

The Museum of Modern Art

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E. J. BELLOCQ: STORYVILLE PORTRAITS. Photographs printed from the original negatives by Lee Friedlander; text by John Szarkowski. 96 pages; 34 illustrations. Hardbound \$12.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed in the United States and Canada by New York Graphic Society, Ltd.; in the United Kingdom by Tabs, Ltd.; and internationally by Feffer & Simons, Inc.

E. J. BELLOCQ: STORYVILLE PORTRAITS, a book consisting of 34 photographs taken in the New Orleans red-light district about 1912 by a little-known photographer named E. J. Bellocq, will be published by The Museum of Modern Art on January 14, 1971.

The photographs, selected from a group of eighty-nine glass plates discovered in Bellocq's desk after his death, are accompanied by an explanatory text in the form of a dialogue edited by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography. Bellocq's working life extended from about 1895 through the first four decades of this century and these plates constitute the only fragment of his work known to have survived. The prints reproduced in the book were made recently by the photographer Lee Friedlander, who first saw the original glass plates in 1958 and purchased them in 1966.

The introductory text is an edited synthesis of four long interviews recorded by Lee Friedlander in 1969, and excerpts from a letter written to him a year earlier. Mr. Szarkowski edited, intermixed and rearranged the source material with a view toward accurately preserving the participants' meaning. They are all former acquaintances of Bellocq, a fellow photographer, several musicians, a writer and a former prostitute who knew Bellocq.

Bellocq, a commercial photographer for a New Orleans shipbuilding company, was a small, misshapen man. Although he had no close friends, he was a familiar figure in Storyville, where he was called papá because of his strong French accent. "Bellocq -- whoever he was -- interests us not as an object of pity but as an artist; a man who saw more clearly than we do, and who discovered secrets.... Even if the pictures reproduced here had been widely known a half century ago, they would not have changed the history of photography, for they did not involve new concepts, only an original sensibility. Seeing his pictures we are persuaded

(more)

that he had knowledge of the nature of other human beings," Mr. Szarkowski comments in the text.

The women obviously posed willingly and with pleasure for Bellocq. Many of them were fashionably clothed, with large hats, demure locket; some are seen playing with their pets, others before mirrors, a few lying nude on a couch. Some are masked, some wear striped and patterned stockings and a minimum of other clothes. In a few of the pictures, the faces were scratched from the glass plates. No one knows why this was done.

Unable to use his conventional method of printing because of the character of the plates, Friedlander was led through research to a printing technique popular around the turn of the century using Printing Out Paper. In this method the prints were exposed by indirect daylight for anywhere from three hours to seven days, depending on the plate's density and the quality of the daylight. Then the paper was given a toning bath of the gold chloride type.

The 34 photographs reproduced in the book are on view at the Museum through January 10, 1971 in an exhibition directed by Mr. Szarkowski. It is possible, he says, that the Storyville pictures were done as a commercial assignment -- perhaps as an equivalent of the standard theatrical publicity portrait useful to the subject in seeking a position in a better house, or to the house in making its staff known to their potential customers.

"But the pictures themselves suggest that they were not made on assignment but as a personal adventure," Mr. Szarkowski adds. "They possess a sense of leisure in the making, and a variety of conception not typical of photographic jobs done at the customer's request. It is more likely that Bellocq photographed the women of Storyville because he found them irresistibly compelling."

Additional information, review copies, and photographs available from Diana Goldin, Coordinator of Press Services, and Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019. (212) 956-7297, 7501.
