

THE HISTORY OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by Jo Plumridge



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"Of all the means of expression, photography is the only one that fixes a precise moment in time." - Henri Cartier-Bresson

The term "street photography" has almost lost its meaning and impact in the modern age. The true definition of the genre simply revolves around the idea of candidly capturing life in public areas. Street photography is all about a photographer's skill in capturing the everyday in a way that promotes interest and a certain mystery; we wonder what the people in the shot were doing, where they were going, what their lives were like.

Nowadays, it seems that it's far too easy to call yourself a street photographer without any understanding of the history of the genre, or indeed any understanding of where your work fits into that bigger picture. Indeed, with the rise of smartphones and cheap cameras, there seems to be a tendency for people to label almost anything as 'street' photography. But, without applying any artistic intent to these images, many of them are just snapshots. To become a street photographer in the truest sense requires skill, artistic intent, and a clear vision.

Most people will have heard of Henri Cartier-Bresson, widely regarded as the father of street photography. While I do agree that Cartier-Bresson brought the genre into the public eye, he wasn't the first to practice street photography. Eugene Atget was photographing the streets of Paris from the 1890s through to the 1920s, although many of his photographs were more concerned with the architecture of the time and didn't actually contain human subjects! Regardless, I believe that his images that did contain people clearly showed an interest in photographing them unobserved and with a clear sense of capturing a particular moment in time. Atget's goal was to document old Paris before it vanished (before much of it was demolished and rebuilt according to the new city plans implemented by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann), meaning that even his images without human subjects still conveyed the 'life' of the streets and buildings he photographed.

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Photograph by Nicolas Hippert

Henri Cartier-Bresson is often credited with bridging the gap between art and photography. Inspired by the Surrealist movement in painting, which sought to channel the unconscious as a means to unlock the power of the imagination, he spent a year in the Ivory Coast and discovered the Leica camera. This, combined with a 50mm lens, was to become his almost constant companion throughout his life. His seminal work, *Images à la Sauvette* (published as *The Decisive Moment* in English) was a remarkable collection of street photography images that encapsulated the genre perfectly. Cartier-Bresson himself remarked, "To me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event." He believed that there was a decisive or perfect moment to take a photograph in any human scene evolving on the streets, also believing that a split second before or after this moment would diminish the value of the photograph.

While I do feel that this is an important concept to remind ourselves of as we navigate street photography, there is of course some flexibility in the notion of a decisive moment, namely that different photographers have different aesthetic tastes and their view of a perfect moment will differ from person to person. There is nothing wrong in this as long as

care is taken and the image tells a story to you, the photographer, and preferably one that will translate well to a viewer!

Cartier-Bresson was himself an admirer of André Kertész, who also shot in Paris on a Leica. He was particularly skilled at capturing spontaneous activity without sacrificing composition. Also, during the 1930s, Brassai began to gain a reputation for his night photographs, using a large format Voigtländer camera with a longer exposure time. Paris had, resolutely, become the center of street photography.

Post-World War II Swiss American photographer Robert Frank was a member of the New York School of Photography, a mid-20th century group of photographers who helped popularize street photography in the USA. In 1958, Frank published *The Americans*, which remains one of the bestselling photography monographs of all time to this day. If Cartier-Bresson is regarded as the father of street photography, then Frank should be regarded as the father of **modern** street photography. His imagery had a raw, edgy feel, with Frank frequently shooting without looking through the viewfinder. Controversial on its release for its dark and critical view of humanity, *The Americans* was seminal in paving the way for new forms of expression and promoted artistic freedom in photographers.



Photograph by Molly Porter

The street photographers of the 1960s and '70s continued to work with Leicas, although some shifted to using color film instead of black and white. Notable American photographers of this period included Diane Arbus, Garry Winogrand, and Joel Meyerowitz, all of whom could be considered direct descendants of Frank. Arbus' unflinching images captured the marginalized, forcing viewers to confront those who were usually ignored or avoided in daily life. Winogrand shot in rapid succession, emulating the burst mode of today's modern digital cameras, whilst Meyerowitz started the trend of using color film in street photography.

Cut to the present and British photographer Martin Parr carries on the street photography tradition with his satirical and anthropological look at the social classes of the UK. His use of bright colors and an eye for the absurdities and quirks of everyday life make his images unmistakable.



