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Cover image: Bill Brandt, Family Supper (recto), 1937, printed circa 1943, photographic print.. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

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Bill Brandt: Photography and the Printed Page, Martina Droth, Paul Messier,
Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon

Bill Brandt: Photography and the Printed Page

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Introduction

This cover collaboration explores the photography of Bill Brandt (1904–1983) from the perspective of the physical print, drawing attention to its material qualities and practical functions. The small sampling presented here captures some of Brandt’s major visual themes, beginning with his socio-political images of wartime Britain through to his more subjective engagement with landscape and art in the post-war decades. This shift is often seen in terms of Brandt’s career path—from photojournalist in the 1930s and 1940s, to art world photographer in the post-war era. Brandt’s stature as an artist came onto assured footing in the 1960s, with exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1961 and 1969, and commercial representation by Marlborough Gallery in the 1970s.¹ While Brandt began to print to meet these new expectations, he did not abandon the long-standing practices and interests of his early career: his commitment to the reproduction of photographs on the printed page. Newsprint illustrations and bookplates remained his primary expressive channels. Between 1936 and the year of his death, Brandt published at least one photo-book per decade, as well as contributing dozens of photo-essays and hundreds of individual photographs to illustrated magazines.

To understand Brandt fully as an artist—to understand what motivated his pictures, why they look the way they do, and how they were seen at the time—we need to look closely at their substance. Brandt printed for specific occasions: for magazines, his own books, and later for the market and for exhibitions. When it came to pre-press preparations, Brandt’s process was typical of photographic practices and focused on providing prints he knew would carry his aesthetic vision when rendered as ink on paper. Although Brandt occasionally lent his negatives (for example, to the *Family of Man* exhibition at MoMA in 1955), his standard practice was to retain these “masters” as his raw material, reusing and reinterpreting them until his death.² These camera originals are devoid of the layers of interpretation—modified contrast, lightening, darkening, and cropping—that Brandt applied in the darkroom and on the prints themselves. Brandt habitually made extensive adjustments with a brush and media, or a pencil—not only to compensate for obvious image defects (dust on the negative, for example) but, in some cases, to dramatically alter the composition by enhancing forms, contours, and key details. While these were common practices, Brandt was in a class by himself in terms of the level to which he reworked the surfaces of his prints, even when there was no chance of print publication.

With recto next to verso, the selection presented here gets us closer to Brandt’s expressive intentions and darkroom practices. The remarkable variety of verso markings, such as caption inscriptions, stamps, editorial

adjustments, and printer's annotations, all provide an immediacy of connection to Brandt as a working photographer. In each case, Brandt demonstrates his process where the print, generally, was the means to a particular end: reproduction and dissemination as ink on paper.

This essay comes out of research undertaken for the book and the exhibition *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, organised by the Yale Center for British Art and touring from 2020 through 2021.³ Martina Droth and Paul Messier are the co-editors of the book that accompanies the exhibition, which is published by the Yale Center for British Art and distributed by Yale University Press. Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon, in collaboration with Paul Messier, undertook the photography of Bill Brandt's prints for the book and for this article.

