



Biography-Willy Ronis

Born in Paris in 1910 to a family of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, Willy Ronis grew up in an artistic household—his mother was a musician and his father a photographer. Music was his first love and undoubtedly would have been his career choice had it not been for him stumbling into photography, initially to help out his father when he fell ill, and then later to earn a living.

Ronis' father died in 1936, whereupon the business collapsed and Ronis was forced to close the studio on Boulevard Richard-Lenoir. The sale of his first photograph to the newspaper *L'Humanité* in 1935 would lead to his life as a press photographer. Firmly committed to the French Communist Party, he published his images in the French magazine *Regards*, and also in *Point de vue* and *Magazine de France*. In the France of the Popular Front government, he was witness to the great social movements of the 1930s, as well as to times of great prosperity and joy among his fellow citizens.

His work reflects a time when photographers as “craftsmen-producers of images,” were known as much for their technical know-how as for the quality of their images. This dual state, along with his own natural curiosity, cemented his status as an independent spirit rather than a traditional agency photographer. He immediately embraced a broad range of subjects: fashion, industry, portraits of personalities, customs and cultural reports. His early works bear witness to his presence in the artistic circles of the time: Robert Capa, Chim and Neftali Avon (Naf). In May 1935, he presented three prints during the exhibition *Documents de la vie sociale* organised by the Association of Writers and Revolutionary Artists (AEAR) in the bookstore-gallery of La Pléiade in Paris. And his editorial work ‘On travaille pour la guerre’ was commented upon by Louis Aragon in the journal *Commune*.

Like Brassai then Doisneau, Izis, Marcel Bovis, René-Jacques and Boubat, Ronis delighted in exploring the streets of the French capital, capturing picturesque scenes, winsome children, bustling pedestrians, lovers, carefree young people at the fairgrounds—but also the solitude of the slums and housing estates, the beauty of the Seine and its barges, the crowds at the Louvre,





the chaos of flea markets during the postwar years, the bustle of the Halles or cafés at night and the nostalgic charm of the Belleville and Ménilmontant neighbourhoods.

Beyond the tender and poetic stories that helped to create the humanist narrative developing in France after the Second World War, Ronis was a committed communist who made no secret about his empathy for the working class. 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, through 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 the picket lines and trade unionists; rather, his images 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*. He refused, however, to compromise in regards to his art and business, insisting on having a say about the cropping and captioning of his images. He stopped working with the American press early on when one of his photographs was used to convey a negative impression of the French workers' movement. This independent streak, which was part and parcel of his political engagement, caused him significant professional and financial difficulties.

Though the majority of his most frequently reproduced photographs were taken in France, Ronis also captured a significant number of images during the course of his foreign travels. This exhibition also sets out to present this lesser known aspect of his oeuvre. In this way we learn about Ronis' fascination with 1950s era London pubs and how the neon advertising signs inspired him to produce dynamic and poetic images of the city with a touch of the strange. 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, to Moscow, Prague and the DDR—that 'other Germany' where, during his stays in 1960 and 1967, he produced his most extensive body of photojournalism outside of France.





Willy Ronis insisted that nearly all of his photographs were “slices of ordinary life.” Always ready with commentaries on his photos, he loved to tell stories and to evoke memories, and he 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 away from my commissioned work, or when the impact of an unexpected event set off a fever of emotions.”

A free and independent photographer, Ronis consistently linked his personal experiences to his work, which also developed and grew through contact with friends and family: portraits of Marie-Anne, his wife (including the famous *Provençal Nude*), his son Vincent, his cats, his friends (Capa) and the personalities he met along the way (Sartre, Prévert and Brassai) express the same poetics of the universal. As do the female nudes, who he never stopped photographing, along with the self-portraits that punctuate his long and impressive career.

Countless works by Willy Ronis illustrate the humanistic photographer’s understanding of the city of Paris, with no less than ten collaborative publications and six individual collections of his work. His signature can thus be found in the majority of books directed by François Cali in the 1950s, along with other photographers of the Groupe des XV, with whom he defended the professional interests of photographers. His work also includes projects that displayed his own sensitivity; for example, the book *Belleville-Menilmontant*, published in 1954 by Arthaud with a foreword by Pierre Mac Orlan and designed by Roger Excoffon. Dedicated to a Parisian neighborhood that was poorly documented at the time, this book “expresses a populism close to his friend Doisneau, but in a less smiling vein, and restores the graphic force of a uniquely urban Paris landscape; where the stairs and the hovels set a counterpoint with the skies and foliage.”

