



Education Resource Kit

Year Levels 7–12

Exhibition: Brassäi: Secret Paris

Dates: 25 July – 15 November 2026

Heide venue: Main Galleries

Exhibition Curators: Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais, Lesley Harding and Philippe Ribeyrolles



Couple d'amoureux dans un petit café c. 1932

Couple in love in a small café

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Brassaï: Secret Paris – Exhibition Introduction

This exhibition brings together more than 150 works from across the career of Brassai, the celebrated artist–photographer whose images reveal the hidden poetry of everyday life and offer a fascinating visual journey into the intimate world of Paris from the 1930s.

Born Gyula Halász in Transylvania in 1899, he adopted the pseudonym Brassai (meaning ‘from Brassó’, the name of his hometown) in 1924, when he settled in the French capital. By this time Paris was alive with cultural innovation and intellectual exchange and had become the centre of the international avant garde, attracting artists, writers, musicians and thinkers from around the globe. Yet while many of them sought to capture the glamour and spectacle of the modern metropolis, Brassai was drawn to its hidden dimensions. Often working often at night, he wandered the streets, boulevards, cafes and bars of Montparnasse and beyond, documenting the city that existed beyond the view of conventional society.

The photographs that resulted are among the most iconic images of the period. Through dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, carefully observed details and atmospheric effects, Brassai unveiled Paris as a place of mystery, drama, and shared human experience. He approached his subjects with curiosity and respect, whether photographing workers, lovers, performers, prostitutes or passers-by, or his renowned friends and contemporaries, including Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Miller and Kiki de Montparnasse.

Nearly a century after many of these works were made, Brassai remains one of the defining photographic voices of modernism and a true chronicler of his era, and of the city that inspired his most enduring achievements.

Notes for Teachers



Couple au bal musette des Quatre saisons 1932

Couple at the Musette Dance Hall of the Four Seasons 1932

This education resource is designed to support gallery visits and classroom learning for students in Years 7–12. It draws upon texts published in the exhibition catalogue *Brassai: Secret Paris*, including essays by Philippe Ribeyrolles, Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais and Lesley Harding, as well as exhibition wall texts, and an interview with Harding about curating and exhibition design.

Themes explored throughout the resource include photography and storytelling, modernism, Surrealism, portraiture, artistic influence, observation and memory. Students are encouraged to consider photography not simply as a tool for recording reality, but as a creative medium capable of transforming the everyday into something imaginative.

The discussion questions in this resource are designed to encourage close observation and critical thinking. Drawing on the Victorian Curriculum Arts viewpoints framework, they invite students to explore Brassai's photographs from multiple perspectives.

Through personal, cultural and structural viewpoints, students are encouraged to consider how meaning is created in artworks, how artists communicate ideas, and how audiences bring their own experiences to the interpretation of visual images. The questions support students to develop confidence in discussing art, while also fostering empathy, imagination and creative inquiry.

Biography



Autoportrait, Brassai photographant la nuit boulevard Blaquy 1931-32

Self-portrait, Brassai photographing boulevard Blanqui at night, 1931-32

Brassai was born Gyula Halász in Brassó, Transylvania (now Braşov, Romania), in 1899. After studying art in Budapest and Berlin, he moved permanently to Paris in 1924. Initially working as a journalist and writer, he began using photography to illustrate his articles before embracing it as his primary artistic medium.

His influential book *Paris de nuit (Paris by Night)*, published in 1933 established his international reputation. Over the following decades he photographed artists, writers, workers, performers, city streets and anonymous graffiti, while also working as a filmmaker, sculptor, illustrator and author. Brassai died in France in 1984, leaving behind one of the most influential photographic records of twentieth-century Paris.

Paris by Night



Les Champs-Élysées c. 1937

Brassai's reputation was founded on his photographs of Paris after dark. At a time when most photography was undertaken during the day, he embraced the technical challenges of working at night. Using long exposures, glass negatives and carefully controlled compositions, he transformed familiar streets, monuments and public spaces into mysterious and atmospheric scenes.

For Brassai, night was not merely darkness. It was another way of seeing. Street lights, fog, rain and reflections changed the appearance of the city, revealing details and moods invisible during the day. His celebrated photographs of Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, cafes and deserted streets helped redefine the possibilities of photography.

Paris by Night – exhibition wall text

Views of Paris illuminated by gas lamps and streetlights would provide Brassai with his earliest inspiration—an urban landscape and its people cloaked in the transformative atmosphere of the night amidst a backdrop of modernisation and cultural change. Winding through the city streets, his gaze would fix upon and dart between subjects—fellow night owls, the shimmering monuments of the City of Light, its cobblestones sometimes slick with rain—and landmarks shrouded in fog and silhouetted by soft ethereal light.

