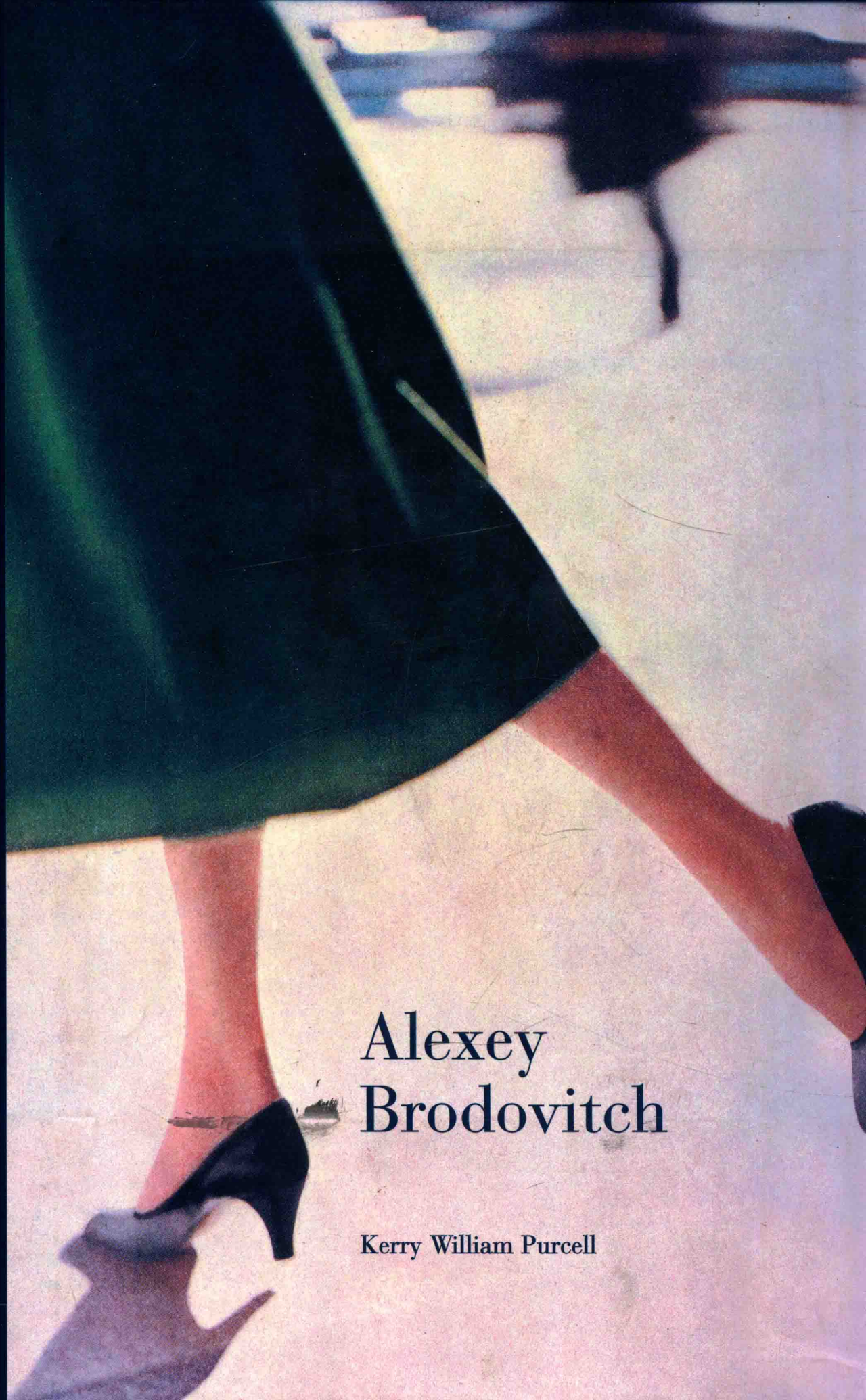

Alexey Brodovitch

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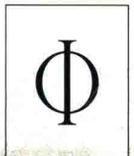

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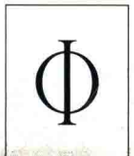


Above: *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1951. Photograph by Richard Avedon.

Frontispiece: Alexey Brodovitch teaching a workshop at Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art, c.1938. Photograph by Arnold Roston.

Brodovitch working on a layout at *Harper's Bazaar*, New York, 1937. Photograph by George Karger.