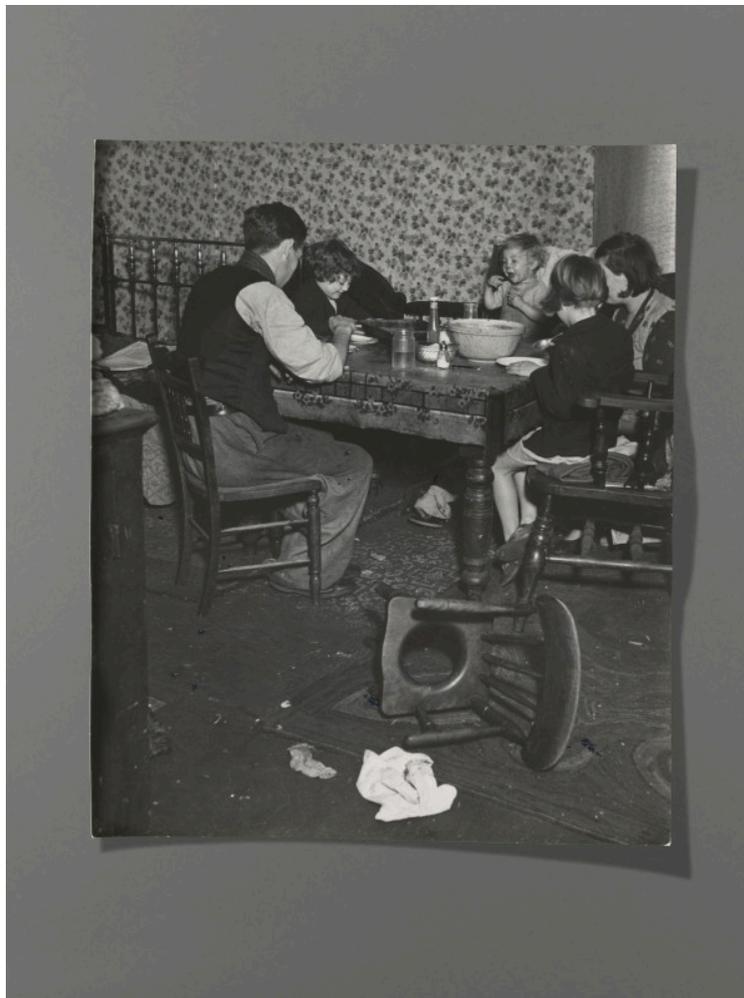


Figure 1.

Bill Brandt, *Family Supper (recto)*, 1937, printed circa 1943, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

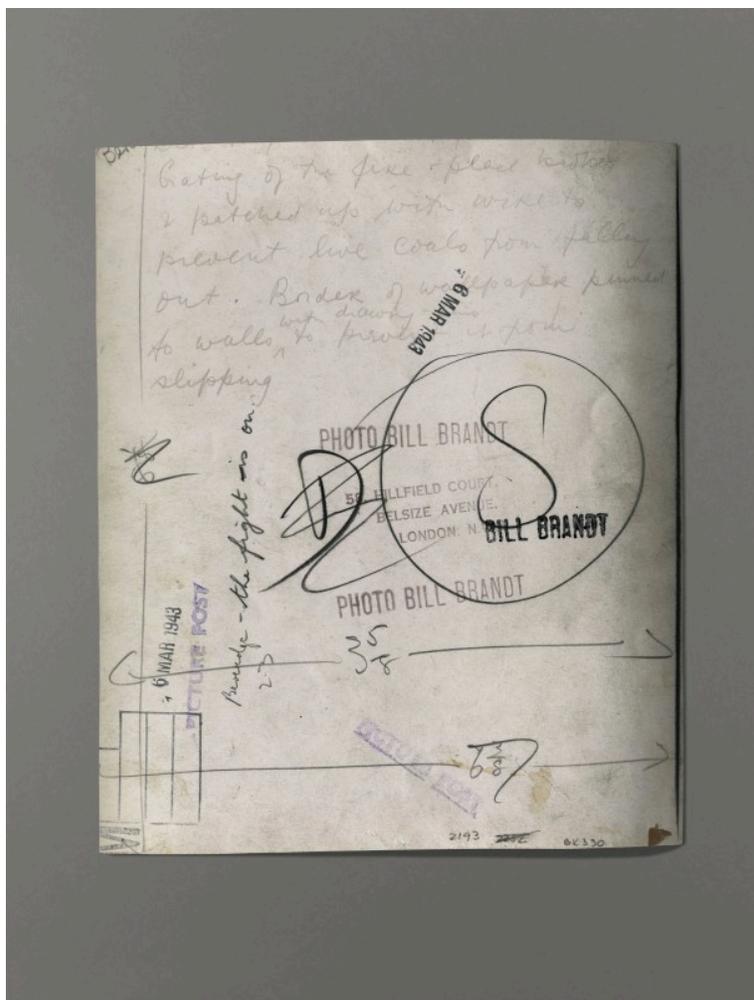


Figure 2.

Bill Brandt, Family Supper (verso), 1937, printed circa 1943, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

This photograph was taken in Jarrow, a Tyneside town that had suffered mass unemployment after the closure of its shipbuilding yard (Fig. 1).⁴ It is among a group of photographs Brandt took on a trip in 1937 to communities supported by heavy industry and coal mining in the north. The photographs were not published at the time, perhaps providing too bleak a commentary on the living conditions of the working poor and the unemployed. This image found its first news outlet in a 1943 *Picture Post* article advocating for the welfare recommendations of the Beveridge Report. It was captioned as one of the “signs of want with which we were all too familiar in the years between the wars”.⁵

