

—Dan Budnik.

André Kertész,
1964

ANDRE KERTESZ, PHOTOGRAPHER

By MARGARET R. WEISS

THE Museum of Modern Art's invitation to its current show read simply: "André Kertész, Photographer." That was more than adequate identification for a man whose innovations in pictorial reporting have been cited not only as inspiration for Cartier-Bresson and Brassai but as a major influence in determining the course of modern European photography.

Wisely, John Szarkowski, director of the museum's department of photography, has elected a long retrospective view as the shortest means of bringing Kertész's contribution into sharp focus. Tracing a half-century career, the exhibit becomes a tale of three cities—Budapest, Paris, and New York—the different locales in which Kertész has

made his home over the years. In themselves, these geographical locations have no special significance. But, like multi-colored threads on a loom, they are warp and woof for a tapestry of singular insights.

Thoughtful attention to every detail has made this a most appealing installation. Mr. Szarkowski uses the visual aids of wall color and framing treatment subtly and skilfully. Space seems apportioned rather than partitioned; the retrospective flow is never interrupted. This is doubly effective, for it reinforces the fact that Kertész's photographs defy classification into "periods." Even the most critical eye will detect little difference in artistic purpose between a view of suburban Budapest taken in 1920 and one of the New York scene made some forty years later.

There is no question of the *one man* in this one-man show. All the seventy prints share the same sensitive approach, the same art of seeing; all bear the common signature of poignancy, humane concern, lack of complacency. Kertész's style has remained as true as his vision—a characteristic that the poet Paul Dermée recognized when in 1927 he wrote of his work that "there is no method, no arrangement, no deception, no embroidery."

Dermée might properly have added that there is no backward look, no slavish ties to the past, no pandering to the *nouvelle vague* of the moment, no swaying with each wind of doctrine. For Kertész has always been an individualist, an independent, and above all an innovator.

Certainly the teen-age Kertész had



Budafok, Hungary, 1919

neither art training nor contact with the photographers of the early 1900s. It was his own small box camera with its dozen-pack of glass plates that introduced him to an exciting new world of visual experience and adventure. Intimate scenes of Budapest and its environs, side glances at carnival, city park, and gypsy camp, people and places and the small happenings of which they were part—these were his first subjects. And in a sense, his most recent ones, too—though transplanted by time and geography to New York's Tudor City or Tenth Avenue and recorded by a versatile Leica rather than his earlier Goertz Tenax.

After army service as a photo reporter in World War I, Kertész was determined that the camera and not commerce would become his lifework. In 1925 he left Hungary and settled in Paris. The ateliers, the cafés, Montparnasse and Montmartre, the banks of the Seine, the life and changing lights of the city were magnets for his lens. Here, indeed, the photographer knew that he had found his spiritual home, and only a few years later the world was to know it, too.

By 1927 his camera reportage had already gained attention in leading European publications. A one-man show in the *Sacre du Printemps* Gallery, followed by representation in the First Independent Salon of Photography, orbited him into prominence among such distinguished names as Atget, Hoynin-gen-Huene, Nadar, Paul Outerbridge, Man Ray, and Berenice Abbott.

Almost at once, top-ranking French and German picture magazines commissioned Kertész for special assignments. His distinctive brand of reporting set the pattern for European photography of the period. In quick succession three handsome volumes of his photographs appeared: *Enfants*, *Nos Amies les Bêtes*, and *Paris Vu*. Welcoming the challenge of a new environment, in 1936 Kertész accepted a New York commercial studio's offer of a two-year contract.

