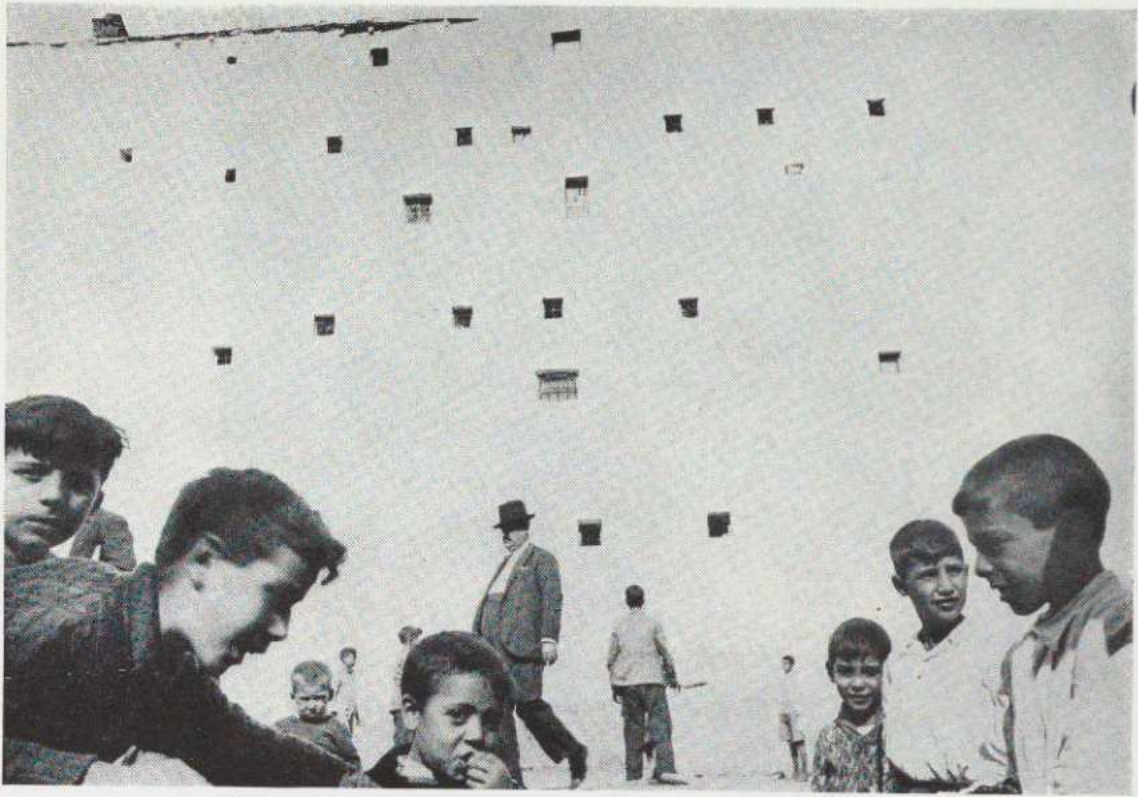
Tivoli, Italy, 1933



Salerno, Italy, 1933



Brussels, Belgium, 1932



Madrid, Spain, 1933



During the visit of George VI of England to Versailles, 1938



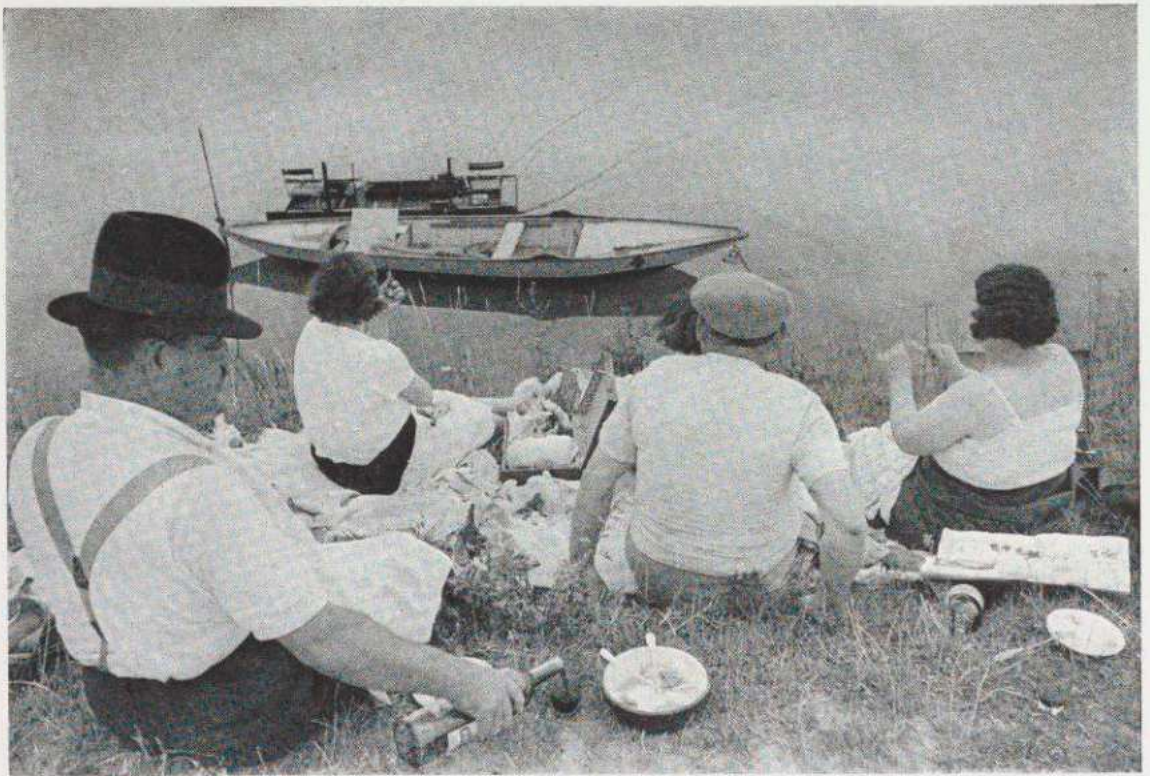
left: At the coronation parade of George