



The Art of Street Photography

Street Photography
and the Decisive Moment

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01 The Magnum Approach

“What’s special about Magnum is the variety of voices in the group, in the collective. So, if you talk about street photography for Magnum you actually are talking about something that is extremely plural. Street photography at Magnum is not one thing that you can define very easily. I think you have to look at everybody case by case and look at what street photography meant for each and every one of them.”

– **Pauline Vermare**

With a history spanning more than 100 years, the genre of street photography is an established and revered practice. Magnum has a deep-rooted relationship with the genre, from the pioneering Henri Cartier-Bresson’s notion of “the decisive moment” to notable contemporary photographers reimagining what street photography can be. There is no singular approach, rather a diversity of unique voices each working to their own vision; from Cartier-Bresson’s wanderings to the vivid social satire of Martin Parr. Throughout the Magnum archives there are myriad approaches and a plethora of visions of what constitutes the genre from the charming and light-hearted to the visceral and vital, from those who maneuver through crowded streets, to those who take a slower approach.

Trent Parke
Australia, 1998.



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Defining Street Photography

“Street photography can be virtually anything at all.”

– **Peter van Agtmael**

“I think every photographer should define what the street means to them in their own way. There’s no one way of defining street photography”

– **Carolyn Drake**

While the term “street photography” is widely used, there is in fact no clear, single and absolute, definition of what constitutes street photography. The term “street” is ambiguous. While it often evokes images of photographers pacing the sidewalk, weaving through traffic, ducking and diving while making “images a la sauvette” (Cartier-Bresson’s original phrase to describe street photographs, images on the run), the “street” can be anywhere in the public realm, indoors or out. It can occur in the smallest village or the largest city, or even in a conflict zone.

“My street photography is grounded in real people doing real things, and my observing them, reacting to them and trying to squeeze them into a rectangle.”

– **Richard Kalvar**

For many, it is grounded in the candid tradition of photography; of “real people, doing real things” as described by Richard Kalvar. For others, the street represents a space to find individuals to engage with and photograph.

At its core, so-called ‘street’ photography is about chance encounters in public spaces; being in the world, discovering things. It is, as Chris Boot says, about “improvising, thinking, responding, dealing with people...discovering pictures in public settings, as distinct from planning pictures...You’re open to the possibilities around you”. It can also be about the presence of the street, and what that represents: humanity, society (and its issues), architectural forms and much more.

“I go out into the world and I don’t know what I’m going to discover. I don’t know what I’m going to find around the next corner. I don’t know what kind of pictures I’m going to come back with when I return. And I think that, for me, might be a much broader, more helpful definition of what street photography is.”

– **Mark Power**

“I don’t think there’s any real definition of street photography. There’s a feeling of the street...It can be a photograph with people, or without people. When I see it, I know it.”

– **Bruce Gilden**

There is no one definition, no one ‘right’ way, as exemplified by the variety of approaches, represented within the history of photography. Working strictly in line with tradition, categories or “pigeon holes” as Bruce Gilden calls them, can be extremely limiting, when in truth the ‘street’ can offer endless opportunities to make different kinds of photographs. As alluded to by Peter van Agtmael, the beauty of the street is in the “unexpectedness of the encounters.” The key is to establish a personal definition for what the street means, and to be innovative, bringing a unique vision and new ideas to challenge the genre’s traditions.

“There is a tradition in photography about this genre. It’s changed, new people come on the scene and different people add different things, from Bruce Gilden, Joel Meyerowitz, Eamonn Doyle, these photographers have added a perspective that’s very personal, very fresh and very different to this genre. It’s constantly being reinvented, which keeps it exciting.”

– **Martin Parr**

Bruce Davidson
New York, 1980.



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Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Decisive Moment

Henri Cartier-Bresson

“To take a photograph is to align the head, the eye and the heart. It’s a way of life”

Born in Chanteloup-en-Brie, France, Henri Cartier-Bresson developed a strong fascination with painting early on, and particularly with Surrealism. In 1932, after spending a year in the Ivory Coast, he discovered the Leica – his camera of choice from that moment on – and started a life-long journey within photography. In 1933, he had his first exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. He later made films with Jean Renoir.

