

## Frank Horvat's best shot: the seedy side of 1950s Paris

'Paris in the 1950s was poor and dilapidated, sordid and dirty. But it made for great photographs'

Interview by Karin Andreasson  
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In 1956, a [New York agency](#) asked me to do a sexy story for a US "men's magazine" about the nightlife of Paris, where I was living. I was 28 and had little money, so was glad to accept. I headed for [Place Pigalle](#) and asked nightclub doormen if they would let me in to photograph the girls in their dressing rooms. They all sent me away, and by 2am I'd had enough.

Then I came across The Sphinx, a shabby little place down a side street. It was named after the city's legendary 1930s brothel, famously photographed by [Brassai](#), who was on such good terms with the owners that he was allowed to watch the goings-on from behind a wall designed for voyeurs that was made out of one-way glass. I gave the doorman a huge tip – a 5,000-franc note – and he let me in.

I was thrilled. I was a young man and the place excited me. The girls were friendly at first. It made a change having someone like me around, but after about 15 minutes one shouted: "What do you pay?" I'd spent all my money so had to leave, but I'd been photographing fast and had about five rolls. Luckily, the magazine liked what I had. One shot was even used in *Vogue*, across a double-page.

I don't know if the man is a businessman or a tourist, but the main thing is that he's alone and drinking champagne. It doesn't look like he's having a great time, but he makes the shot. The terrible painting behind adds to the atmosphere – it was so of

its time. As the stripper walked past under the lights, her naked body was very over-exposed: she looks like a marble sculpture. A lot of things came together in this shot. I didn't make it, really – it was given to me. I could never take it again, even if someone paid me a million pounds to try.

[Robert Doisneau](#) and the so-called humanist photographers heavily romanticised 1950s Paris. It didn't look like their shots. It was poor and dilapidated. Pigalle was in all the songs and poems, but it was not a nice place. It was sordid and dirty. But that kind of thing can make great photographs, too.

When I look at this picture, it is as though my grandfather took it. It is so far away, so much time has passed. I am lucky enough to have been photographing from the 1950s until now. I have, following all the incredible things that have taken place. It isn't just the world that has changed – the very meaning of photography has changed, too. I used to try to take pictures of things that were special, but photography is everywhere now. And nothing is special any more.