

Lauri Nelson

Cartier-Bresson in Houston, 1957

I have never been interested in the documentary aspect of photography except as a poetic expression. Only the photograph which springs from life interests me. Henri Cartier-Bresson

In April 1957, Henri Cartier-Bresson came to Houston at the invitation of John and Dominique de Menil to photograph the American Federation of Arts'



A private prop jet conveyed attendees of the 1957 American Federation of Arts convention to see art in other Texas cities.

1957 convention, which the Menils helped organize. The 48-year-old photographer, using an inconspicuous 35mm Leica whose silent shutter allowed him to anonymously document the streets of the world, had already created some of the most memorable images of the 20th century. At the time of his visit to Houston, Cartier-Bresson had achieved a level of popular and critical recognition previously unattained by any photographer.¹

The 114 prints resulting from Cartier-Bresson's visit, never widely published or exhibited,² portray a particularly dynamic moment in Houston's history. During the preceding decade the city's population had doubled, and its wealth had increased fivefold. Annexation of 27 outlying districts by city council had recently doubled its size. The photographs mark the juncture when the Magnolia City became Space City, as the pace of the Old South began accelerating to that of an international metropolis.

Cartier-Bresson's photographs of Houston share the qualities for which his more familiar work is known. They feature a broad range of locales and not infrequently were taken amid large gatherings of people. The photographer used the same technique he had employed to great effect during his 1938 series of the coronation of George VI or his 1948 images of Gandhi's funeral, in which he turned his back on the central event in order to capture images of the crowd. Cartier-Bresson is especially known for his photographs of individuals in intimately observed and commonplace moments — photographs that, as Lincoln Kirstein observed, transform the everyday into a never-fading permanence, in the French tradition of Degas and Baudelaire. Cartier-Bresson's photographs derive their meaning from both their subject matter and the rigorous arrangement of formal elements, achieved by split-second timing on the part of the photographer. Negatives were never cropped or altered in the developing process. Borrowing from Stendahl, Cartier-Bresson described his endeavor as "putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis."

The American Federation of Arts convention ran from 3 April to 6 April 1957 and was held at the Shamrock Hotel. It included speeches and panel discussions, exhibitions, house tours, poolside luncheons, and banquets; on the third day, a private plane ferried delegates on a day trip to museums and private collections in Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio. Visitors to Houston wandered the Shamrock, its green-carpeted, fully air-conditioned public rooms undoubtedly resonating with allusions to its recent depiction in the 1956 movie *Giant*, starring James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor. The conference was the first time African Americans were permitted to attend events at the hotel, although black conferees still could not register as overnight guests.

The conference, the largest in the federation's history, attracted an audience of more than 1,400 when only 200 had been anticipated. Approximately 60 percent of the registrants were Texans. *Arts*,

Art News, the *New York Times*, *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Life*, and the United Press sent staff to cover the event from New York aboard a private jet chartered by the conference organizers. The discus-

Ward, and River Oaks, and even a tent revival outside Humble.

The convention visit was not Cartier-Bresson's last to the Houston area. In

1962 he was invited by John de Menil to photograph the historic architecture of Galveston. The resulting photographs, along with those of architectural photographer Ezra Stoller, were published in 1966 by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in Howard Barnstone's book *The Galveston That Was*. Like the Houston photographs, they show a



Philip Johnson (center) and James Thrall Soby (right) at the American Federation of Arts convention, organized in large part by the Menils and held at the Shamrock Hotel.

sion panels were composed of some of the art world's most influential scholars, critics, artists, collectors, and dealers. Art historian Meyer Schapiro of Columbia University delivered the keynote address. Other important participants were Rudolf Arnheim, Gregory Bateson, Stuart Davis, Marcel Duchamp, Jimmy Ernst, Sidney Janis, Randall Jarrell, Philip Johnson, William Seitz, James Thrall Soby, and James Johnson Sweeney. The toastmaster for the annual banquet was actor and collector Vincent Price. *Art News* reprinted five of the convention speeches in the summer of 1957, including the conference's most lasting contribution, Marcel Duchamp's talk "The Creative Act."

The Menils invited Cartier-Bresson to stay on after the convention and photograph various locations in and around Houston. In fact, the record of the conference proceedings constituted only about 15 percent of what he shot during his visit. Local architect Howard Barnstone and the Menils took the photographer on a wide-ranging tour of neighborhoods and industrial sites such as the Houston Ship Channel, the Anderson, Clayton & Company cotton warehouses, oil drilling sites, and chemical plants. He also went downtown, where Foley's department store, occupying some of the most expensive retail property in the country, shared Main Street with the old Stelzig's Saddlery shop, founded a century before. He visited school assemblies, country clubs, such neighborhoods as Third Ward, Fourth

Southern town in the midst of irrevocable change, a record made possible by Cartier-Bresson's unique ability to range beyond the prescribed boundaries of social class, race, and the rural or urban context.

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¹ Cartier-Bresson had already photographed the postcolonial world under the auspices of Magnum, the first cooperative agency of photojournalists, which he helped found. His travels had taken him to India, Burma, and Pakistan, to China during the last six months of the Kuomintang and the first six months of the People's Republic, and to Indonesia at the moment of its independence. In 1953 he was one of the first photographers to be admitted to the Soviet Union after Stalin's death and the restoration of international relations. By 1957, Cartier-Bresson's numerous international honors included two Overseas Press Club awards, for his reportage following the death of Gandhi in 1948 and for his work in Russia in 1954.