Taking his first photographs in 1929 on a camera borrowed from a friend, Brassai had purchased his own professional equipment by 1930: a tripod-based Voigtländer Bergheil camera using 6.5 x 9 cm glass plates. His adoption of photography as a medium and method coincided with a period of significant experimentation and technical advancement in the field. Self-taught, he approached the technical challenges of shooting at night with ingenuity and sustained practice. His meticulous work would continue in the darkroom as he studied, translated, and shaped his images through the creative and chemical alchemy of developing and printing them.

On his night-time strolls Brassai began to develop a portrait of the city through his lens that would become emblematic of Paris in the 1930s. A selection of his early nocturnal photographs would be collated and published in his first photo book *Paris de nuit (Paris by Night)* in 1933. The publication was met with acclaim and secured the young artist's reputation as a master of night photography, heralding his name to an international audience.

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Personal Viewpoint

- How do Brassai's photographs taken at night make you feel?
- What memories or experiences does it remind you of?
- Have you ever experienced a familiar place differently at night?

Cultural Viewpoint

- What do these images reveal about life in Paris during the 1930s?
- Why might city life at night have fascinated modern artists?
- What aspects of society become visible after dark?

Creative Practice

- If you photographed your own neighbourhood at night, what would you choose to document?
- How might darkness completely change a familiar place?

Structural Viewpoint

- How has Brassai used light and shadow?
- Where does your eye travel first within the composition?
- How does framing contribute to the image's meaning?
- How does the photographer create atmosphere?

Secret Paris



Pre Catelan, Masquerade Ball, Marie-Laure de Noailles and Leonor Finn 1946

Brassai was interested in aspects of Parisian life often overlooked by mainstream society. He photographed dance halls, cafés, performers, and night-time gathering places filled with diverse people and workers. Rather than presenting sensationalised images, he approached his subjects with respect, curiosity and empathy.

His photographs document an urban community and reveal the many lives that coexisted within the modern city. The resulting images are both documentary records and artistic interpretations of Parisian culture during the 1930s.

Secret Paris – exhibition wall text

At night, the labyrinthine streets of Paris would reveal hidden worlds to Brassai. Granted access to the city's lesser-known communities and spaces, Brassai masterfully captured the atmosphere of its glittering balls and the humanity of its fringes and underbelly. On the subject of his fascination with

this largely secret realm, he would write: 'I conducted a study of customs through photography, a social study of underground Paris'.

Where Brassai's photographs may first appear as spontaneous snapshots, upon closer inspection their deliberate compositions and thoughtful staging become apparent. The long exposures of his photographic technique and the technical challenges of shooting in low light were ill-suited to an impromptu approach. Rather, his studies of the city's secrets were styled through the creative eye of a storyteller. Scenes and characters were composed with careful consideration, his subjects usually aware of his presence and often willing participants.

The body of work Brassai developed reveals both essential honesty and constructed illusion, and a selection of images would later be published as *Le Paris secret des années 30 (The Secret Paris of the 1930s)* in 1976. His photographs of the private gatherings and intimate moments within the Folies Bergère, Le Monocle, Chez Suzy, and beyond, provide glimpses into another time and world that is at once real and dreamlike, resonant with the nostalgic mythology and bohemian energy of the city during the interwar period.

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Looking Closely

- What clues help you understand the relationships between people in the photograph?
- Does this image feel spontaneous or carefully arranged?
- What details help create a sense of place?

Personal Viewpoint

- Which character in the image draws your attention most strongly?
- Whose story would you most like to know?
- How do you think the subjects might have felt about being photographed?

Cultural Viewpoint

- Which aspects of Parisian life was Brassai choosing to reveal?
- Why might these subjects have been considered unusual or controversial at the time?
- How do these images challenge stereotypes about cities or urban life?

Structural Viewpoint

- How does Brassai use mirrors or reflections?
- What effect do multiple viewpoints create?
- How does the photograph encourage viewers to become observers?

Creative Practice

- How might you document hidden or overlooked aspects of your own community?
- What responsibility does a photographer have when representing other people's lives?

Paris by Day



Jeunes enfants au Jardin du Luxembourg c. 1930

Young children in the Luxembourg Gardens c. 1930

Brassaï was curious about the world around him. As he explored Paris with his camera, he looked closely at everyday scenes that other people might pass by without noticing. He believed that ordinary moments could tell important stories about a city and the people who live there.

His photographs encourage us to slow down and pay attention. By capturing real life as it happened, Brassaï showed that even familiar places can become interesting when viewed with curiosity and care. His images help us see Paris through the eyes of an observant photographer, and reveal his belief that everyday life could be both meaningful and beautiful.

