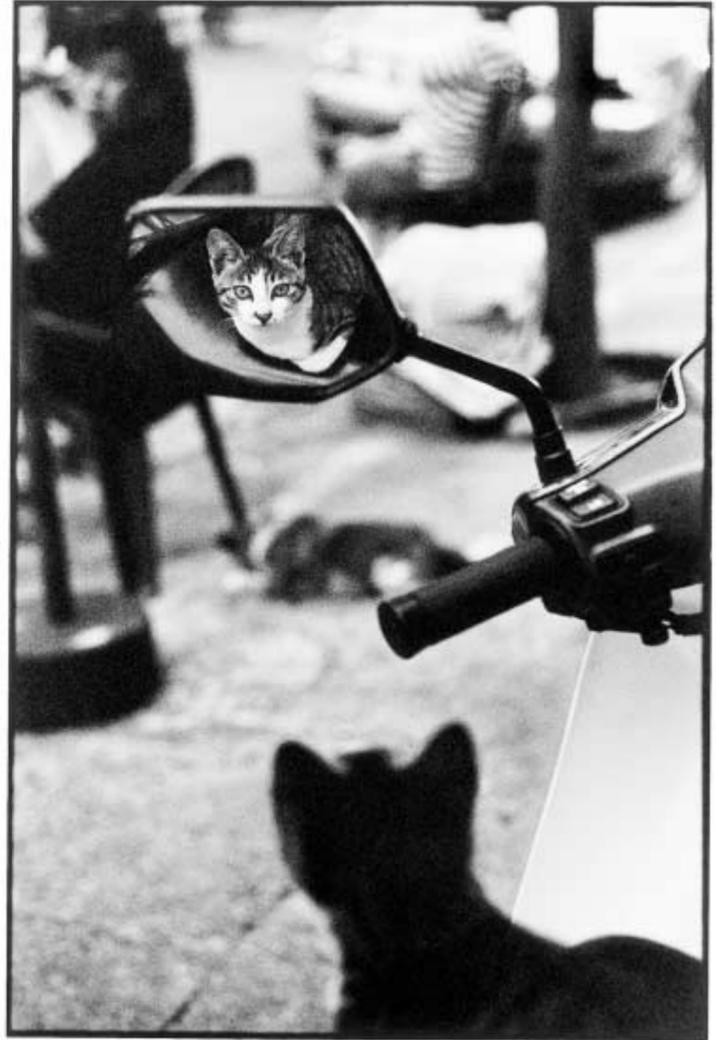




Pictures taken by members of the Leica Club in Seoul. Clockwise, from upper left: Yun Seok-doo, New York City (1999); Kim Kyung-tae, Seoul (1998); Kim Kyung-tae, Seoul (1997); Chung Jin-seok, Vatican City, Italy (2003)

“Reportage is a communication between the world and the guy who’s shooting.”
Henri Cartier-Bresson



Cartier-Bresson lives on in Leica lovers

By Inès Cho
Staff Writer

The death of Henri Cartier-Bresson, one of the world's most acclaimed photographers, in August was mourned by photography lovers all over the world, especially a sizable coterie of admirers in Korea who are determined to maintain his legacy.

For these people, attaining the so-called “Cartier-Bresson-ness” in photography started as a humble attempt at imitation, which fed a passion for photography.

For Choi Mi-li, who had organized an exhibition of 13 original works by the photographer at her Gallery Lumière in Cheongdam-dong in southern Seoul, finding out about his death on Aug. 3 was overwhelming. Pointing at Mr. Cartier-Bresson's shaky handwriting in the immaculate black frames, she said, “These photographs might be the very last ones signed by Cartier-Bresson himself.”

The news of his death brought crowds to the gallery. The exhibition, which was initially scheduled to end in September, was extended to this Sunday after visitors and professional photographers lobbied for it. By the end of September, the gallery had nearly 5,000 visitors since the exhibition opened on June 25.

Ms. Choi has also organized weekly seminars in August and September and small gatherings on Friday evening to talk about the photographer's work and to celebrate his life.

During these meetings, the real passion and admiration of Korean photographers, both amateur and

professional, was evident.

Kim Kyung-tae, a self-taught professional photographer who travels around the world to shoot runway scenes, said he regards Mr. Cartier-Bresson as his spiritual mentor and learned to take photographs of life's beautifully accidental moments.

To Mr. Kim, it was senior photographer Yun Seok-doo's distinctive “Bresson-style” photographs taken in New York City that deeply inspired him to purchase his Leica, a camera favored by Mr. Cartier-Bresson, in 1995.

Mr. Kim never met Mr. Cartier-Bresson but studied his work through a few tomes on Mr. Cartier-Bresson he has owned for years.

Since discovering a Leica, the world's first small, light and handheld camera that uses 35 mm film, in 1932, Mr. Cartier-Bresson never used anything else.

“The world [of cameras] has become totally digital, but Cartier-Bresson stuck with his Leica camera despite the trend toward convenience and speed,” Mr. Kim said. “To people who use Leicas, just like Cartier-Bresson, the camera is something very personal and meaningful. There are people who have inherited that spirit of Cartier-Bresson and continue the history of photography.”

