

Coming into Focus

Photobooks were an unheralded form in the mid-20th century, but JAMES MONRO discovers how teamwork between photographers and publishers made them a viable genre.

There is nothing in this world that does not have a decisive moment and the masterpiece . . . is to know and seize this moment.
—Cardinal de Retz (1613–1679)

EARLY ON IN MY ENTHUSIASM for collecting photography I set out to acquire photobooks, much like record albums, to be enjoyed repeatedly over time. As with music, photography includes many genres, most reflecting a given artist's particular vision or worldview, along with breakthrough innovators, promoters, pretenders, detractors and, usually, a golden age of output. This process is underscored in the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908–2004) and Robert Frank (born 1924), both of whom pioneered photobook publication in an age when fine art photography struggled to gain respectability as a valid art form.

Many years ago, as a budding photobook collector, among the first works I sought out were those of Cartier-Bresson and Frank. From a mail order book dealer in Paris I acquired a first edition of Cartier-Bresson's *Images à la Sauvette*, published by Verve (Paris) in 1952, with a simultaneous American co-edition by Simon & Schuster (New York) entitled *The Decisive Moment*. As a follow-up at a New York auction I bought a first edition of Frank's *Les Américains*, originally published by Delpire & Co. (Paris) in 1958. The U.S. edition followed a year later in 1959 as *The Americans*, published by Grove Press (New York).

Shortly after its release, *Images à la Sauvette*/*The Decisive Moment* was described by Robert Capa as "a Bible for photographers." Now, given the historical stature attained by Frank's *Les Américains*/*The Americans*, Cartier-Bresson and Frank stand as rival authors of the dueling bibles of 20th-century photography.

Cartier-Bresson and Frank were ideal

antagonists—two scorpions in a bottle, as it were. Both forged their own unique and authoritative departures from inherited documentary traditions yet played by its foundational rules—a veritable tangle of ironies, their legacies resulting in fundamental change for the language of lyrical documentary.

These two visionaries had more in common than not, though each with distinct and different aesthetic propositions. Cartier-Bresson always emphasised the importance of composition and liked to instinctively fix a geometric pattern into which a chosen subject would enter. The idea that he lay in wait for someone to walk into a pre-composed frame may explain his extraordinary hit rate. Cartier-Bresson's Leica camera allowed him "the velvet hand [and] the hawk's eye," as he wrote in the introduction to *The Decisive Moment*.

Frank's shots, on the other hand, were not artfully framed or carefully balanced, breaking the conventions of acceptable picture composition and painterly perspective. His framing was loose and casual, often with out-of-focus foregrounds and wonky horizons. Frank's answer to the inevitable comparisons with Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment was "to search for some moment I couldn't explain." This point is stressed as Frank shot over 760 rolls of film making an estimated 28,000 exposures, then spending 18 months cloistered in an editing process to render a final 83 images for *The Americans*—a staggering shooting ratio of 300 to 1. This proved a vision-driven solitary pursuit.

As I came to appreciate the pioneering genius of these two photographers, I found myself increasingly steeped in the backstory around the skill set and teamwork necessary to promote Cartier-Bresson and Frank's practices as art. Because so much has been written on their overarching narratives and individual iconic imagery, I found it fascinating to step

back and regard the lore around publishers, art book designers, illustrators, printers, and the then state-of-the-art technology involved. This was a force that constituted “the moving parts” of an innovative machine that propelled Cartier-Bresson and Frank’s masterpieces forward. That collective teamwork is central to the material and social history of photography. As the saying goes, *it takes a village* . . .

Why do these two books, more than 60 years later, share the limelight as the guiding roadmaps of the genre? How did these two visionaries, worlds apart, launch these essay styles? Why the photobook? One piece of the puzzle is that photobook sequencing is something held close to the vision and control of the photographer. We already know about Frank’s rigorous editing process which assured rightful authorship of his work. Interviewed by fellow photographer Daniel Masclet for the magazine *Photo-France* in 1951, Cartier-Bresson pointed to the connection—and distinction—between photography the art medium and photography the mass medium. “Although our prints are beautiful and perfectly composed (and so they’d better be) this does not make them pictures for salons,” he said.