Paris by Day – exhibition wall text

Long before he began living in Paris, Brassai developed a special appreciation for its rich heritage and vibrant street life. When he was just five years old, he spent a year in the French capital with his family when his father, a professor of French literature, was granted leave for a sabbatical. From this early discovery of Belle Époque Paris he retained some foundational images: the fountain in the Luxembourg Gardens where he sailed paper boats; the fashionable Bois de Boulogne; the mansions of the Champs-Élysées; and the grand boulevards lined with *fiacres* (horse-drawn carriages). These early impressions left a lasting imprint on his imagination and sparked his enduring attachment to the city.

Brassai became a collector of old Parisian images—he was fascinated by the documentary photographs of Eugène Atget and André Kertész, for example—and set about becoming an ‘image maker’, himself. Henry Miller wrote that ‘he was always on the *qui vive*, always sniffing the air, always poking into corners, always looking beyond you. Everything, literally, was of interest to him’. He found inspiration in the textures of the streetscape, in the everyday interactions of people, and in the otherwise insignificant details of ordinary life. ‘Nothing is finer or greater than reality itself’, he wrote in 1932, ‘why wrap it up in our own confused emotions?’

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Looking Closely

1. What details in the photograph tell you it was taken in Paris?
2. What can you learn about daily life from this image?
3. Which objects, buildings or people draw your attention first?

Personal Viewpoint

1. Imagine you are standing in this scene. What might you notice first?
2. What do you think makes this moment interesting to Brassai?
3. Does this photograph remind you of a place you know? Why or why not?

Cultural Viewpoint

1. What aspects of city life is Brassai documenting?
2. How might daily life in Paris during the 1930s be different from today?
3. Why is it important to record ordinary moments from everyday life?

Structural Viewpoint

1. How has Brassai arranged people, buildings or objects within the frame?
2. How do lines, shapes or patterns guide your eye through the image?
3. What role does light and shadow play in the photograph?

Creative Practice

1. Choose a familiar place in your community and photograph it as if you were seeing it for the first time. What details would you focus on?
2. How can photography help people notice and appreciate everyday moments?

Graffiti: The City Speaks



Série IV: Masques et visages – Les Roi-Soleil 1952

Series IV: Masks and Faces – The Sun King 1952

For decades Brassäi photographed graffiti carved, scratched and drawn onto the walls of Paris. Long before street art was widely recognised as an art form, he understood these anonymous marks as creative acts worthy of attention.

He carefully documented and classified hundreds of examples, believing they represented a universal human impulse to communicate through images. By isolating and photographing them, Brassai transformed temporary marks into enduring works of art. Today, his graffiti series is viewed as an important precursor to contemporary street art and urban visual culture.

Graffiti – exhibition wall text

Amidst his purposeful wanderings of Paris's streets, Brassai's curious eye was drawn to a language that seemed to emerge from the city's very walls. Graffiti comprising of symbols and figures appeared on myriad surfaces as coded language and pictorial poetry carved and embedded within the textures of the urban landscape. These spontaneous compositions, some expanding upon and responding to existing imperfections and mark making, seemed to the artist to travel across the ages—somehow both ephemeral and eternal.

Brassai's scholarship of Parisian graffiti manifested in writings, exhibitions, and photobooks. He recognised and placed it within art history, writing on the subject in his essay 'Du mur des cavernes au mur d'usine' (From the cave walls to the factory walls) published in 1933 in the legendary Surrealist magazine *Minotaure*. Several exhibitions of his photographs of these expressive, high-contrast images were mounted, including *Language of the Wall: Parisian Graffiti Photographed by Brassai* shown at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1956–57, and his photobook *Graffiti* was published in 1961.

For nearly forty years, Brassai photographed, revisited, and studied the anonymous scrawls and inscriptions made upon the walls of Paris. He developed a classification system for graffiti's evolving language, arranging the works within a series of themes: wall propositions/the wall as inspiration, the language of the wall, the birth of humankind, masks and faces, animals, love, death, magic, and primitive images. Translated through Brassai's gaze into photographic objects, the works continue to speak in cryptic prose beyond the city streets and across time.

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Looking Closely

- What visual qualities attracted Brassai to these marks on walls?
- When removed from their original location and photographed, do they become something different?
- What shapes, symbols or patterns can you identify?

Personal Viewpoint

- Do you think these images should be considered artworks? Why?
- Which photograph do you find most powerful or interesting?
- What feelings do these marks communicate?

Cultural Viewpoint

- Why do people leave traces of themselves in public spaces?
- What might these graffiti images reveal about life in Paris?
- Why did Brassai take these anonymous creators seriously as artists?

Structural Viewpoint

- How has Brassai framed and isolated these images?
- What role does photography play in transforming the original graffiti?
- How does scale affect our reading of these works?