Introduction

In New York, from 1941 to 1966, Alexey Brodovitch taught a class for students of photography and the graphic arts titled the "Design Laboratory." Many evenings, following the end of the class, Brodovitch would invite a select group of students to his apartment for coffee. One of the students who frequently made this weekly pilgrimage was the photographer Harvey Lloyd. "One evening," Lloyd recounts, "we left the class with six or eight people, and went up to his place. When we arrived at the door everyone walked in and he looked and saw that [Bob] Adelman was coming in at my invitation, he hadn't invited him. He said: 'Goodnight Mr. Adelman.' Bob had to leave. I called him the next morning and said: 'Alexey, what in God's name are you doing? How can you be so rude?' I said: 'That was a really terrible thing to do.'... Nonetheless, later that year *Popular Photography* invited Brodovitch to select a 'Photograph of the Year.'... The photograph that appeared was Bob Adelman's photograph of the blacks in Birmingham being hit with a fire hose. I realized, nothing would interfere with his vision. His personal attitudes had nothing to do with his attitudes toward art."[1]

Such stories of Alexey Brodovitch's unswerving dedication to the values of originality and immediacy in the graphic arts are both legendary and numerous. In both meanings of the word, he was a seer. His ability to recognize when an individual had discovered something exciting, and foresee the possibilities this

work held for the printed page, was uncanny. Even if, as above, the human values of concern and empathy frequently suffered in his constant search for the new and imaginative, the list of those touched by Brodovitch's creative life is a role call of pivotal innovators in the graphic arts: A. M. Cassandre, Salvador Dali, Brassai, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Frank, Bill Brandt, Man Ray, Hans Namuth, and Richard Avedon, to name but a few. It was through his groundbreaking layouts as the revolutionary art director of *Harper's Bazaar* (1934–58) that Brodovitch's designs fused with the work of these artists, photographers, and designers. As a result of these creative encounters alone, Brodovitch's influence on twentieth century art and photography is both considerable and enduring.

Alexey Brodovitch's lasting legacy extends beyond the pages of *Harper's Bazaar*. In 1920, he arrived in Paris as an exile from the Bolshevik Revolution and was to play a part in that decade-long experiment that forever transformed our ways of seeing.[2] His years in Paris were central to his development as a graphic designer. In this environment, where aesthetic boundaries dissolved in a radical synthesis of the arts, Brodovitch's creative energy was absorbed and cultivated by unlimited opportunities. Whether painting sets for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, or designing posters, fabrics, china, jewelry, and books, Brodovitch displayed a Renaissance-like mastery of the graphic arts. After only five short years in Paris he had established himself as a designer of repute. Yet, unlike many of his Parisian contemporaries, his eclectic approach to questions of form resulted in Brodovitch never developing a consistent theory toward the arts. Rather, he always approached each new project with the attitude "If you know yourself you are doomed."