The final image is always the printed one, but Cartier-Bresson always felt frustrated by not being able to follow up on the selection, sequencing and layout of his images in his work for press and periodicals. He would express the feeling of being dispossessed of his images in the foreword to *The Decisive Moment*: “The magazine can publish exactly what the photographer wanted to show; but the photographer runs the risk of letting himself be molded by the tastes and requirements of the magazine.”

THE DECISIVE MOMENT

What are Cartier-Bresson’s decisive moment and Frank’s astronomical shooting ratio and forensic editing process in the face of today’s tsunami of social media imagery and no accountability blogging? Are the photographs of the masters no longer relevant? Has it all been done before? Is the “decisive moment” dead in light of advancing digital technology? Most smart phone cameras today feature a “burst” exposure which, with one tap of the finger, can

capture up to 90 frames, potentially enabling the shooter to capture the “decisive moment” automatically. Over 100 million photos and video images are shared on Instagram alone every day.

I would speculate that after extended auto-image harvesting, one loses the mental acuity to calculate, or effectively use any practised hand-to-eye muscle memory at the precise moment of shutter release. *Use it or lose it*—the double-edged sword of relentlessly advancing technology cuts both ways.

In contrast to today’s digital age, mid-century technological advances that now seem quaint and clunky were embraced and exploited to maximum effect by Cartier-Bresson and Frank. Free from the cumbersome setups required by medium and large-format cameras, both photographers took advantage of the Leica 35mm camera along with new fast film stock. In the 1940s and 50s, new 35mm film products, considered breakthroughs at the time, were introduced. The emulsion which coated black-and-white negative stock was packed with more light-sensitive silver halide compound, allowing a much enhanced low light level capability and object-motion image capture. These tools combined portability and high picture quality that allowed the photographers a nimble presence in a crowd and more opportunity to seize that magical, elusive moment where the image alone represents the event itself.

CARTIER-BRESSON:

JOURNEY TO PUBLICATION

Cartier-Bresson, literary and erudite in his painterly outlook, employed a certain compositional formalism to his photography, with an eye for geometric symmetry. His formative training in the studio of the Cubist painter André Lhote and sensibilities forged by ties with the Surrealists served him well.

Cartier-Bresson was struck by a 1931 photograph by Hungarian photojournalist Martin Munkácsi showing three young boys running into the surf of Lake Tanganyika. This photograph inspired him to stop painting and to take up photography seriously. “It made me suddenly realise that photography could reach eternity through the moment,” he told Munkácsi’s daughter Joan in 1977. Much has been offered on his legendary

style relative to timing and geometry. Cartier-Bresson himself wrote, remarked in his 1951 interview with Masclet, “Would you believe it, some of my pictures have a composition, an arrangement—at a hundredth of a second—that follows the Golden Ratio exactly.” Known since Classical times, the golden ratio of 1:1.618 is said to result in exquisitely beautiful design. It was employed by architect Le Corbusier as well as type designer Hermann Zapf, and also the Surrealist Salvador Dali. The year after Cartier-Bresson’s interview, Surrealist photographer Maurice Tabard picked up the thread in his essay “Cartier-Bresson and Geometry.” He maintained that, chiefly as a result of

André Lhote’s tutelage, Cartier-Bresson applied “dynamic symmetry,” a proportioning system and natural geometric design methodology which assured continuity, flow and balance within his photographic compositions.

