

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**HIGH MUSEUM TO HOST RETROSPECTIVE OF ICONIC
20TH-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHER HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON**

Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century
February 19–May 29, 2011

ATLANTA, February 16, 2011 – The High Museum of Art will host “Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century,” the first major retrospective in the U.S. in more than 30 years of one of photography’s most original and influential masters. The exhibition is organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, and will be on view from February 19 through May 29, 2011. The exhibition comprises more than 250 photographs dating from 1929 to 1989—at least one-fifth of which are previously unknown to the public—and focuses on the photographer’s most productive decades, the 1930s through the 1960s. Also included is a generous selection of original issues of *Life*, *Paris Match* and other magazines in which many of the photographs first appeared.



Cartier-Bresson’s uncanny talent for seizing lasting images from the flux of experience, long identified with the title of his book “The Decisive Moment” (1952), made him a leading figure both in photography’s experimental modernism of the 1930s and the very different realm of photojournalism after World War II. “Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century” offers a fresh overview of that complex achievement by drawing upon a great deal of previously inaccessible information and images from the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris, which was established in 2002, two years before the photographer’s death at the age of 95, and which has generously lent 220 prints to the exhibition.

“Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century” is organized into 13 sections, beginning with 34 prints drawn from Cartier-Bresson’s work of the early 1930s, when the young Surrealist rebel used the quickness and mobility of his handheld Leica camera to invent a new brand of creative magic. Several of his early pictures celebrate motion by freezing it, such as “Behind the Gare Saint-Lazare, Paris” (1932), in which a leaping man is forever fixed just before his heel touches the water that reflects his silhouette. Other pictures utterly transform reality, reinventing the life of the street as Surrealist theatre, more mysterious and compelling than the world we know. In “Valencia, Spain” (1933), for example, a boy gazes upward at a ball he has tossed; because the ball is out of the picture’s frame, the boy is transformed into a figure of rapture.

The prints that constitute the following section introduce Cartier-Bresson’s long career in photojournalism, focusing on the aftermath of World War II and profound political and social transformations in Asia, where he worked from 1947 to 1950. After the war, during which he spent nearly three years as a prisoner of the Nazis, Cartier-Bresson found in photojournalism a productive framework for his passionate engagement with the rapidly changing world. Instead of mystery and

magic, he now sought clarity and completeness, forging a style that could sum up a story or situation by framing a small number of characters in a scene of stunning simplicity. In “Shanghai, China” (1948) the upheaval of the Chinese revolution is vividly evoked through the panic of a crowd desperate to retrieve gold from the bank before the city falls to the Communists. The accompanying display of magazines presents issues of *Life*, *Paris Match* and *Illustrated*, in which Cartier-Bresson’s Shanghai bank panic photographs appeared, along with his nine-page *Life* story on Beijing.

The remaining eleven sections are organized thematically rather than chronologically, with the third, fourth and fifth chapters exploring the photographer’s evocations of age-old patterns of life in Asia, throughout Europe and the West and in his native France. Born at a time when the automobile and the airplane were still in their infancy, Cartier-Bresson was deeply attached to social and cultural customs untouched by modern industry and commerce, and many of his best pictures could have been made hundreds of years prior, had photography existed. His alertness to concrete cultural particulars saves his work from the pitfalls of sentimental tourism as he traveled around the globe observing such scenes as a polite exchange between old friends on the street in Beijing (1948), two women and a child scrubbing the sidewalk in a Dutch town (Kampen, The Netherlands, 1956) and a fishmonger selling her wares at the market in the Rue Longue, Marseille (1954). Instead of untouched nature, his landscapes always evoke the presence of man, be it in the carefully tended rice paddies of Sumatra, Indonesia (1950), the undulating farmland of Castille, Spain (1953), or an avenue of plane trees in his native country (Brie, France, 1968).

The exhibition next turns to the new worlds of the United States and the Soviet Union. Cartier-Bresson photographed more extensively in the United States than in any other country except for his native France, but his American pictures are among his least well known. In principle, the clarity and balance of Cartier-Bresson’s postwar style went hand in hand with a posture of neutral observation. But his image of the United States incorporates a distinctly critical thread, alert to American vulgarity, greed and racism. Following the death of Josef Stalin in 1953, Cartier-Bresson was the first Western photographer to be admitted to the Soviet Union. The pictures he made in the summer of 1954 were news themselves, and were widely published in magazines. When he returned nearly two decades later in 1972 and 1973, he added a new dimension—grim, barren and bleak—to his images of Soviet life.

The photo-essay—a group of pictures about a single subject, usually accompanied by captions—was a staple of photojournalism throughout Cartier-Bresson’s career, and the next two sections of the exhibition feature two such essays in abbreviated form. In 1958 Cartier-Bresson undertook an ambitious campaign to photograph China’s “Great Leap Forward,” Mao Tse-tung’s intensive program of forced industrialization. Beginning in mid-June, he worked steadily for four months in China, and although he was closely monitored by the authorities, he returned with a very substantial body of work. *Life*’s version of the story (on view in this section) was typical of many other versions around the globe, for it devoted nearly half of its 17 pages to splashy color images at the expense of the quieter but more informative black-and-white photographs. Apart from a small paperback published in 1964, “China as seen by Henri Cartier-Bresson,” this exhibition is the first in-depth presentation of the black-and-white pictures.

