

In 1924, the state of Maine contained 50,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan. But both artists capitalized on these climates to further their careers. Hartley, about whom the famous 291 Gallery's Alfred Stieglitz said, "[He] wants admiration—& Cash!—Cash! Gosh! It's an awful spectre—ever growing," seized upon a "reactionary modernism" whose components Thomas Mann described in another context as a "mixture of robust modernity and an affirmative stance toward progress combined with dreams of the past." According to Abramowicz, Morandi confessed in his autobiography that he "had much faith in Fascism from its beginnings—faith that never wavered even during its most sad and tempestuous days." He was a member of the Strapese group of artists and thinkers formed by two friends of Il Duce. Through these Fascist connections, he landed a job that pulled him through hard times as an educational inspector who went around seeing how regional elementary schools were carrying out the government's new education programs. Roberto Longhi, the curator of a posthumous retrospective at the 1966 Venice Biennale, held that Morandi's work "represents an acrimonious reproach to those [artistic] degenerates whose taste runs towards abstractionism."

Morandi weaseled his way into art school with a grade fiddle and graduated with very low marks. He got a break of sorts by participating in a 24-hour exhibition in the basement of a Bologna hotel and later fell in with the Valori Plastici group of artists, who were thought during much of the Mussolini era to be a politically acceptable avant-garde. He had a brief run-in with the authorities when he was jailed for one week after a friend was charged with subversion. Yet during World War II,

despite his brief imprisonment in 1943 by the Fascist police, Allied bombardment of Bologna and the surrounding countryside where his family had sought safety, and the Nazi massacre of innocent civilians practically at his doorstep, Morandi was able to close himself off from the horrifying events taking place around him. He made painting his sole purpose during the war years.

In terms of production, the war did somewhat inconvenience the painter. From an output of 68 paintings in 1943, Morandi plummeted to a mere 10 in 1944, when he complained in a letter about his inability to satisfy customer demand. After just 10 more pictures in 1945, Morandi ratcheted up his creativity to 52 and 42 paintings in 1946 and '47. And from 1948 to his death 16 years later, he cranked out a whopping 772 paintings. During that time, Morandi also was on the planning committee of almost all the Venice Biennales. His postwar fate hinged, in the end, much more on his considerable talent than on his regrettable record as an Axis fellow traveler.

Hartley's American flirtation with German fascism took a different, more erotic, course. During his young-artist sojourn in Europe (1912-15) to see modernism in the flesh, he fell in love with a German officer named Karl von Freyburg, who was eventually killed in battle. "If there was ever a true representative of all that is lovely and splendid in the German soul and character," Hartley wrote to Stieglitz, "it was this fellow at the age of 24 perfectly equipped for a life of joy and strength and beauty—most exceptionally handsome with that rarest accompaniment of soul and character which

one finds so often lacking in just beauty." Hartley's rather Tom-of-Finland taste, reactivated on a second trip to Germany during 10 early months of Hitler's regime, ran, Cassidy says, to the "rugged, muscular, hypermasculine, with an expansive chest and exaggerated genitals." "Outside, on a bench, sprawled over the whole width of it sits a young man alone," Hartley swooned over one Alpine youth, "basking in the sunlight, sunning not only his flesh but his sex, he is the epitome of that moment when full manhood has overwhelmed him, and he wants to cry it out to the mountaintops."

Back in the States for his final years in Maine (1937 to 1943, when he died), Hartley re-identified himself with such towering figures in American culture as Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Melville and Whitman. He also made a big deal out of having been a close personal friend of Albert Pinkham Ryder: "I am the only American artist who was devoutly influenced by him." Hartley hopped on the bandwagon of what Cassidy calls "the artist as a man of the people, an ordinary guy casually dressed in a flannel shirt" rolled out by the appearance of Thomas Hart Benton on the cover of *Time* in 1934. In the studio, he obsessed over the pictures of hunters, rocky seacoasts, driftwood and iconic Mt. Katahdin for which he is justifiably famous. Of course, you have to be careful what you wish for—say, the appellation "painter of Maine"—because you just might get it. The year before his death, Hartley wrote to a friend, "I cannot sit around on the rocks, fine as they are, and watch fifty foot waves dash up and then fall—I want to be where there is more of a sense of the present picture of life."

