

Monograph

Geometry modulated by the heart

The life and photography of Willy Ronis, a remarkable survivor

Born in 1910, Willy Ronis is among the last survivors of a remarkable generation of humanist photographers who flourished in Paris before and after World War II. His father owned a photography studio and camera shop in Paris, and, naturally Ronis was drawn to photography, a *métier* which became his life's work.

At 16, he got his first camera: as a schoolboy he visited the Société Française de la Photographie which advanced artistic, as distinct from his father's commercially based, photography. He encountered in the Latin Quarter gallery-cum-bookshop of La Pléiade radically new photographs by Modernists then working in Paris, such as André Kertész and Germaine Krull. Brassai and innovative French practitioners, such as Florence Henri, followed in the 1930s. Swayed by such mentors, Ronis soon turned away from his father's stock-in-trade of conventional, often saccharine portraits.

His earliest images, from 1926 to 1939, show how well he assimilated everything to do with lighting and composition. After military service in 1932, he bowed to his ailing father's urgent pleas and reluctantly ran the shop. The only consolation for this monotony came from his street photographs of Paris and alpine images taken on holidays. In 1935 his skiing resort pictures found favour with the French national railway company (SNCF) and the Ministry of Tourism. He met the Polish-born photographer, David "Chim" Seymour, through whom he made important contacts, such as Naf, the industrial photographer with whom he worked, and the Hungarian emigré, Robert Friedman who became famous, as Robert Capa, as a war photographer. All four became friends.

After his father's death in 1936, Ronis abandoned the "fossilised aesthetics" of the shop and worked freelance. Besides the new tourism and advertising assignments, he focused on committed social photography for various left-wing journals, such as *Regards* and *Ce Soir*, documenting the wave of strikes that swept

France. In 1937, he bought a Rolleiflex camera and established his own photo archive of landscapes, industrial photography and reportage, while rejecting "the very idea of specialisation—however lucrative—because I was afraid I'd get bored and because my curiosity was insatiable."

Having Jewish antecedents, he was forced to flee to the Vichy-controlled Free Zone in 1941, where he nearly lost his life as well as his belongings, and where he joined the circle of the poet Jacques Prévert.

With the Liberation, Ronis returned to Paris where his former client, the SNCF, commissioned coverage of the returning French prisoners of war. In 1946 he signed

up with the Rapho agency, which included Brassai and Robert Doisneau, joined "Le groupe des XV" association of photographers and, in 1947, won the Prix Kodak. Edward Steichen showed Ronis' work in 1953, along with Brassai, Doisneau and Izis, in "Four French photographers" at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), published his work, and chose one of his pictures for MoMA's celebrated "Family of man" exhibition of 1955.

Like many home-grown talents, Ronis came to prominence during the brief flurry of post-war optimism in France, when the resurgent, pre-television print media embarked on an intense, if short-lived, publishing bonanza. Ronis' genial survey of the old fashioned, working-class Paris district of Belleville-Ménilmontant, which he photographed between 1947 and 1951 and which was published in 1954, cemented his reputation. When first published, the book was a critical success, but a commercial failure.

"I subsequently had such abominable experiences with

publishers that it was making me ill; I swore that I would do no more books," Ronis is quoted as saying in Jean-Claude Gautrand's essay in *Willy Ronis*. This text is set in French, German and English (and there is an Italian, Spanish and Portuguese edition as well), although primarily destined for an English-speaking readership, a larger market and one in which the artist's work is less well known. Having sworn off books, he avoided publishing his work for 17 years until his prize-winning monograph appeared in 1980. Since then, 25 books have appeared.

Most of Ronis' best work emerged between 1945 and 1960. He learned to bring a lyrical touch to the ordinary moments of everyday life, but at the same time was exacting in the standards he demanded, leading him to turn down work for some magazines, such as *Life*, which refused to use his captions. For a while he worked for *Vogue* and *Le Jardin des Modes* and undertook some foreign

reportage. Lack of demand for his services along with the soured atmosphere of the Cold War, caused him to fall from favour and he almost abandoned photography.

He made a clean break, quitting Paris for Provence in 1972, where he did some teaching at the Avignon Ecole des Beaux-Arts, and at the universities of Marseilles and Aix-le-Provence. With time, the enduring pull of realist photography, and the growing public interest in the medium, Ronis' reputation was regenerated. In 1979 he contributed to "10 photographs for the national heritage" at the Pompidou Centre.

He returned to Paris in 1983 and donated his archive to the nation. He was the subject of a major retrospective at the Palais de Tokyo in 1985. Perhaps belatedly, he has harvested the fruits of decades of work. He took his last photograph in 2001 and the most fitting coda to his predominantly upbeat yet never sentimental output may be his own words: "A fine image is geometry modulated by the heart."

Richard Pinsent

□ Willy Ronis and Jean-Claude Gautrand, *Willy Ronis* (Taschen, 2005), 192 pp, £14.99, \$24.99, €19.99 (hb) English, French, German ISBN 3822839582, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese ISBN 3822841544