Creative Practice

- What contemporary forms of visual communication could be considered today's equivalent of Brassai's graffiti?
- What traces of your own community could be documented and preserved through photography?

Surrealism and Transformation



Colonne Morris, avenue de l'Observatoire à Paris 5e 1933

Morris Column on avenue de L'Observatoire, Paris 5th arrondissement 1933

Although Brassai was closely associated with Surrealist artists and regularly contributed to the influential magazine *Minotaure*, he resisted being labelled a Surrealist. Many of his photographs reveal unexpected or dreamlike qualities in ordinary objects and situations. Reflections, fog, unusual lighting and dramatic framing transform everyday reality into something strange and poetic. His *Transmutations* series pushed these ideas further. Working directly onto photographic negatives, Brassai altered and transformed images, creating compositions that blur the boundaries between photography, drawing and abstraction.

Surrealism – exhibition wall text

'I invent nothing. I imagine everything. I have sought only to express reality, for nothing is more surreal'.—Brassaï

Although Brassaï was not formally part of André Breton's Surrealist movement in Paris in the 1930s—its organised, 'clannish' aspect did not appear to him—some of his work at the time elaborated on its tenets, such as the principles of chance and 'super-reality'. His more experimental photographs reveal his interest in discovering the surreal in everyday things, such as a flower, leaf or butterfly wing, or in the shape of a shadow on a wall or the sunlight reflecting from a pair of glasses. Inspired by Picasso, in 1934–35 he also trialled engraving on exposed glass negatives, creating an iterative series of works he described as 'Transmutations'. They were later compiled into a limited-edition artist's book published in 1967.

Also in this room are photographs Brassaï took of Picasso's studios in Paris and Boisgeloup, the earliest of them having been commissioned for the first issue of the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (1933–39). The two artists met in 1932 and would become lifelong friends. Picasso later stated that Brassaï's photographs were so authentic that they resembled 'a blood sample allowing an analysis of who I was at those moments'. Brassaï captured his character in the book *Conversations with Picasso* (1964), which was translated into numerous languages and became a key reference work for its insights into their shared artistic and intellectual milieu.

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Looking Closely

- What parts of the image appear real and what parts appear transformed?
- How does ambiguity affect your interpretation?
- What visual clues suggest movement or change?

Personal Viewpoint

- Does this image feel dreamlike, unsettling or playful?
- Why do you think people enjoy artworks that are open to interpretation?
- What questions does this artwork leave unanswered?

Cultural Viewpoint

- Why were artists during the 1930s interested in dreams, imagination and the unconscious?
- Why might Brassaï have resisted being labelled a Surrealist despite his close connections to the movement?
- Can reality itself appear surreal?

Structural Viewpoint

- How has Brassaï manipulated the photographic image?
- How does the transformation of a photograph alter its meaning?
- What role does experimentation play in artistic practice?

Creative Practice

- What ordinary object could you transform into something unexpected?
- How could photography move beyond recording reality to expressing ideas?

The Parisian Avant Garde



Salvador Dalí 1932

Brassaï moved within the vibrant artistic community of interwar Paris. Over several decades he photographed many of the leading artists and writers of the twentieth century. These photographs provide valuable documentation of modern art history, but they are also portraits of creativity itself. Brassaï captured artists in their studios, surrounded by works in progress and the objects that inspired them. His long friendship with Picasso was particularly significant. Picasso later remarked that Brassaï's photographs revealed something essential about their subjects, comparing them to a 'blood sample' of a moment in time.

The Parisian Avant Garde

Brassaï was surrounded by a constellation of prominent creative figures during a period of great cultural advancement. He was acquainted with Salvador Dalí, interacted with Man Ray, Henry Miller and André Breton, and enjoyed a long friendship and working relationship with Picasso. Many contributors to the Parisian avant garde and intelligentsia of the era were his close friends and influenced the formation of his artistic persona.

Before moving to Paris, Brassai had trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, then at the Akademische Hochschule in Berlin. He had a deep understanding of, and sympathy for, the work of his peers, and while today he may be best known for his photographic practice, he was also an accomplished writer and professional journalist, draughtsman, painter, sculptor, and experimental filmmaker. He made a name for himself, too, as a talented portrait photographer, sensitively recording the personalities of his models while knowingly documenting those who participated in the creative ferment of French modernism as an unofficial historian.

Alongside examples of his portraits, this room features an experimental short film that Brassai shot at the Paris Zoo in 1955 capturing the behaviour and personalities of its animals. 'This is not a zoo film', he wrote. 'I have taken the animals and used them as dancers in a ballet; a musical ballet; perhaps closer to animated design than a documentary'. His creation won the prize for the most original short film at the Cannes Film Festival the following year, and would become the first work of art by Brassai seen by Australian audiences, when it was screened at the Melbourne Film Festival in 1958.