The four artists chronicled here—all great on canvas, but only one, Braque, who is likely to make the cut at the Pearly Gates—perhaps put the lie to my cavils about artists' biographies. Their lives are pretty interesting between covers. Still, I had to put up with such gems of prose as Abramowicz's "the year 1914 thus began auspiciously for the unknown but ambitious twenty-three-year-old painter," and, in Cassidy's otherwise admirable effort, endure what has come to be a standard deconstructionist disclaimer:

Our understanding of the past is never so direct [i.e., from "a preexisting reality waiting to be 'discovered' by the scholar"] but is always partial and mediated by varied representations, both linguistic and visual. . . . As art historian Keith Moxley has written: "History is a constructed narrative rather than one that is described in the order of things. . . . It is the context of the present . . . that determines the attitudes that permeate our interpretations of the past."

The chief paradox of such views is, to be sure, that they never seem to be subject to the same sort of doubt. Relativists are always 100 percent certain that everything is relative. Moreover, the parameters of their "maybes" are never laid out. No sane art historian would maintain, for instance, that Hartley was a Cherokee princess, kidnapped and raised as a boy in the Philippines, who painted all those pictures of Maine from a remarkable imagination and devotion to Yaweh. So unless I know up front that I'm going to spend time with an author who's sure that facts are facts, and isn't fashionably apologetic for connecting the dots, artists' biographies are going to fall even farther down my priority list.

Author: Peter Plagens is a painter and critic who lives in New York.

Photographic Flaneurs

Henri Cartier-Bresson: A Biography, by Pierre Assouline, trans. by David Wilson, London, Thames & Hudson, 2005; 280 pages, \$34.95.

Brassai: An Illustrated Biography, by Diane Elisabeth Poirier, Paris, Editions Flammarion, 2005; 208 pages, \$49.95.

Lee Miller: A Life, by Carolyn Burke, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005; 426 pages, \$35.

Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist, by Kevin Moore, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2004; 272 pages, \$45.

BY ANDY GRUNDBERG

The generation of high modern photographers, those active in the first half of the 20th century and celebrated as masters in the second half, is no longer with us. Henri Cartier-Bresson, who died in August 2004, was the last important surviving figure of this era, which included such pioneers as Ansel Adams, Margaret Bourke-White, Bill Brandt, Brassai, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, Walker Evans, André Kertész and Man Ray. Historically, too, their achievements are now firmly in the past, as the art world has moved on and wholeheartedly adopted a more interdisciplinary, less "pure" attitude toward mechanically produced images of all sorts.

Yet the early decades of the last century still hold enormous sway over the art-historical imagination—in part because our histories of modern photography were written around them. Above all, Paris, the artistic capital to which many innovators gravitated, provides a romantic center for reconstructing the heady days when an international avant-garde redefined camera-based art.

No one, arguably, was more central to the ambitions and style of modern photography than Cartier-Bresson (b. 1908), whose deceptively casual images of public behavior, collected in the 1952 book *The Decisive Moment*, became an inspiration for everyone from restive photojournalists to fashion photographers. His knack for sealing an instant of time when form and incident resolved themselves as one, coupled with a Surrealist-inspired yen for chance juxtapositions, set a standard for Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander, Garry Winogrand and hundreds of their followers. He also provided an esthetic that John Szarkowski, the taste-making photo curator who started at the Museum of Modern Art in 1962 [see *A.i.A.*, May '06], could reenvision in terms of photography's own formal possibilities and vernacular traditions.

Pierre Assouline's biography of Cartier-Bresson is the result of the author's extensive conversations with his subject in the five years before the photographer's death. Not surprisingly, the book has an "as told to" quality that makes it breezy and readable but undercuts any claim it might have to being authoritative. While a scholar would have felt obliged to attribute aspects of the narrative to his sources, which here included the photographer's archives as well as his surviving family, friends and professional associates, Assouline, a journalist and magazine editor who has written several previous biographies, is more interested in telling a good story. The result is a kind of autobiography by proxy. What comes through, often enough, is a sense of how the notoriously prickly pho-

tographer felt ambivalent about his mission in life, while essential conflicts and tensions (his divorce and remarriage, his rocky relationships with various Surrealists) are left unexamined.