The golden ratio helped Cartier-Bresson capture what the elusive, fleeting aspects of life, making memorable what was otherwise transitory and impermanent. Writing on the impermanent nature of memory and image in *The Decisive Moment*, he said:

Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes forever the precise and transitory instant. We photographers deal in things that are continually vanishing, and when they have vanished, there is no contrivance on earth that can make them



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Martin Munkácsi, *Lake Tanganyika, Tanzania* (1931)

come back again. We cannot develop and print a memory. The writer [or painter] has time to reflect. He can accept and reject, accept again; and before committing his thoughts to paper he is able to tie the several relevant elements together. There is also a period when his brain ‘forgets,’ and his subconscious works on classifying his thoughts. But for photographers, what has gone is gone forever.

DIARISTIC IMPULSES

In 1937, with fascism on the march in Europe and the world on the brink of war, many artists and intellectuals embraced political alternatives for resistance. Cartier-Bresson was no exception. He joined the staff of *Ce Soir*, a Communist daily where he applied his skill and talent to documenting the burning political issues of the



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The composition of Henri Cartier-Bresson's photos typically reflected the Golden Ratio.

time. His concerns turned from lyrical and poetic imagery inspired by the Surrealists to a more traditional photojournalistic tendency in his cinematic and photographic pursuits. A prime example of his work at the time was *L'Espagne Vivra/Spain Will Live* (1938), a documentary on medical relief on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War. This was Cartier-Bresson's first film, co-directed with Herbert Kline. Cartier-Bresson subsequently served as a photographer during the Second World War, working with the French Resistance following his escape from a German prisoner-of-war camp (it was even rumoured he had been killed during the war). One can only surmise that these experiences tempered his humanistic worldview.

It's fair to say Cartier-Bresson was a fellow traveller of the Communist and left-leaning political wave that swept European intellectuals at that time. He was steeped in a political environment that afforded little time or concern for artistic manifestations of surrealist dreamscapes. The prevailing anti-fascist ideology in such circles was coupled with a messaging imperative tending toward social realism and human rights. Though drawn by his own nature to a more individualist reflection, Cartier-Bresson turned by circumstance to a traditional stream of

photojournalism, seeking to temper an artistic mission of his own creation, which was to exempt himself from the strictures of a journalistic orthodoxy while imposing his own order and sensibility on the human drama unfolding before his Leica lens. Cartier-Bresson's changing vision at this career crossroad has led some critics to say his work veered towards a sterile formalism.

In 1947, Cartier-Bresson co-founded Magnum Photo Agency with a war-weary yet worldly cohort of documentary photographers including Robert Capa, David "Chim" Seymour, William van de Vert and George Rodger. Magnum was to offer form and structure—indeed, a home for a select new generation of photographers who resided broadly in the photojournalism camp—and to promote publication of photobooks, work that continues to this day.

In 1952, the simultaneous co-publication in France of *Images à la Sauvette* and *The Decisive Moment* in the U.S. was a direct reflection of Cartier-Bresson's split view between art and journalism. The book is divided into two chronological and geographical sections he photographed. The first spans 1932–47 with photographs taken in the West, lyrical and free form street photography with poetic propensity. The second, from 1947–52, contains images shot



Matisse artwork for *The Decisive Moment*

mostly in the East where Cartier-Bresson followed struggles for independence in countries like India, China and Indonesia. Rarely are photography publications so torn between art and reportage. This aggregate body of work was to make up content for *The Decisive Moment*. There were 126 images in all. At that particular period in his long career, Cartier-Bresson had arrived at the idea that the photobook was the best format for his diaristic impulses in creating an overarching storytelling narrative. His views would sway on that over the years as his stature became legendary and museum and gallery exhibition invitations increased.

Cartier-Bresson's transitional approach to his journalistic career phase (and in stark contrast to Frank's style) is encapsulated in his famously non-invasive pastoral of the French working-class family enjoying a riverbank picnic in 1938, the first year that workers in France were awarded a paid annual holiday.

