

# Tête à Tête

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**Portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson**



**Smithsonian**  
*National Portrait Gallery*

# Tête à Tête: Portraits by Henri Cartier-Bresson

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## Teacher Resource Materials

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## Classroom Extension Exercises

### What's in a Photograph?

For this exercise, students will need to bring in a photograph. Any photograph will work—a family snapshot, a photograph from a magazine or newspaper, a portrait from a photo booth, a passport picture, a postcard, a copy of a photograph in a book, or a photograph downloaded from the Internet. They will use their image to answer questions about the ways in which photographs represent the world. These questions can be used for class discussion or for a writing exercise.

1. What is the relationship between a photograph and the subject it represents? Does a photograph simply copy the world? Is it always accurate, or truthful? Can photographs lie? Can photographs reveal the feelings of the photographer?

2. How do we classify photographs? Ask students to describe the criteria they use to recognize and evaluate different kinds of pictures. How do we distinguish a family snapshot from a formal portrait? Pose? Lighting? Setting? Number of people in the picture? What can we tell about this group (or this person) from the things we see in the picture? What kind of information does not appear?

3. How do we distinguish a factual document from a persuasive advertisement? Color? Composition? Choice of subject matter? (Would you photograph a desert to advertise a mountain resort? On the other hand, what kind of resort would want to advertise its desert location?) How does a caption change our perception of the subject?

4. Is this a work of art? What makes a photograph a work of art? If it hangs in a museum, does that make it art? Can a photograph express the feelings of the photographer? How can photographers express emotion by depicting the world that already exists? How does a photographer change and manipulate what he or she sees?

Ask students to answer these questions by looking at their pictures. Have them back up statements with specific references and identify the precise aspects of the picture that support the argument.



## Classroom Extension Exercises

### The Art of the Photograph: Composition and the Decisive Moment

1. How does a photographer compose a photograph?

Some photographers make a shot and make adjustments later, in the darkroom. They find the most important part of the picture, and print only that portion. They cut out parts of the picture that interfere with the message they want to convey. Take a picture and crop it with a pair of scissors, or use blank paper to cover up portions of the image until you see only the part that seems most important to you. How does the picture change when the frame changes? What happens when the edges come very close to the subject? What happens when the subject of the picture is surrounded by large empty spaces?

Cropping makes it easy to change the shape of the image itself—it can be square, round, or rectangular; it can be long and thin or flat and wide. How does the shape influence the message that the picture conveys?

Henri Cartier-Bresson never crops his pictures. He believes that the subject cannot be separated from the composition. He uses the rectangular shape of the 35 mm negative and organizes his material inside the frame. For him, the picture emerges from the process of finding the right way to frame the subject. Everything within the frame helps him tell his story. At the moment he snaps the shutter, the whole picture comes together; he calls this “the decisive moment.”

2. What makes a decisive moment?

To see how this process works for Henri Cartier-Bresson, analyze one of his photographs. Begin by naming everything in the picture—don't forget any details, and look closely at the edges of the frame. Look for the physical relationships between people, or between people and animals. Do they touch each other? Do they look at each other? Do you know what will happen next?

Then describe the way these objects are organized within the frame. Think of the image as a flat piece of paper; try to forget about the subject as it exists in the three-dimensional world. Look at the dark and light. Look for abstract shapes. Do you see squares, rectangles, or circles? Do you see diagonal lines? Do you see shapes that repeat within the frame? How do these abstract shapes reinforce (or contradict) the message you see in the subject alone?

What does this image tell you about the photographer himself? What do you know about the person who made this photograph? What does he notice? What does he ignore? What can his pictures tell you about the world? What do these pictures leave out?

Henri Cartier-Bresson's images suggest that the world is a great place to see and explore, but this approach leaves out the kind of information that other photographers find essential. There are very few words, and very brief captions. These images tell nothing about the historical circumstances of the portrait, and rarely contain any evidence about why Cartier-Bresson chose to make the portrait, other than wanting to preserve this meeting, and this moment, in a photograph.



## Classroom Extension Exercises

### The Art of the Photograph: Composition and the Decisive Moment

#### ***One Step Further***

Read more about this philosophy in Cartier-Bresson's own words (see List of Primary and Secondary Source Material Attachments/Primary Source Material, *The Decisive Moment: Photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson*) and in Beaumont Newhall's essay, "Vision Plus the Camera: Henri Cartier-Bresson" (see List of Primary and Secondary Source Material Attachments/Secondary Source Materials, number 3).

