

Taipei Fine Arts Museum Press Release

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Historical Images from a Half Century Ago Unveiled at Taipei Fine Arts Museum “Henri Cartier-Bresson: China 1948-1949 | 1958” Officially Opens

The international photo exhibition “Henri Cartier-Bresson: China 1948-1949 | 1958” officially opens on June 20, 2020 at Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM). Originally scheduled to begin in April this year, it was postponed due to shipping delays from the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier this month the works eventually arrived in Taiwan, and now the exhibition is able to commence. The exhibition presents images from two trips to China, in 1948-49 and then again in 1958, by legendary French photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson, capturing priceless impressions of the era and bearing witness to historic moments of transition.

Photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson was born in France in 1908. His photographic style was shaped by his early training in painting and his involvement in surrealism as a youth. Keenly centered on human expressions and overall composition, he developed a strong personal style. Becoming a photographer in the 1930s, his iconic works from this decade include coverage of Spain’s elections and the Coronation of George VI of England. In 1947 he founded the world-renowned documentary photo agency-Magnum Photos with friends. In 1948 he met Ghandi on the day of his assassination, capturing his final image and his funerals. Later he traveled to China twice, documenting the change of regimes there. Bearing witness to an age, these historically significant photo series cemented his standing as a great photojournalist.

This exhibition covering these two famed photo excursions to China was co-curated by the authoritative historian of photography Michel Frizot of France and Taiwanese curator Su Ying-lung. The two arranged the exhibition according to both chronological order and Cartier-Bresson’s travel itinerary, establishing a series of themes based on the cities he visited and the historic events he encountered. Thus, the order of the images affords a window onto those tumultuous times. TFAM director Ping Lin remarks: “Cartier-Bresson’s works of photojournalism behold and capture the transformation of China in the last century. Clues to the evolution of modern Asian history are clearly visible in these photographic images. The exhibition is highly significant as a complement to the cultural context of Taiwan.”

In 1948 Cartier-Bresson was commissioned by *Life* – the magazine with the world’s largest circulation, at 5 million per month, to enter China and document the critical moment when political power was about to change hands. On Dec. 3, 1948, he landed in Peking (Beijing), which by then was already encircled by People’s Liberation Army troops. As the situation became increasingly precarious, he left for Shanghai on Dec. 15. During his half-month stay in Peking, Cartier-Bresson took 26 rolls of film, over 900 frames. Later, in 1949, this series would be published for the first time in the pages of *Life* with the title “A Last Look At Peiping¹,” receiving wide international distribution. Departing Peking, he made his way through Shanghai, Hangchou, and Nanking over the course of nine months, documenting historic events such as the Shanghai “Gold Rush,” the retreat of Kuomintang forces from Nanking after the collapse of

negotiations with the Communists, and the entrance of the People's Liberation Army into Nanking, capturing the grand trajectory of the age with his camera.

China never escaped the mind of Henri Cartier-Bresson, and in 1958 he chose to revisit Peking and Shanghai. Just as the "Great Leap Forward" was underway, the photographer encountered an atmosphere dramatically different from ten years before. Traveling with a Communist minder, he captured a National Day parade, students building a swimming pool by hand, and much more. These photos portrayed the many disparate faces of China following the revolution, drawing broad international attention. In that era of drastic change, the camera caught the wide array of people and the chaotic times, but the pictures themselves consistently maintained rigorous composition. Though the photos in these series are independent of one another, they all exhibit his well-known "anti-documentary style," calmly and neutrally capturing the form and character of people in brief moments of history.

The two co-curators share that Cartier-Bresson was once asked: "One kind of photographer sees what they want to see in their own world. Another kind of photographer removes himself from a specific vision of the world and perceives the life and actions of the real world. Which kind of photographer are you?" Cartier-Bresson replied that every photographer has two sides: "Everyone discovers themselves and also discovers the world." When it came to photography, what he cared most about was the instant when he pressed the shutter. Each click of the shutter was an independent moment. When such conception of photography met a world in flux, The record from Cartier-Bresson's 35mm Leica camera lens became his irreplaceable accomplishment and contribution to the history of photography.

All the works in this exhibition are original photographs personally developed by Cartier-Bresson while he lived. Following instructions in his will, the Foundation Henri Cartier-Bresson no longer develops or reproduces his works. Thus, the plethora of originals on display is particularly valuable.

Curator Su Ying-lung explains: "This exhibition was first presented at Henri Cartier Bresson Foundation in Paris. Because of the historical significance of this series photo to Taiwan, Professor Frizot and I have particularly reorganized the exhibition contents for the museum. About 40 more original photos will be included in comparison with the exhibition in Paris, and it is also the first time to display various archived items such as telegrams, print samples, and original magazines. The showcase of those historical documents in TFAM is the most complete exhibition in its scale and scope, and will also tour Beijing, Milan and other cities."

Due to the fragility of the original photos, TFAM specially reminds the public that the photography is restricted at the exhibition, and the flash is prohibited. In conjunction with the opening, Professor Frizot has recorded a video lecture for the public, an introduction to the historical contexts within this exhibition. The lecture will be released on June 20 at 9:30pm on the official Taipei Fine Arts Museum YouTube channel.

*¹ Peiping was the name for Beijing or Peking used by Kuomintang regime between 1928-1949.