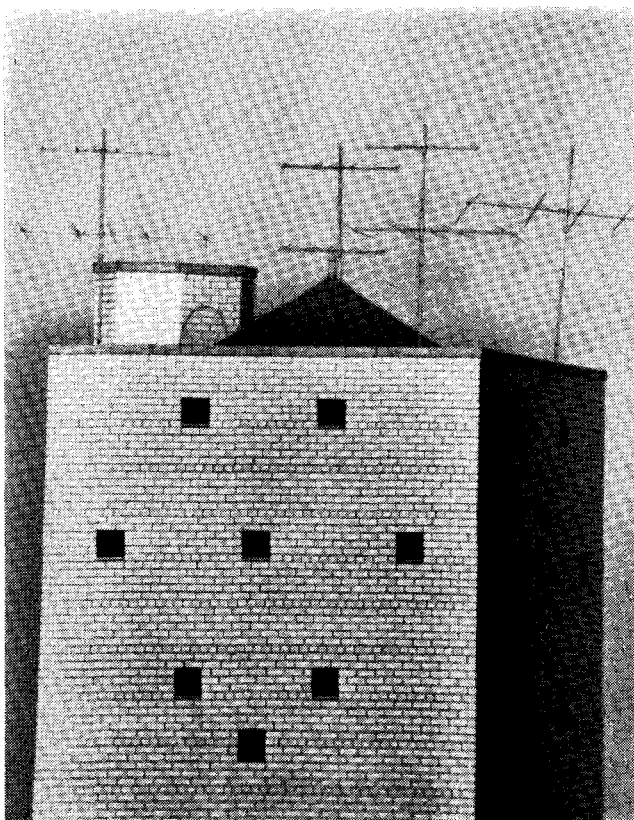
When war prevented his return to France, Kertész remained here to become a permanent Manhattan resident. Professionally, he regards this half of his career with mixed feelings. There was no opportunity for what he wanted to do most and could do best—photo-