Discussion Questions – Choose one or two images for close observation

Looking Closely

- How has Brassai represented artists that tell us something about the subject's profession or interests?
- What does the surrounding environment contribute to the portrait?

Personal Viewpoint

- Which portrait feels most revealing?
- Which figure would you most like to meet?
- Does the photograph make you feel close to the subject or distant from them?

Cultural Viewpoint

- Why is it important that photographers document artists and their creative communities?
- What do these portraits reveal about modern Paris as an international cultural centre?
- How do artistic networks contribute to creativity and innovation?

Structural Viewpoint

- How does composition influence our understanding of the sitter?
- What relationship exists between the artist, the subject and the viewer?
- How does the setting contribute to the portrait's meaning?

Creative Practice

- How would you photograph a contemporary creative person?
- What objects or surroundings would help communicate their identity?

Brassaï: The Man and the Artist

Summary of the catalogue essay by Philippe Ribeyrolles



Brassaï et Picasso à Mougins, 8 juillet 1966

Brassaï and Picasso at Mougins, 8 July 1966

In this essay, Philippe Ribeyrolles, Brassaï's nephew and representative of the artist's estate, combines personal memories with art historical analysis. The essay presents Brassaï not only as a photographer, but as a curious and versatile artist whose work was shaped by close observation, intellectual enquiry and a lifelong fascination with everyday life.

Who Was Brassaï?

Brassaï was not only a photographer but also a writer, painter, sculptor, filmmaker and illustrator. Rather than specialising in one medium, he moved between different forms of creative practice throughout his life.

According to Ribeyrolles, Brassaï saw all of these activities as connected. Whether working with a camera, pen or paintbrush, he was interested in finding new ways to understand and represent the world around him.

Discussion Questions

- Why might an artist choose to work across different art forms?
- How can experiences in one medium influence work in another?
- What does it mean to be an "image-maker" rather than simply a photographer?

Photography as a Way of Seeing

A central idea in the essay is that Brassai did not think of photography as simply recording reality. He described photography as a 'mental construction grounded in reality', meaning that observation and imagination worked together in the creation of an image.

Brassai carefully composed his photographs and often rejected the idea of the spontaneous snapshot. Instead, he planned images thoughtfully and considered how forms, shapes and light could communicate meaning.

For Brassai, photography was not merely about what was in front of the camera but about how an artist interprets and presents what they see.

Discussion Questions

- Is a photograph always an accurate record of reality?
- How do artists shape the way viewers understand an image?
- What choices can photographers make to influence meaning?

Why the Night Interested Brassai

Brassai became famous for photographing Paris at night. Ribeyrolles explains that he was drawn to darkness because it transformed familiar places. At night, buildings, streets and people appeared different, creating new possibilities for observation and imagination. Rather than seeing night as an absence of light, Brassai regarded it as another way of seeing. Shadows, reflections, fog and artificial light all became important creative tools.

Working at night presented technical challenges. Long exposure times, heavy equipment and limited light sources required patience and careful planning. Brassai used available light such as street lamps, shop windows and reflections, building his compositions with the precision of a painter.

Discussion Questions

- How does night-time change the appearance of a place?
- Why might an artist be attracted to shadows and darkness?
- How can technical limitations influence creative outcomes?

The City as a Subject

Ribeyrolles describes Paris as Brassai's greatest source of inspiration. He explored the city extensively, observing people from many different backgrounds and recording a wide variety of urban experiences. He photographed artists, workers, performers, wealthy socialites, neighbourhood communities and people living on the margins of society. Importantly, Ribeyrolles emphasises that Brassai approached all his subjects with the same curiosity and respect.

Rather than judging his subjects, Brassai sought to understand them and reveal their humanity.

Discussion Questions

- Why is it important to represent a wide range of people in art?
- How can photography help document social history?
- What responsibilities does a photographer have when representing others?

Photography and the Darkroom

The essay highlights Brassai's belief that photography did not end when the camera shutter closed. He regarded the darkroom as an essential part of the creative process.

Brassai carefully controlled contrast, tone and composition while printing his photographs. He often revisited negatives, adjusted details and created different versions of the same image. The final print was therefore the result of many creative decisions rather than a simple reproduction of reality.

Discussion Questions

- Why might artists continue to develop and refine their work after it is created?
- How does the printing process affect the meaning of a photograph?
- Can editing be considered part of artistic practice?

Graffiti and Everyday Creativity

One of Brassai's most innovative projects involved photographing graffiti carved and drawn on the walls of Paris. Over many decades he documented these anonymous marks and organised them into categories.

