Brassaï, (1899-1984)

Gyula Halász

(b. 1899 Brassó, Austro-Hungarian Empire – d. 1984 Nice, France)

Brassaï (pseudonym of Gyula Halász, b. 1899 Brassó, Austro-Hungarian Empire – d. 1984 Nice, France) was a Hungarian photographer known for his depiction of life in interwar Paris. His family emigrated to Paris when he was three years old to join his father, who was teaching at the Sorbonne. He studied painting and sculpture in Budapest before returning to Paris in the early 1920s. He adopted the name Brassaï (meaning ‘from Brassó’) in 1923. Working initially as a journalist, he roamed widely over the city, particularly at night. He was drawn to photography as a means of capturing urban life, guided by his fellow Hungarian, André Kertész. His images of nocturnal Paris, and his fascination with its more marginal locations and inhabitants, helped to shape perceptions of the city as a place of louche sexuality and moral ambiguity. His streetscapes exploit light, dark, shadow and fog to create unsettling visions of the urban environment, echoing the Surrealists’ interest in the city as a location of the irrational and the uncanny. His work also depicts what he called the ‘secret’ Paris of nightclubs, brothels, abattoirs and sewers. He photographed some of the major figures of the European avant-garde, many of whom lived in Paris, including Alberto Giacometti and Pablo Picasso.

References and further reading:

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