Out of step with prevailing trends of publishing at the time, the realisation of *Images à la Sauvette/The Decisive Moment* was truly a mould-breaking exercise in visionary entrepreneurship. The legendary publisher Tériade was a key figure in the Parisian art scene for some five decades and a major influence throughout Cartier-Bresson's artistic career. Born in Greece in 1897 ("Tériade" is a francised form of his real name, Efstratios Eleftheriades), he went to France in 1915 to study law but soon abandoned

his studies for art journalism and, later, art publishing. Tériade met Cartier-Bresson in the early 1930s and they planned to produce a book about Paris which never came to fruition. Their consultations, cooperation and business dealings, however, continued for decades.

Tériade had met Henri Matisse and published his first article on the artist in 1929. The collaboration between the two men continued until Matisse's death 25 years later. Each year from 1937 through to 1954, an exclusive art book from Tériade's Verve Press featured cover art by Matisse, showcasing his famed paper cut-outs or *gouaches découpés*. In a trifecta triumph of publishing teamwork, Tériade, Matisse and Cartier-Bresson worked together to produce *Images à la Sauvette/The Decisive Moment*. Tériade, through Cartier-Bresson's connections, had crafted a business association with Richard L. Simon of Simon & Schuster (New York), and the book found its concrete form as a French-American co-edition even though the core of its content, the book's essence, was largely realised by the French team.

The photographer Minor White wrote in a review of the book for *Aperture* magazine: "The cover design by Matisse is as utterly delightful as it is inappropriate for a book of photographs." Ironically, collectors in recent years have been acquiring copies of Cartier-Bresson's book and saving only the lithographed cover to frame, an original Matisse litho print in their very own

living room. For his 4,500-word philosophical preface, Cartier-Bresson wrote eloquently about his work in three sections: beginnings and vision; working style and method; and theoretical concept of photography. Strangely, for the American version of the book, the co-publisher Simon insisted that he himself pen a more technical addendum (about D-76 developers, Omega enlargers and Varigram paper).

Overseeing all production details on the French side, Tériade held up the highest technical standards as with all of Verve's output, turning to the best in art book production. To do justice to Matisse's vibrant and colourful cover art, Tériade contracted Mourlot Studios, which was the premiere lithography printer in Paris. Its body of work and reputation was formidable and included work in the 1930s for the Daumier and Manet exhibitions at the French national museums and later, in 1937, for Verve's book covers. It was at that time the Mourlot organisation began its long collaboration with Tériade specialising in art book printing.

The innovative design of this photobook, together with the pristine tonal quality of the black-and-white heliogravure photograph printing from the industry's leading craftsmen, Draeger Frères, was the best of its time. While the French contract did not specify the print run, correspondence between the principal publishers Tériade and Simon indicate that it was around 3,000 for the French edition and around 7,000 for the American version.

ROBERT FRANK:

JOURNEY TO PUBLICATION

A Swiss, Jewish, post-war immigrant to America, Frank was the consummate outsider who rebelled against his strict middle-class upbringing in the 1930s and wartime Zürich, tempering his outsider view through his lens-work. He has cited the worldly photographer Gotthard Schuh as an influence in his photography.

In 1947 at age 23, Frank immigrated to America where he was wildly impressed by the unleashed possibilities and endless diversity. He hard-scrabbled a living at magazine assignments in New York, frequenting the same neighbourhoods as poetic photographer Louis Faurer,

with whom he forged a bond of friendship and professional kinship. This period also saw Frank globetrotting with his camera. He traveled to Peru, France, England, and Wales, shooting relentlessly. In the early 1950s, unable to sell his photographs in the U.S., Frank had already established a relationship with the visionary French publisher of *NEUF* magazine, Robert Delpire, who readily published his photographs of Peru.

Frank's uncompromising style is also reflected in his 1955 photo essay *Ben James: Story of a Welsh Miner*, on the grinding toil and daily life of miners in the Welsh mining village of Caerau. Dai Smith of Swansea University said of the image of Caerau: "I think it's a fantastic photograph. It's an image which is not just documenting that place—it's uncovering its soul."

