

## *Discovering Photography*

Shortly after my repatriation from the Far East, I went to New York where, after a period of seesawing between France, England, and America, I decided to settle down, for a while anyway, in Manhattan. My first job was writing articles on Asia for the *Columbia Gazetteer of the World* and its *Encyclopedia*, but unsuited for the academic life, I subsequently went to work for the American outlet of a British publisher. That job lasted a year. Two unfortunate encounters led me to look for another occupation. The first occurred on a trip back to England when I had to call on a lady who was writing a book of memoirs. She lived in Suffolk, in her Elizabethan manor. At dinner, she sat at one end of a long refectory table, I at the other. The meal over, the butler deposited a decanter of port by my side. I stood up to serve my hostess, making my way along the right side of the table when I heard her icy voice, “Young man, port travels on the LEFT!” She requested that my employers assign another editor for her memoirs.

The second encounter was with a psychoanalyst and author who lived in New Jersey. I was asked to wait in the living room when his four-year old son pushed the door open, climbed on the piano—the lid was open—and peed into it.

I was trying to put a stop to this behavior, my voice several decibels above normal, when the father appeared. He threw me out of the house, screaming, "I hope for their sakes that you never have children!" He withdrew his manuscript and moved to another publisher. It was suggested by my employers that perhaps I was not suited to deal with the vagaries of authors. Eventually, I realized that I needed to be on my own. Taking orders went against the grain. Maybe I had not entirely recovered from six years in the army.

I got married to a very young woman born in Paris of Russian parents. Natacha urged me to think seriously about our future. It was spring, and I suggested the Colombe d'Or, a small but celebrated country hotel and restaurant in the Provençal village of St. Paul de Vence—a pleasant place to think. Natacha agreed. I acquired a camera (at the time I didn't own one), a Leica. I'd long admired its design, the silky white metal and the sexy black body. Anyway, who knew, I might want to take a few pictures.

We first flew to London, where I had arranged to pick up a two-seater, black MG with big nickel-chrome headlights and a wooden steering wheel. After crossing the Channel, we slowly motored down to St. Paul, following country roads (autoroutes were to come much later), and a week after leaving London we pulled up at the door of the Colombe d'Or. We met Paul Roux, the owner. He was sitting at a table in the garden, a broad-rimmed hat from the Camargue region on his head, a blue peasant smock over his shirt. Feathery white doves fluttered down from the roof, ruffling the warm sunny air with the beating of their wings. When told we wanted to stay at his place for a month or perhaps two, Monsieur Roux asked to know why. I explained that it was to decide what to do with my life. "I suppose you don't have much money," he said, his voice lowering as if he was thinking aloud. The Colombe d'Or was anything but a modest, moderately priced

country inn. Moreover, Roux was choosy about his guests. He would shelter artists in exchange for their works; or he might tell someone who rolled up in a Rolls Royce, but whose face or manners he disliked, that the inn was full. In our case, he suggested bed and board for the equivalent of five dollars a day—a giveaway—moreover allotting us one of the few rooms with a bathroom. A Matisse painting hung over the bed.

Over drinks at the bar before dinner, Roux introduced us to the intellectual and artistic fauna that congregated there daily, among them André Verdet, a poet. Within minutes, Verdet and I were addressing one another with the familiar *tu* rather than the formal *vous*. Perhaps because I was a foreigner, he divulged a *crise de conscience*, a moral dilemma. He loved abstract painting, but he also had a great deal of sympathy with the Communist movement—in the early 1950s, a universal tendency in French intellectual circles. The orthodox Communists despised abstract art; only socialist realism directed by Moscow was acceptable. If, thanks in small part to his efforts, pondered Verdet, the Communists ever came to power, what would happen to him and his collection of abstract art? It was a rhetorical question to which I wasn't expected to supply an answer; a silence followed.