The second photo-essay on view arose from a commission to illustrate the 1960 annual report of Bankers Trust Company in New York. At the time the informal, small-camera style of photography that had been popularized by the magazines began to appear regularly in the annual reports of American corporations, and the assignment granted Cartier-Bresson access to the inner workings of the bank, which would have been otherwise hard to penetrate. Neither Chinese communism nor American capitalism conformed to Cartier-Bresson’s idea of a just society; yet he carefully studied

the specific activities of individuals, and described them patiently without resorting to rhetorical effect. Only the bosses are regarded with a skeptical eye.

The exhibition continues with a selection of 34 portraits that reveal Cartier-Bresson as one of the great portraitists of the twentieth century. Throughout his far-flung travels he was alert to every opportunity to add to his pantheon of notable people—mostly artists and writers—which eventually numbered nearly 1,000. He preferred to picture his sitters at home, and when asked how long the session would take, he liked to answer, “Longer than the dentist, but shorter than the psychoanalyst.” Sitters photographed in France just before and after World War II include Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus. Cartier-Bresson’s tour of the United States in 1947 yielded lasting portraits of William Faulkner and Truman Capote, among others. Later portraits that evoke a keen alertness to telling gestures include George Balanchine, New York City (1959), Louis Kahn, Philadelphia (1961), and Coco Chanel, Paris (1964).

A brief section of 10 photographs that feature Cartier-Bresson’s eye for beauty and his talent for transforming the most banal subjects into elegant images includes photographs made at The Museum of Modern Art and at an Easter Parade in Harlem, both in 1947. The subsequent section samples Cartier-Bresson’s sensitive observations of encounters and gatherings of all kinds in the lively theater of the street, beginning with simple groups such as two friends chatting beside a newsstand (Naples, Italy, 1960), a pair of French farmers in a heated argument (Mende, Lozère, France, 1968) and a young couple asleep on a train (Romania, 1975). A 1937 photograph of eccentric Londoners at the coronation of King George VI is drawn from one of Cartier-Bresson’s earliest assignments, during which he inaugurated a lifelong strategy of ignoring the main event to study the spectators. A horserace in Cairo in 1950, a football game in Michigan in 1960 and the inauguration of French President François Mitterand in 1981 are among other scenes to which he applied this strategy.

The exhibition concludes with a section devoted to Cartier-Bresson’s explorations of the often unlovely rise of modernity—mechanization, commerce, consumerism and leisure—around the globe. Despite his affection for preindustrial cultures, Cartier-Bresson did not shrink from observing the rapidly changing world, and as a consequence his work as a whole embodies a historical panorama as broad as the geographical range of his travels. Among the final images of the exhibition are scenes of contemporary relaxation (Country Club, Aguascalientes, Mexico, 1963), including a Club Med gathering in Corsica, France in 1963, a picnic in Japan during a reenactment of a Samurai scene (Nikko, Japan, 1965) and a rodeo in Los Angeles in 1960, at which an American cowboy—once the symbol of grit and pioneering independence—finds himself playing his guitar in a parking lot. The pictures suggest that comfort and convenience may have made things easier, but perhaps not better.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) was a French photographer considered to be the father of modern photojournalism, an early adopter of 35mm format and the master of candid photography. He helped develop the “street photography” or “real life reportage” style that has influenced subsequent generations of photographers. His work of the early 1930s helped define the artistic potentials of modern photography. A decade later, after surviving three years as a prisoner of war, Cartier-Bresson emerged from World War II determined to use his camera to engage a world in the midst of profound change. In 1947 he joined Robert Capa and others to found the Magnum photo agency, and by the mid-1950s Cartier-Bresson had produced several major bodies of reportage. For more than 25 years he was the keenest observer of the global theater of human affairs, and one of the great portraitists of the twentieth century. In 1968 he began to turn away from photography and

return to his passion for drawing and painting. Cartier-Bresson withdrew as a principal of Magnum in 1966 to concentrate on portraiture and landscapes. He retired from photography in the early 1970s.

Exhibition Organization and Support

“Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Modern Century” will be on view at the High Museum of Art from February 19 to May 29, 2011 and is organized by Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art. This exhibition is made possible by Mr. and Mrs. Robert A. Yellowlees, Dorothy Smith Hopkins Exhibition Endowment and Massey Charitable Trust.

High Museum of Art

The High Museum of Art, founded in 1905 as the Atlanta Art Association, is the leading art museum in the southeastern United States. With more than 12,000 works of art in its permanent collection, the High Museum of Art has an extensive anthology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American and decorative art; significant holdings of European paintings; a growing collection of African American art; and burgeoning collections of modern and contemporary art, photography and African art. The High is also dedicated to supporting and collecting works by Southern artists and is distinguished as the only major museum in North America to have a curatorial department specifically devoted to the field of folk and self-taught art. The High’s media arts department produces acclaimed annual film series and festivals of foreign, independent and classic cinema. In November 2005 the High opened three new buildings designed by architect Renzo Piano that more than doubled the Museum’s size, creating a vibrant “village for the arts” at the Woodruff Arts Center in midtown Atlanta. For more information about the High, please visit www.High.org.

The Woodruff Arts Center

The Woodruff Arts Center is ranked among the top four arts centers in the nation. The Woodruff is unique in that it combines four visual and performing arts divisions on one campus as one not-for-profit organization. Opened in 1968, the Woodruff Arts Center is home to the Alliance Theatre, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the High Museum of Art and Young Audiences. To learn more about the Woodruff Arts Center, please visit www.woodruffcenter.org.

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