The publishing and printing history of the photograph is recorded on the verso: directions are provided to the magazine's printer for cropping and dimensions, and the *Picture Post* stamp records the publishing date (Fig. 2). At the lower left corner is a box with lines and the letter M (for "Modern"), the classification stamp with which *Picture Post* indexed photographs in its collection—here left empty as the photograph was returned to Brandt's possession rather than remaining with the publisher.⁶ Less perfunctory is the pencil inscription on the back (perhaps added to suggest a caption for the images), in Brandt's hand, which reads: "Grating of the fire-place has been broken and patched up with wire to prevent live coals from falling out. Border of the wallpaper pinned to walls with drawing pins to prevent it from slipping." Not visible in the image, these details at once focus on the family's precarious condition and its fragile, humanising assertion of middle-class refinement expressed through wallpaper. The empathy conveyed in these observed details is in stark contrast to the exploitative and intrusive nature of this shocking image of squalor. As the family later recalled, Brandt himself had staged the scene by arranging the furniture and the people to suit his purpose.⁷



Figure 3.
Bill Brandt, A Group of Coal Searchers near Heworth, Tyneside, Pithead Train in the Distance (recto), 1937, printed circa 1966, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

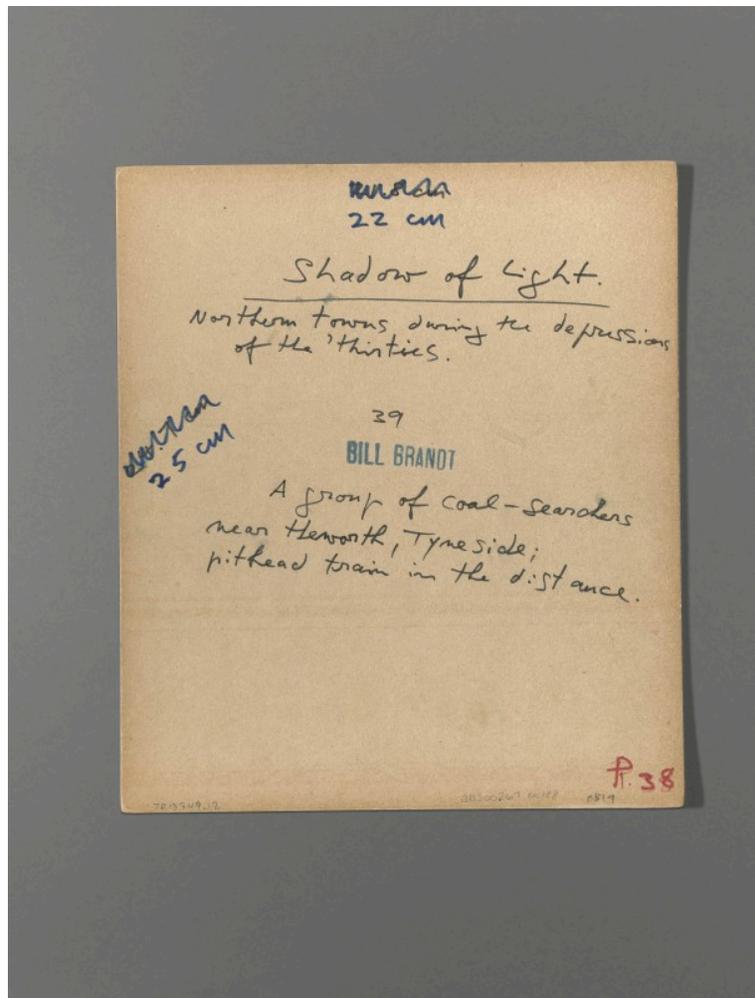


Figure 4.

Bill Brandt, A Group of Coal Searchers near Heworth, Tyneside, Pithead Train in the Distance (verso), 1937, printed circa 1966, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

Taken during the same journey north as *Family Supper*, this photograph shows two men and a boy on the incline of a slag heap, wearily picking through the rubble for usable coal (Fig. 3). In the lower distance behind them, a train carries full carts of coal from the mine. The carts, and the fence below, have been sharpened and accentuated with pencil lines drawn on the surface of the print. The outbound train, so as not to be overlooked, is further emphasised by the title. The coal, extracted in vast quantities, is for the enrichment of others and inaccessible to the men and boys digging for scraps.

The verso indicates that this print was made almost three decades later, specifically for inclusion in Brandt's seminal photo-book of 1966, *Shadow of Light* (Fig. 4). It appears as plate 39, page 39, in Chapter 2, titled "Northern

Towns during the Depression of the Thirties". The information on the back of the print almost exactly matches that in the book. The discoloured paperboard to which the print is mounted serves to keep the print perfectly flat for pre-press reproduction. During our research, we came across several prints mounted in the same way, with *Shadow of Light* inscriptions. This was Brandt's sixth book and marks a period during which he sealed his reputation as an artist through retrospective printing and publication of his most significant works. The print shows a subtle range of contrast and greyscale, which it shares with reproductions made for the first edition of *Shadow of Light*.