Buda, Hungary, 1920

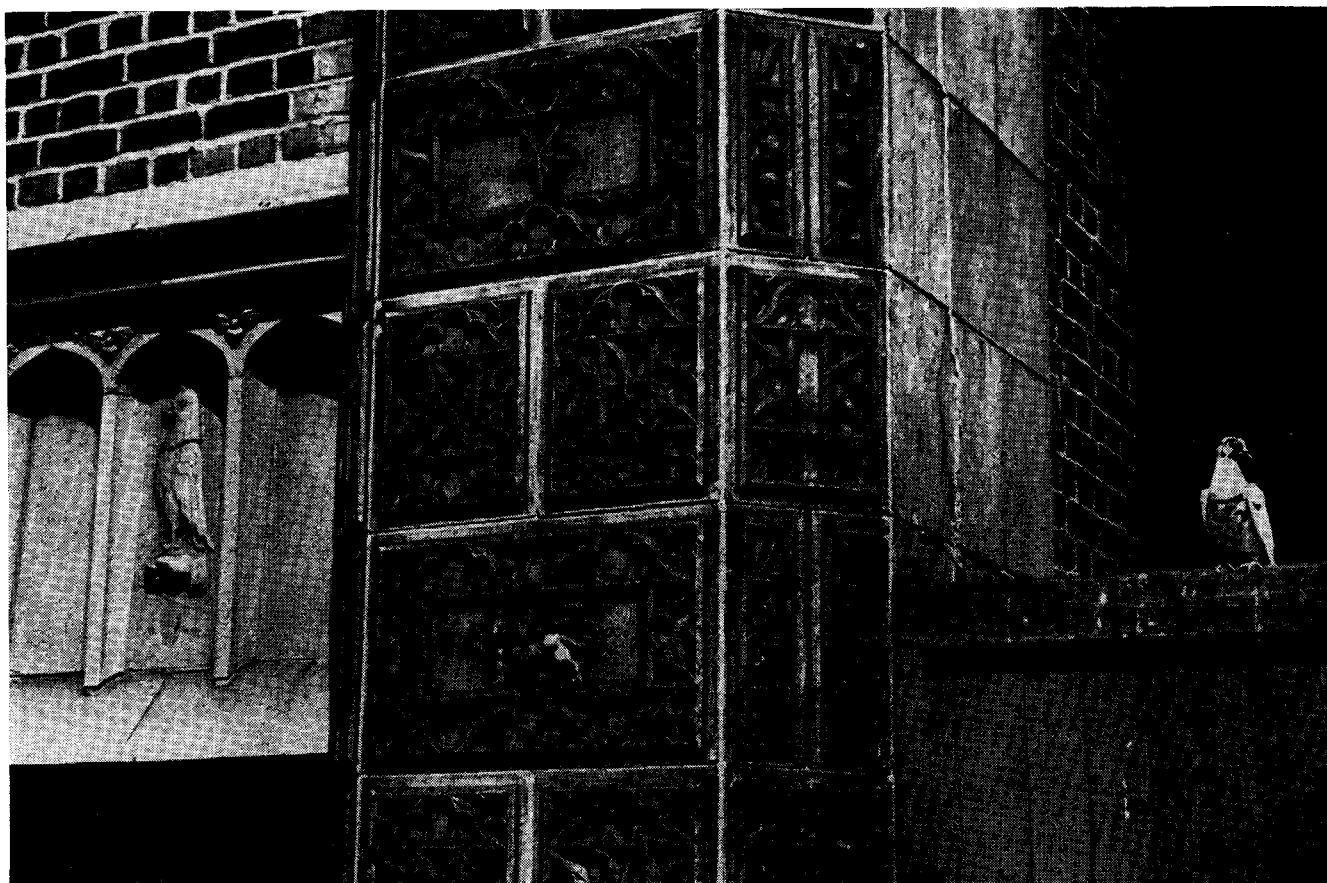


Paris, 1926



Water Tower, 1962

Tudor City, 1962



journalism. Ironically enough, one of the inventors of the photo-reportage technique found himself spurned by editors who felt he “talked too much with his pictures.”

To be sure, he soon earned a reputation as the recorder of highly styled interiors and their equally chic occupants for *Harpers' Bazaar*, *Town and Country*, *Vogue*, and *House and Garden*. Lucrative though it may have been, the world of magazine illustration was stultifying to him. The correlation between material success and spiritual starvation seemed overwhelming.

Two years ago Kertész decided to terminate his affiliation with Condé Nast. He has returned to making pictures that “talk too much”—pictures that reveal warm responsiveness, candor, and wide-eyed fascination with the smallest frame of human life.

If critical acclaim is any index, the wisdom of his decision should go unquestioned. Last year he was awarded a gold medal at the Venice Biennale, and his exhibition at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris was enthusiastically reviewed.

That Kertész's choice was the proper one is perhaps best demonstrated in his most recent prints, many of which are included in the current Museum of Modern Art show. We agree with John Szarkowski: “In their economy and ease, in their abandonment to the uncomplicated pleasure of seeing, they are the work of a master.”



Varnay's Elektra—Notable Nutcracker

ASTRID VARNAY and Strauss's *Elektra* had a rousing reunion at a series of concert performances recently by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of William Steinberg. It is now eight years since Mme. Varnay last appeared at the Metropolitan as Kundry in *Parsifal*, and the happy news is that she is sounding a good deal better than she has in many a long night of Wagner singing hereabouts.

For those who were not operagoers as of December 1941, it may be retold that Astrid Varnay, aged twenty-three, made one of the most remarkable debuts in Metropolitan history. Her Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* was not merely her first venture on that stage, but was also the first time she had appeared in any operatic role anywhere. In the twenty-three years since, she has not merely doubled her age and multiplied her experience a thousandfold, but seemed, periodically, on the point of burdening her voice even beyond roughness and wobble. Thus the notable fact of 1964 is not that she performed a wholly absorbing dramatic performance of *Elektra*—she did that with the same Philharmonic as long ago as 1948—but that she sang the music about as well as it ever has been heard in New York since Gertrude Kappel introduced the role to the Metropolitan stage in the 1920s.

In her busy career, Miss Varnay has missed few of the heaviest roles that the exacting repertory of Wagner, Strauss, and Verdi have to offer, but she has come out of it now in better vocal health than she sometimes seemed to be a decade ago. Apparently, in the eight years since she was last heard in New York, Miss Varnay has put her always acute intelligence to the work of vocal rehabilitation that was vitally necessary. There is a degree of solidity and poise in her middle and upper register that makes them sturdy new resources for the artistic and dramatic impulses she has always possessed. Below a mezzo forte, as in some of the exchanges with Chrysothemis, Miss Varnay still has her problems, for the sound tends to be thick and without the pulsations that produce warmth. But in every other respect, and especially in the sustained power to finish out an hour and a half's effort with a thrust rather than a lunge at the final phrase, this was the achievement of a singing actress with few equals among contemporaries.