Made a prisoner of war in 1940, he escaped on his third attempt - in 1943 - and subsequently joined an underground organization to assist prisoners and escapees. In 1945, he photographed the liberation of Paris with a group of professional journalists and then filmed the documentary *Le Retour* (The Return).

In 1947, with Robert Capa, George Rodger, David 'Chim' Seymour and William Vandivert, he founded Magnum Photos. After three years spent travelling in Asia, in 1952, he returned to Europe, where he published his first book, *Images à la Sauvette* (published in English as *The Decisive Moment*). He explained his approach to photography in these terms: "For me the camera is a sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity, the master of the instant which, in visual terms, questions and decides simultaneously. It is by economy of means that one arrives at simplicity of expression."

From 1968, he began to curtail his photographic activities, preferring to concentrate on drawing and painting. In 2003, with his wife and daughter, he created the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in Paris for the preservation of his work. Cartier-Bresson received an extraordinary number of prizes, awards, and honorary doctorates. He died at his home in Provence on 3 August 2004, a few weeks short of his 96th birthday.



Henri Cartier-Bresson
Greece, 1961

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An interview with Agnès Sire, Artistic Director of the Foundation Cartier-Bresson

Who was Henri Cartier-Bresson?

That's a big question. I think he was a very multifaceted person, which is clear in his photography. He was a nuanced person. He was a surrealist, a political activist, a reporter, a painter, an artist. I don't think one specific personality can be used to define this character, whom I had the luck of getting to know and meeting regularly from the year 1982 onwards, which was the year I joined Magnum Photos.

He was a little impulsive — very free — and thanks to his talent, was very quickly able to stand out in his trade. He took pictures of what interested him. He was a hugely cultured person, who was infinitely curious, who read tons, who was friends with the most famous painters from various eras, who knew people like Matisse, Bonnard.

What was unique about his vision and sensibility as a photographer?

Well, just like there isn't one Cartier-Bresson — one single person — his vision was extremely multifaceted as well. The [man] who was walking around aimlessly in Europe in the 1930's with André Pieyre de Mandiargues [the French writer] and Leonor Fini [an Argentinian surrealist painter, designer, illustrator, and author] is extremely different from the photographer in 1948/ 1949 in China who was photographing the arrival of communism and the fall of Kuomintang.

These are very different people with very different photographic styles. It's clear that he, as he would say, liked to "hit the pavement". For Cartier-Bresson photography was "à la sauvette" ["on the run"]. This well-known expression was the most apt for him in terms of photography, meaning he took photos running.

Cartier-Bresson's genius was having a frame — a notion of geometry — in his brain and in his eye. He used this a lot when he studied with André Lhote [a French cubist painter] and when he

looked at paintings, such as the works of Paolo Uccello [an Italian painter and mathematician who was notable for his pioneering work on visual perspective in art]. He spent hours at the Louvre looking at his work. He did that all of his life, and it formed his brain, so when he took a picture, the frame was obvious because that was something that came naturally to him. That was his strength because not everyone can take a picture like, for example, the photo at Saint-Lazare of a man jumping across a puddle, with his reflection in the puddle of water, and on the wall in the background, is a poster with a man jumping in the same position.

When we think that he took this photo behind a fence without being able to approach the subject completely, which he then had to frame, and that there is only one of them — it's just one single moment — you truly have to be able to judge distance simply by sight. That was one of his characteristics.



Henri-Cartier Bresson
Paris, France. 1932.



Henri-Cartier Bresson
France, 1932.

How the ‘decisive moment’ came to be...

To go back to this notion of an image “à la sauvette” [“on the run”]; that was something Cartier-Bresson liked because he enjoyed the idea of being a little thief—a little photo thief. And there were often scenes or statements where that was clear. For example, one day he photographed Yves Saint Laurent. He went to his home and Saint Laurent was extremely nervous. Henri Cartier-Bresson was looking at the paintings on the walls, in the library, and finally Saint Laurent said, “Okay, when are you going to take my portrait?”, and he said, “Oh I took it a long time ago.” He had pressed the shutter when he came into the room and that was it. So truly “à la sauvette”. He was not someone who set up a photograph.