Figure 5.

Bill Brandt, *On the Platform of an Underground Station* (recto), 1940, printed circa 1948, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

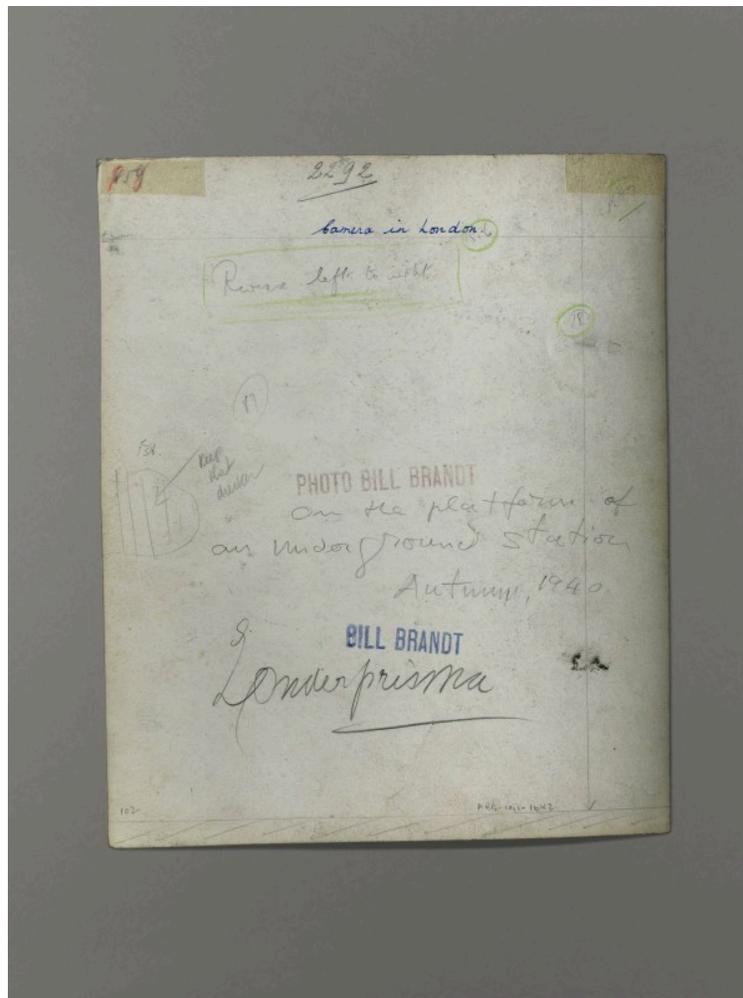


Figure 6.

Bill Brandt, *On the Platform of an Underground Station* (recto), 1940, printed circa 1948, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

Among Brandt's most iconic images are his photographs of civilians sheltering in the London Underground during the Blitz. Taken on 11 September 1940, this print shows men and women sleeping closely together on the platform of Elephant & Castle station (Fig. 5). Like his other wartime pictures, the photograph was made under the auspices of the Ministry of Information, the British government's enabler and censor of photography, which controlled materials and printing permissions.

Brandt nevertheless printed his own work. A scan from the original negative, deposited with the [Imperial War Museum](#), provides a glimpse of Brandt's raw material: a light-flooded image with perspectival details, and an empty space next to the sleepers—a walkway for passengers as this station served both as a shelter and a working transport system. The intensity and atmosphere

of the final print were fastidiously created in the darkroom; moreover, details of light, shade, and pattern were emphasised in afterwork on the print itself, which Brandt often carried to an obsessive level of detail, as can be seen here. The reverse of the print, inscribed with references to publication in Brandt's 1948 book *Camera in London*, includes a remarkable instruction, written in pencil near the centre left side: "keep that checker" (Fig. 6).⁸ An arrow points to a drawing of a shape with stripes. When we turn the print over, the meaning becomes clear: the printed image in the book must preserve the "checker" (actually more striped) pattern in the sleeping man's shirt. This area of the print is heavily retouched to reduce contrast and emphasise the striped pattern both with what appears to be airbrushed pigment and brushed on dyes. Details like these matter when translating a photograph to the printed page because contrast tends to increase and detail can be lost in both dark and light passages.

A further instruction is to reverse the image left to right which, in fact, is how the image appears in the book—a decision based on rhyming the print with its opposite on the double-page spread, which points to the care Brandt took with his books to ensure his images formed relationships and continuities across pages.



Figure 7.

Bill Brandt, Stonehenge (recto), 1946, photographic print.
Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt
Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert
Hixon.