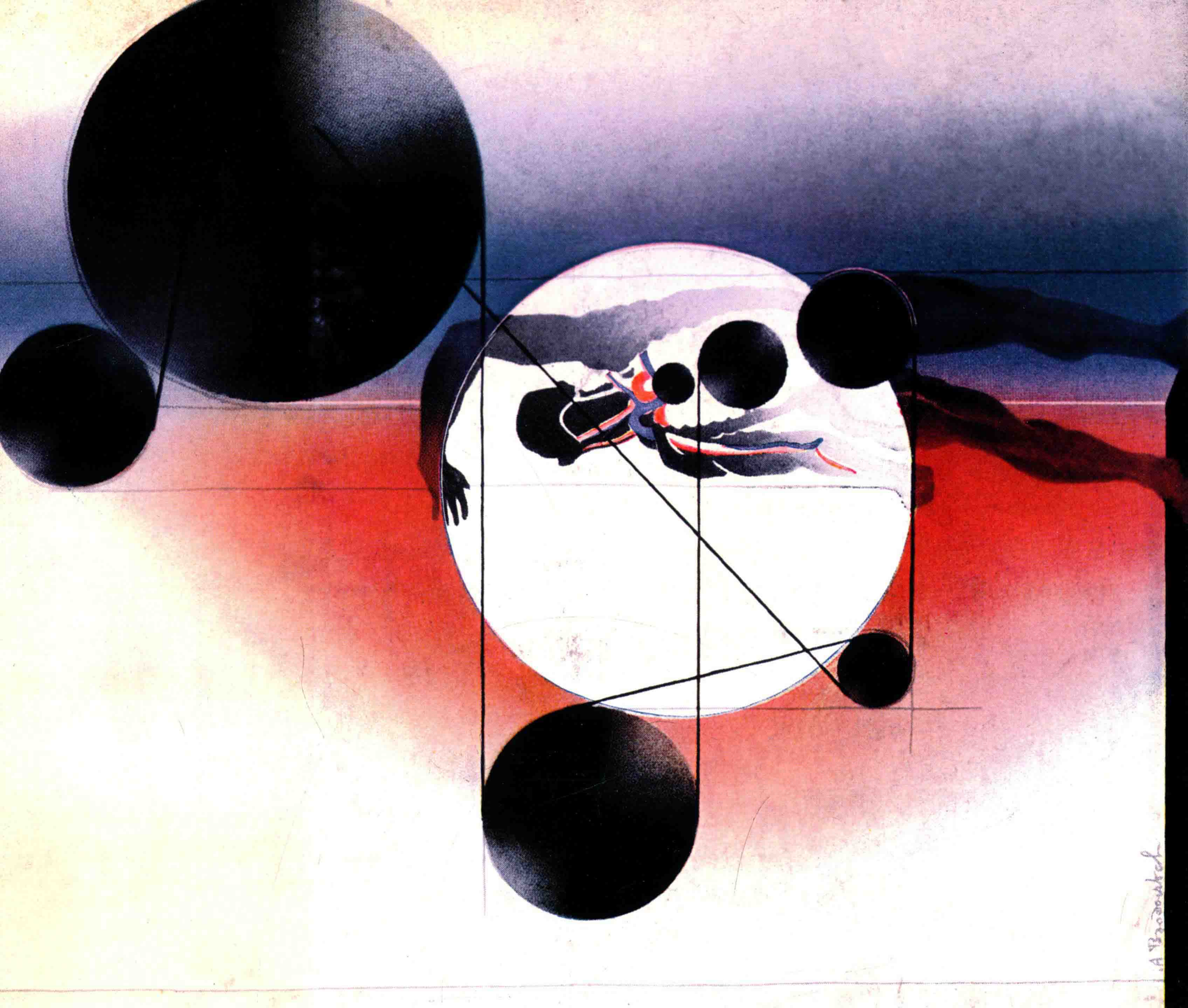
It was his work during this period that eventually brought him to the attention of John Story Jenks. Then vice president of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, he persuaded Brodovitch to journey to America in 1930 to establish a department of advertising at the museum's School of Industrial Art. Over the coming decades Brodovitch's early assimilation into the world of American commercial art provided an entrée for many other translators of modernist ideas into American culture. Through *Harper's Bazaar*, *Portfolio*, and books such as *Observations* and *Ballet*, Brodovitch acted as a conduit of European art and design, introducing the influential ideas of Fernand Léger, de Stijl, and Surrealism to a traditionally conservative American audience. In this regard he was a pioneer.

Today, in an age where the line between art and commerce is casually traversed, Alexey Brodovitch's design influence is so pervasive as to be invisible. However, never afraid to contradict himself (and irritate those around him), he would have rejected this easy association between the creative and commercial. Once satirically noting that "Madison Avenue practices birth control on creative photography," he continually pushed those photographers and designers who entered his world to excite and provoke, never to simply satisfy. It is here that we find the true legacy of Alexey Brodovitch. That is, those students and colleagues who transformed the fields of photography and design throughout the twentieth century by responding to Brodovitch's goading to "constantly experiment. Constantly go forward," to never be satisfied or content with what one has produced.

One year after his death, the photographer Irving Penn recalled how Brodovitch sustained this energy to provoke right up until the end:

A number of years ago Brodovitch was in the hospital and they said he was dying. I went to the hospital thinking it would be my last visit. There he was lying on the bed and I said hello. He said, "Thank you, Penn, for sending me a copy of your book, but frankly, I must tell you it is terrible." I thought, is that the last word I would ever have from him? He really let me have it right there and I just took it.... You see, he was not charming. He was a special person and they don't come often. There isn't a designer or photographer in our time who hasn't felt the influence of Brodovitch. The waves that went out from Harper's Bazaar *since his first issue are still rippling.*[3]