With letters of recommendation from Walker Evans, Edward Steichen, and a pledge from Delpire promising a book deal, Frank was awarded a 1955 Guggenheim fellowship to foray outside New York, crisscrossing America across Route 66 to Michigan, Montana, and California, and into the Deep South documenting picnics and funerals, rodeos and roadside accidents. National Public Radio senior arts



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Gotthard Schuh, Young Coal Miner, Belgium (1937)

editor Tom Cole recounts on the program *All Things Considered* in February 2009, “There were some hairy moments. In Arkansas, Frank was stopped by state police for no other reason than that he was a foreign-looking person driving an older car. When the police stopped him, he didn’t speak with a good Southern accent. He was jailed and interrogated for several hours. Frank was a foreigner with a bunch of cameras at the height of the Cold War. Police thought he was a spy. In a way, he was.”

The two-year road trip resulted in Frank’s seminal work, *The Americans*, which galvanised supporters and critics alike to respond strongly. The road to publication had many twists and turns. America was not ready for Frank’s vision. In contrast to the *Saturday Evening Post* magazine’s Norman Rockwell covers of the same era, Frank’s photo documentary sliced into the affluent underbelly of Eisenhower’s America. In the 1950s a certain mood fueled by McCarthyism permeated some sectors of the American cultural establishment, “dog whistling” an aversion to any perceived cultural subversion.

It’s no wonder that publishers such as *Life* magazine rejected his vision of everyday life. The iconic magazine turned him down time and time again. *Popular Photography* magazine called Frank’s imagery “a meaningless blur of grainy, muddy exposures, drunken horizons, and general sloppiness.” Undeterred, Frank aimed to go his own way, to produce a story that rivaled those published in *Life*, but not be like them.

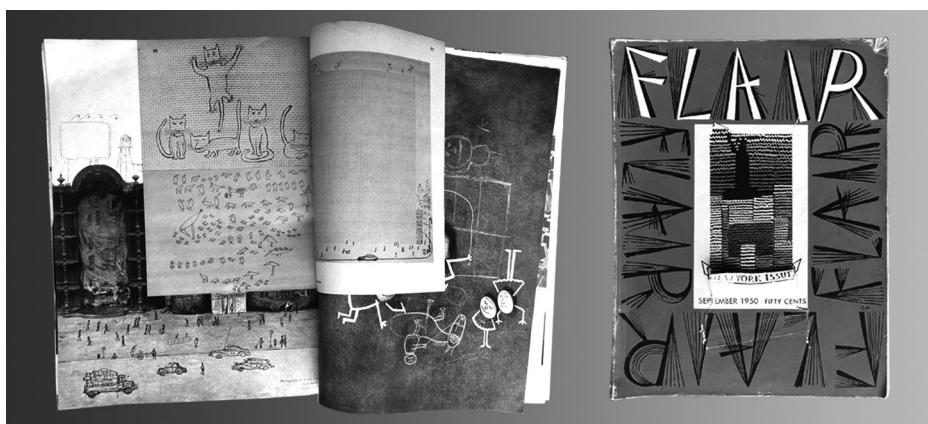
Pleasant or jarring, Frank’s counterintuitive viewpoint permeates his work. In San Francisco on a hazy afternoon, a picnicking couple turn and stare Frank down, radiating displeasure as he snaps their picture without permission. Sarah Greenough, senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. said that this shot is actually one of Frank’s favourites from the book, one that “distinctly expresses that reaction that a photographer can provoke in his subjects.” Greenough pinpoints the unique mixture of outsider influences informing Frank’s method, who had befriended Beat poet icons like Allen Ginsberg and writer Jack Kerouac: “Frank is both sort of a quintessential Beat artist—responding immediately and

intuitively to the world, seeming to live in a very disorganised, chaotic environment—he’s also fundamentally Swiss, too . . . Beneath what looks like chaos, there’s often a lot of order to his life.”

