

'I've been in revolt all my life'

Drawing is a meditation, fast or slow. With photography one is always on the crest of a wave, like a surfer, always struggling against time," says Henri Cartier-Bresson. He shows me, a shade unwillingly, his latest drawing, of a pensive male face, and, more openly, his latest photograph, criss-crossing ski tracks on snow, a bit like a Jackson Pollock painting. The drawing is still not quite finished, he remarks, indicating a line that requires erasing and redoing; while the photograph was seized in a split second a few weeks ago while travelling in a Swiss cablecar. He cocks his head and quickly frames one of his piercing, forget-me-not blue eyes with his hands as if holding his little Leica. Having noticed two small windows in the side of the téléphérique, he says, he stuck his head out of one, the camera out of the other, and snapped — in the insouciant manner, now legendary, set out half a century ago in his most famous book, *The Decisive Moment*.

We are talking in his mansion flat, high up in the heart of Paris, flooded by winter sunshine. The view, appropriately enough for a photographer so acutely responsive to form and geometry, is a magnificent vista of the Tuileries Gardens with, to the right, the Eiffel Tower, to the left is the Louvre. From his balcony, Cartier-Bresson once saw a black, eel-shaped cloud balance itself with protractor-like accuracy on the tip of the tower. A friend found him watching the juxtaposition with childlike rapture and laughing softly, as if at some prank. The photograph lies waiting to be packed into Cartier-Bresson's suitcase: it is a last-minute addition to the exhibition of almost 70 years of his photographs, *The European*, that opens at the Hayward Gallery this week. The drawing, assuming that it finally satisfies his exacting standard, will appear in an exhibition of Cartier-Bresson paintings and drawings at the Royal College of Art, opening next month. Meanwhile, his celebrated photo-ports — ranging from Henri Matisse, Marilyn Monroe and Mahatma Gandhi, to completely unknown people from all over the world — are about to go on display

'Think of the statues of Buddha, Henri — their eyes are almost always closed. But yours are almost always open'

at the National Portrait Gallery in an exhibition wittily entitled *Tête-à-Tête*. Later in the year, after his ninetieth birthday in August, the Victoria and Albert Museum has planned an exhibition of 50 photographs from his entire career, selected, unlike the other three exhibitions, purely by Cartier-Bresson.

The art historian Sir Ernest Gombrich, introducing *Tête-à-Tête*, pays high tribute to Cartier-Bresson's photo-ports. "How will they look, once their ways of dressing and behaving have receded into the past? We cannot tell, but since we are not put off by the attire worn by the sitters of Titian, Van Dyck, Rembrandt or Velazquez, we can be confident that they will retain that spark of life that only a master was able to impart to the photographic portrait." Cartier-Bresson himself leaves me in no doubt that drawing and painting matter to him today far more than photography. He brings out a postcard message from the American cartoonist Saul Steinberg (subject of a photo-portfolio), taps it and says firmly that I should quote it. "Dear Heart... It seems that photography has been callithenics, deoxy, alibi, for your real thing." When I comment that there is a not a single photograph on the walls of his room, only paintings, he is emphatic that he is not interested in photographs, only in the act of shooting. He calls himself a "lousy journalist", and tells of



Les Diablerets, a Cartier-Bresson drawing from 1944

Throughout his long career, Henri Cartier-Bresson has been known for his remarkable images. They capture moments of joy, they surprise, they engage, they are often witty. They are classics. Yet Cartier-Bresson remains a shadowy and private figure. Now, as he approaches 90, a series of exhibitions will acknowledge his status as the icon of 20th-century photography. Today, Cartier-Bresson speaks exclusively to *The Times*, explaining how he now prefers drawing and painting to photography. Interview: Andrew Robinson



Face of the artist: a Cartier-Bresson self portrait

A farewell to Gandhi

THE two countries where Cartier-Bresson feels most at home are India and Mexico; they possess, he says, an extraordinary spirituality. Any one who has seen his series of photographs of Gandhi, his assassination and funeral in 1948, will easily perceive Cartier-Bresson's affinity for India. He met Gandhi on the afternoon of January 30, 1948, and showed him ("like a salesman," he says now) his first book of photographs, which had been published by New York's Museum of Modern Art the previous year as the catalogue of a supposedly "anonymous" exhibition — the curators thought Cartier-Bresson had been killed in the war. Gandhi looked through the book slowly, saying nothing until he came to a photo of a man gazing at an elaborate hearse. He asked: "What is the meaning of this picture?" Cartier-Bresson told him: "That's Paul Claudel, a Catholic poet very much concerned with the spiritual issues of life and death." Gandhi thought for a moment, and then said, very distinctly: "Death... death... death." Cartier-Bresson left at 4.45pm. Fifteen minutes later, the Mahatma was shot dead.

minute"; and that "the only rule is that there is no rule". But the discrepancy between himself and orthodox Buddhists is perhaps best caught by his amused wife, who says that Henri belongs to the sect of Agitated Buddhists. ("She keeps me young," he remarks to me. "No," Martine corrects him fondly, "it's your brain.") And as an old French friend once told him: "But think about the statues of Buddha, Henri — their eyes are almost always closed, while yours are almost always open." We should all feel eternally grateful for those eyes, so in love with life. They have taken photographs that are mysteriously alive, balletic, and have created portraits that, at their finest, do indeed have the complex presence of the Old Masters. How fascinating, then, that the master has never photographed himself. In fact he hates to be photographed by anyone, describing himself as "camera shy" — "do not do to me what I am doing to others."