This idea of images à la sauvette really encompassed him. In 1952, after returning from three years in Asia, he decided to make a book with the French art publisher Tériade. The book would bring together all the photos he had taken up until that point. Tériade was a magnificent editor, who focused on surrealism and painting,

but had never published photography. He decided to make a very large book with an original cover painted by Matisse depicting a photograph taken by Cartier-Bresson five years earlier. It was a book that was very expensive, that used heliogravure [otherwise known as photogravure, a printmaking technique], and the production quality was amazing.

He looked for an American co-editor, and settled upon Simon & Schuster. They made the book with Tériade, and then there was the question of the title. In French the title was *Images à la Sauvette* [*Images on the Run*] but the editor didn’t think that was catchy enough. In our archives, there is a whole series of titles that Cartier-Bresson proposed that are often linked to temporality, the loss of a moment; something more in line with loss. And there was also this notion of an indecisive instant. And, in the end, that was the title that the American publisher kept, *The Decisive Moment* which, in the end, stuck with him and became a sore spot for Cartier-Bresson. He found the expression much too limiting because while it is not wrong — you press the

shutter on the camera and there is a decisive moment — he was also very interested in psychoanalysis and the subconscious.

On the ‘rubble of the subconscious’ and the limitations of the ‘decisive moment’.

He talked a lot about what André Breton had taught him. He taught him to search through the rubble of the subconscious. Those are some pretty important things to know. It’s not just any photographer who thinks like that. And so, this notion of “the decisive moment” obscures all of that. It’s very precise, very literal. It doesn’t take into account all the different temporalities of photography, of the subconscious, of the past, of the day before. The temporality of the “decisive moment” is just a snap and then it’s finished. Whereas he thought that the temporality of photography was a search through the rubble of his memory, and that photography is created through all of that — everything that we are.

So there you have it. It’s not wrong. It was [very] catchy, because it’s an expression

that really stayed with Cartier-Bresson throughout his life, but as I said it is very limiting. And that’s too bad, and it’s mentioned everywhere. In France, we call it an “overplayed tune”.

I have a pretty funny memory when Martin Parr joined Magnum. He had just received a copy of the original book, *The Decisive Moment*, and asked Cartier-Bresson to sign it for him. The title stated *The Decisive Moment*, and Cartier-Bresson added “The More or Less Decisive Moment”.

The camera as a ‘sketchbook’

When Cartier-Bresson discovered the Leica camera in 1932, this Leica became the extension of his eye...it was a small device in his hand. He never put it around his shoulder, but with a band around his wrist. It was a little bit like a weapon. And he got this question a lot, it was published in a lot of books: “What does the camera represent to you?”.

He would say it could be a kiss, it could be a knife cut or a psychoanalyst’s armchair. It’s clear that he still kept in mind the

subconscious and aggression, because taking a picture can be aggressive. We also see that he thought of photography in a more tender sense, in symbiosis with the person; when he says it can be a kiss.

He also had the tendency of saying that “one must approach the subject with the stealth of a wolf and velvet gloves; no hurrying”. He would say [that] a fisherman would never throw a stone where he wants to catch a fish in the river. You have to do the exact same thing with photography.

What can photographers learn from Henri Cartier-Bresson?

I think that open-mindedness, curiosity, his way of approaching literature and painting, all of those are key ingredients in order to create something. Of course, you first have to have talent. If you don't have talent, don't bother. But, you have to cultivate talent. I think if you're a photographer, to only cultivate your talent with photography is pretty dull.

You have to read, you have to look at sculpture and paintings. That's how you

build this talent. Right now, you have to be involved. That was definitely something that Cartier-Bresson said pretty often. You have to be involved... you have to be engaged in what you see. Otherwise, the photos will not be good. You'll just do your job as an indifferent spectator. So, involvement—talent and involvement—are both things that hold a lot of weight.



Henri-Cartier Bresson
Italy. 1933.

Henri-Cartier Bresson
Spain, 1933.



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Further Reading

[Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Europeans](#)

[Henri Cartier-Bresson's Mexico](#)

[A Surreal Friendship: How Man Ray, Marcel Duchamp and Henri Cartier-Bresson riffed on each other's practices](#)

[India and the Death of Mahatma Gandhi: Henri Cartier-Bresson's classic photo-essay captured India at a critical time in its history](#)

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