Other than Gallery Lumière, aspiring photographers can be found in Chungmuuro on Saturday afternoons. Most stores there are closed for the weekend, but the nondescript Amigo cafe in the heart of Chungmuuro, the oldest dive for film buffs and photographers, is bustling with droves of Korean men of varying ages, from baby-faced college grads to those who could pass for their uncles and fathers. Next to their 2,000 won coffee, their Leica cameras of various vintage, sizes and styles are on display.

Mr. Kim discovered an online Leica Club (www.leicacub.net) and

joined two months ago to share and expand his knowledge of his favorite camera. Wherever he goes, he carries an M7 over his shoulder.

“Cartier-Bresson was carrying his Leica at all times, just like this, and then when he saw something, he took pictures,” he said, as he mimed pressing the shutter.

With Mr. Kim are Ha Seok-jun, Oh Dong-ik and Lee Kyung-up, who are all members of the club. Mr. Ha is a computer software developer; Mr. Oh is engaged in industrial oil trading, and Mr. Lee sells steel beams.

They have little in common but a love for Leica cameras. “We discuss mostly new gadgets,” Mr. Lee said.

In Korea, it is a common practice among camera shop owners to organize small, casual get-togethers to sell cameras and accessories to their regular customers, but the founder of the Leica Club, Lee Dong-jun of Incheon, thought these cameras were too precious to be handled commercially. The club had to be special and different — non-commercial.

The Leica club's Web site was created in 2001 and was improved later by another co-founder, Kim Yeong-jun. After Mr. Ha, a computer expert, joined six months ago, the Web site became more user-friendly. There are about 5,000 registered members, of which 500 are active members who submit their photographs to the Web site gallery and participate in online forums.

“The ones who show up at Amigo cafe are ‘patients,’ you know, who are ‘addicted’ to Leica,” said Mr. Kim, surveying the noisy cafe filled with a thin screen of cigarette smoke.

To better understand Bresson-style photography, Mr. Lee attended a seminar at Gallery Lumière and plans to attend more events. He also gave a lecture on Cartier-Bresson style photography at the gallery last month.

What makes “Bresson-style” pho-

tographs unique can be explained by two different types of cameras a photographer chooses to use. Fantastic image manipulation, such as fireworks in the sky, can be taken using a SLR (Single Lens Reflex) camera, which allows the camera user to preview and adjust the focus through viewfinders to capture the desired image.

Unlike the more commonly used SLR cameras, the classic Leica series is a LFC (Lens Finder Camera), which means the camera captures the true image seen with the naked eye. Because a Leica can only take pictures from a certain distance, Mr. Oh is particularly fascinated with the way a photographer walks through the crowd, just as Cartier-Bresson did, to take close-up pictures.

“The M series can be used with wide angle or long distance lens, but it's very rare,” he said. “So with an M7, for example, you cannot take pictures from afar. You must go inside the people and take pictures from within. So you read what's going on around you with your own eyes and then capture that very moment you want.”

“I have to put my thoughts into the frame,” Mr. Oh said.

“And accuracy,” Mr. Kim added.

Mr. Lee said that the small and handy feature of Leica cameras makes it easier to work around people. “Unlike some serious-looking professional cameras that are so huge and intrusive, a Leica doesn't look intimidating.”

Serious Leica-philes are simply uninterested in the latest digital cameras, no matter how far technologies advance. “The latest Nikons come with state-of-the-art functions, but they are too complicated to use. The Leica is really simple, with just basic functions,” Mr. Ha.

Mr. Oh said he immediately fell in love with the beauty of a Leica camera and purchased his first one in 1999.

He took his camera from the bag: a 1950s vintage with a 1960s lens.

“After I bought the camera, I had to learn how to take pictures with it,” he said. “So I got into it. Even when I don't take pictures, I just hold my camera and press the shutter, if only to hear that pleasant sound of the shutter clicking.”

“Yeah, I could sit all day, just clicking the shutter. The sound is really wonderful,” Mr. Kim said.

The love for Leicas doesn't come cheap. When asked about costs, all four photographers shook their heads, saying some rare vintage Leicas could cost a fortune. Mr. Kim said a vintage model called “black paint” could cost 10 million won (\$8,300) or more.

Mr. Kim's advice for Leica novices: Be ready to take a chunk out of your savings. “A minimum of 3 million won can get you started with really basic stuff. And Korea actually has very good prices for Leicas because of the black market.”

Leaving the cafe with his fellow photographers, Mr. Kim beamed. “We'll talk more about Leica over dinner and tea. I love these people. They are so pure — and so into photography.”

inescho@joongang.co.kr

The exhibition “Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Decisive Moment” is running until Sunday. The gallery is holding its last event commemorating the death of the photographer: “The Night of Bresson” at 7:30 p.m. on Friday. A limited number of people can reserve in advance for a simple buffet dinner and wine before viewing a black-and-white documentary film at the gallery's outdoor terrace. The 35-minute film, titled “Henri Cartier-Bresson, ? [a question mark],” was made by Sarah Moon, a close friend and associate of the late photographer. For more information or reservations, call (02) 517-2134 or visit www.gallerylumiere.com (some English available).

A Leica M3 “Black Paint,” or original finish, is one of the rarest, most sought after Leicas.