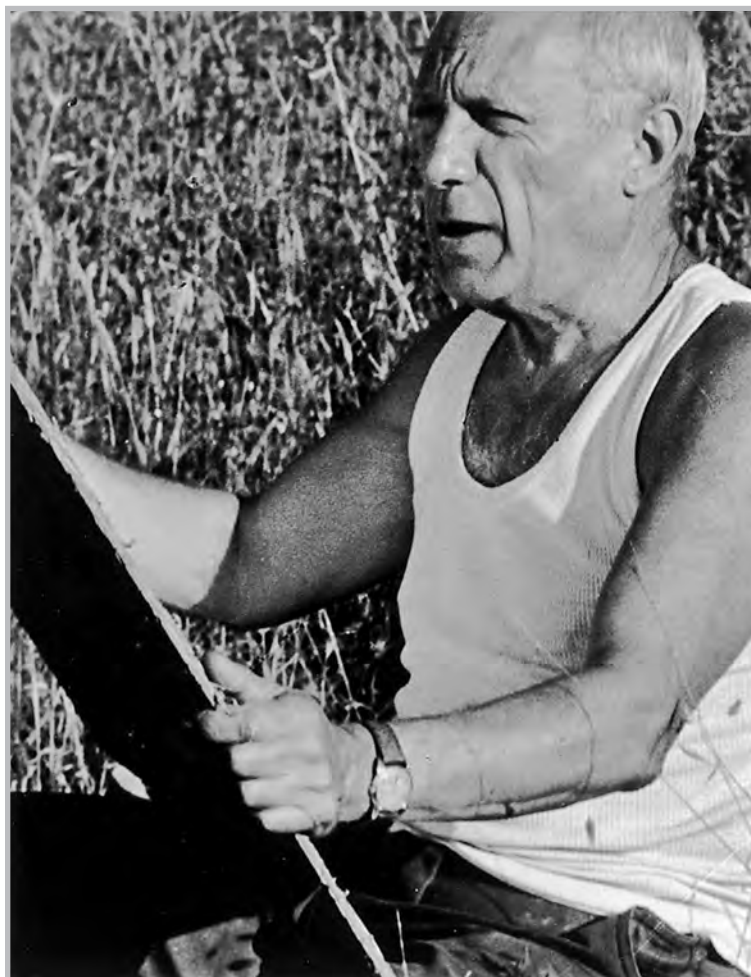
“How would you like to meet Picasso?” he asked.

I said yes, I would very much, and it was arranged that we'd drive early the next morning to Vallauris, where Picasso was then working on his ceramics.

Thanks to André Verdet, Picasso accepted me, although I learned later that he was unforgiving toward anyone who might nibble at his time. He took André by the arm and led him to his studio. I followed. They stood chatting by the sculpture of a large and spiny goat with huge udders. There was a transvestite look about it, as if she was really a billy goat. I took a picture of it, and then asked Picasso to stand by himself

next to the goat. I snapped—the Leica's first clicks. The day wore on, and unaware of my outrageous behavior, I requested that Picasso go and sit in a nearby field of high grasses, take with him pad and pencil, and draw. He did as told. The result was my first portrait, posed, directed, thought out.

We returned to Vallauris a couple of days later because my services were required as interpreter. Picasso had agreed



to meet an American collector at the café in the town square. We sat outdoors at a table covered with a paper tablecloth. In front of us, in the center of the square, stood the Picasso sculpture of a shepherd holding a lamb in his arms. The American collector, a man in his late forties, was visibly moved. Shortly after the usual preliminaries, the collector spoke of the way he had acquired the master's drawings and prints. I translated. While listening, Picasso pulled out a pencil and started making quick, nervous drawings on the paper table covering—artist and model, bulls, women. The collector was entranced. It was a moment he would never forget. Picasso, with a wave of the hand over the paper, quietly said, "It's yours."

Picasso was fiendishly intelligent and knew what would follow. "I'm overwhelmed," said the collector, "absolutely overwhelmed. Please, would you sign it?" Picasso signed it. "*Merde*," he said in his Spanish accent, "it's wrong, it disturbs the balance." He tore off the corner that bore his signature. He applied his name to another part of the tablecloth and repeated the maneuver again and again until all that was left of the paper was a fragment. "That's worth nothing," he said as he crunched it up and threw it away. For the collector, it must have been the Chinese torture known as the Thousand Cuts, in which the victim dies very slowly and painfully. "The idiot, he wanted to make sure that scrap of paper had an acquired value. Too bad for him!" said Picasso later.