## Classroom Extension Exercises

### Small Cameras and the Art of Photojournalism

#### ***Historical Background, 1839–Present***

Whereas a painter masters paint and brushes to put ideas on canvas, a photographer relies upon a camera and light-sensitive materials to create photographic images, whether the materials are sensitized metal plates that create daguerreotypes, negatives made on paper, glass or film used to print on photographic paper to make conventional photographs, or today's digitally recorded data that is used to produce images on a computer screen or is printed with ink on a page. From 1839 to the present, photographic technology has steadily changed—cameras have grown smaller and lighter, and paper and negatives have grown more sensitive and easier to manipulate. As these tools change, photographers make new kinds of pictures. In fact, the whole history of photography can be seen as a dialogue between technological progress and aesthetic achievement.

Early photographic materials were bulky and time-consuming to use. Cameras were large constructions of wood with metal fittings, leather bellows, and large lenses that had to rest on a tripod. Like the first daguerreotypes, the first negatives, whether of paper or glass, needed a lot of light to register an image. They also remained sensitive to light only when the chemical emulsion was still wet, which meant that a photographer had to carry chemicals and glass on every expedition out of the studio. Once the plate was ready and loaded in the camera, the photographer simply removed the cap from the lens and counted the seconds while light shone through the lens onto the negative, replacing the lens cap when the exposure was complete.

Many different technological changes contributed to the development of small, fast cameras. During the middle third of the nineteenth century, lens-makers learned to make stronger lenses that could shine more light onto the negative, and camera-makers developed mechanical shutters that allowed photographers to limit exposure time to a mere fraction of a second. At the same time, photochemists sought ways to make negatives that would record light while dry; by the end of the 1880s, “dry plates” were manufactured and sold around the country. It was also important to make negatives more sensitive to light, to allow a short exposure time. Finally, camera-makers developed handheld cameras that allowed photographers to work out of doors. But as late as 1880, “instantaneous views” remained difficult to make. They were especially prized by amateurs, who made endless efforts to seize spontaneous expressions or stop motion in midair. While all the steps became simpler, amateurs still needed the same skills used by professionals, because they developed their own film and printed their own negatives. But in 1889, George Eastman replaced glass plates with a winding reel of celluloid negatives, which he loaded into the handheld camera that he named “Kodak,” and promised amateurs, “You push the button, we do the rest.” Amateur photographers eagerly purchased his cameras loaded with unexposed film. After shooting the roll of film, one simply sent the whole camera back to Eastman, who returned the photographs along with the camera, now loaded with fresh film. Serious photographers called this a toy, and for many years continued to use conventional handheld cameras and glass plates.

## Classroom Extension Exercises

### Small Cameras and the Art of Photojournalism

Photographs made with Kodaks or other hand-held cameras were still famously awkward, in part because the cameras, bulky by today's standards, remained difficult to use and control. The brief snapshot exposure could also distort facial expressions or place a body in an improbable position, and the edge of the photograph often sliced people or things apart in a way that most artists would avoid. Skilled amateur photographers often adjusted these errors in the darkroom, isolating the successful parts of the negative and cropping away the rest. A small group of artists also used handheld cameras, especially to work outside the studio, making landscapes, city views, and travel pictures. Still, most professional photographers preferred to use large cameras on tripods.

Photographic technology jumped forward again in the 1920s, when a new group of European manufacturers, including Ermanox and Leitz, developed cameras not much larger than a hand. Small, light, and loaded with rolls of 35mm film that advanced smoothly and quietly on sprockets—like the film used to make moving pictures—these cameras brought photographers great new opportunities. Photographers could now move freely and work quickly. They could also plan their pictures with great precision because of the advent of the range finder, a small, rectangular window built in to the camera, which allowed them to see the image that would be captured on film. Just as George Eastman brought together a handheld camera, roll film, and the processing plant to cause a great explosion in amateur photography, the Leitz company and its Leica camera brought a revolution in photographic practice. With the Leica, a photographer could use the camera as an extension of the human eye.

Journalists exploited this new technology to make photographs behind the scenes, undetected by officials or celebrities who were accustomed to large, obtrusive cameras of the past. In addition, the new size, speed, and flexibility allowed photographers to pursue subjects that had been too difficult to capture with older equipment. Athletes became thrilling new subjects as photographers caught them in motion. With cameras suddenly easy to transport, photography of distant, exotic places and people became immediate and fresh.