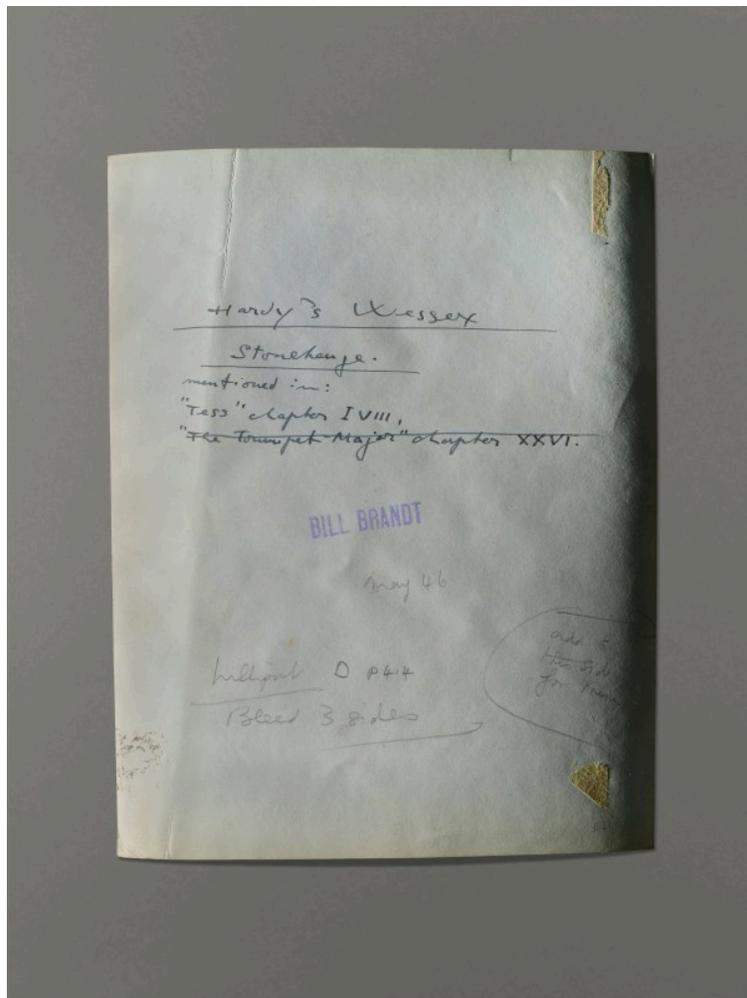


Figure 8.

Bill Brandt, Stonehenge (verso), 1946, photographic print.
Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt
Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert
Hixon.

The great prehistoric sites of Britain had become popular destinations for tourists and artists in the first half of the twentieth century. At the end of the Second World War, they were recast as timeless symbols of British sovereignty. In 1946, this image of Stonehenge appeared in two photo-essays: in the February issue of *Harper's Bazaar* under the title "The Hardy County", and in the May issue of *Lilliput* as "Thomas Hardy's Wessex" (Figs 7 and 8).⁹ The verso confirms this print was destined for the latter. The inscription, in Brandt's hand, "Hardy's Wessex", refers to Hardy's name for the south-west region of England where he set his major novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *The Trumpet-Major* (1880). Brandt cites the chapter references for both, but strikes through the latter, presumably because he and his publisher concluded that the tragic romance of *Tess* provided the more evocative reference point. In the same hand as the date, the printer is

instructed to “Bleed 3 sides” and at right: “add to this side for trim”. “Bleed”, in printer parlance, refers to edges of the image that can be cropped flush to the page. Typically, bleed allows for slight misalignments of the paper as it goes through the press. In this instance, the three-side bleed would be left, right, and top where Brandt provides no unprinted border.

Brandt’s preparations for the printer are also visible on the photograph itself. Black paint exaggerates the crevice of the deeply shadowed horizontal stone that demarcates the bottom of the composition; the left edge of the standing stone at the right of the image is sharpened by a black painted line; and the shadows of the largest stone are similarly deepened with paint. Once noticed, the paintwork becomes obvious, even crude, but that is to miss the point—Brandt was thinking a step ahead to the contrasts of newsprint in which these augmentations would blend into a coherent whole. His chief concern was to produce a brooding image of the sculptural vitality of these enigmatic stones.