It was very well, for the good of this particular project, that Miss Varnay was capable of the superb effort she put forth, for it was otherwise not quite a supercharged *Elektra*. To be sure, there was an eruption of bravos and cheers at the end, but Strauss's time bomb has so long a delayed fuse—ninety-two or ninety-three minutes—that the release of tension, when it comes, is, in almost any circumstance, overpowering. But aside from the strong effort of Regina Resnik as Klytemnestra and the sound work of Walter Cassel as Orestes and, in slightly lesser degree, Phyllis Curtin as Chrysothemis and Arturo Sergi as Aegisthus, it was rather a halting pass at a massive target.

Much of this was the responsibility of Steinberg. With the entrance of Orestes and the swelling tide that rises from the recognition scene to the climax, he was helmsman as well as passenger. But in the shifting course of the hour or so of music that precedes, he gave little evidence of the assurance that one craves to hear in such an undertaking, concentrating much more attention on the printed page than on the performers of it. On the other hand, the orchestra showed itself capable of performing by the memory of the past if not by the example of the present.

IF the abilities of the late Dimitri Mitropoulos hovered in the mind during the Philharmonic's *Elektra*, there was almost an aching absence of them in the Metropolitan's first venture with *Simon Boccanegra* in four years. For it was the last new production he prepared for that stage before his death in Milan (barely more than six months after Leonard Warren, the Boccanegra of that production, collapsed and died during a performance of *Forza*).

This was, in all, a *Boccanegra* that was prime in only one respect—as an example of a creditable production gone to middle-aged seed. The kind of steady leadership provided by Fausto Cleva may also be termed static, and the kind of animation that Renata Tebaldi has supplied for some other lagging ventures in the past is no longer readily at her command. There were some beautifully formed phrases in her *Amelia*, but only where the line crested at G or below. Higher than that, the sound came only through a rude rather than a well-controlled, artfully cultivated physical effort. In his own terms, George Shirley did

creditably in his first venture as Gabriele Adorno, but this hardly puts him in the Verdian category of such a predecessor as Richard Tucker, not to mention *his* predecessor, Giovanni Martinelli.

As Boccanegra, Anselmo Colzani is neither the vibrant dramatic figure nor the compelling vocal one to support the responsibility put upon the performer of Verdi's title role. He manages a solid order of accomplishment in the council chamber scene, but there was not the vocal finesse to give the effect the composer intended to Boccanegra's "figlia!" at the end of the preceding episode, or the personality to command the stage in the scene of his death. For another detail, Giorgio Tozzi's voice does not now get down to the bottom required of a proper Fiesco, and William Walker, as a replacement for Justino Díaz as Paolo, performed but a well-sounding walk-through of the role. Physically the Frederick Fox décor has its attractive aspects, and there are evidences still of Margaret Webster's shaping hand as director. But *Simon Boccanegra* is only partially spectacle, partially music drama, partially older-fashioned opera; it is mostly an incomplete product of Verdi's capacious mind, here rising to heights of musical characterization, there holding to an indecisive level of set pieces. It needs a degree of galvanizing that these participants did not provide.

As a house specialty, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* has been delighting audiences of the New York City Ballet ever since George Balanchine had the happy idea of giving it a permanent place in the repertory ten or so years ago. Now that the Ballet has a new "house" to call its own (for the time being, at least), it is even more a specialty than ever, thanks to a new production by Rouben Ter-Arutunian (underwritten by Lincoln Center) that preserves the best of the old and adds some engaging touches of novelty as well. Now the Christmas tree that rises from the "soil" beneath the stage of the New York State Theater can rival the one in Rockefeller Center for size and excel it in dazzle.

However, there is much more to this *Nutcracker* than spectacle and production. It is, to begin with, a staggering project in logistics; with untold numbers of student dancers to supplement the efforts of such celebrities as Allegra Kent, Melissa Haydn, Patricia Neary and Patricia McBride, Jacques d'Amboise, André Prokovsky and Edward Villella, who alternate in principal roles. Roland Vazquez is a perfect *paterfamilias* as Dr. Silberhaus, and Penelope Gates is no less suitable a Frau Silberhaus. Were this not enough to keep the senses aquiver, the orchestra, well directed by Robert Irving, plays the beguiling score with love and care.

—IRVING KOLODIN.