

Contact : Capucine Milliot 33 1 40 76 84 08 cmilliot@christies.com
Anne-Laure Mazel 33 1 40 76 85 88 amazel@christies.com

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE COLLECTION OF CLAUDE BERRI

19th November 2005

Paris – Christie's is delighted to offer Photographs from the Collection of Claude Berri on the 19th of November, during the annual international fair, Paris Photo, at the Carrousel du Louvre. The majority of the works in the sale dates from the early decades of the 20th century to the 1950s and reflects two main themes: abstraction and Surrealism.



*Hans Bellmer
La Poupée, 1935
Hand-colored print
Estimate: €100.000–150.000*

Through major names such as Eugène Atget, Hans Bellmer, Constantin Brancusi, Brassai, Claude Cahun, Harry Callahan, Gustave Le Gray, André Kertész, Man Ray, Aaron Siskind, Edward Steichen, Paul Strand, Félix Teynard and Raoul Ubac, the Collection of Claude Berri, distinguished French film director and producer, clearly demonstrates his artistic preferences. It was never Berri's intention to represent an exhaustive history of photography. He chose, rather, to concentrate on works that involved a marked degree of abstraction – with a particular focus on the avant-garde of the 1920s–30s and early post-war years – and on works expressive of the Surrealist imagination: “I endeavored to put together a collection of largely abstract photographs. Yet, in contrast to painting, which can achieve total abstraction, a photograph

will always be tied to its subject, though it can transform it. The crucial factor for me is that the work should inspire an emotion, that it can transcend its subject and become something beyond a factual document."

Claude Berri began his collecting activities in the mid 1980s by acquiring paintings. In 1996, he came face to face with Brassai's Graffiti photographs at Gilberte Brassai's home. He was stunned by their impact and became a photography collector then and there: "These photographs are magic. From wall to wall, they summarize life's main events: birth, love, and death." Showing naïve faces and skulls engraved onto Parisian walls, this rich selection of Graffitis, all stamped and signed by Brassai or authenticated by his widow, Gilberte Brassai, will be offered with estimates starting at €3,500.

His next discovery was Raoul Ubac. Berri acquired several works through the artist's daughter whom he had befriended: "The photomontages – Les Penthésilées – by Ubac are true creations. The artist's role is to present a vision of his world which is unique and unknown to the rest of us." Characterised by their sense of depth and mystery, these complex constructions of melting forms superimposed in an intangible space are disconcerting expressions of a Surrealist vision. Highlights are Groupe I from 1939 (estimate: €25,000–40,000) and Combat II from 1937 (estimate: €15,000–20,000).

Photographs by the Surrealist artist Hans Bellmer further emphasize the importance of this movement within the Collection. Several exceptional large-format prints from his disturbing Poupée series – glorified by the Surrealists when they first appeared – will be featured. Hans Bellmer conceived the Poupée almost as a mechanical device; a body that is being altered, deconstructed and rebuilt and that becomes an element of study in a physiological, organic, imaginary and fantastical sense. The most important photograph in this group is a large hand-colored print from 1935 (estimate: €100,000–150,000); other highlights include the Poupée of 1938 and the pregnant Poupée from 1937–49. The large scale of these prints, which is very rare for vintage photographs of this period, not only enhances their power and presence but also gives them a strong sense of modernity.

Claude Cahun's smaller photographs from the 1920s and 30s are of a more intimate and delicate nature. Several self-portraits are offered, including one from 1927, estimated between €25,000 and €35,000.

Rayographs by Man Ray are among the highlights of the sale. First explored in 1922, the Rayograph process involved making photographs without the use of a camera, simply by placing objects on sensitized paper and exposing them to direct light. Berri comments: "In a Man Ray Rayograph, the object becomes abstract, sublimated by light." The 1925 Rayograph is an exceptional piece with an interesting history: in 1940 it was gifted to the Museum of Modern Art in New York by James Thrall Soby who had received it directly from the artist. In perfect condition and boasting prime provenance, this work should excite collectors worldwide and is expected to reach in excess of €200,000. Another Man Ray highlight is the 1922 Rayograph, a*

work of pure abstraction in which the subject appears to have dissolved into a sculptural play of light (estimate: €160,000–240,000).

*In the images of Constantin Brancusi, the sculptural form is sublimated through the use of specific framing and lighting, as can be seen in his 1938 work entitled *La colonne sans fin* (estimate: €17,000–25,000).*

*A range of powerful photographs by Edward Steichen retraces the artist's technical and conceptual evolution. The famous *Balzac d'Auguste Rodin* of 1908 presents a deliberately soft and painterly image, almost phantom-like, and perfectly illustrates the poetic use of light, a characteristic of the pictorialist movement (estimate: €120,000–180,000). The 1925 work, *Les Trois Pommes* evokes a completely different atmosphere. The clear lines, clarity and tight cropping reflect the evolution of the photographer's work to what is known as 'straight photography' (estimate: €80,000–120,000).*

Covering many fields, from abstraction through Surrealism to formalism, the Claude Berri Collection also focuses on the overtly 'documentary' with several photographs by Eugène Atget. A testimony to historical Paris, the images offered include a view of the staircase of the Hôtel Sully-Charost around 1904–05 (estimate: €20,000–30,000). In addition, the collection contains fine photographs by Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans. Both spectators of daily life in America and of the mutations of the urban world, they captured the disproportion of the modern city in such images as Abbott's vertiginous low-angled shot of the skyscrapers of Manhattan in 1936, estimated between €17,000 and €25,000.

*Paul Strand's photographs are more formal and abstract and reveal an artist concerned with the close analysis of things, as can be seen in the 1946 depiction of the white doors of a church in New England (estimate: €40,000–60,000), or in his 1950 close-up image of a door bolt at Argentière (estimate: €35,000–50,000). Also offered is *Mullein* from 1927 (estimate: €50,000–65,000).*

**James Thrall Soby (1906–1979): Collector and well-known MoMA supporter between the 1940s and 60s, played a decisive role in Man Ray's career.*

Viewing: 15 – 18 November 2005

Sale: 19th November 2005 at 7pm

Christie's – 9 avenue Matignon – 75008 Paris

#

Images available on request
Visit Christie's at www.christies.com