

Stolen moments

One of the remarkable band of photographers who recorded French life in the first half of the 20th century, Willy Ronis had a unique eye, writes **John Banville**

Willy Ronis, born in Montmartre in 1910, is one of that remarkable band of French photographers that includes Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai and Robert Doisneau, who came to prominence in the 1930s and whose work forms an incomparable record of French life before, during and after the second World War. Not as great as Cartier-Bresson – but then, who is? – Ronis nevertheless has a unique eye. He is also refreshingly modest; his photographs, or “stolen moments”, he has written, are not attempts at fixing a universal truth but rather are “small steps on the road toward a poetic representation of modest happiness”.

As the photographer and historian Jean-Claude Gautrand writes in his introduction to this fine selection of Ronis's work, photography in France was at its most successful in the years immediately after the war, when Nazi censorship was swept away and “the resurgent French media began a riot of publication”. Particularly in demand were illustrated papers and magazines, and news photography flourished. Later on came television and the inevitable disenchantment with still images. Ronis was one of the photographers whose reputation dwindled, and it was not until the late 1970s that he was taken up again – in 1979 he was awarded the Grand Prix National de la Photographie.

Ronis's father had been a photographer and photo retoucher, with a studio on Boulevard Voltaire. Although Ronis later repudiated the kind of work his father did – “conventional portraits made to tickle petit-bourgeois vanity”, as Gautrand writes, rather severely – he learned the rudiments of his craft in the family workshop. At 16 he was given a Kodak camera, and began to take pictures of Paris street life. What started as a hobby would soon turn into an obsession and, presently, a profession.

In 1932, when Ronis had finished his military service, his father fell seriously ill, and the son was forced to take over the running of the studio. When his father died, four years later, Ronis sold the business and, as he said, “ventured – fearfully – into freelance photography”. He met, among others, the photographers David

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“Chim” Seymour and Robert Capa, two of the founders of the Magnum agency. Then came the war, and Ronis, who was part Jewish, was forced to flee Paris for the south. In Nice he fell in with the circle around the charismatic poet and songwriter Jacques Prévert, and made a precarious living as a studio decorator, stage manager and jewellery painter.

Back in Paris after the Liberation, Ronis secured a number of commissions, notably from SNCF, the national railway company, and *Life* magazine, for which he worked for two years up to 1950; it was, he wrote, “the Golden Age”, but like all such blissful intervals it came to an end. Having covered everything from skiing tournaments in the Alps to major strikes in French factories, he came into conflict with the management of *Life*, who on one assignment said he would not be allowed to write his own captions. “I turned the job down and that was the end of my work with *Life*. It was a moral issue.”

He went to work for himself, and in 1954 published his legendary book, *Belleville-Ménilmontant*, a volume of photographs taken during years of wandering through this working-class *quartier* of Paris. As Gautrand writes, the images in the book, “full of light and happiness . . . reveal the profoundly empathetic and humane reporter, sensitive to the patterns of daily life”.

In 1972, disillusioned with a Paris in which he felt he had been sidelined by a new generation of photographers, such as William Klein and Jeanloup Sieff, Ronis moved to Gordes, in Vaucluse, where he worked mostly for himself, and taught in photographic schools in Avignon, Marseilles and Aix-en-Provence. Some of his most beautiful and sensuous photographs date from this period. In 1983 he moved back to Paris, where the genius of his work had once again been recognised. Over the following two decades he was made a *chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* and a *commandeur de l'Ordre du Mérite*.

Ronis's photography is in the grand humanist tradition: warm, witty and compassionate yet clear-eyed and unflinching in its honesty. For him, as for Cartier-Bresson, form is all. As he beautifully puts it: “A fine image is geometry modulated by the heart.” His art is best summed up in the words of Jean-Claude Gautrand: “In the most rigorously classical of styles, one which combines modesty and detachment with simplicity and warmth, Willy Ronis has strung together on the ‘threads of chance’ (*Sur le fil du hasard* [the title of one of his books]) a collection of little miracles. Only the most unyielding attention and restless sensitivity to the moment can explain this wonderful harvest. They owe nothing to chance, for chances are taken only by those with the sensitivity, alertness and technique to capture them.” ♦

Willy Ronis, edited by Jean-Claude Gautrand, is published by Taschen, €19.99; John Banville's *The Sea* is BBC Radio 4's *Book at Bedtime* next week (Monday-Friday 10.45pm), read by Jim Norton

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