Cartier-Bresson came to photography in his 20s and abandoned it in his 60s in favor of painting. But his career, which began with pictures indebted to the Surrealist notion of automatism and ended with images that functioned as a kind of humanistic photojournalism, spanned both the globe (he was in New Delhi when Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated, in Beijing when Mao's troops entered the city) and the traditional divisions of art and commerce. Like Magnum, the famed photo agency he helped found in 1947, Cartier-Bresson produced work that suited newspapers and magazines but also maintained the trappings of idealism and the aura of art.

While Assouline takes the achievements of Cartier-Bresson as a given, he is adept at providing a social and cultural context for them. His recapitulation of life in the French capital from the 1920s to the immediate post-WWII period is confident and to the point. Where the author stumbles is in accounting for the impact of the art itself; comments like "all that was required for him to achieve the status of a modern classic was to grow older" reveal a profound naïveté about artistic temperament and the ways of the art world.

Brassaï (who was born Gyula Halász in Brasso, Transylvania, in 1899) occasionally rubbed shoulders with Cartier-Bresson in Paris in the 1930s, but Brassaï was from the other side of the economic tracks and an émigré. Where Cartier-Bresson took his native France largely for granted and traveled widely, Brassaï saw his adopted Paris as a source of endless fascination. His pictures of the Parisian demimonde—gay and lesbian revelers, prostitutes, barflies—cemented his reputation as an artist and inspired practitioners like Bill Brandt, Lisette Model and, in our own time, Diane Arbus and Nan Goldin.

Diane Elisabeth Poirier's *Brassaï: An Illustrated Biography* is another inside job. Poirier, whose Parisian parents often socialized with Brassaï and his wife, Gilberte, became the amanuensis of the photographer's widow until the latter's death in 2004, and helped her manage his estate. As a result, the text is at root a recitation of Gilberte's reminiscences of her husband, supplemented by materials drawn from his diaries and letters, and borrowings from recent exhibition catalogues.

One could safely say that what is new about Brassaï's life here is largely a matter of the illustrations—a wealth of seldom or never-before published pictures by and of the artist. Many are by-products of his most famous documentary project, the self-assigned *Paris by Night* (first published in France in 1932), while others are from family albums that show Brassaï as a strapping young man in his native environs. Most interesting, in terms of understanding the context in which he worked, are reproductions of magazine and newspaper pages that show his pictures reproduced. Brassaï, like André Kertész and other émigrés in Paris, earned a living by making reportages for the picture press; while these images sometimes were shown in galleries of art, they were not entirely autonomous. This melding of art and commerce makes Brassaï both a peer to Cartier-Bresson and a precursor for those engaged in today's hybrid practices.

Among the works under review, Carolyn Burke's biography of Lee Miller (1907-1977) stands out for its

thoroughness and professionalism. Although the author met her subject while working on a 1996 biography of the artist and poet Mina Loy, the encounter did not induce the kind of hero worship that mars Assouline's and Poirier's methodology. What does spoil things is that Lee Miller is in no sense one of the major photo artists of the modern period. Though her life was full of brushes with great success (sharing a darkroom and a bed with Man Ray, being on the front lines of World War II as a war correspondent for *Vogue*, counting Picasso and Henry Moore among her pals), they do not add up to an independently coherent artistic career.

Burke is neither an art critic nor an expert in photography, but she does know how to enlist psychological insights as keys to her narrative. In Miller's case, everything starts with her childhood rape. At age seven, she was molested by a male caretaker while staying in New York with friends of her Poughkeepsie parents. Remarkably (more remarkably even than Burke lets on) the next year, at age eight, she is being posed by her father, made to stand naked outside in the snow, so that he can take a picture called *December Morn*. The nude modeling sessions with dad continued into her early 20s—a fact that is not new here but shocking all the same. Is it any wonder that Miller became famously promiscuous and drove Man Ray into jealous rages, or that her later marriages were rife with unfaithfulness? Recounting Miller's life does allow Burke to tell a larger story about the interrelationships between art and society in Europe between the world wars. The author also provides new details about Miller's marriage to the Egyptian playboy Aziz Eloui Bey, as well as a picture of cosmopolitan Cairo, which in the 1930s was a Middle Eastern version of Paris.

