

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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GRAFFITI PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRASSAI TO BE ON VIEW AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A unique subject, the scrawls and pictures carved and drawn on building walls in Paris during the past 20 years is the theme of an exhibition of photographs by the famous French artist, Brassai, on view at the Museum of Modern Art, from October 24 through January 6. Selected by Edward Steichen, LANGUAGE OF THE WALL: PARISIAN GRAFFITI PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRASSAI consists of approximately 120 photographs.

Graffiti, an Italian word meaning scribblings or scratchings, are rudely scratched inscriptions and figure drawings, found on rocks, walls, vases and other objects. Graffiti from the past have been used as a guide to archeologists, and scholars of language evolution, but are chiefly valuable for the light they throw on the everyday life of the 'man in the street' of the period, and for the intimate details of customs and institutions of people in a particular time and place.

It is this aspect of the subject that interests Brassai who feels that graffiti give a spontaneous testimony as to the character and life of an epoch and who for two decades has been collecting "these ephemeral and savage flowers of art, blooming everywhere on the walls of Paris' boroughs."

Commenting on the exhibition, Mr. Steichen says:

This exhibition stands as a postscript to the memorable group of 64 Brassai photographs exhibited here at the Museum in 1951, wherein his robust curiosity about the every-dayness of life produced a vivid portrayal of Paris and Parisians. Here he takes us with him prowling around Paris where for over a period of 20 years he has looked at the images scratched on the walls of Paris by many anonymous youngsters. Brassai the photographer sees these graffiti just as he has seen people and places. Like his other photographs, these images come to life with an existence of their own. Here is evidence that youngsters have had their imaginations stimulated by the weathered aspect of a wall's surface or by accidental or deliberate mutilation. I believe the visual image, as children and young people see it in films, in the magazines, in newspapers - the comic strips, on Paris kiosks, has had an influence on young minds, interesting them not only in the shapes and patterns but also in the emotional expression these images may have. Brassai has obviously been impressed with how many of these graffiti begin with two holes in the wall, and he has found and photographed many faces so that the eyes create an extraordinarily dramatic impact.

With the extent and quality of this work, Brassai opens up a new horizon in the field of photography, one which has been scarcely explored by photographers and presents an example to other photographers who are willing to devote their interest and artistry to fresh revelations of the world's art. To the host of amateur photographers, this field offers a professional outlook as well as a substitute for indiscriminate snap-shottery or inane pictorialism.

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Brassai has divided his photographs into five categories, according to the subjects he found: faces, magic, death, love, animals. Most of the faces Brassai photographed are dominated by two deep holes used as eyes with other features scratched in varying ways into the wall. The diversity of drawing is illustrated by the different kinds of expressions these faces appear to have--sad, fierce, comic. Drawings characterized by Brassai as Magic include variations on devils, faces that resemble our Halloween pumpkins and witches. Death is represented by a series of drawings of a skull and cross-bones, ranging from extremely detailed pictures to an abstraction consisting simply of two crossed lines, each ending in a knob. Love is a pierced heart and birds and beasts and fish are both imaginary and real, or sometimes a fantastic combination of people and animals, or of animals alone.

Presumably drawn by Parisian children of various ages, (graffiti are usually scrawls by boys, street idlers, the casual 'Tripper,' according to the Encyclopedia Britannica), Brassai's photographs of these graffiti bring to us and preserve a unique aspect of everyday life.

Brassai, born in 1899 in Brasso, an old town in Transylvania, first wanted to be a painter. (His given name is Gyla Halasz; Brassai means from Brasso). After studying art in Budapest and Berlin, he went to Paris where he became interested in journalism, then in photography. In 1933 he published 'Paris de Nuit,' a widely admired book of photographs. In London, the Batsford Gallery organized an exhibition of his photographs. During the occupation of France, encouraged by his friend Picasso, Brassai took up drawing and a limited edition of his drawings was published in 1946 accompanied by a poem by Jacques Prevert. At this time he also executed photographic decors for the ballet, 'Le Rendez-Vous,' and for the play, 'En Passant.'

The exhibition was installed in the Auditorium Gallery by Kathleen Haven, Museum staff member.

Publicity prints and additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, Circle 5-8900.