
WHAT CHANGED?

The Photograph Stayed the Same. I Didn't.

How a beautiful image became a memorial to an almost forgotten Surrealist.



Man Ray (American, 1890-1976), *Nusch Éluard and Sonia Mossé*, 1937, gelatin silver print. © Man Ray Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Reproduced at low resolution for the purpose of criticism and review.

I stopped scrolling because the photograph was beautiful. Then I read the caption. One of the women was **Sonia Mossé**. The photograph had not changed. I had.

FROM THE DIRECTOR

I didn't stop scrolling because of history.

I stopped because the photograph was beautiful.

Two women lean gently into one another. Their faces almost touch. The image feels intimate, timeless and strangely contemporary, despite being made almost ninety years ago. Then I read the caption. One of the women was Sonia Mossé. An artist. A designer. A member of the Surrealist circle in Paris. In 1943 she was deported and murdered at Sobibór.

The photograph had not changed. I had.

WHO'S WHO?

Nusch Éluard (1906-1946) Performer, artist and Surrealist. Wife of the poet Paul Éluard and a frequent collaborator of Man Ray.

Sonia Mossé (1917-1943) Artist, designer and Surrealist. Deported and murdered at Sobibór, aged 25.

This issue began with a photograph I could not stop thinking about. It reminded me that images do not just show us the world. They shape what we remember of it. This is about the gap between looking and knowing, and what happens to us in that gap.

WHY IMAGES MATTER

Knowledge changes what we see. The image is never the whole story. It is only the part we have noticed so far.

So this one is a little quieter than usual, and a little more personal. I think it earns it.

Researching this story changed the way I look at my own photographs. They feel less like records of places I have visited, and more like decisions about what I chose to remember. A small selection from Paris appears later in this issue.

Angela McCormack

Director, Understanding Art

A LIFE, BRIEFLY LIT

Who Was Sonia Mossé?

Artist, designer, Surrealist, and victim of the Holocaust.

Her story changes how we read the photograph.

- 1917** Born 27 August in Paris, into a Jewish family.
- 1937** Acts on the Paris stage, and is photographed by Man Ray with Nusch Éluard.
- 1938** Designs a Surrealist mannequin for the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme.
- 1942** The yellow star is imposed on Jewish people in occupied France.
- 1943** Refuses to wear the star. She is denounced and deported.
- 1943** Murdered at Sobibór on 30 March, aged 25.

She was not simply someone other people painted. She made things: a Surrealist mannequin, paintings, stage and decorative work. When France ordered Jewish people to wear the yellow star, she refused, a last act of authorship. Almost none of her own work survives. *We remember her, in large part, through an image someone else made.*

IN CONTEXT

What Was the Yellow Star?

The yellow star was a compulsory badge worn by Jewish people under Nazi occupation. Its purpose was not identification alone. It was designed to isolate, exclude and control.

The badge made discrimination immediate and visible. People could be singled out, monitored and separated simply by being looked at. A symbol did the work of a sentence.

For many, refusing to wear the star was an act of resistance that carried enormous risk. It is a stark reminder that images and symbols are never neutral. They can shelter memory, and they can be turned into instruments of harm.



Nazi propaganda, occupied Europe. The text reads: whoever wears this sign is an enemy of our people.

WHERE THIS BELONGS

Surrealism, in Brief

Sonia Mossé and Man Ray belonged to one of the boldest experiments in modern art.

Surrealism began in Paris in 1924, when the poet André Breton published its first manifesto. It grew out of Dada, the anti-art movement born in the wreckage of the First World War. Where Dada tore things down, Surrealism wanted to build something stranger: art drawn straight from the unconscious mind. Dreams. Chance. Desire.



Surrealism in the flesh. Salvador Dalí leaps for Philippe Halsman's camera in *Dalí Atomicus*, 1948 (left). Dalí with Man Ray in Paris, 1934 (right).

The Surrealists felt reason had failed the world, so they looked for truth elsewhere: in automatism, in accident, in unrelated things placed side by side. Photography suited this perfectly. A camera records the real world, then a Surrealist bends it until it turns dreamlike. That tension, real and unreal at once, is what gives the Man Ray portrait its strange and lasting power.

A SHORT TIMELINE

- 1916** Dada begins in Zurich, a revolt against a world at war.
- 1924** André Breton publishes the first Surrealist Manifesto in Paris.
- 1938** The Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme. Sonia Mossé shows her mannequin.
- 1940s** War scatters the movement. Many artists flee to New York.