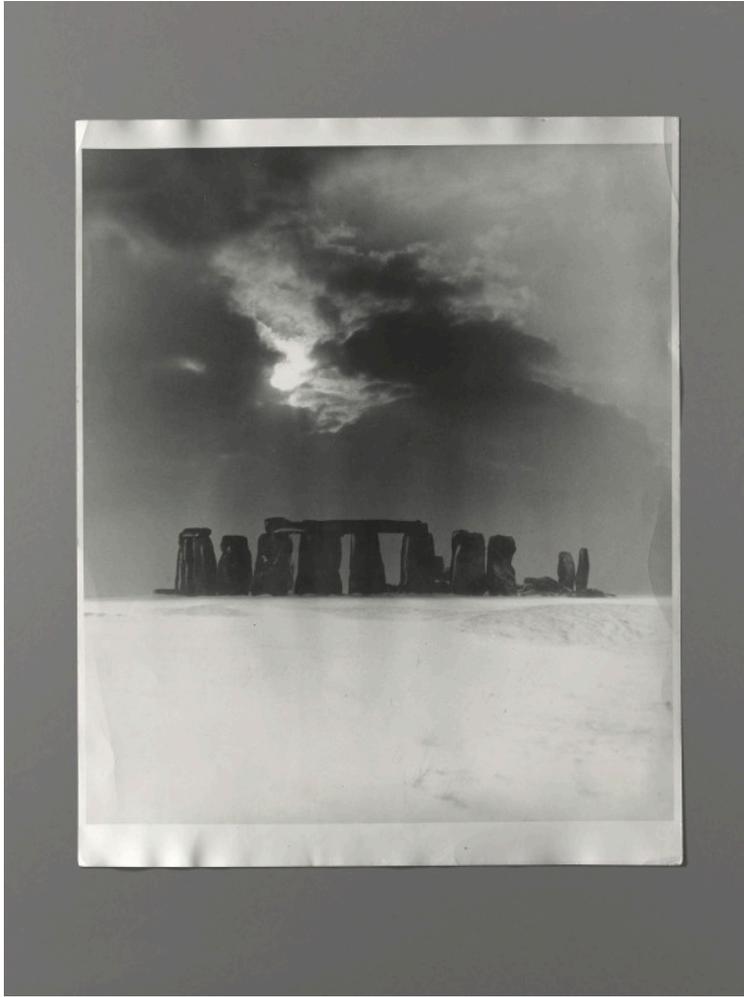


Figure 9.

Bill Brandt, *Stonehenge Under Snow (recto)*, 1947, printed later, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

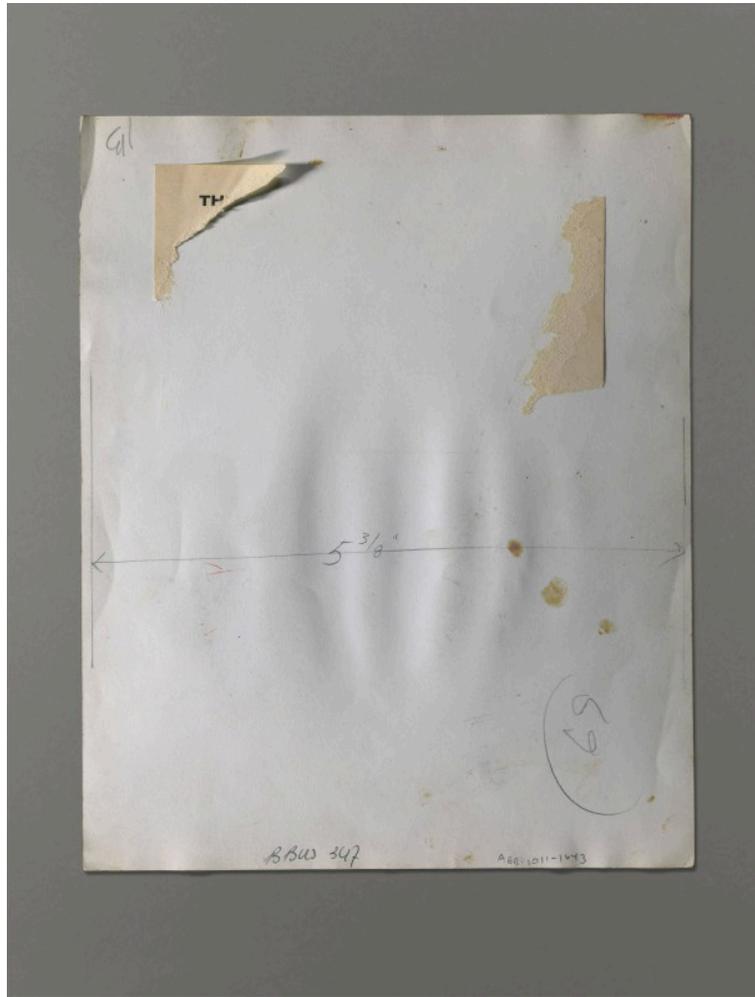


Figure 10.