Célia Bertin, a writer and a beautiful woman who lived in St. Paul de Vence, said, "Have you really photographed Picasso? I'll give you a letter so that you can visit Matisse in Nice."

Matisse's studio and apartment were in that part of Nice called Cimiez. A card pinned by a thumbtack to the door frame read HENRI MATISSE ARTISTE-PEINTRE. We rang. A woman led us to Matisse's bedroom, which was also his work

place. Matisse was sitting in bed, drawing on a wooden tablet across his knees. Full-size sketches were traced directly on the walls, preparatory for the murals of a chapel in Vence, an inland town nearby. *Le Maître* had been warned of our arrival, and his kind, gentle face reflected by the way his smile greeted us his friendship with Célia Bertin.



Matisse was wheezing. I recognized the symptoms of asthma, an affliction that alas was also Natacha's. I had indeed noticed a cat lying quietly on the bed, hidden under the wooden tablet, but had kept quiet. Should I have suggested that the cat be moved out of the way? Unthinkable. Presently, Natacha too started wheezing, and bravely tried to hide it while I took pictures. We soon left. It was high time to remove her from the feline's presence.

The Leica never left me. I enjoyed taking snapshots of the white doves, of the twisting narrow streets of St. Paul, of the village women chatting around the fountain, of the cats sitting in windows, in brief of the obvious, the picturesque, the dubiously poetic. But somehow I also, by instinct rather than by deliberate thinking, recorded the postman delivering letters in the early morning, the Colombe's headwaiter and his daily strenuous physical training, the gravedigger's son who had become a self-taught sculptor, and the young girls in white looking like angels on their way to church for their First Communion. And of course, the writers, the painters, the potters, anyone who, as I'd always believed, was contributing to mankind's true call and salvation. When Braque turned up at the Colombe, I set him under an archway and snapped him. I'd now bagged Picasso, Matisse, and Braque. A good shoot.

Nevertheless, to Natacha's distress, I hadn't applied myself to thinking about the future. The present absorbed me. These were carefree, beautiful days. Mass tourism did not yet exist, cars were few, life was cheap, and the food of Provence simple and perfect. Tootling around the countryside in the MG—along the Mediterranean coast not yet buried under concrete, in the hills covered with olive groves and lavender—diverted my mind from the prospect of making a living in New York City. Natacha announced that she was returning



there with or without me. We'd been at the Colombe for over six weeks. I told her that I would stay on for another two and would then join her. I'd been invited to the inauguration of Matisse's chapel in Vence and didn't want to miss it. She left.

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**A**t the inauguration, while Monsieur le curé was delivering his homily, I took a walk around the chapel, camera in hand. I saw no one save for a man with a black Leica who approached

me and asked what magazine I was working for. “None,” I replied. At the time, if truth be told, I didn’t know that magazines had photographers on their staff. “The way you stood, I thought you were a professional,” said Mr. Black Leica, who then asked where I had my film processed. “At the drugstore in New York, close to where I live” (so far, I hadn’t seen any of my photographs). The drugstore wasn’t a good idea, I was told. I should try to spend a few days in Paris on my way back to New York and entrust my films to Pierre Gassman at Pictorial Service, 17 Rue de la Comète. “He will show you how to develop, how to crop, all kinds of things. And tell him I sent you.”

“And what is your name?” I asked.

“Henri Cartier-Bresson.”

And that’s how I found out what I would do in life.

That chance meeting and the pictures of St. Paul de Vence opened the doors of the New York magazine world. Three years went by, and I’d turned into a successful photographer, when on assignment in Europe, on a night train from Paris to Lausanne, I found myself sharing a sleeping compartment with another man—Cartier-Bresson, still with his black Leica at his side. I introduced myself, asked him if he remembered our meeting at Matisse’s chapel. Yes, he did. He looked at me quizzically. “Have you ever regretted that meeting?” he asked.