VI, Trafalgar Square, London, 1938; *right:* Listening to a soap-box orator, Hyde Park, London, 1945



At the coronation parade of George VI, Trafalgar Square, London, 1938



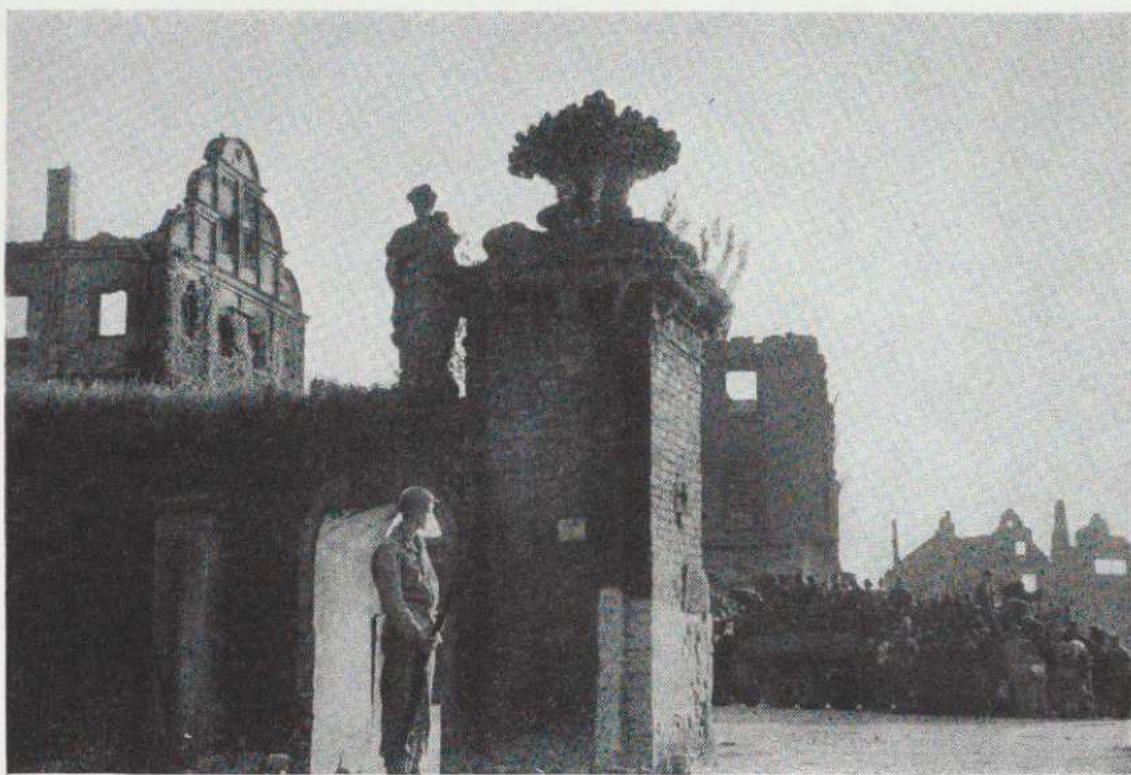
At the coronation parade of George VI, Trafalgar Square, London, 1938