As a reporter for British *Vogue* from 1939 to 1950, Miller covered the war in France and Germany and took a bath in the defeated Hitler's tub in Bavaria. (Her lover at the time, David Scherman, immortalized the moment with a photo.) But she always seemed one step behind: most of what she photographed, including freshly liberated Nazi death camps, had been recorded earlier (and, arguably, better) by Margaret Bourke-White, who was working for *Life* magazine. When Miller settled down after the war with Surrealist chronicler Roland Penrose and devoted herself to cooking and drinking, the threads of her life unraveled, making Burke's story one of artistic possibility gone awry.

Before Miller and Man Ray, before Cartier-Bresson, Brassaï, and André Kertész, there was Jacques Henri Lartigue (1894-1986), the indulged son of a rich industrialist fascinated by new devices for making amateur photographs and films. As a child and young man, Lartigue used his father's hand-me-down cameras to make amazingly vivid images of his family and friends, images that are marked by their interest in mobility and modern life. Bicycles, automobiles and planes appear as if for the first time in his pictures, which he duly filed in albums until, in the late '60s, Lartigue brought them to the United States, where he was belatedly discovered.

Jacques Henri Lartigue: The Invention of an Artist is a sophisticated, clearly written and argumentative book that reads more like a dissertation than a biography—which, paradoxically, is all to the good. Author Kevin Moore is a young art historian with a thesis to grind, one that lends interest to what otherwise might be a desultory survey of Lartigue's precocious photography and its subsequent reception. Moore's argument is not really focused on Lartigue, although he disappointingly points out the adult artist's deceit in refashioning the facts of

The early decades of the last century still hold enormous sway over the critical imagination—in part because our histories of modern painting and photography were written around them.

his early career, such as mixing old and new prints in the supposedly vintage albums. The author's real target is the now retired but still powerful John Szarkowski. Soon after his arrival at MOMA, Szarkowski was shown the then-unknown photographs that Lartigue had taken in the first 20 years of the 20th century. The Modern's exhibition of the work several months later put Lartigue on the art-photography map and sparked interest in the "snapshot esthetic" among contemporary photographers, some of whom (prominently Garry Winogrand) could count Lartigue as a stylistic precedent.

As Moore convincingly argues, Szarkowski's promotion of Lartigue coincided with the curator's early attempts to validate photography as an art whose formal qualities were derived not from painting or other "synthetic" mediums but from its own "analytic" traditions of vernacular and commercial practice. This essentially Greenbergian, separate-but-equal strategy required Szarkowski to find "naive" practitioners, like Lartigue (and, later, Eugène Atget), who originated many effects that Winogrand, among others, were then consciously employing. To Moore, this means that Szarkowski took pains to present Lartigue as a "true primitive," an essentially outsider artist whose best work was done as a child.

Before he was 10, Lartigue did make remarkable pictures of action subjects like leaping siblings and speeding cars and airplanes, but Moore's research points to the important influence of his father, an avid amateur photographer who gave his young son equipment and technical advice, and to the boy's own interest in magazines that published similar images. More importantly, the author observes that the dates of the photographs chosen for exhibition by Szarkowski reveal that many were taken when Lartigue was in his 20s—hardly the "child" constructed post hoc for the public. None of this should take away from our enjoyment of Lartigue's photographs, but Moore does complicate the legend that has long made them seem innocent of adult intention.

Moore's book also brings into relief the reason so many biographies of artists fail. Authors have to grapple with the gap between the events of their subjects' lives and the evidence of their art, which presumably is why we admire them and want to understand them in human terms. Photographers in particular seem to pose a problem. Photographs are like facts, but incidental ones. Even when assembled, they rarely constitute a coherent picture of a life. For that one needs a narrative, and a point of view, shaped by an idea of what all these facts might mean given the personality of their maker, the photographer. □

Author: Andy Grundberg is the administrative chair of photography at the Corcoran College of Art and Design. He recently co-authored the book *William Christenberry* (*Aperture*, 2006).