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BY Y. ERNEST SATOW

FILMS, EXPOSURES, DEVELOPERS, TECHNIQUES

TAKING PICTURES  
AFTER DARK

by

Ernest Y. Satow

AMPHOTO

New York

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TAKING PICTURES  
AFTER DARK



A 20 diameter enlargement of a section of a 35mm negative made at 5 A.M., in Darien, Conn. Leica M3, 400mm Leitz Telyt. Ansco Super Hypan rated at 800. Exposure was 1/15 sec. at f/5; development was in Ilford Microphen.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*All photographs not otherwise attributed are by the author.*



A classic of after-dark photography, made in the early thirties by the French master Brassai. The camera was his famous 6x9cm Voigtlander. Film is unknown as is the development procedure. What is known is that the camera was on a tripod and this was a time exposure. The man by the kiosk is Brassai.

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Picture-taking after dark is as old as photography itself. Photographers—like poets and painters—have always been fascinated by the coming of dusk, then night. The world around us is now different. A tree against a cool sky is a new image, both beautiful and sad. A hot Mexican plaza is no longer cruel. Fully-lighted, the Manhattan skyline is full of excitement. When shadows fall on the world, man's mind is bright with flame. Conversations—intellectual and emotional—flourish. The conductor's hands translate notes into nuance and mood, heroic and lyrical. The theatre lights a man's soul. A figure standing by a street lamp is philosophical. This is the time for picture-taking!

Photo-technology brought flash to perfection, yet some photographers always shied away from it. They wanted to "be there" quietly; they did not want to be outsiders intruding rudely.

Henri Cartier-Bresson expressed this feeling precisely. "The idea of working only with existing lights and interfering as little as possible with a situation as it develops before the lens comes from respect and love for form, light and reality." (*Available Light and Your Camera*, edited by George Wright, Amphoto.) In order to observe and record the truth, vitality, beauty and excitement of the world around us at night; this must be our approach.

The advent, shortly after World War I, of small format cam-

eras with fast lenses, such as the Ermanox and the Leica, gave photographers a vital, new and expressive tool. In 1928 Dr. Erich Salomon began to use a hand-held miniature camera to give the world the image of politicians and diplomacy of the period. His photographs of the League of Nations conferences, of Churchill and Baldwin, and of King Fuad and Einstein are not only valuable historical documents, but classic examples of existing-light photography. The camera and film, primitive compared to what we have today, came alive through his constructive imagination, and recorded quietly and sympathetically an ephemeral world's true appearance. (Can anyone match his skill today?) The French photographer Brassai was a pioneer in photography after dark. The two examples of his work reproduced here were made in the early 'Thirties.