Among his most delightful portraits is one showing the broad back of the aged Matisse painting a portrait of a beautiful woman with a voluptuous bosom. Being a deep admirer of the sensuous forms of Matisse (who designed the glorious jacket of *The Decisive Moment* out of paper cutouts), Cartier-Bresson felt bothered by Matisse's describing as the culmination of his life's work the radiant stained glass at the Dominican chapel in Venice. "Monsieur Matisse," he finally ventured, "you have never shown any serious interest in religion, and you are all the time painting these odalisques, these beautiful girls. Why didn't you decorate, instead of this Christian church, a Temple of Voluptuous Delight? Wouldn't that have suited your temperament better?" Matisse listened carefully, his face grew very serious, and then he said to Cartier-Bresson: "You are right, of course. But the only institution that would ever commission a Temple of Voluptuous Delight is the French Republic, and no French government has ever made me the offer."

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Exhibitions: Hayward Gallery, Feb 5-April 5; National Portrait Gallery, Feb 20-June 7; Royal College of Art, March 6-April 9; V&A, Nov 26-April 12, 1999. Books: *all published by Thames and Hudson*; Henri Cartier-Bresson: Europeans, Jean Clair, £29.95; Tête-à-Tête: Portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson, E.H. Gombrich, £32.



A classic Cartier-Bresson image: today the man who revolutionised the world of photography says that drawing and painting have become far more important to him

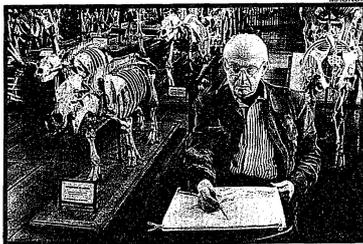
how he forgot to photograph the dancer Rudolf Nureyev's arrival in the West in 1961, so engrossed was he in the event itself. Some 25 years have passed since Cartier-Bresson began to concentrate on painting. In 1966, he technically ceased to be a member of Magnum, the world's most famous photo agency, which he founded in 1947 with the war photographer Robert Capa, David Seymour and George Rodger (all of them now dead). But he remains hugely influential in the agency's affairs and freely admits that he is joined to Magnum by "an umbilical cord" — not least because of his wife Martine Franck, also a well-known photographer, who is one of the few women members. The agency remains too "macho", grumbles Cartier-Bresson: his wife agrees, but qualifies his criticism, as she often does when Henri expostulates, by remarking that once a woman has been elected as a member, she is treated as an equal. Magnum was formed at a time of burgeoning photo-journalism, when people everywhere, awakening from the nightmare of war,

were at last able to indulge their insatiable curiosity about the rest of the world. With its collective ethic and its respect for the integrity of the photographic image ("no cropping" is an unbreakable Cartier-Bresson principle), Magnum did much to raise photography to the status of an art — although Cartier-Bresson distrusts that idea, preferring to see photographers as "artists". Perhaps, as a born rebel ("I've been in revolt all my life, in favour of God knows what"), who is nevertheless unusually sensitive to tradition, he has inherited a little of the contempt for photography of his strict Norman grandfather. Even his father was "very embar-

assed" to say that his son was a photographer. Painting, by contrast, was considered respectable. A great-grandfather was an artist, so was an uncle. It was natural for Henri, who began painting as a teenager, failed his high-school diploma and made clear his lack of interest in the family textile firm, to study painting. He worked in Paris

with the Surrealist André Lhote for a while, and also in Cambridge, but felt dissatisfied with his paintings and destroyed most of them (though not a good portrait of his Cambridge landlady, dated 1929). Returning to Paris, he became passionately absorbed in avant-garde culture, most of his friends being writers or painters. He took his work as an assistant director on two films, one of which, *La Règle du Jeu*, has a good claim to be the greatest work of art in cinema. "He was a very warm man, very cultured, but he loathed pretentious intellectuals. Jean had an intelligence about everything, in the way that an animal is intelligent, and

not cerebral. He was not a specialist of anything, except generosity, and life for him always came first." Similar qualities first emerged in Cartier-Bresson's Mexican photographs, taken in 1934. Here, in the haunting faces of unknown men, women and children, surviving in a harshly beautiful, death-obsessed, religion-soaked land, the world first became aware of the arrival of a unique and original photographic eye that fused humanist and intellectual rigour. In far-away Calcutta, the teenage Satyajit Ray came across the images, credited simply "Cartier", in the French magazine *Verve* and became, in the words of Ray's foreword to *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India*, "an instant and lifelong aficionado". Throughout his long and incredibly packed life, Cartier-Bresson has felt the tension between the active life, such as the photographer's, and the meditative life, such as that of the painter. He speaks often of his attraction to Buddhism — while roundly denying that he is a Buddhist. He likes the idea that "life changes every minute, the world is born and dies every



The artist pictured at work by his wife, Martine Franck

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