

NEWS RELEASE

Exhibition: Brassai, *Language of the Wall: The Tapestries, 1968*

Dates: January 9 – March 5, 2016

Opening: Saturday, January 9, 10 – 6pm

Higher Pictures presents *Language of the Wall: The Tapestries, 1968* presenting together for the first time *Graffiti I* and *Nocturne*, two of the earliest of seven known tapestries created by Brassai. The tapestries, both made in 1968 by the renowned Atelier Yvette Cauquil-Prince, were woven from Brassai's collages of his own Graffiti photographs and are exhibited here alongside a selection of gelatin silver prints from the well-known series.

Brassai began taking photographs of graffiti he saw on walls throughout Paris in the early 1930s and first published a suite of them in a 1933 issue of the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (no. 3 – 4), writing there that graffiti had “toppled all the painstakingly devised canons of our aesthetic.” Brassai wrote about the spontaneous, untrained scrawls and carvings of the graffitiists as eternal and formative gestures, imagining children discovering and recreating the human face by gouging two eyeholes into stone or sharing naïve expressions of love through carved hearts and roughly inscribed initials. Though this language would later inspire Jean Dubuffet to make a direct connection between Brassai's project and Art Brut, a term Dubuffet coined in the late 1940s to describe what we now call outsider art, Brassai never aligned himself with the movement.

In 1956, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted the exhibition *Language of the Wall: Parisian Graffiti Photographed by Brassai*, featuring over 100 prints from the series selected by Edward Steichen and organized by the artist into visual categories, including: faces; love; war; birds and beasts; wizards and phantoms; and the sign of death. In the exhibition's press release, Steichen establishes graffiti as “chiefly valuable for the light they throw on the everyday life of the ‘man in the street’ of the period, and for the intimate details of customs and institutions of people in a particular time and place.” It was following MoMA's exhibition and the subsequent publication of *Graffiti de Brassai* in 1961 that Brassai and Yvette Cauquil-Prince—a master weaver who had already worked with Pablo Picasso and would collaborate with Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee and Alexander Calder—first discussed translating his photographs into textiles. The process of making *Graffiti I* and *Nocturne* would have begun with Brassai making a collage of prints (each tapestry here comprises more than twenty photographs) that was then used to create a full-scale template, called a cartoon. Placed under or behind the loom, the cartoon provided the weaver with a blueprint for the final piece.

Graffiti I (1968) was Brassai and Cauquil-Prince's first tapestry. Measuring nearly 5 feet tall and 10 feet wide, it features what Brassai called the “bird-woman” (the gelatin silver print is also on view here) in the center of the composition and twinned in miniature in the upper left corner. She is surrounded primarily by images of lovers' hearts, though a skull and other glyphs appear, all rendered in the grays, browns, and blacks of Paris' walls. *Nocturne*, 4 ½ feet tall and 9 feet wide, was completed the same year. The eponymous evening light is captured in vibrant blues and violets; once again, though now facing in the opposite direction, the bird-woman anchors the composition in the center and reappears in the upper left corner. A number of the same hearts from *Graffiti I* appear around her, joined by a curvilinear female silhouette and a crossbones motif topped with a broadly smiling face in the place of a skull. The Graffiti project charts Brassai's transposition of drawing into photograph, and then both into tapestry, ultimately, in the artist's own words, returning to the wall what he took from it.

Brassai was born Gyula Halász in Brassó, Transylvania in 1899. In 1924, after studying painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest and the Academy of Fine Arts at Charlottenburg in Berlin, he moved to Paris where he began working as a journalist and, eventually, a photographer. He took the pseudonym of his hometown in 1932 and the next year published his first photobook, the landmark *Paris de Nuit*. Widely considered one of the most important artists of the interwar period, Brassai worked actively through the late 1960s; he died in Beaulieu-sur-Mer, France in 1984. His work has since been the subject of several major retrospectives, including *Brassai* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris and Hayward Gallery, London in 2000 and *Brassai: The Eye of Paris* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; and the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC in 1998.

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