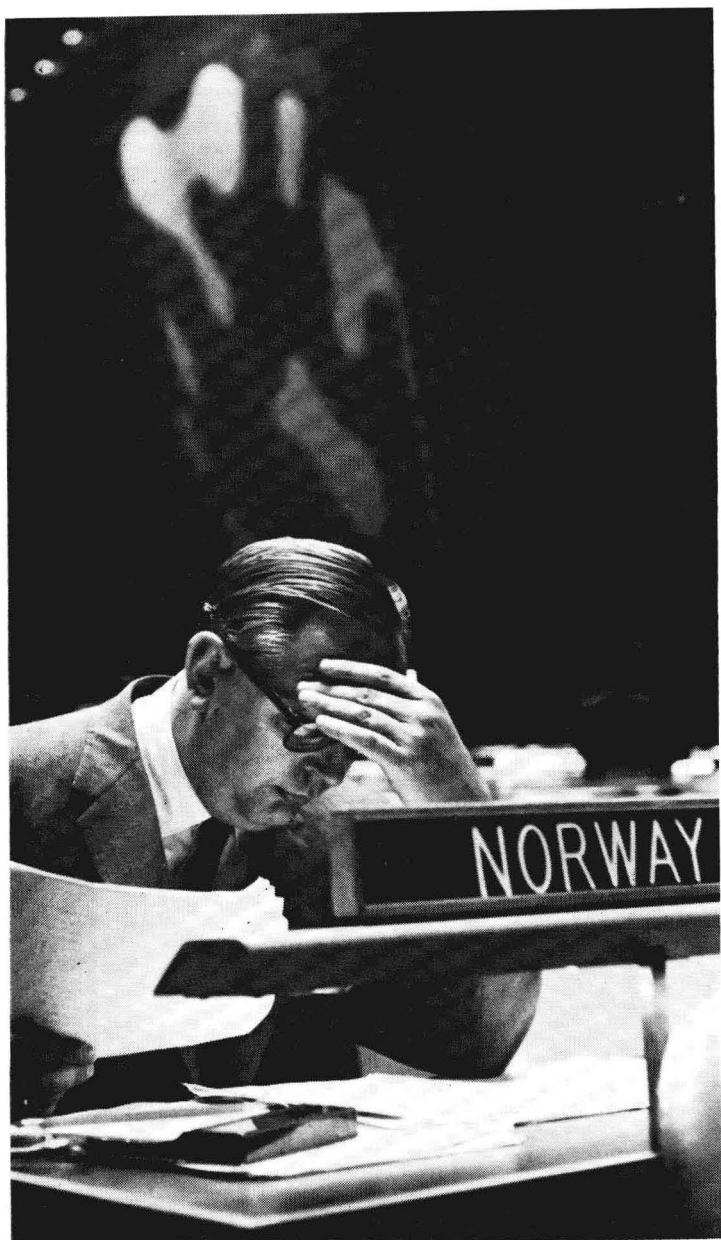
Since then, photojournalism has grown. Men like Henri Cartier-Bresson, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Robert Capa, Werner Bischof and many others depicted the world, using whatever illuminations that were available to them. Esthetic pictorialism also grew. Photographers like Moholy-Nagy, Man Ray, Callahan, Siskind, Kepes, Steinert, Adams, Weston and many others nurtured a respect for form and design, and for a more purely poetic vision.

The development of photo-technology in recent years has been tremendous, and most of that development has been in precisely the area which broadens the scope of after-dark picture taking. Today's camera design—particularly in the 35mm field—makes the picture-taking operation efficient and fast. Current lenses are fast too, and sharp. Speeds as high as 2,000 ASA are available in some films. We now have a better, more dependable system for rating films. To go along with the above, we have variety of film developers—some for preserving the grain pattern, sharpness and gradation inherent in today's emulsions, and others for boosting the exposure level. In the following chapters, you will be hearing more about the characteristics of these photographic tools.

Picture-making after dark is undoubtedly difficult. In daylight photography, the strong illumination makes possible the use of slow, fine-grain films. The production of an image is simple and there is room for a full range of means for expressing personal vision. But, at night—indoors or outdoors—light is low, sometimes quite dim. If your subjects are well-illuminated by such light sources say, as fluorescents in office



The Seine at Paris, by Brassai. Also made in the early thirties with 6x9cm Voigtlander. Film and development procedure followed are unknown at this late date.



left, Hans Engen, Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of Norway preparing to speak at a United Nations meeting. Leica M3, 50mm Summicron. Plus-X rated at 320 and developed in Clayton P-60 (diluted 1:2). Y. Ernest Satow.

M. Engen after the meeting. Leica M3, 35mm Nikkor f/1.8. Tri-X rated at 1000, processed in D-76 for 12 minutes. LIFE photo by Bill Ray. This was one of a series of M. Engen shot by the light of the car's little overhead lamp. The cheek highlight was provided by the headlights of another car, which was approaching from a sidestreet. Exposure  $\frac{1}{4}$  at f/1.8; the camera was braced on the car's front seat.



or stores, or spot-lights in the theatre—you will have a contrast-control problem. For most occasions, the use of fast films is necessary. This poses an additional problem of grain-control. Therefore, consistently high-quality picture-making after dark requires of you thorough familiarity with the technology of exposure and development.