Sunday on the banks of the Marne, 1939



Sunday on the banks of the Marne, 1939



Repatriation of French prisoners of war, Dessau, Germany, 1945



Displaced Belgian family waiting for passage home, Leipzig, Germany, 1945



Exposing a stool-pigeon in a displaced persons camp, Dessau, Germany, 1945



Russian child returning home, Halle, Germany, 1945



In the Negro section of New Orleans, 1946



Siesta in the French Market, New Orleans, 1946



Madrid, Spain, 1933



Cardinal Paccelli in Montmartre, 1938



M. and Mme Joliot-Curie, Paris, 1946



Jean-Paul Sartre, Paris, 1946



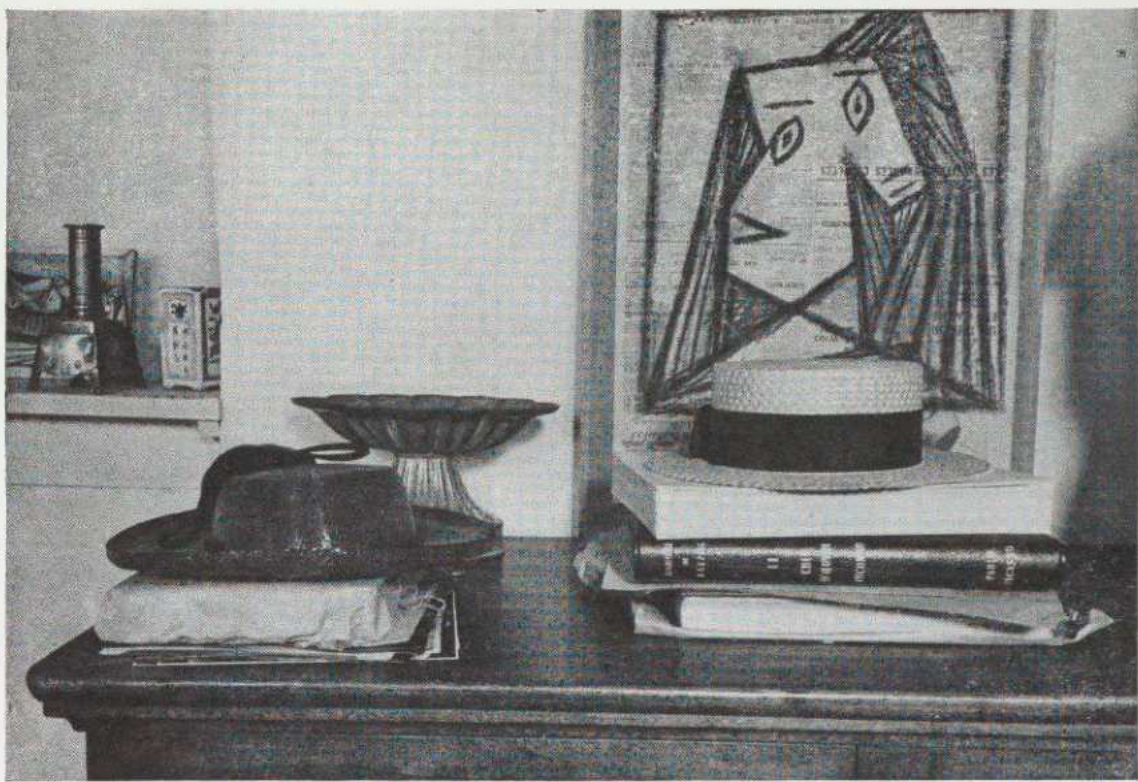
Paul Claudel in Brangues, France, 1944



Pierre Bonnard in his studio in Cannet, France, 1944



Henri-Matisse in his home in Vence, France, 1944



Picasso, bedroom, 1944



Georges Rouault in his home in Paris, 1946



Georges Braque in his home in Paris, D-day, 1944



Vinegrower of Touraine, France, 1946



Mme Lanvin, Paris, 1945

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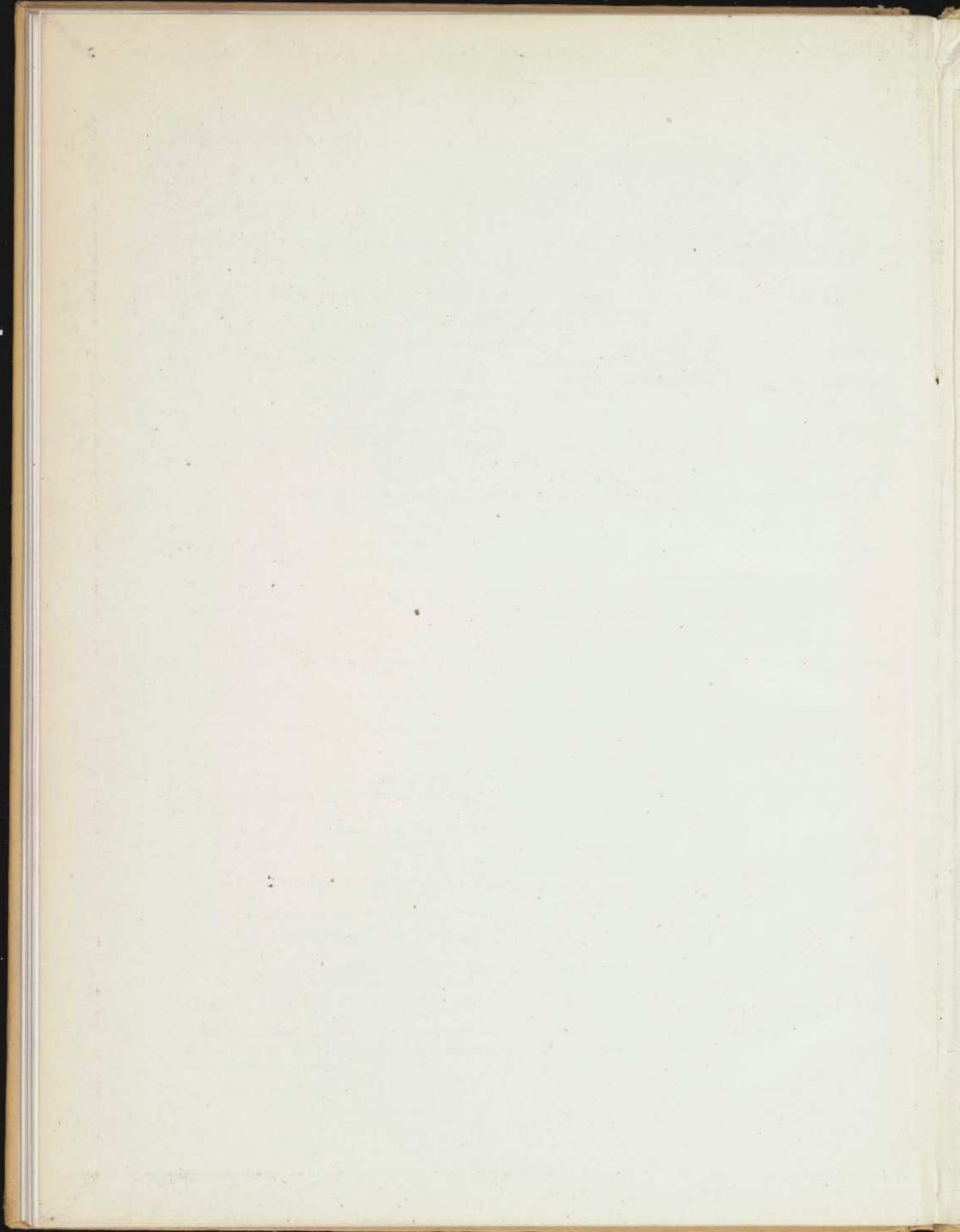
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