NAMES WORTH KNOWING

André Breton	Man Ray	Salvador Dalí	René Magritte	Meret Oppenheim
Sonia Mossé				

THE WOMAN IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Photography doesn't just record history. It creates it.

Photography is often dismissed as simply recording reality. We say things like “the camera captured the moment,” as though the image somehow made itself. Artists know better. Every photograph is a series of decisions. What to include. What to leave out. Where to stand. How to use light.

A photograph outlives the moment it records. What survives is not the event but the image, and often the image becomes more powerful than the event itself.

That is what happened here. Art lovers may recognise this photograph immediately. Most people, however, are more likely to respond to its beauty than its history. Far fewer know Sonia Mossé's story.

*The image survived.
The woman almost
disappeared from history.*

The photograph shows Nusch Éluard and Sonia Mossé, both part of the Surrealist circle in Paris. Nusch, already one of its most recognisable figures, leans protectively over Sonia. Their faces almost touch. Whether Man Ray meant the image to suggest friendship, intimacy or simply a balanced composition is impossible to know. What remains remarkable is how contemporary it feels. Nearly ninety years on, the photograph still invites you to build a story between the two women.

Who gets remembered? Art history loves to celebrate famous artists while quietly forgetting the collaborators, muses, writers and designers who helped shape entire movements. Much of Sonia Mossé's own work is lost. The photograph remains.

Perhaps that is why images matter so much. A photograph can become evidence. A witness. A memorial. Long after the people in the frame are gone, it keeps looking back at us.

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Look Closer

Visual literacy asks us to slow down and look carefully, before we reach for the caption. Sit with the image first. Then ask:

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING

- 1 Where does your eye go first?
- 2 Why do you think Man Ray composed the image this way?
- 3 What emotions do you associate with the pose?
- 4 What assumptions are you making about the relationship between these two women?
- 5 How did your reading of the image change once you learned Sonia Mossé’s story?

THE UNDERSTANDING ART METHOD

The SEEU™ Framework

Spot. Examine. Explore. Understand. A way to read any image, and to understand why it matters.

SPOT What immediately catches your attention?	EXAMINE What details, choices and visual clues can you find?
EXPLORE What contexts, perspectives or possibilities help explain what you are seeing, or not seeing?	UNDERSTAND How has your understanding changed? What meaning are you constructing?

VISUAL LITERACY INSIGHT

Images do not contain meaning. Meaning emerges when image, context and viewer meet.

IS PHOTOGRAPHY ART?

Photography doesn't record reality. It interprets it.

Photography has spent much of its history defending its place in the art world. Critics once argued that a camera simply records what is in front of it. Artists argued something very different. Every photograph involves choices. What to include. What to exclude. Where to stand. When to press the shutter. How to frame the subject. How to use light. Every photograph is an act of selection. Two photographers show this beautifully, from opposite directions.

SURREALISM

Man Ray

- Constructed reality
- Dreamlike and staged
- Psychological
- Artistic intention left visible

HUMANIST PHOTOGRAPHY

Robert Doisneau

"I don't photograph life as it is, but life as I would like it to be."

- Appears spontaneous
- Emotionally truthful
- Often carefully arranged
- Storytelling through the lens

Both remind us that photographs are never neutral. One builds a dream and shows you the seams. The other builds a feeling and hides them. Both are making something, not merely catching it.

WORTH A LOOK

See Doisneau's famous Paris kiss on Google Arts & Culture: artsandculture.google.com (search "Le baiser de l'hôtel de ville, Robert Doisneau").

A PERSONAL NOTE

Paris Through My Eyes

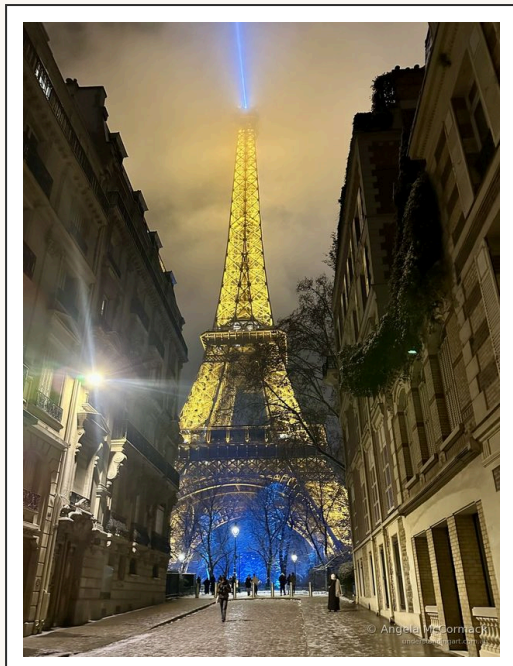
While researching Sonia Mossé and Man Ray, I started looking at my own photographs differently. Not records of where I went, but choices about what I could not walk past. Here are a few from a snowbound Paris.



