

**#86 Oct. 2023 Cameraderie
Magnum Photos (1947-)**



This is the fourth of five articles in which I am taking up five organizations (or movements) throughout the 20th century that were major forces in the direction of American photography. There were similar organizations (or movements) in Europe and elsewhere. Some of the organizations (or movements) were international from the start.

In the last three months, I discussed the Photo-Secession movement, Group f/64, and The Photo League. This month, I am going to discuss Magnum Photos. I have discussed many Magnum photographers over the years that I have been writing these articles, most recently Paolo Pellegrin (#82, April 2023). Next month, I will look at Getty Images.

Magnum Photos was started by Robert Capa (#29, May 2018) and others as a photographers' cooperative. Here is the Wikipedia reference, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnum_Photos, and a few key quotes from it:

Magnum was founded in Paris in 1947 by Robert Capa, David "Chim" Seymour, Henri Cartier-Bresson (#43, Sept. 2019), George Rodger and William Vandivert (all photographers), Rita Vandivert and Maria Eisner, based on an idea of Capa's.

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Rita Vandivert was the first President, and head of the New York office; Maria Eisner the head of the Paris office. The plan was for Rodger to cover Africa and the Middle East; Cartier-Bresson to cover south and east Asia; Seymour and William Vandivert to cover Europe and the United States, respectively; and Capa to be free to follow his curiosity and events.

Magnum is one of the first photographic cooperatives, owned and administered entirely by members. The staff serve a support role for the photographers, who retain all copyrights to their own work.

The Magnum cooperative has included photojournalists from across the world, who have covered many historical events of the 20th century. The cooperative's archive includes photographs depicting family life, drugs, religion, war, poverty, famine, crime, government and celebrities.

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Magnum is owned by its photographers, who act as shareholders.

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In the early years of Magnum, membership had generally come about by the personal invitation of Robert Capa. However, in 1955 a three-stage membership system was set up that continues to this day.

You may find it interesting to go to the Wikipedia website and have a look at the membership list. It reads, as expected, as a list of many of the most famous names in photography.

Here is an article discussing the history and impact of Magnum Photos, both commercially, culturally, and artistically:

<https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/51714/how-the-popular-fascination-with-photography-helped-launch-the-mythic-magnum-photo-agency/>

I find it particularly interesting to have learned that Cartier-Bresson's "Decisive Moment" concept spawned a book by him of the same title and a trend in photography that had both artistic and commercial aspects, even crossing into travel advertising for the ordinary person.

Being a commercial enterprise, Magnum Photos has a fine public-facing website, <https://www.magnumphotos.com/>, with lots of information and a great gallery showing the work of its many members—see the "Gallery" button. Please have a look through the gallery. I have chosen a few examples from the gallery to discuss below.

Dennis Stock, Portrait of James Dean, 1955.



Dennis Stock shot a great number of images of James Dean. According to the Magnum Photos website, they were close friends. Note the all-white background, similar to the later technique of Richard Avedon (#3, Feb. 2013).

Stock posed for Andreas Feininger's (#45, Dec. 2019) 1951 image, "The Photojournalist":



Marc Riboud. An American young girl, Jan Rose Kasmir, confronts the American National Guard outside the Pentagon during the 1967 anti-Vietnam march. This march helped to turn public opinion against the US war in Vietnam.



Who remembers this iconic image? The Magnum Photos website is full of memorable news images.

Abbas. Village of San Augustin de Oapan. A woman in a dust storm, a walking tree. State of Guerrero, Mexico. 1985.



The following is from the Magnum Photos website:

Abbas occupied a niche that straddled both photojournalism and art. “I used to describe myself as a photojournalist, and was very proud of it,” wrote Abbas for Magnum in 2017. “The choice was to think of oneself either as a photojournalist or an artist. It wasn’t out of humility that I called myself a photojournalist, but arrogance. I thought photojournalism was superior, but these days I don’t call myself a photojournalist, because although I use the techniques of a photojournalist and get published in magazines and newspapers, I am working at things in depth and over long periods of time,”

“I don’t just make stories about what’s happening. I’m making stories about my way of seeing what’s happening.”

Bruno Barbey, The view of Ortakoy Mosque and the Bosphorus Bridge. Ortakoy, Istanbul, Turkey. 2009.



I am including this image because it has personal interest for me. My wife is Turkish, and we have made visits to this spot in Istanbul. The Ortakoy neighborhood is full of cafes on the Bosphorus. The sounds of backgammon dice clicking are everywhere in these cafes. The view of the relatively new (showing European architectural influence) mosque under the bridge is classic. I have taken this shot myself.

Alex Majoli, Dior Jewelry Shoot in Vanity Fair Magazine.



I will finish this article with another reminder that Magnum Photos is a commercial organization, promoting the work and success of its members. The Magnum Photos website has an extensive display of samples of commercial work that its photographers have done.