The technique of night photography can only be learned by persistent practice and discipline: repeated use of your camera and exposure meter, and of films and developers. In the end, you will no longer be self-conscious about technique—it will become automatic, and you will be completely spontaneous in reacting to any photographic situations. By that time, you will have selected cameras, chemicals and working methods which will mark your work with your own personal style. In this process, you will probably use many rolls of films, many bottles of chemicals; in alternate frustration and satisfaction. But the essence of photography, after all, lies in discovery—and the path to discovery is that of trial and error.

I suggest that you look at as many collections of photographs as possible. There are many excellent photographic books, annuals and magazines. You will learn a great deal from them. When you find a photograph such as “Islands in the Sea at Night” by Yuichi Midorikawa on pages 562–3 in Peter Pollock’s *The Picture History of Photography*, you will, as I am sure, feel an excitement that will inspire you to take beautiful night pictures.

## EQUIPMENT

Obviously, you will be working with whatever tools—camera, lens, film, etc.—you have on hand. Your equipment will decide what you can—and what you can't—do. No one camera can do everything. For instance, a big view camera—4 x 5, 5 x 7, 8 x 10, etc.—cannot match a hand-held 35mm's mobility and versatility in coping with existing-light situations. But, large format negatives require little enlargement—a characteristic that makes for fine quality. The news agencies and the newspapers still use 4 x 5's when extreme mobility is not required. A 4 x 5 fitted with a Big-Bertha (extra long telephoto lens) is still a familiar sight at such places as the photographers' booth in the United Nations' Plenary Hall and any ball park. A 2¼ x 2¼ camera like the Rolleiflex, Mamiyaflex or Hasselblad is also popular. It presents the advantages of light weight plus the negative size of 120 roll film.

It is ideal to own cameras of three different sizes: 35mm, 120 and 4 x 5. Indeed, many professionals are required to do so. But this is unnecessarily elaborate for most amateur photographers. If there is one lesson I wish to get across in this book it is that successful night photography is possible with virtually any equipment, even the simplest, provided you learn your camera's potentialities and limitations and modify your working methods and choice of subject accordingly.

Just this evening, before writing this chapter, I strolled over to observe the annual Japanese "Bon-Odori" dancing festival

in New York City. There were many photographers there seeking to capture the moments of color and gaiety in this after-dark situation. But the photographers were roped in one area which, to my judgment, was just about the worst place to shoot from. (At public functions photographers are almost always given the worst place to shoot from! They are herded away from the center of interest; a well-lit area is nowhere near. The subjects are flatly illuminated and all-important highlights are hidden from the lens.)

What should be done? You can either violate the regulations of the festival committee, equip yourself with a series of lenses of different focal lengths; or try to get along with the reality.

Don't violate the regulations. At the Newport Jazz Festival I saw a photographer violating all the rules to get up on the stage during the performance to take a picture. This selfishness merely got him ordered off and made working harder for the other photographers present.

To get the best possible variety of pictures using the second possibility requires two or three camera bodies—one or two rangefinder cameras with normal and/or long focus lenses plus an eye-level reflex with telephoto. You will then have complete flexibility in relation to composition, perspective, coverage and angle. The addition of a motor may give you quick sequence pictures. Ideal—this set up is also expensive.

So, let us tackle the problem of shooting with whatever camera we have, from whatever position we are assigned, beginning with a simple briefing on the characteristics of various tools of our craft.

## 35mm Cameras

In taking pictures after dark, the 35mm system is perhaps the most versatile. It is compact, small and inconspicuous. Its lens interchangeability is a great asset. It can provide incomparable speed. To take an extreme example, a 1.1 lens makes this medium superb particularly for after-dark color. It gives you a wide variety of angles of view, anywhere from the 90 degrees of the 21mm to the acute angle of the 150-inch. As another virtue—the greatest of all—the 35mm has mobility and speed of operation. You can hand-hold it, even when it is fitted with a long, heavy but well-balanced lens such as the Sonnar 180mm.





Bon dancing at Riverside Park, New York. Leica M3, 85mm Nikkor. Tri-X (old) rated at 800. 1/50 at f/2.8, developed 14 min. in May and Baker's Promicrol.