He believed graffiti revealed a universal human desire to create images and communicate ideas. By photographing and exhibiting these marks, Brassai transformed overlooked urban traces into works worthy of attention and study.

Discussion Questions

- What can graffiti tell us about a community?
- Should everyday visual expressions be considered art?
- How can artists help us notice things we normally ignore?

Brassai and Other Artists

Brassai developed friendships with many leading artists and writers, including Pablo Picasso, Henry Miller, Alberto Giacometti and Salvador Dalí. His photographs provide valuable records of creative life in Paris during the twentieth century.

His long friendship with Pablo Picasso was especially important. Through photographs, books and conversations, Brassai documented Picasso's studios and artistic process while creating a unique visual record of modern art history.

Discussion Questions

- Why are photographs important historical documents?
- How can artists influence one another's work?
- What can photographs reveal about creative processes?

Themes for Students

Observation

Brassaï believed that careful observation could reveal extraordinary things within ordinary life.

Curiosity

His work demonstrates a constant interest in people, places and visual details that others might overlook.

Transformation

Brassaï did not simply document the world. Through composition, lighting and printing he transformed reality into something poetic and thought-provoking.

Humanity

Whether photographing famous artists or anonymous passers-by, Brassaï approached his subjects with empathy and respect.

Creative Practice: Looking Like Brassaï

Choose an everyday object, place or detail that people often ignore.

Consider:

- What drew your attention to it?
- How could you photograph or draw it in an interesting way?
- What story might it tell?
- How could lighting, framing or composition change how viewers see it?

Key Takeaway

Ribeyrolles presents Brassaï as far more than a photographer of Paris at night. He was an artist, observer and storyteller who found significance in ordinary life and transformed everyday experiences into lasting images. His work encourages us to look more carefully, remain curious, and recognise the creative possibilities hidden in the world around us.

Brassaï: 'The Eye of Paris'

Summary of the catalogue essay by Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais



Montmartre 1937

In this essay, Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais explores how Brassai became one of the most important photographic interpreters of Paris. She examines his lifelong connection to the city, his development as a photographer, and the ways he combined documentary observation with imagination, poetry and artistic vision. The essay explains why Brassai earned the title 'The Eye of Paris' and how his photographs transformed ordinary moments into memorable images.

A Lifelong Connection to Paris

Brassai's relationship with Paris began in childhood when he lived there for a year with his family while his father was on academic leave. He later recalled vivid memories of parks, boulevards, horse-drawn carriages and everyday city life. These early experiences left a lasting impression and inspired his lifelong fascination with Paris.

After studying art in Budapest and Berlin, he moved permanently to Paris in 1924. Working initially as a journalist, he became interested in photography as a way to document the city he loved and to accompany his published articles.

Discussion Questions

- How can childhood experiences influence an artist's work?
- Why might a city become an important source of inspiration?
- What makes a place memorable?

Learning to See the Everyday

The essay emphasises Brassai's remarkable powers of observation. Writer Henry Miller, one of his close friends, described him as someone who was interested in everything and constantly looking beyond the obvious. Brassai photographed everyday life with curiosity, patience and attentiveness.

He photographed children, workers, lovers, passers-by and street scenes, believing that ordinary subjects could reveal poetry and meaning. Objects that many people would overlook became important subjects in his photographs.

According to the essay, Brassai's work is characterised by empathy, humour and sensitivity. He looked closely at the world around him and encouraged viewers to do the same.

Discussion Questions

- Why are ordinary moments worth recording?
- What details might we miss when moving quickly through daily life?
- How can photography help us notice familiar things differently?

Paris by Night

Brassai became internationally famous for his night photography, particularly the images published in *Paris de nuit* (*Paris by Night*) in 1933. Emmanuelle de l'Ecotais explains that the city appeared transformed after dark. Shadows, fog, reflections and artificial lighting gave familiar places a mysterious quality.

Brassai believed night revealed things that daylight concealed. Rather than simply documenting Paris, he sought to capture its atmosphere and sense of wonder.

His photographs presented Paris as both a real place and an imaginative landscape where ordinary streets could appear dreamlike and unexpected.

Discussion Questions

- How does a place change between day and night?
- Why might darkness encourage imagination?
- What emotions can lighting create in a photograph?

Experimentation and Technique

Creating photographs at night during the 1930s was technically challenging. Brassai used large cameras, glass plates and long exposure times, which required considerable planning and patience.

The essay explains that he carefully controlled every stage of image-making. Light from lamps, car headlights, shop windows and reflections became essential elements in his compositions. He was interested in creating mood rather than simply recording information.