Émigré: The Formative Years



Once, at the restaurant opposite the Orthodox Russian Cathedral on the rue Daru, Stravinsky ordered his famous raw repast in the company of composer Nicolas Nabokov. Nabokov could not finish his cotelettes Pojarsky*; Stravinsky scooped the remainder of Nabokov's cutlet onto to his own plate, doused it with sour cream, and devoured the morsel saying, "I want to astonish the raw potato in my stomach."* – William Wiser, *The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties*

Russia

Born in Ogolitchi in 1898, Alexey Brodovitch was to be forever marked by the conflicts of fin de siècle Russia. At a time when new, modern, and revolutionary ideas were developing throughout a country permeated by old, traditional, and conservative values, Brodovitch's early years in Russia (1898–1920) were riddled with inconsistencies and oppositions. His father, Cheslav Brodovitch, a Polish doctor, and his mother, an amateur painter and early influence on Brodovitch's future direction, attempted to provide the young Brodovitch with an even keel in those unbalanced times. By his own account, Brodovitch's father was a stern taskmaster. With a description sounding like an extract from a Pushkin short story, Brodovitch recounts the events surrounding his birth:

Shortly before I was born, [my father] persuaded my mother to join him on a hunting trip to North Russia … where they lived in a comfortable but very primitive hunting lodge rented from the elders of the village; the temperature was below zero and there was lots of snow. Mother had narrow hips and my father ordered her to walk in the snow for exercise.

Two weeks later I was born, a healthy baby; my mother was alright. A week later, my father put me in deep snow for a few seconds and then dried me over an open fire, out of doors. The lodge was steaming hot … I choked down my first vodka.[4]

As a doctor, Brodovitch's father was posted to various hospitals. In February 1904, Russia entered a disastrous conflict with Japan

and, in early 1905, Cheslav Brodovitch was assigned to a Moscow hospital to tend the increasing number of sick and dying soldiers from the front. In Moscow the young Brodovitch had his first of many encounters with war. It was a rendezvous that not only sparked a youthful desire to enter the army but, indirectly, precipitated Brodovitch's interest in photography. Brodovitch's father had given the young Alexey a box camera, and the first photographs he took were in Moscow of Japanese prisoners of war.

Toward the end of 1905, following the short-lived fatuity that was the Russo-Japanese War, Brodovitch's grandfather died and bequeathed to his son, Cheslav Brodovitch, a large hotel, two restaurants, and an exclusive grocery store in St. Petersburg. To manage his inheritance, Cheslav Brodovitch transferred to St. Nicholas' Hospital in St. Petersburg, and moved his family to the city. St. Petersburg undoubtedly had a major influence on the young Brodovitch's mind. Continuing to take photographs with his box camera – he has referred to another series of images he took of patients within his father's hospital, this time a mental institution – Brodovitch found himself in a city that was, visually, a fertile seedbed for a young, creative imagination.[5]

Through an abrasive combination of the forced modernization of Russian society, but within a country that was still predominately populated by rural peasants, St. Petersburg found itself in a constant state of flux during the 1890s and 1900s.[6] During this period, those distinctively modern symbols of the forthcoming century, factories, grew in size and number. As a result, cities such as St. Petersburg were swelled by hundreds of thousands from rural towns and villages looking for work. The sudden influx of peasants into these showcases of modern industry transformed social behavior and dress, and most significantly, the subsequent development of modern commerce. Walking down Nevsky Prospekt, the central thoroughfare in St. Petersburg analogous to Regent Street in London or the Champs Elysées in Paris, Alexey Brodovitch would have found himself in the midst of modern Russia. In Andrei Bely's modernist masterpiece *Petersburg*, published in 1916 but set in 1905, the main character provides

Page 9: Untitled Brodovitch design, Paris, c. 1928.

Above: Brodovitch family portrait, c. 1905. From left, brother Nicholas, sister Natacha, Alexey, father Cheslav.

Right: St. Petersburg, view along the central thoroughfare, Nevsky Prospekt, c. 1905. At the turn of the twentieth century, St. Petersburg changed profoundly as new forms of advertising, shops, streetcars, automobiles, and lights multiplied in the urban environment. These spectacles undoubtedly influenced a young, receptive Brodovitch.