Bill Brandt, *Stonehenge Under Snow (verso)*, 1947, printed later, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

This now-iconic photograph of Stonehenge in the snow was originally commissioned for the cover of *Picture Post's* special issue on the deadly winter crisis of 1947 (Fig. 9). The ancient stones are rendered as black silhouettes on the horizon line between the moody sky dominating the top half of the composition and the expanse of snow of the bottom half. At the time, the snow anchored the photograph to the contemporary moment and Stonehenge appeared as a stoical symbol of survival and resilience. This print was made many years later, and today audiences would more readily interpret the image as a timeless and romantic winter scene, unmoored from the socio-political symbolism that Stonehenge held in 1947. We chose this print for the cover of our book, *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, as it is indicative of many aspects of Brandt's practice—his repeated return to and reinvention of earlier works, and the elastic meanings they accrued over time.

This print is undated. The torn-off label showing only the letters “TH” is similar to the all-uppercase blocky typeface used by the Museum of Modern Art until the mid-1960s (Fig. 10). Indeed, Brandt exhibited a larger version of *Stonehenge* at MoMA in his first major solo show, curated by John Szarkowski in 1969.¹⁰ Perhaps originally intended for exhibition, the print was certainly designated for print publication as notes on the verso indicate an image dimension of 5³/₈ inches and instructions for cropping the left and right sides so as to eliminate the white margin and presumably produce a full bleed across the page.

The cracks visible on the front of the print are indicative of the hard glossy surface of a ferrotyped print. Ferrotyping was a means for a photographer to increase print gloss, which served to saturate the blacks and thus increase the contrast and the range from black to white. Augmenting these qualities anticipates reproduction in print, which tends to compress tonal range. Particularly apparent on the reverse are distinct ripples near the centre of the print, likely owing to drying against a ferrotyping plate.

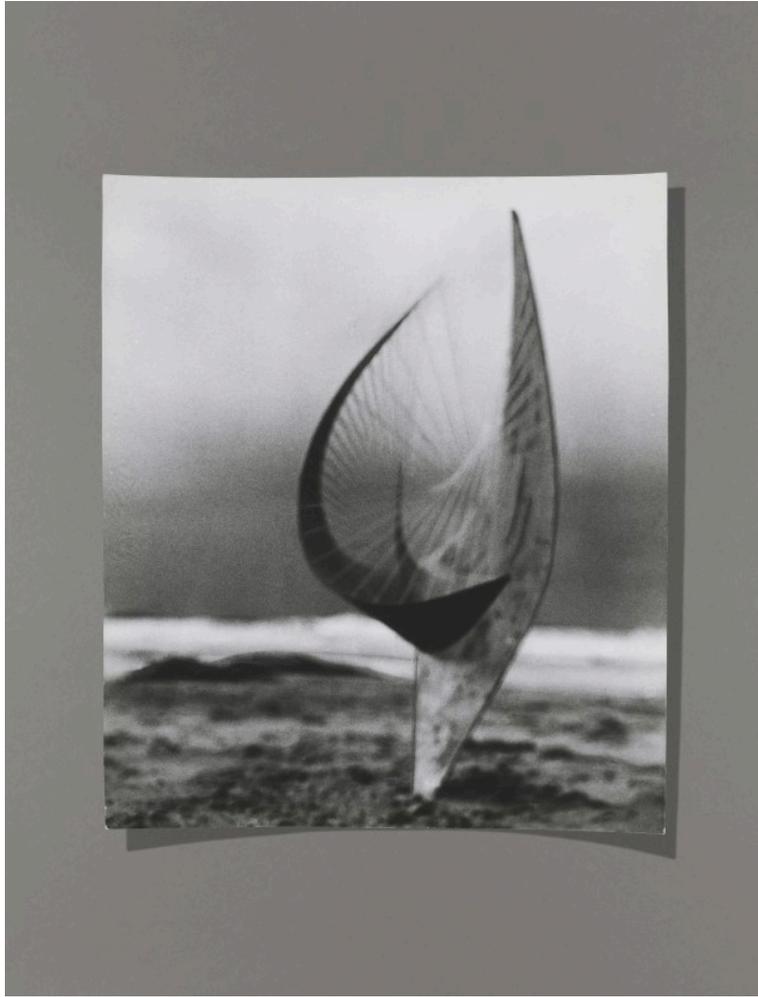


Figure 11.