Brassai also regarded the darkroom as an important creative space. He frequently cropped, adjusted and reinterpreted negatives, creating final prints that reflected his artistic vision.

Discussion Questions

- How can technical limitations encourage creativity?
- What role does editing play in photography?
- Should photographers be considered artists as well as documentarians?

Exploring Secret Paris

One of the essay's major themes is Brassai's exploration of parts of Paris that many people rarely saw. He photographed entertainers back stage, workers and communities that existed on the edges of mainstream society.

Rather than presenting sensational stories, Brassai approached these subjects with respect and curiosity. He described this work as a 'social study' of Paris and sought to better understand the people and places he encountered.

Discussion Questions

- Why might photographers choose to document hidden or overlooked communities?
- What responsibilities do photographers have when representing other people?
- Can a photograph be both truthful and carefully constructed?

Graffiti and Public Expression

Brassai spent nearly forty years photographing graffiti found on the walls of Paris. He viewed these anonymous marks as evidence of creativity and self-expression.

Rather than dismissing graffiti, he carefully documented, organised and classified it. He believed these marks revealed something important about human communication and imagination.

Through his photographs, everyday markings became works of art and historical records.

Discussion Questions

- What stories can graffiti tell about a community?
- Can anonymous artworks be important cultural documents?
- How can artists help us appreciate overlooked visual forms?

Brassaï and Surrealism

Although Brassaï worked alongside many Surrealist artists and contributed photographs to *Minotaure*, he did not consider himself a Surrealist.

His photographs often appeared strange or dreamlike because of lighting, framing and perspective, but he insisted that he was simply revealing reality. He argued that reality itself could be more surprising than fantasy. This idea became central to his artistic philosophy: ordinary life already contains mystery, beauty and wonder if we learn to look closely enough.

Discussion Questions

- What makes an image feel surreal?
- How can reality appear strange or mysterious?
- Do artists create meaning or reveal it?

Creative Practice

Becoming "The Eye of Your Community"

Choose a location you know well and spend time observing it carefully. Consider:

- What details do people usually overlook?
- What happens there at different times of day?
- How could you photograph or sketch the place to reveal something unexpected?
- How can you turn an ordinary scene into a visual story?

Key Takeaway

Emmanuelle de l'Écotais presents Brassaï as a photographer who combined sharp observation with artistic imagination. Whether photographing Paris by day, Paris by night, graffiti, artists or ordinary passers-by, he found beauty and meaning in the everyday. His work reminds us that the extraordinary is often hidden within the familiar, waiting to be discovered by anyone willing to look closely.

BIG IDEAS: REFLECTING ON THE EXHIBITION

Personal Viewpoint

- Which photograph stayed with you longest after viewing the exhibition? Why?
- Which image challenged your expectations about photography?
- What connections can you make between Brassai's Paris and your own community or experiences?

Cultural Viewpoint

- What does Brassai reveal about life in Paris during the 1930s?
- Which communities or stories are made visible through his photographs?
- How might different audiences respond differently to these images today?

Structural Viewpoint

- How does Brassai use light, shadow and composition to shape meaning?
- How does photography differ from painting as a way of representing reality?
- How do cropping, framing and viewpoint influence what we notice?

Artist's Practice

- Why did Brassai describe himself as an "image-maker" rather than simply a photographer?
- What role does experimentation play in artistic practice?
- How can mistakes, accidents or unexpected discoveries become part of the creative process?

Audience and Interpretation

- How do your own experiences affect the way you respond to an artwork?
- What responsibilities do audiences have when viewing photographs of people from another time or place?

Making and Responding

- If Brassai visited your neighbourhood today, what subjects might attract his attention?
- What hidden stories exist within your own community?
- How could you create a photographic series inspired by Brassai's approach to observation and storytelling?

Curating and Designing *Brassaï: Secret Paris*, by Lesley Harding



***Brassaï: Secret Paris*, exhibition image, Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2026**

Curator Lesley Harding discusses how she and co-curators Emmanuelle de l'Écotais and Philippe Ribeyrolles planned, prepared and presented the major international loan exhibition *Brassaï: Secret Paris*. Their work included selecting more than 150 photographs from the artist's estate in Paris, developing exhibition themes, preparing interpretation materials, and designing an exhibition experience that would engage Australian audiences. Harding explains how decisions about exhibition design, display methods, lighting and spatial layout contributed to the visitor experience.

The Curator's Role

'Exhibitions are the result of collaboration between many people. For *Brassaï: Secret Paris*, three curators worked together across two countries. Because the photographs were held in Paris, Philippe Ribeyrolles and Emmanuelle de l'Écotais carried out preliminary research, assembled groups of works around key themes, documented the condition of artworks and prepared information needed for international loans. As the commissioning curator, I worked with them to make final selections and shape the exhibition for Australian audiences.