Brodovitch was to be marked forever by this time of great sociopolitical transformation

an expressive account of the spectacle Brodovitch would have apprehended on an evening walk along the Nevsky Prospekt:

In the evening the Nevsky is suffused with a fiery murk. And the walls of many houses burn with a diamond light: words formed from diamonds brightly scintillate: "Coffee House," "Farce," "Tate Diamonds," "Omega Watches." Greenish by day, but now effulgent, a display window opens wide on the Nevsky its fiery maw: everywhere there are tens, hundreds of infernal fiery maws: these maws agonizingly disgorge on to the flagstones their brilliant white light; they spew a turbid wetness like fiery rust. And the prospect is gnawed to shreds by rust. The white brilliance falls on bowlers, top hats, feathers; the white brilliance rushes onwards, toward the centre of the prospect, shoving aside the evening darkness from the pavement.[7]

In his 1903 essay "Metropolis and Mental Life," Georg Simmel concluded that the outcome of the visual "shocks" experienced by the individual in their migration to the city, resulted in the "essentially intellectualistic character of … mental life."[8] The protection of this "inner life" from the roar of the urban everyday, engendered a demeanor of conscious detachment, a desire to see without being seen. The characteristics Brodovitch cultivated to cope with this sudden cacophony of sight and sound – a blasé manner expressing a spirit of indifference to everything around him – would forever define his formal and austere disposition. It was a stance that was ideally suited to observing the products of modernity – the bright shop signs and advertisements, the plate-glass display windows, the motorcars and trams – and other spectators of the city. Akin to Baudelaire's acts of "*flânerie*" in Paris over thirty years earlier, the residents of the Nevsky Prospekt were offered a uniquely modern vocabulary.[9] It was a language in which shops, street lights, cars, and the like became letters of a visual alphabet, spelling new words and sentences. This phantasmagoria of urban life marked the beginning of Brodovitch's visual education. Although he never attended a traditional school of artistic instruction, his immersion in this age of "condensed" modernization clearly shaped his unique vision. He would forever draw on the intense quality of this period in both his teachings and designs.

From around 1906 it seems the Brodovitch family divided their time between winters in the city of St. Petersburg and summers on their farm in Ogolitchi. In an effort to steer him away from any direct encounter with the mounting political tensions of pre-revolutionary Russia, Brodovitch's parents sent him to the prestigious Prince Tenisheff School and then hired a private tutor. Regardless of their efforts, Brodovitch was to be a marked forever by this time of great sociopolitical transformation when change of one sort or another was the oxygen of public life.[10] As one historian of the period highlighted, everybody from

when change of one sort or another was the oxygen of public life.

"moderate conservatives to the extreme left was obliged to be a revolutionary. The only question was of what kind."[11] When, in the summer of 1914, the perceived threats to Russia's great power led a hesitant Nicholas II into war with Germany and Austria-Hungary, Alexey Brodovitch was impatient to play a part:

When war broke out in 1914, I was in a progressive school of Prince Tenisheff. Burning with patriotism, I declared to my father that I was going to the front. My father refused to listen, and engaged a private tutor to help me finish school. Finally, as he was now very rich, my father bought me the diploma.

After a week or so I ran away to the front line to kill Germans. But my father, now a military general at the head of a Red Cross hospital train, had plenty of influence, and I was soon brought back to him. On the train back I was employed as a nurses' aid. In East Prussia I ran away again and joined a nearby regiment. Once again I was caught, and this time I was sent to an officers' school, the Corps de Pages.[12]

In the 1760s the Russian state had opened a number of schools which, primarily because of their exclusive admissions policies or high fees, were limited to children of the aristocracy and the wealthy. Beginning as purely educational establishments many of these institutions eventually closed or, such as the Corps de Page, became military colleges. The alumni of the Corps de Page enjoyed a wide range of social advantages. Brodovitch had the "privilege of being able to meet the Czar and his family once a week between courses whilst serving as a Guard Page at the palace."[13] It seems that Brodovitch's ingratiating familiarity with the czar assisted him with his swift movement up the military ladder. Just eight months after the outbreak of World War I, Brodovitch graduated to the position of first lieutenant, selecting to serve the Twelfth Acktirsky Hussar Regiment in Romania. With his customary brevity, he summarized his time in war as follows:

Front lines: 2 weeks in the trenches, 2 weeks with horses, 1-2 miles behind the lines. Evenings – old songs, guitars, vodka, and champagne. Those who have read Pushkin will know what the life of a young hussar is like.[14]

At the outset of World War I many rallied to the cause of Russia as savior of the Slavs in the Balkans. However, Nicholas II

Opposite: Brodovitch family portrait, c. 1911.
From left, Natacha, Nicholas, mother Ludmilla, father Cheslav, Alexey.