The first major monograph of his work, *Images à la Savette*, appeared in 1952. Translated as *The Decisive Moment*, it was a great influence on American photographers of the 1960s, particularly Helen Levitt and Bruce Davidson. Cartier-Bresson's first museum retrospective, an exhibition of more than 400 works, was the first show of photography to be installed in the Louvre; it was touring under the title *The Decisive Moment* in Japan, Canada, and the U.S. in 1957, the year of his visit to Houston.

² A Schlumberger Companies newsletter, *Intercom*, published a selection of the photographs in its August 1958 issue, edited by Howard Barnstone. In spring 1959, *The Forum*, a literary magazine at the University of Houston, also published a small group of them. In 1968, an exhibition of Cartier-Bresson's photographs in the Cologne Kunsthallen featured a single work from the Houston series, a dockworker on the Houston Ship Channel, mistakenly labeled as having been taken in New Orleans in 1958. This is the only time a work from the Houston series was selected by Cartier-Bresson for exhibition. The first exhibition of the series was held at the Menil Collection in November-December 1994 and featured 24 of the 114 photographs in the 1957 series.



The cotton-classing room at Anderson, Clayton & Co. (above). Twins downtown on Main Street (above right). Elmo's Coffee Shop, Preston Avenue, on the near north side of downtown (right).



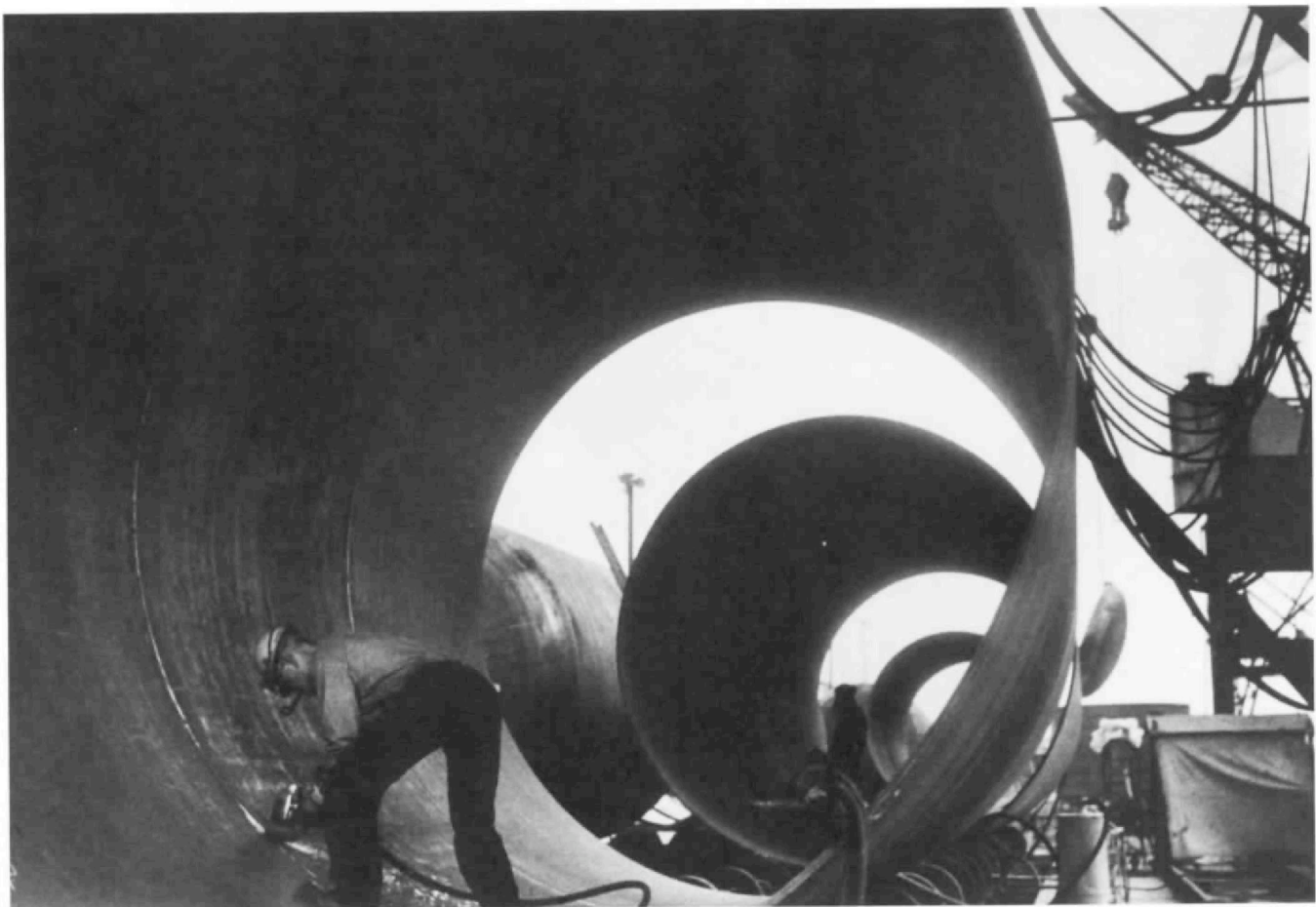


The hat section at Foley's department store (above right). Street scene (right). River Oaks Country Club (below right).





Tent revival, Humble, Texas
(above, left and right). Grinding
welds inside storage vessels,
Houston Ship Channel (below).





Loading flour, Houston Ship Channel (above left). Two boys (above right). The Gulf Freeway, only five years old, where it cut through Third Ward (below).