'The project also involved managing the practical requirements of transporting artworks internationally, including permits and documentation for exporting and importing artworks.'

Discussion Questions

- What skills does a curator need when organising an international exhibition?
- Why is collaboration important when developing a major exhibition?
- What practical challenges might arise when artworks travel between countries?

Selecting and Organising Artworks

‘As Brassai’s work had not been seen widely in Australia for many decades, the curators wanted visitors to gain an understanding of the full breadth of his practice. While Brassai is best known for his photographs of Paris at night, the exhibition also included works exploring surrealism, graffiti and portraits of artists, writers and cultural figures associated with the Parisian avant-garde.

‘We curators organised these different aspects of Brassai’s practice into a narrative that unfolded throughout the exhibition, then we considered how each room at Heide could contribute to the overall story while allowing different themes to be explored in depth.’

Discussion Questions

- How do curators decide which artworks to include in an exhibition?
- Why is it important to present different aspects of an artist's practice?
- How can the arrangement of artworks help tell a story?

Exhibition Design

‘To create an engaging experience, I commissioned Studio Bright to design the exhibition. Because the exhibition included more than 150 black-and-white photographs, the design team looked for ways to create variety and visual interest.

‘One innovative strategy was the use of large-scale reproductions of selected photographs. These enlarged images allowed visitors to feel immersed in Brassai’s world and revealed details that might be missed in the original prints. The enlarged works also highlighted evidence of Brassai’s working methods, including marks made directly on negatives and variations created during the printing process.’

Discussion Questions

- How can exhibition design influence the way visitors experience artworks?
- Why might designers include enlarged images alongside original artworks?
- What advantages are created by immersive exhibition environments?

Conservation and Display

‘The exhibition featured original vintage and later prints made by Brassai himself. Because these photographs are unique and cannot be replaced, conservation requirements played an important role in exhibition planning.

‘Light levels were carefully controlled to protect the works. Photographs, works on paper and textiles are particularly sensitive to light exposure and were displayed under a maximum light level of 50 lux. Prints were also professionally mounted using acid-free materials and framed to ensure their long-term preservation while remaining accessible to visitors.’

Discussion Questions

- Why must some artworks be displayed under low light conditions?
- How do conservation requirements affect curatorial decisions?
- What balance must museums achieve between preservation and public access?

Building Curatorial Connections

A key aspect of Harding's approach was creating connections between Brassai and Heide's own history.

I was interested in the overlap between Brassai's Paris of the 1930s and the artistic community developing around [Heide founders] John Reed and Sunday Reed at Heide during the same period.

'I knew that the Reeds closely followed developments in international modernism through journals and publications. I also identifies parallels between Brassai's photographs and the work of Australian artists such as Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan and John Perceval. Tucker's photographs of Melbourne nightlife, performers and everyday life share similarities with Brassai's documentation of Parisian culture. Likewise, the night-time imagery found in paintings by Tucker and Nolan suggests an awareness of Brassai's photographic vision.'

Discussion Questions

- How can curators create meaningful connections between different artists and historical contexts?
- Why might Australian audiences be interested in links between Paris and Heide?
- How can exhibitions encourage visitors to see familiar artworks in new ways?

Curatorial Thinking

'This exhibition demonstrates that curators do more than select artworks. They research, interpret, organise, conserve and present works in ways that create meaningful experiences for visitors. Through careful planning, design and storytelling, *Brassai: Secret Paris* connected an internationally significant photographer with Australian art history and the legacy of Heide Museum of Modern Art.'

Creative Practice

1. Imagine you are curating an exhibition about your local community. What themes would you choose and why?
2. Create a simple floor plan showing how you would arrange artworks to guide visitors through a story.
3. Consider the lighting, colour and display strategies you would use to enhance the visitor experience.

Glossary of Key Terms

Avant Garde

Artists and thinkers who experiment with new ideas and challenge established traditions.

Darkroom

A light-controlled space where photographic film and prints are developed.

Documentary Photography

Photography that records real events, people or places.

Flâneur

A French term describing a person who wanders and observes city life.

Modernism

A broad cultural movement that embraced innovation, experimentation and new ways of seeing the world.

Negative

The original photographic image used to produce prints.

Portrait

An artwork representing a person.

Surrealism

An artistic movement that explored dreams, imagination, chance and the unconscious mind.

Transmutation

A process of transformation or change. In Brassai's work, this refers to images altered directly on the photographic negative.

Vintage Print

A photograph printed by the artist close to the time the original negative was made.

Visual Culture

The study of images and how they shape our understanding of the world.

Image-Maker

A term Brassai used to describe himself, emphasising his role as a creator rather than simply a recorder of images.



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