The Unmistakable Silhouette

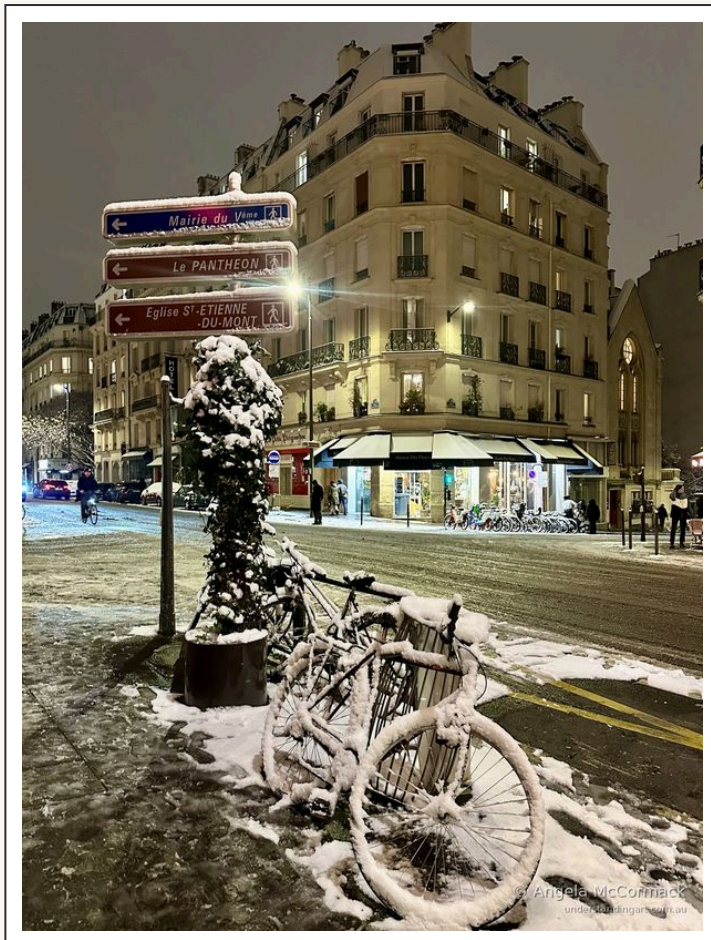
The last light of a freezing day casts a metallic, golden glow across the Haussmann rooftops. From this high vantage point, the eternal elegance of the spire meets the fleeting lines of modern aviation as the city settles into the night. It is Paris in a single, quiet evening breath.

A PERSONAL NOTE, CONTINUED



The Decennial Call

On my very first night in Paris, the skies opened to a rare winter storm. Walking down the silent, snow-dusted side streets, the Eiffel Tower loomed through the low fog like a beacon. It felt less like a monument and more like an invitation... a reminder that it had been ten years since the city last wore this white coat, and I was exactly where I was meant to be to witness it.



A New York Vision Seen in Paris.

This limited edition photograph is an intentional homage to the winter photography of Scott Brideson, whose striking images of snow-covered New York inspired this perspective on a quiet, frozen evening in Paris.

A PERSONAL NOTE, CONTINUED



Paris, the city of art and love. Even a quiet corner becomes a canvas.

Street mural by another artist, photographed with admiration. Not for sale.

Every image is a choice about what to keep.

A selection from this series will be offered as fine art prints in time. Subscribers will be the first to know.

BEFORE YOU GO

Questions for Looking

The next time you meet an image online, pause for a moment.

Ask yourself: Who made it? Who is in it? Why was it created? What happened before this moment? What happened afterwards? Five small questions, and a photograph opens up like a door.

Sometimes the most important part of a photograph is not what it shows. It is what it helps us remember. The picture of Sonia Mossé did not change. What changed was us, the moment we learned her name. That is the whole quiet argument of this issue: looking is easy, understanding asks more of us, and it is always worth it.

FURTHER LOOKING

Man Ray

Robert Doisneau

Henri Cartier-Bresson

Dorothea Lange

Vivian Maier

NEXT ISSUE

When Seeing Isn't Believing: AI Images, Deepfakes and the New Visual Literacy.

If this issue made you look twice, forward it to someone who loves a good story behind a picture. If it found its way to you, you can subscribe at understandingart.substack.com.