Below: Alexey (right) and his younger brother Georges, c. 1917.
Brodovitch attended military college and served in the White Army before fleeing the Bolsheviks in 1920.

found it difficult to muster support from all quarters of Russian society. The immense size of Russia resulted in a country where notions of homeland tended to be regional, frequently stretching no further than the next village. As a result, many soldiers did not fully understand why they had been drafted or what they were fighting for. Once the Russian army started to amass high casualties through successive defeats and the supply of goods to front lines became poor, this sense of alienation was only exacerbated. Thus, together with the growing food crisis of 1917 – prompting the Bolshevik rallying cry: "Bread, Peace, Land" – a need for radical change manifested itself with the October Revolution. Unlike the ordinary foot soldier, Brodovitch, the lieutenant, may not have felt this growing sense of demoralization. As a loyal supporter of the czar, it was a natural move for Brodovitch to become part of the White Army attempting to defend the status quo. It was a decision that would ultimately result in lifelong exile from his homeland.

Between the onset of war with the Bolsheviks in 1917 and his eventual evacuation to Paris via Constantinople in 1920, it seems that Brodovitch was permanently homeless. Like much of his early years, what we know of this period is shrouded in mystery. What is clear is that following fighting in Odessa, Brodovitch was severely wounded by a large shell and was evacuated to Kislovodsk, in the Caucasus, where he spent eight months in hospital throughout 1917–18. Eventually Kislovodsk itself was surrounded by the Bolsheviks, and along with four hundred officers and three thousand refugees, Brodovitch fled to the south. It was while on the run from the Bolsheviks that Brodovitch met his future wife, Nina.

Recalling moments of this fragmented journey, Brodovitch's description of his flight south to the Black Sea port of Novorosysk – a favored route for many fleeing the Bolsheviks – has the quality of individual still images. Akin to war photography, it reads like a montage of stills that together evoke the panic, confusion, and misery of a forced mass exodus:

Battles, escapes. No doctors, no medicine. We slept with rats on piles of hay in the barn. As nurses, Nina and an epileptic. Our days were spent fighting and running away from the Reds. Typhoid fever, dysentery. We were now reduced to fifteen capable officers to defend the refugees. Nina and I both became sick with fever. My brother Nicholas, a soldier, took care of us and our horses. One day, while watering them, he lost the horses. No transportation, no money. Nicholas went to a nearby town to look for luck.[15]

If the abridgment of this nightmare journey reads in style like a Sergei Eisenstein film, the period leading up to Brodovitch's flight from Russia is, as he once said, characteristic of a Hollywood epic. When Brodovitch's brother Nicholas was walking along the main street in Novorosysk he suddenly saw his father. Cheslav Brodovitch had been imprisoned in St. Petersburg by the Bolsheviks but had managed to escape and headed for Novorosysk in the hope of finding his family. Reunited with his family, Cheslav arranged for Brodovitch's mother and other relations to be evacuated to Constantinople. Brodovitch's father was then assigned as doctor to the SS *Vitias*, leaving Brodovitch and Nina behind in Novorosysk. Aided by the Italian consul, an old friend from the Corps de Page, they were able to flee via the SS *Roma* just minutes before the Bolsheviks invaded the city. The next day at Poty, Brodovitch saw the SS *Vitias* and his father. He arranged for Brodovitch and Nina to board the ship. Being the only passengers, they travelled in relative luxury, taking over two months to sail to Turkey. In Constantinople they met up with the whole family. It was, as Brodovitch noted, a miracle accomplished.[16]

What we lack in the way of work by Brodovitch during his formative years in Russia is compensated by the increasing number of sociohistorical texts that examine this period, allowing us to paint a picture of his early development and influences. Charting the growth of modern commerce, the onset of war, and the chaos of revolution, we are able pinpoint some of the major events, not only of Brodovitch's life, but of world history, which played a principal role in the transformation of a society's way of seeing. By recognizing these widespread shifts in visual culture, we are able to discern deeper continuities not visible on the surface of everyday life. For example, paradoxical as it may be, even though politically Brodovitch was fighting for the preservation of Czarist Russia, his subsequent book designs, posters, and magazine layouts shared aesthetically many of the ideas that shaped the avant-garde