Minor White, a renowned photographer and major Frank detractor who held great influence as editor of *Aperture* magazine in the years 1952–1976, had a low esteem of documentary photography. His own photobook, *Mirrors, Messages and Manifestations* (Aperture, 1969) represented an almost-polar opposite to Frank’s aesthetic and included White’s comment, “the documentary photograph, a literal image is the ultimate illusion, the hopeless illusion, the dangerous illusion because the documentary perpetuates the illusion that life itself is the only reality. The documentary obscures metaphysic, the science of the *Real*” and noted *The Americans* offered “a wart-covered picture of America by a joyless man.” White further commented in his review of *The Americans* for *Aperture*: “Frank as a practitioner of the social documentary school may be expected to have an axe to grind . . . Or is his disgust so great that he is willing to let his pictures be used to spread hatred among nations?”

Kerouac, novelist, writer, poet and artist roundly acknowledged as a spearhead of the Beat Generation and one of America’s most important authors, saw Robert Frank as a compatriot in establishing his own artistic rules. Kerouac pithily countered Frank critics with: “America wasn’t ready to see itself standing in the ghostly light of a jukebox of a desolate bar without a nickel to play a tune.”

All but drummed out of American photographic circles and unable to convince any U.S. publisher to take him on, Frank turned to Delpire, whose start in the publishing business was as bold and brassy as it was visionary. As a medical student in Paris he gravitated more towards cultural concerns at the *Maison de la Médecine*. He edited the university’s cultural journal *NEUF* and audaciously solicited submissions from André Breton, Henry Miller, and Jean-Paul Sartre, and from the illustrator Saul Steinberg who would later supply graphics for the book cover design of *Les Américains*. To provide French readers with a wrap-around text for Frank’s radical photographic vision, Delpire hired writer and critic



Saul Steinberg, *Flair* magazine, September 1950

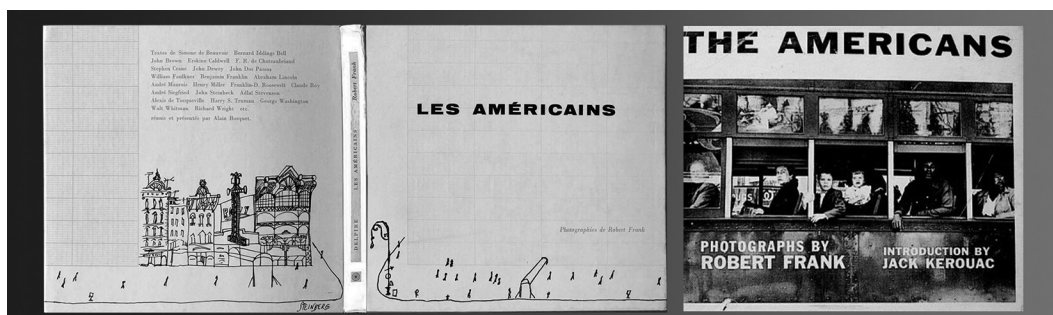
Alain Bosquet to lend a literary perspective for *Les Américains*. Bosquet compiled writings from a wide range of authors as diverse as Alexis de Tocqueville, Simone de Beauvoir, John Steinbeck, Walt Whitman and 24 other significant commentators on the American experience. Bosquet was uniquely positioned for the job as a prominent literary figure and cross-Atlantic teacher whose anthologies on poetry reached across cultures.

Steinberg employed the same (almost identical) graph paper design and line drawings of a New York cityscape as in the September 1950 issue of New York's highly cultured but short-lived *Flair* magazine (coincidentally or not, Steinberg's original *Flair* illustrations were matched with Louis Faurer's photos). In a separate contract with Steinberg, and against Frank's wishes, the illustrations were brought into the mix by publisher Delpire in his efforts

to build a team of rivals. With the benefit of hindsight in a 2009 interview with Michel Frizot, Delpire belatedly and correctly acceded to Frank's initial editorial instincts, saying "When I reprinted the book in 1986, I used a photograph because I had discovered, basically, that he was right." Steadfast to a lifelong professional friendship, this glitch did not diminish Frank and Delpire's mutual respect for one another.