At the same time, demand for photographic images increased dramatically as changes in printing technology made it possible to inexpensively reproduce photographs on magazine pages, and with pleasing results. Picture magazine editors clamored for material to fill their pages, and photographers found new ways to comply. The new partnership of photography with the printed page created a new form of reporting that produced such influential magazines as *Vu* in Paris, *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* in Germany, and *Life* and *Look* in the United States.

#### **Big Cameras vs. Small Cameras**

How do different cameras influence the kind of work photographers produce?

In a studio, the photographer has complete control of everything that comes before the camera's lens. The photographer can arrange the subject, set the lights, choose the background, and repeat each shot until he or she gets the desired results. The method remains very much the same whether shooting a still life or a portrait. Many photographers in fashion and advertising work with these strict controls.



## Classroom Extension Exercises

### Small Cameras and the Art of Photojournalism

1. Using magazines or newspapers, find photographs that have been made in a studio. (Hint: look for fashion, advertising, and celebrity portraits.) What signs suggest that this image was made in the studio? What is in the background? Where does the light come from? Where are the shadows? What are the ways in which you can recognize a studio photograph?
2. Pretend you are in a studio and construct an image. Choose a subject, arrange (or pose) the subject, place the lights, examine the background, etc.

With a 35mm camera, the photographer is free to work in the world, but has little control over events. Yet thanks to the small, light, fast camera, the photographer can respond quickly to events as they take shape. Henri Cartier-Bresson compares this kind of work to fishing or hunting, requiring great patience and flawless reflexes.

3. Again using magazines and newspapers, find an image that was made with a 35mm camera outside the studio. What tells you this was not made in a studio? What kind of camera would you prefer? Why?

#### ***Photography in the 1930s***

Photography was a booming profession in the 1930s. Many photographers worked for the magazines and the press. Others worked for government agencies in this country and in Europe, making national records and promoting government programs. To learn more about the various forms of photojournalism and documentary photography, study monographs or biographies about individual photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White and Alfred Eisenstaedt, who worked for

*Life*, and Walker Evans, who worked for *Fortune* and for the Farm Services Administration of the United States government. Also see the work of other FSA photographers, including Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Esther Bubley, and John Vachon. Do they seem to look for decisive moments, or are these images staged and planned? How can you tell? Who is in charge? The photographer? The magazine? The subject?





## Classroom Extension Exercises

### Henri Cartier-Bresson, His Contemporaries, and His Legacy

#### ***Henri Cartier-Bresson, Magnum, and “Concerned Photography”***

After World War II, Henri Cartier-Bresson, along with his friends Robert Capa and George Rodger, formed their own picture agency in order to control and protect their work. They named the agency after the large bottle that holds wine or champagne, a magnum. This agency was run as a cooperative venture, with all members contributing fees to give themselves freedom and support. Over the years, Magnum welcomed new members, including Bruce Davidson, Eve Arnold, Elliott Erwitt, Josef Koudelka, Ernst Haas, Inge Morath, and David Seymour (known as “Chim”). Some were members of the co-op for only a short time, including Danny Lyons, Mary Ellen Mark, and Eugene Smith. Many of these photographers have published books devoted to their photographs. Compare their work to that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. How has his work influenced these photographers? Is there a “Magnum” style?

#### ***One Step Further***

Read more about the story of Magnum in Jean Lacouture’s essay, “The Founders” (see List of Primary and Secondary Source Material Attachments/Secondary Source Materials, number 4).

## List of Primary and Secondary Source Material Attachments

### Primary Source Materials

1. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment: Photographs by Henri Cartier-Bresson* (New York: Simon & Schuster, in collaboration with Editions Verve of Paris, 1952).

### Secondary Source Materials

2. Biography of Henri Cartier-Bresson, from International Center of Photography, *Encyclopedia of Photography* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1984).

3. "Historical Data on Henri Cartier-Bresson," compiled from Weston J. Naef, *Counterparts: Form and Emotion in Photographs* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982), p. 152.

4. Beaumont Newhall, "Vision Plus the Camera: Henri Cartier-Bresson" from Newhall, ed., *Photography: Essays & Images—Illustrated Readings in the History of Photography* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), pp. 283–87.

5. Jean Lacouture, "The Founders," from William Manchester, *In Our Time: The World as Seen by Magnum Photographers* (New York: American Federation of Arts in association with W. W. Norton, 1989).

6. "Henri Cartier-Bresson: A Selected Bibliography."

