

Willy Ronis

A Poetics of Engagement

16 April – 22 August 2010





Autoportrait aux flashes, Paris, 1951



Carrefour Sèvres-Babylone, Paris, 1948

Marking the centenary of his birth and approaching the first anniversary of his death, this exhibition is more than a homage to one of the most internationally famous French photographers, for it also sets out to reveal previously unknown aspects of his work. Indeed, the images presented here were selected from the ensemble of works bequeathed by Willy Ronis to the French state during his lifetime. This collection, held by the Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine, under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Communication, contains thousands of negatives, documents, albums and vintage and modern prints.

This exhibition thus offers a first glimpse of the riches in this holding, which still needs to be fully catalogued and subjected to rigorous critical and academic analysis. Nevertheless, in order to honour the wishes of Willy Ronis who, in the weeks before his death, imagined a big exhibition in Paris to celebrate his hundredth birthday, Jeu de Paume and the Monnaie de Paris are joining forces with the Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine to make that dream a reality, albeit a posthumous one.

The exhibition is articulated around five main themes which, while certainly not coterminous with Ronis's work, do crop up throughout his career: the street, with Paris as its main theatre; the world of work; travel; bodies; and, finally, friends and family. All these images partake of that poetics of engagement which was so characteristic of Ronis's life and work.

Born in Paris in 1910 to a family of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe, Willy Ronis grew up with a musician mother and photographer father. Music was the source of his first artistic emotions, and would no doubt have been his career choice had he not become involved with photography, initially to help his father when he fell ill, and then to earn a living. Like Brassai then Doisneau, Izis, Marcel Bovis, René-Jacques and Boubat, Ronis delighted in exploring the streets of the French capital, capturing the picturesque scenes, the winsome children, the busy pedestrians, lovers, happy young people at the fair – but also solitude in the slums or housing estates, the beauty of the Seine and its barges, the crowds at the Louvre, the hodgepodge of the flea markets in the postwar years, the bustle in the Halles or cafés at night, or the nostalgic charm of the neighbourhoods of Belleville and Ménilmontant.



Nu au tricot rayé, Paris, 1970

Beyond these anecdotal, tender and poetic stories which helped create the humanist narrative that developed in France after the Second World War, Ronis, a committed communist, made no secret of his attraction for and empathy with the working class and the world of work. When covering the strikes at Citroën (1938) and Renault (1950), or reporting on the mines of Saint-Étienne (1958) or the textile industry in Alsace (around 1950), he was acutely aware of the gravity and strength of the men and women who, by their individual work, were contributing to the collective effort. He celebrated the harmony of tool and body while denouncing social injustice. There is nothing sensational or sentimental in his images of the poor and powerless, of pickets and trade unionists; rather, they express a genuine solidarity with the struggles of labour and an active engagement on behalf of the underprivileged and unwanted. In his approach, Ronis faithfully embodies two of the greatest utopias of the twentieth century: humanism and communism.

Ronis produced numerous photojournalism pieces for *Regards* and *Vogue*, among others, also working for foreign publications such as *Life* and *Time Magazine*. He refused, however, to compromise, insisting on having a say on the cropping and captioning of his images. He soon stopped working

with the American press (one of his photographs was used to convey a negative impression of the French workers' movement). This independence, which was part and parcel of his political engagement, caused him real professional and financial difficulties.

Even if the majority of his most frequently reproduced photographs were made in France, Ronis also took large numbers of them in the course of his various foreign travels, and this exhibition also sets out to show this less well-known aspect of his work. We thus discover that in London, in 1955, Ronis's fascination with the atmosphere of the pubs and the many neon advertising signs inspired him to produce dynamic and poetic images of the city that have a touch of strangeness to them. A polyglot, curious and cultivated, Ronis travelled frequently to Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, New York and Réunion, not to mention, at the height of the Cold War, Moscow, Prague and the DDR, that "other Germany" where, during his stays in 1960 and 1967, he produced his most extensive piece of photojournalism outside France.

Willy Ronis insisted that nearly all his photographs were "slices of ordinary life." Always ready with commentaries on his photos, he loved to tell stories



HLM, Porte de Vanves, 1957



"Schaeffer", Mulhouse, 1946

and evoke memories, and did so with great precision. As he wrote in *Sur le fil du hasard*, published in 1979: "I could experience my joyous expeditions only when I stole time from my commissioned work, or when the impact of an unexpected event set off the fever of big emotions." A free and independent photographer, Ronis always linked his personal experience to his work, which also developed and grew through contact with friends and family: portraits of Marie-Anne, his wife (including the famous *Nu provençal*), his son Vincent, his cats, his friends (Capa) and personalities he met (Sartre, Prévert, Brassai, etc.) express the same poetics of the universal as the rest of his work. And so do the female nudes, that he never stopped photographing, and the self-portraits that punctuate his long and impressive career.

Chronology

1910

Born in Paris into a family of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe.

1926

First camera.

Holiday photographs and first series on Paris.

1932

Starts working in his father's photography studio.

1936

Death of his father.

Decides to become an independent photojournalist and leaves the studio.

First publications in *Regards*; a report on the Popular Front.

1937

Buys his first Rolleiflex. First reportage published in *Plaisir de France*.

Friendships with Capa and Chim.

1938

Reportage on industrial unrest at Citroën.

1941-44

Fleeing persecution and the obligatory yellow star, he leaves Paris and heads for the free southern zone in 1941.