In the introduction for the publication of the Grove Press 1959 edition the following year, Jack Kerouac commented, "with that little camera that he raises and snaps . . . with one hand he sucked a sad poem of America onto film, taking rank with tragic poets of the world . . . leaving us not knowing whether a jukebox is sadder than a coffin."

What outraged critics at the time would barely raise an eyebrow today. Upon the book's U.S. launch, Minor White further described *The*



Les Américains/The Americans cover art: left, Saul Steinberg graphic Editions Delpire (1958); right, Robert Frank, New Orleans photo, Grove Press (1959)

Americans in his review for *Aperture* as “One-sided! Utterly misleading! Degradation of a Nation!” Not even the Museum of Modern Art would sell the book, despite the fact its photography department was headed by one of his mentors, Edward Steichen. As a result, the book quickly went out of print after selling only 1,100 copies. Today’s fine art photography market is spiraling to the heavens in large part due to both Cartier-Bresson’s and Frank’s seminal masterpieces. For example, Frank’s classic Miami Beach Hotel elevator photo, which depicts a harried-looking hotel staffer of whom Kerouac wrote, “That little ole lonely elevator girl looking up sighing in an elevator full of blurred demons, what’s her name and address?” sells in the range of US\$150,000–\$250,000.

EQUAL STATURE

Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Frank certainly share an equal stature in the history of photography. Both triumphed in their life’s work, powerfully and poetically, setting an imprint for generations of photographers, showing great empathy for the underdog and the dispossessed. These two iconic figures, though dwelling in the same cultural milieu, never really had an association, or a friendship. If direct parallels are to be drawn in their respective aesthetic approaches, it would be between Cartier-Bresson’s earlier pre-war surrealist-pumped humanist portrayal of *la vie quotidienne* and Frank’s overarching reach into darker regions creating harsh yet compassionate chronicles of the outsider and the estranged.

Natural schisms lay between Cartier-Bresson’s geometric composition and focus on choreographed contact between his subjects, especially in his work with Magnum and Frank’s resistance to the journalistic ground rules of organising real-life fact into a cogent narrative at odds with his gut empathy towards his subjects’ emotions. Frank felt Cartier-Bresson actively

froze him out of Magnum’s inner circles and cited their different approaches. Frank said of Cartier-Bresson’s later career photojournalism phase, “He travelled all over the goddamned world, and you never felt that he was moved by something that was happening other than the beauty of it, or just the composition.”

Before his death in 2004, Cartier-Bresson came full circle from his early search through the world of surrealism and art to journalistic documentary and back again. He decided to lay down his Leica camera and return to his first love of painting and drawing, to which he brings the same magic that infused his famous photographs. His final book was *Line by Line: Drawings of Henri Cartier-Bresson* (Thames & Hudson, 1989).

Frank remains forever outside looking in. In a follow-up to *The Americans*, he managed to enrage even the Rolling Stones over a commission as free-rein director for a documentary of the Stones’ 1972 North American tour. The finished film was too much even for rock’s ultimate bad-boy Mick Jagger, who upon screening Frank’s *cinema vérité* chronicle of rock ‘n roll royalty’s on-the-road depravity, refused the film’s release.

True to his perennial poetic mission, Frank made numerous books, publications, exhibitions and more than two dozen documentary films between 1959 and 2018. Well into his 90s he continued to be seen roaming the streets of Manhattan, still as Jack Kerouac once described him: “unobtrusive, nice, with that little camera that he raises and snaps.”

✦ Thanks to Aude Raimbault, head of collections at the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, for her generous response to my research inquiries.

.....
~ James Monro is an award-winning documentary filmmaker and media software developer. He holds serial patents for cloud-based video editing systems. He lives in Vancouver.

