

ARTslant Paris



Brassai, Pour l'amour de Paris
Brassai
Hôtel de Ville
5 rue de Lobau (4e), 75004 Paris, France
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Ode to Paris

by Briony Lewis

Hôtel de Ville is the proud host of a retrospective exhibition of Brassai's photography of his beloved Paris. The native Hungarian, Gyula Halasz, worked under the pseudonym 'Brassai', (referring to his hometown Brassó). Brassai moved to Paris in 1924 and never returned to his home country. From 1925 he was socialising with the likes of Eugène Atget, André Breton and Salvador Dalí amongst others, and in 1949 he was granted French nationality, making the tie to his adopted home official.

At the Hôtel de Ville, the exhibition is well balanced between positive and negative portrayals of the city in Brassai's work, providing a binary vision of the artist's own approach to a divisive city. An introductory essay supports these seemingly contrary representations: "Avec Brassai, c'est tout Paris qui s'illumine..." (With Brassai, all of Paris lights up). Both literally and metaphorically, Brassai highlighted the opposing personalities of Paris: the sensuous romanticism against the mysterious darker side; the fascinated spectators of circuses both complementing and contrasting with the

amusement entertainment of leering men at the Folies-Bergère and Chez Suzy; the nightclub La Vie Parisienne, which was owned by the gay singer and actress Suzy Solidor, incredibly popular from its opening in 1930.

Brassaï said himself that he sought to present the beauty of Paris through captured moments of everyday life and objects. We see the joie de vivre and naïveté of Paris in photographs of children holding hands and giggling, boys setting their first sailboat afloat in the fountain at Jardin du Luxembourg, the iconic images of young couples in love canoodling in bistro corners, and celebrations at the Tour Eiffel. These snapshots accumulate into a portrayal of Paris as a city full of possibilities.

For me the Paris de Nuit collection stands out above all. (Paris de Nuit was published as a book in 1932-3.) On his thematically sombre photography of the roaring twenties, Brassaï said that he wanted to “rid the eyes of that layer of habit and prejudice that has fouled them up.” The eerie scenes of deserted Paris are a reference to Atget, who proved a huge influence. The focus on the reality of Paris is mirrored in the approach in his photographic technique, as seen in Chez Suzy, La Présentation, which could easily be a reporter’s photograph. However, Brassaï was not enlightening his audience to a shocking hidden world. He presented this world to unravel taboos about this side of Paris, as real as the carefree canoodling couples.

This exhibition essentially demonstrates why Brassaï chose to live in Paris, encapsulating the spirit of this era of Paris and its duality, both objectively and subjectively, contrasting qualities inferring some hesitation in the perspective of the artist on a personal level as he spent more time and garnered a deeper understanding of the French capital. An essay in the exhibition summarises the overall sentiment of Brassaï’s photography: “Brassaï regarde toujours avec amour celle et ceux qui constituent l’humanité de Paris.” (Brassaï always handles with loving affection all that which makes up the humanity of Paris). Brassaï’s profound admiration of both sides of Paris is visible across his photographic work. There is deliberation rather than urgency, nothing is spontaneous, reflecting the character of the city itself: the seductive soothing rhythm of Parisian life sweeps you along in a half-intoxicated daze.