Various jobs.

1945-49

After the war he joins the French Communist Party (he leaves in the mid-1960s but remains a sympathiser).

Marries Marie-Anne Lansiaux (1946).

In 1946 he joins the Rapho agency (he leaves it in 1955 then returns in 1972).

Several reports for *Life* (1947-49).

1950

Member of the Groupe des XV.



Londres, Piccadilly Circus, le jour, 1955

1950-60

Numerous reports for *Vogue*.

Exhibition at MoMA, New York, with Brassai, Doisneau and Izis (1953).

Publishes *Photo-Reportage et chasse aux images* (1951) and *Belleville-Ménilmontant* (1954).

Reportage in London (1955).

Gold medal at the first Mostra Biennale Internazionale de Fotografia in Venice (1957).

1965

Features in the exhibition "Six photographes et Paris" at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, along with Robert Doisneau, Daniel Frasnay, Jean Lattès, Janine Niépce and Roger Pic.

1967

Reportage in East Germany.

1972

Leaves Paris for the South of France. Lives in Gordes and then L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue (Vaucluse). He teaches, notably at the École des Beaux-Arts d'Avignon.

1979

Takes part in the Mission Photographique for the Direction du Patrimoine of the French Ministry of Culture. Receives the Grand Prix National des Arts et des Lettres for photography.

1980

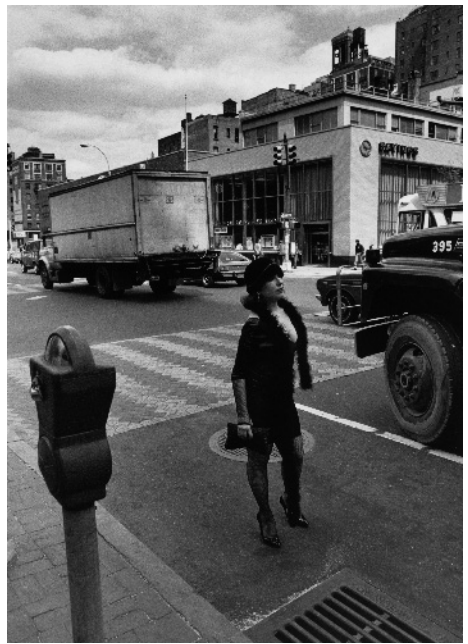
Guest of honour at the eleventh Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie d'Arles.

1981

Wins the Nadar Prize for *Sur le fil du hasard*, published the previous year by Contrejour.

1982

Patrick Barbéris directs a feature film, *Un voyage de Rose*, with Willy Ronis and Guy Le Querrec.



New York, 1981

1983

Returns to Paris.

Willy Ronis, a biography, is published by Bertrand Eveno (Belfond).

Donates his archives to the state (taking effect post-mortem).

1985

Retrospective at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris

1989

Made Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Complementary donation to the state.

1991

Willy Ronis is volume no. 46 of the "Photo Poche" series published by the Centre National de la Photographie.

1995

Several exhibitions abroad, including a retrospective at the Oxford Museum of Modern Art.

1996

Retrospective at the Pavillon des Arts, Paris.

2000

Exhibition at the Kyoto Museum of Contemporary Art.

2001

Derrière l'objectif, Photos et Propos, texts and photographs by Willy Ronis, Hoëbeke.

2005

"Willy Ronis à Paris," exhibition at the Hôtel de Ville de Paris in homage to the photographer, on the occasion of his 95th birthday.

2006

Ce jour-là, texts and photos by Willy Ronis, Mercure de France.

2009

Presentation by Jeu de Paume with a retrospective of about 80 photographs at the Sainte-Anne church during the Rencontres d'Arles.

Death of Willy Ronis, 11 September, at the age of 99.

Willy Ronis

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Monnaie de Paris

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Tuesday to Sunday 11 am-7 pm

Thursday (late opening) 11 am-9.30 pm

closed Monday and May 1st

admission: 7 € – concession: 5 €

This exhibition is organised jointly by Jeu de Paume and the Monnaie de Paris with the support of the Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine/ Ministry of Culture and Communication.

Guided tours of the "Willy Ronis" exhibition will be available every Saturday at 3 pm.

Group tours (schools, adults) are organised on Wednesday and Saturday at 2.30 and 4 pm.

Reservation obligatory at
exposition@monnaieparis.fr
or on +33 (0)1 40 46 56 66

publications

! *Willy Ronis, une poétique de l'engagement*

coedition Democratic Books /

Jeu de Paume / Monnaie de Paris

catalogue of the exhibition, 192 pages, 35 €

! *Willy Ronis*

Connaissance des Arts exceptional issue

44 pages, 10 €

curator: Marta Gili
assistant curator: Nathalie Neumann

acknowledgements

Jeu de Paume and the Monnaie de Paris would like to thank Stéphane Kovalsky, grandson of Willy Ronis, and are very grateful to the executors of the photographer's estate, Roland Rappaport, Daniel Karlin, Gérard Uféras and Jean Guerry, for supporting this project.

Jeu de Paume receives a subsidy from the Ministry of Culture and Communication.



It gratefully acknowledges support from **Neuflyze Vie**, its global partner.



Les Amis du Jeu de Paume contribute to its activities.

It is realized in partnership with:



layout: Gérard Plénacoste

translation: Charles Penwarden

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