



Exhibition

Henri Cartier-Bresson. Le Grand Jeu

BnF | François-Mitterrand | Galerie 2
13th april - 22nd august 2021

The BnF is set to introduce the French public to « Henri Cartier-Bresson. Le Grand Jeu » (Henri Cartier Bresson. The Great Game), a unique project centred on the photographer's Master Collection. The exhibition is the fruit of an exceptional collaboration between the Bibliothèque nationale de France and Pinault Collection, with assistance from the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson. Following a first airing last autumn at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, it is to be presented in Paris, with a scenographic itinerary specially adapted to the BnF's layout.

An ensemble created in 1973 by the artist himself at the request of his friends and collectors Dominique and John de Ménéil, the Master Collection brings together « the best possible prints of Cartier-Bresson's 385 best photographs ». 6 editions of the Collection were printed and distributed across the world¹, providing a remarkable overview of the photographer's body of work.

The exhibition « Henri Cartier-Bresson. Le Grand Jeu » submits the Master Collection to the viewpoints of five guest curators, all of whom have close connections with photography in common : François Pinault, collector, the photographer Annie Leibovitz, the writer Javier Cercas, the film director Wim Wenders, and Sylvie Aubenas, heritage curator at the BnF. No monograph, theme, geographic area or chronology in this exhibition, but rather a confrontation of five points of view on the work of the « eye of the century », revealed in the course of an unparalleled architectural walkabout.

¹ The 6 editions of the Master Collection are now conserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the University of Fine Arts in Osaka, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Menil collection in Houston, and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation and now Pinault Collection in Paris.

The rules of the game / five installations

As the exhibition's chief curator Matthieu Humery explains, "The Great Game – a title somewhat reminiscent of the element of chance so dear to the surrealists – is first of all a reference to the artist's choice. The term has more than one meaning, though, and can also evoke entertainment and recreation. And finally, the notion may refer to all the rules we have to submit to, "compliance with the game". But, above all, [in the French version of the title] "jeu" (game) is also and above all a homophone of "je" (I). Hence, a true exquisite corpse, the Great I is glorified, first of all through the tribute paid here to one man's body of work, and also through the visual expression of each curator's self, which is necessarily manifested in the game they have created."

The rules of this particular game are simple enough : the five co-curators each had to select fifty of the artist's images. Selection was limited to Cartier-Bresson's picks for the Master Collection. None of the curators were aware of the others' choices. The scenography, framing and colour of the hanging rails – all such exhibition components were left to the curators' absolute discretion. Hence, each area is an exhibition in its own right, independent of the others. Free to go their own way, each of the five curators delivers their own story and feelings, revealing the role that these images have taken on in their own work and life. Each of the five installations immerses the visitor in a particular aspect of the photographer's and his curator's world.

Henri Cartier-Bresson and the BnF

Henri Cartier-Bresson's earliest contacts with the Bibliothèque nationale de France date back to the 1950s. Jean Adhémar, the then Director of the BnF's Department of Prints, wanted to develop the Library's photographic collections and in doing so established friendly relations with a good many photographers, including Brassai and Man Ray, from whom he had acquired some excellent prints for the institution. Hence, in 1959, the Department of Prints' reading-room provided the venue for a small exhibition based on a Henri Cartier-Bresson photo report on the Americans. Cartier-Bresson went on to present the BnF with several panels, extracts from his various exhibitions. But the most significant acquisition took place in 1976 with the addition of one of the few editions of the Master Collection to the Library's collections. In 2003, on the occasion of the retrospective "De qui s'agit-il ?" (Who Might That Be?) held at BnF | François-Mitterrand, this already impressive ensemble was complemented by the addition of modern prints included in the exhibition. As a result, the BnF now houses one of the world's largest collections of Henri Cartier-Bresson's photographs.