Photograph by Valery Rabchenyuk

It would be impossible to cover all the influential street photographers of the last century in one guide! But these influential names helped to shape the genre and give it direction.

Somewhat controversially in some people's eyes, I would suggest that street photography has lost its way in the modern age. The rise of the smartphone with a camera that everyone carries in their pocket has made it easier for everyone to take photographs. Obviously, there's nothing wrong with that intrinsically. Even I, as a pro, have been known to take photos on my phone! But the street photography genre has suffered from this, with literally hundreds and thousands of 'candid' shots posted every day on social media. We are saturated by these images and their content has become worn out in our eyes.

This is not to suggest that there isn't talent out there – there is. But so much of what people call street photography has no vision or thought behind it. There is a common misconception that you can just snap a photograph of anything and call it street photography – don't bother to frame it, focus it, or look through the viewfinder at it as it's just a 'candid' shot. There is a banality and lack of any artistic vision in these shots, and that's not street photography.

Part of the problem is the ubiquity of digital technology. It costs nothing to keep firing the shutter on our digital cameras or clicking the button on our phones. We can take thousands and thousands of images without it costing a cent. Again, the ability to take lots of photographs without it costing the earth can be a wonderful thing – in the right hands. Where it fails is when people just blindly shoot without thinking, hoping that in their hundreds of shots there will be a few that hit the spot.

For those of us that grew up and started our careers shooting on film, this trigger-happy approach seems baffling. When you shoot on film, you consider each shot. With only a limited number of shots to play with on a roll of film, it's essential to make sure you get your money's worth. All the photographers I've mentioned here had the same issue. And shooting street photography wasn't easy for them. They all had to commit and invest in the idea of making their images, and then submit them to critics and publishers. These critics understood the history of photography and the philosophy of aesthetics. Work was judged as part of a larger conversation.

Compare this to the modern world, where the popularity of a photograph is judged by how many 'likes' it receives on social media. Somehow this has become validated as a means of judging artistic worth. The street photography genre in particular has become saturated with people uploading dozens of images a day. Where is the editing of work and the careful selection of that one single frame that

captures the 'decisive moment' in the photographer's eyes?

If we look at the work of the photographers I've mentioned here, their output isn't infinite. There are a finite number of memorable images produced by each photographer, and you can bet that each shot counted. I mentioned Martin Parr at the end of my concise history as an example of a modern street photographer who still chooses his imagery with artistic intent (although, even his output is way beyond that of what Cartier-Bresson, Frank, etc. were able to produce). If street photography is to survive as a viable and valuable genre, we need to keep employing a discerning eye over it to sort the wheat from the chaff.



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Photograph by Ern Gan



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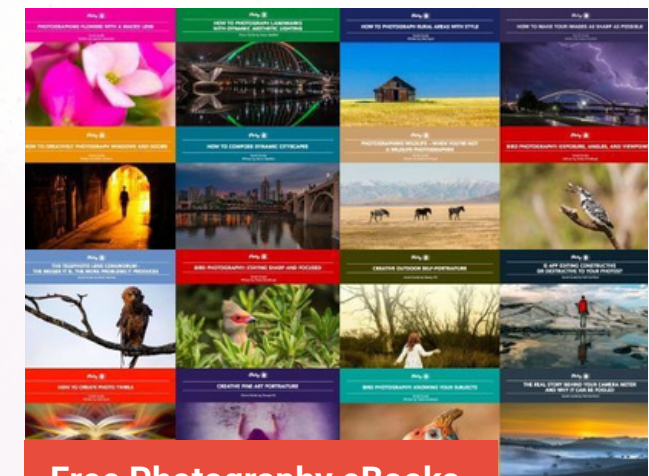
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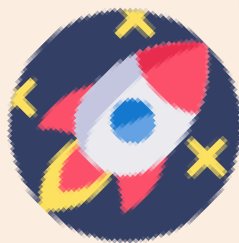
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jo Plumridge is a UK-based freelance writer and photographer. She writes photography, travel, and opinion pieces for magazines, websites, and books, and specializes in portrait and corporate photography. You can view some of her work on her website, www.joplumridge.co.uk, and follow her on Twitter at JoPlumridge.

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