

Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century

by Peter Galassi

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) is one of the most influential and beloved figures in the history of photography. Released to accompany an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century* is the first major publication to make full use of the extensive holdings of the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris, which was established in 2002, two years before the photographer's death at the age of 95, and includes thousands of prints and a vast resource of documents relating to the photographer's life and work. The heart of the book surveys Cartier-Bresson's career through 300 photographs divided into 12 chapters.



The book was both a joy and a pain to review and is one of a small number that the reviewer has carefully read, cover to cover. With technical books it is possible to skim through, checking the odd fact for accuracy and then making a list of the topics covered. Galassi's work is on a different plane. The sheer size and weight of the book makes it difficult to read; you need to sit at a table, probably also allowing space for a dictionary (and the *Concise Oxford* will not do, you will need the full version!). For this is a book that does not spare the reader, the writing is complex with many unfamiliar words and convoluted descriptions. The book is divided into a front descriptive section, a large series of 300 photographs arranged in sequences and a final references and maps section at the rear. This means that the reader has to read the narrative and then navigate into the main body to find the referenced image, a feat requiring some strength (hence the need to read at a table).

After a while Galassi's text becomes irritating. It has a bias towards the photographer at the expense of the magazine editors and page designers. Henri Cartier-Bresson (aka HCB) was prone to bitch about them himself and almost always insisted that his images were not cropped in any way (sometimes without success). The writing sometimes lapses into complete sycophancy, with writing that is barely comprehensible. Try this:

'He felt an obligation to justify the change from one medium to the other and to define, in his lapidary aphorisms, the difference between them'

HCB had abandoned photography (at the age of 65 years) and taken to sketching. Lapidary is the polishing of gemstones, and aphorism is a pithy formulation of a truth – go figure!

Aside from this there are some classic quotes from the man himself: 'We both know that photographs have four edges, there's nothing we can do about it. But in a portrait it would be rude to pay too much attention to composition; it's the person who counts above all!'

The pictures, of course, are excellent; most are well known. They are presented as themed sets, which adds cohesion. The set on Russia for example, shot in 1954 and 1972 depicts the stark reality of life in the former communist regime. Shops with nothing or little to sell contrasted with the apparent wealth of central Moscow. Often the detailed captioning 'makes' the image, without it they are meaningless, as they sometimes are when viewed as solo images. This is a problem if you open a page and want to know the background to an image. The description may be hidden deep within pages of text at the front of the book: some we never found.

The author's analysis of the contact sheets lapses into further sycophantic ramblings – at the end of the day we are looking at the work of a jobbing photographer. In the narrative sequence about some dancers in Bali, HCB is described moving around a scene to remove distracting backgrounds and improve the composition, it's not rocket science, it's what we do all the time! 'This bold act eliminated the distraction of the bright background' is the description tagged to a rather over-egged commentary on the short sequence which purports to illustrate HCB's 'discipline!'

The contact sheets do, however, show how frugal HCB could be with his film. A bull-fight at Pamplona is dispatched in just 36 frames (eventually to make one 'memorable' image). It is difficult to imagine a digital photographer today shooting fewer than 360 'frames' in similar circumstances! Not that the editors of the day were stingy on their images. *Life* sent 14 photographers to the 1952 Republican presidential convention. They exposed 35,000 frames, from which 2,000 enlargements were made, to yield 56 pictures over 14 pages. Happy days these, with fees of \$40,000 for a story from *Life* alone, topped up with a myriad of subsequent sales to other magazines.

It is because the body of work is so large, so diverse, and spans 60 years, that the sum is greater than the parts. The maps at the back show in detail just how extensively HCB travelled. In times when travel was a far more adventurous pursuit it is quite mind-blowing to trace his path across the continents.

Should you buy this book? If you are a student of photography it should be compulsory reading as it effectively catalogues the start of the transition between monochrome reportage/feature photography and colour. These are features which are unlikely to be repeatable or repeated, the budgets are no longer available and the world has shrunk so that there is less of a thirst for this style of picture story. If your interest is more casual, you can at least enjoy the images and dispense with trying to fathom out the turgid language. Either way it is a fabulous piece of scholarship, bringing together many decades of photo journalism from one of the recognised masters.

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Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century by Peter Galassi, is published in Britain on Monday 12 April 2010 by Thames & Hudson (336 pp., 24.0 x 30.5cm, 435 illustrations, 75 in colour, price £55, hardcover ISBN 978-0-50054-391-7) [and in America by The Museum of Modern Art, New York (price \$75.00, hardcover ISBN 978-0-87070-778-0)].



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON (FRENCH, 1908–2004) SAN FERMINES, PAMPLONA, SPAIN. 1952 GELATIN SILVER PRINT, II 7/8 x 8 1/4" (30.1 x 21 cm) FONDATION HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON, PARIS © HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON / MAGNUM PHOTOS

**Lake Light**

by Dave Butcher

Dave Butcher is a professional photographer with a love of landscape photography in particular. A chemist by profession for 21 years (at Ilford) he is one of a dwindling number of practitioners who still prefers to work with silver halide for both capture and printing. This third book follows *High Light* (2005) and *Peak Light* (2007) and concentrates exclusively on the English Lake District. Most of the images are given plenty of breathing space, many a single page. The captions, informative but short, and an annotated map at the front will help the curious pinpoint the locations. Finding the point on the map is one thing, getting into position with medium-format gear in snow conditions is quite another and we should be grateful for the intrepid photographer bringing the scenes to us. Having stood on almost all of the spots from which Dave Butcher has made his images, your reviewer can confirm that some of them are exciting places to set up a tripod and try to balance the choice between the image and self-preservation! The quieter valley and river scenes have a certain tranquillity and a number of infrared images add variety to this lovely collection. At £15 it is a snip!

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