Photography at the BnF

On 6 September 1851, Louis-Désiré Blanquart-Évrard paid an unsolicited visit to the Bibliothèque Nationale to deposit the very first photographs he had produced. Today, thanks to voluntary application of legal deposit, donations, artists' generosity and numerous acquisitions, the BnF's houses one of the world's leading collections, standing out for its age and size alike. The BnF conserves a collection of almost 5 million items, from the origins of photography to the present day. In addition to the pioneers of the 19th century (Niépce, Nadar, Le Gray, Atget, etc.), it takes good care of the works of over 5,200 modern and contemporary French and foreign photographers. The BnF's proactive acquisition policy also confirms the institution's support for photographers currently working in France.

The Library wasted no time in making good use of its collections of photographs. Through its exhibitions, the public were introduced to the works of Winogrand, Arbus and Larry Clark in the 1970s, and Stéphane Couturier, Antoine d'Agata, Raymond Depardon, Roger Ballen and Sophie Calle more recently. In 2018, the BnF organised the first major exhibition devoted to the three Nadars. And for the 2020-2021 season, the BnF has made full use of its photographic collections through a series of remarkable exhibitions and collaborations within and outside its walls: Ruines by Josef Koudelka (at the BnF); Girault de Prangey photographe at Musée d'Orsay, and Noir et Blanc, une esthétique de la photographie at the Grand Palais, before Henri Cartier-Bresson's outstanding Grand Jeu and discovery of the photographer Paul Ickovic's work at BnF | François-Mitterrand.

The Pinault Collection and photography

The collection that François Pinault has been amassing for over 40 years currently comprises over 10,000 works, with a particular focus on art from the 1960s to the present. Wishing to share his love of the art of his day with as many people as possible, François Pinault came up with an open-ended cultural project distinguished by a lasting commitment to artists and contemporary scenes, an ongoing exploration of new creative territories, museum activity in Venice and Paris, a programme of offsite exhibitions and support for the history of contemporary art. Photography has been a major focus of the Pinault Collection since 2006. From Berenice Abbott to Cindy Sherman, Irving Penn to LaToya Ruby Frazier, via Roni Horn and Boris Mikhaïlov, successive exhibitions bear witness to the creation of a benchmark corpus and openness to a wide variety of generations, origins and practices. As large ensembles are given priority, the collection acquired one of the six editions of Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Master Collection" in 2014 : an ensemble of 385 photographs selected by the photographer in 1973 at the request of his friends and collectors John and Dominique de Menil. Cartier-Bresson considered it to be one of his most significant ensembles. It provides a remarkable overview of the intimate but universal body of work produced by "the eye of the century" and is of major historical and artistic importance in the widest possible sense.

Exhibition

Henri Cartier-Bresson. Le Grand Jeu

Exhibition at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, co-organised with Pinault Collection-Palazzo Grassi, in collaboration with the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson

13th april - 22nd august 2021

Galerie 2
BnF I François-Mitterrand
Quai François Mauriac, Paris XIII^e

Tuesday to Saturday 10 am > 19 pm
Sunday 13 pm > 19 pm
Closed on Mondays and public holidays

Admission 9 euros, reduced rate 7 euros – reservation recommended on bnf.tickeasy.com and via the FNAC network

Admission free for Reading/Culture Pass and Research Pass holders – reservation recommended on bnf.tickeasy.com

Head curator

Matthieu Humery, photography specialist, photography advisor to Pinault Collection

Curators

Sylvie Aubenas, Director of the BnF's Department of Prints and Photography

Javier Cercas, writer

Annie Leibovitz, photographer

François Pinault, collector

Wim Wenders, film director

The exhibition project's Scientific Advisor

Agnès Sire, Artistic Director of the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson

Publication

Henri Cartier-Bresson. Le Grand Jeu

Trilingual edition (French, English and Italian), 304 pages, 60 euros

Co-edition Marsilio Editori, Palazzo Grassi - Punta della Dogana and BnF

In partnership with Arte, Le Monde, Connaissance des arts, Le Point & France Inter

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Pictures :

1/ Henri Cartier-Bresson *Derrière la Gare Saint-Lazare, Place de l'Europe, Paris, France, 1932.*

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2/ Henri Cartier-Bresson *Couronnement du roi George VI, Trafalgar Square, Londres, Angleterre, 12 mai 1937.*

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3/ Henri Cartier-Bresson *Alberto Giacometti, Rue d'Alésia, Paris, France, 1961.*

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