

# Photographing People . . . . Photographing Cultures, Too

• Mon, 01/31/2011 - 12:21pm [archive](#)

As a young man, my favorite column in The New Yorker was "Letter From Paris." Every Saturday morning I waited for the brown paper-wrapped magazine to fall into our Texas mailbox and wondered if someone called "Genet" had again crafted elegant sentences and paragraphs closely observing the most seductive of cities.

Of course I did not know that Genet was Janet Flanner, an American expatriate, who wrote about France and the French with detachment, affection, amusement and mischievous irony, just as Tocqueville had written about the United States a century earlier. (Her collection of essays, "Paris Was Yesterday" is a classic of extraordinary writing.) So I was thrilled to see her -as elegant and controlled as her prose - staring at me from the wall of Joie de Livres Gallery, where Merideth McGregor is presenting a small, quiet yet stunning show of photographs by Berenice Abbott.

Abbott, one of America's greatest photographers, moved to Paris in 1921 and quickly joined an artistic avant garde that included many translated Americans - Gertrude Stein, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ernest Hemingway, Flanner. She studied sculpture, worked for Man Ray and then, in 1925, first saw the photographs of Eugene Atget and immediately decided on her career.

Atget produced intense, pure images of French cultural icons - the Trianons, grand and petit, and the Tuileries garden for example - of incomparable authority. His visual catalog of French places and

objects has never been surpassed.

Abbott opened a portrait studio and brought the same intensity and purity to her photographs of Parisian artists and intellectuals.

Here is Flanner looking squarely at the camera, the serious essayist and mischievous cultural observer. She is wearing a top hat that sports two eye masks, one above the other. This is the essence of Genet.

Here, too, is the great image of James Joyce, slouching and weary. Abbott's lighting is flat and gray, nothing is highlighted, so everything is equal - Joyce's fine, rakish hat, his famous round eyeglasses and elegant hands, his tie and even his right ear.

This was Joyce after "Ulysses," when his wife was critically ill and he was rapidly losing his sight.

Edna St. Vincent Millay looks precocious and boyish in a man's shirt, tie and collar pin; Djuna Barnes is the essential bad girl in a shiny, metallic cloche, and Jean Cocteau lies pale in bed, eyes closed and cradling a deathly white face mask.

Was Cocteau ever subtle?

After returning to the United States in 1929, Abbott began photographing what she called "Changing New York." These images are original and authoritative, often surprising. Though never as pure as Atget - Abbott uses light and geometric forms for dramatic effect - they too catalog the icons of a culture, but one in flux.

The Flatiron Building, supremely slender and unique, is more interesting because Abbott shows it with a beaux-arts building and

cupola in the background to the right. Three East River floating oyster houses are charming, and the famous shot of Blossom Restaurant (soup and bread, five cents; two eggs, potatoes and coffee, 10 cents) next to a barber shop (shave, hot towel and bay rum, 10 cents) captures the energy and diversity of the city. A Con Ed station is crisply geometrical.

This is a fine exhibition of great photographs. You may want to visit it more than once as I have done.

"Berenice Abbott: Portraits and Places" is at Joie de Livres Gallery in the rear annex of Salisbury Wines, 19 Main St. The gallery is open Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. McGregor will host an opening wine reception on Saturday, May 29, from 4 to 6 p.m. The exhibition runs through the summer. Prices range from \$1,500 to \$6,000. Most prints are signed. Call 860-435-0530 for information.