

Life Is Once, Forever is curated by Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art Toby Kamps.

This exhibition is generously supported by the Robert J. Kleberg, Jr. and Helen C. Kleberg Foundation; Lazard Frères & Co.; Gilbane Building Co.; Eddie and Chinhui Allen; Suzanne Deal Booth; Adelaide de Menil Carpenter; Susan and Francois de Menil; Franci Neely; Leslie and Shannon Sasser; Anne and Bill Stewart; and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Reading and Book Signing

Presented in conjunction with FotoFest

Monday, March 14, 5:00 p.m.

Menil Collection Bookstore

Photographer Ewa Zebrowski reads from and signs her recent artist's book *twomblly, italia.*

Lecture

Monday, March 14, 7:00 p.m.

Peter Galassi, curator of the 1987 exhibition *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, talks about the artist's place in the history of photography.

NOTES

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), n.p.

2. "About Magnum," accessed November 14, 2015. www.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=CMS3&VF=-MAX_2&FRM=Frame:MAX_3

3. Henri Cartier-Bresson, quoted in *Teaching Guide to Images of Man 2: The Photographs of Eliot Porter, Brian Lanker, William Albert Allard, Henri Cartier-Bresson* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Scholastic Magazines, 1973), 74.

Front: Ascot Racecourse, 1955, printed 1985. Gelatin silver print, 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 12 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (41.6 x 31.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

All photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson and © Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Life Is Once, Forever Henri Cartier-Bresson Photographs

The Menil Collection March 11–July 24, 2016

En today, when mass and social media overflow with candid images of individuals and events, the quickly yet expertly composed photographs of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) stand out as unparalleled milestones in the quest to stop the flow of time. To gaze into his black-and-white prints is to be transported out of our screen-filled world to places and times where the camera was just beginning to explore the corners of life and the human psyche.

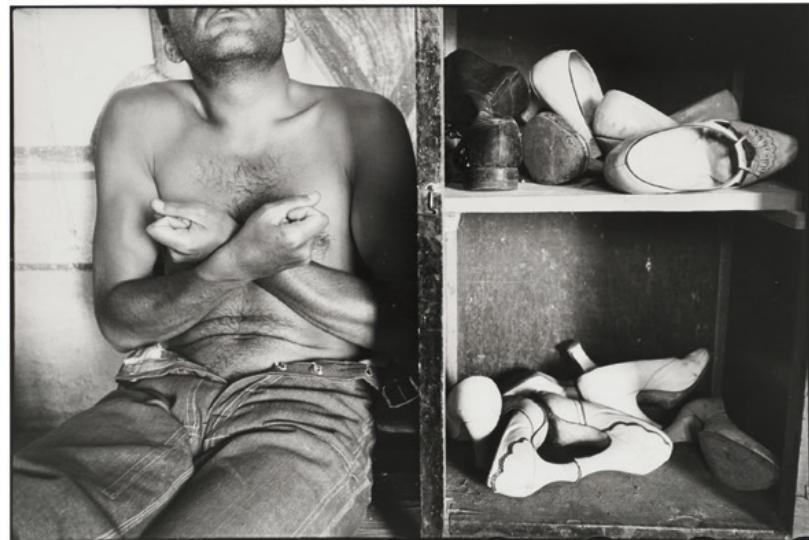
Cartier-Bresson is widely considered to be one of the founding fathers of street photography, a form dedicated to capturing telling moments in the public sphere. Born to a wealthy, cosmopolitan family of textile manufacturers in Paris, he was primarily self-educated, interested in leftist politics, and had a knack for discovering consequential events and individuals. He began taking pictures as a child but distinguished himself in the early 1930s when, after a stint as a big-game hunter in Africa, he returned to Europe and started to shoot *à la sauvette*, or on the run, with a handheld Leica 35mm camera.

Working in every location, both urban and rural, that he could access, Cartier-Bresson quickly became renowned for his humanist vision, which emphasized universal rights and the importance of the individual. His early images, made in Mexico, Spain, and North Africa, were prized by the Surrealists for their intricate, collage-like compositions and the enigmatic gestures and architecture they captured. During World War II, Cartier-Bresson escaped from a German prisoner-of-war camp to document Europe's devastation in photographs and documentary films, and afterward he went on to create countless images of newsworthy, popular-interest, or chanced-upon subjects as well as hundreds of both casual and revealing portraits of cultural luminaries.

In his career-defining 1952 book, *The Decisive Moment*, Cartier-Bresson summarized his approach as "the simultaneous recognition in a fraction of a second of the significance of an event as well as the precise organization of forms."¹ His street scenes, landscapes, portraits, and especially his depictions of individuals caught up in the everyday are filled with uncanny details and formal rhymes. Widely imitated but never equaled, his style is pellucid, free from sensationalism and infused with humor, mystery, and pathos.

In 1947 Cartier-Bresson and a small group of like-minded photographers started the legendary photographic agency Magnum to promulgate their new form of photojournalism. Formed just before the advent of television, during the heyday of illustrated magazines, it represented "a community of thought, a shared human quality, a curiosity about what is going on in the world... and a desire to transcribe it visually."² The agency also made it significantly easier for the photographers to work without a predetermined assignment, giving Cartier-Bresson the freedom to pursue the subjects that most interested him, such as the ascendancy of Communism in China, the Partition of India, or the Soviet Union during the Cold War of the 1950s.

In the early 1970s, at the instigation of longtime friends John and Dominique de Menil, Cartier-Bresson attempted to create a succinct overview of his enormous body of work, resulting in the so-called Master Collection. He chose 385 images, which were printed by his Paris laboratory, Photographic Services, in 1972–73 and



Santa Clara, Mexico, 1934, printed 1985. Gelatin silver print, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 16 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (31.4 x 41.6 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

again in 1985, with a few additions. Versions of this archive reside at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; the Osaka University of Arts, Japan; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and at the Menil Collection, which has over a thousand images by Cartier-Bresson.

Life Is Once, Forever—the exhibition title comes from Cartier-Bresson's own words³—presents a selection of these Master Collection images from throughout the artist's career. In creating the compilation, Cartier-Bresson grouped his photographs by region and country rather than by theme or date, and this exhibition follows his lead. Included are early iconic photographs epitomizing the "decisive moment," such as a 1932 image of a man frozen mid-leap above a mirror-like Paris puddle, and well-known expressions of Surrealism's existential riddles, including the puzzling pictorial space in a 1933 image of children playing in Madrid or the Freudian charge of a scene of a shirtless man, arms crossed and fists clenched, sitting next to boxes of women's shoes in Mexico in 1934. Later photographs, both famous and obscure, reflect Cartier-Bresson's extraordinary ability to create crystalline narratives and discover psychological insights, whether reporting on world events, making casual images of artists, writers, and musicians, or exploring an increasingly technological world. A selection of works made in Houston in 1957 and Galveston in 1962 that were commissioned, respectively, by the de Menils and by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with which the couple was involved at the time, gives a local flavor to the exhibition. Although not in the Master Collection, these photographs illustrate the incisive vision Cartier-Bresson brought to bear on the area at a time when it was being buffeted by rapid urbanization, hurricanes, and racial tensions.

—Toby Kamps