Bill Brandt, "Stringed Figure" sculpture by Barbara Hepworth (recto), printed ca 1956, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

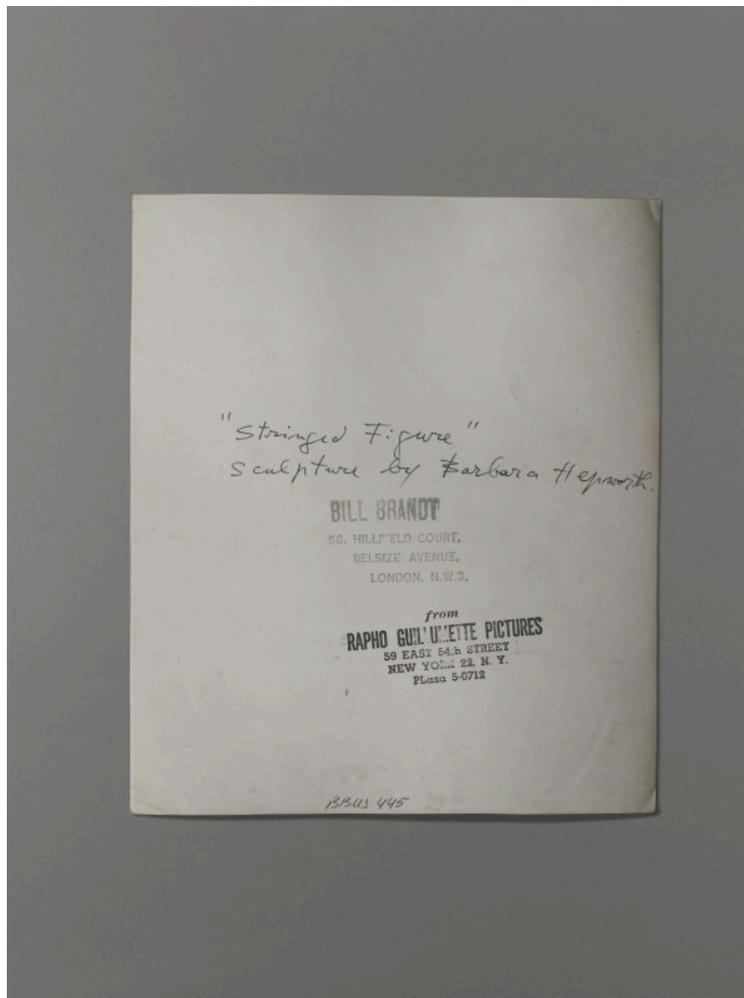


Figure 12.

Bill Brandt, "Stringed Figure" sculpture by Barbara Hepworth (verso), printed ca 1956, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

This is one of a series of photographs Brandt took on a visit to Barbara Hepworth's studio in St Ives in around 1956 (Fig. 11). As well as taking the sculptor's portrait in the studio, Brandt photographed at least four of her works on the beach.¹¹ Each was carefully set up against the empty shoreline, the base buried in the sand to create the impression of a monolithic form risen from the sea—modern parables for the ancient standing stones that Brandt had photographed years earlier.

Brandt seems to be trying to salvage this poorly focused photograph, understandably given the trouble of moving the sculpture to the seaside. The image is heavily retouched with a pencil and a blade, sharpening the blurry contours, the strings, and the lines on the inner surface of the form. There is further retouching on the background. As seen elsewhere, Brandt often took

a heavy hand when it came to retouching his prints, adding media with a brush and scraping out blemishes with a knife. He knew, of course, that these alterations would be invisible when the image was translated to the printed page and certainly he must have been satisfied with the result as he sent the finished product out for publication.

Indeed, the Rapho-Guillemette stamp on the reverse helps confirm that this print was intended for distribution and illustration as a printed reproduction for audiences in the United States ([Fig. 12](#)). Rapho was an early picture distribution agency founded in Paris in 1933. The agency moved to New York in 1940, where it remained in business until 1975. It represented many notable photographers including Brandt. The role of photograph distribution agencies was to represent photographers and market their images, and Rapho-Guillemette became a major supplier of pictures for magazines, books, and advertising. In the mid-1950s, Barbara Hepworth was promoting her work actively in the United States, which increased the prospect of Brandt earning licensing fees on this particular image from American publications.

The verso also bears a stamp for 58, Hillfield Court in London, the address at which Brandt resided from 1935 to the end of the 1940s. The stamp, therefore, considerably pre-dates the photograph, as we know that Brandt visited Hepworth in around 1956, the year that she made all the sculptures he depicted.

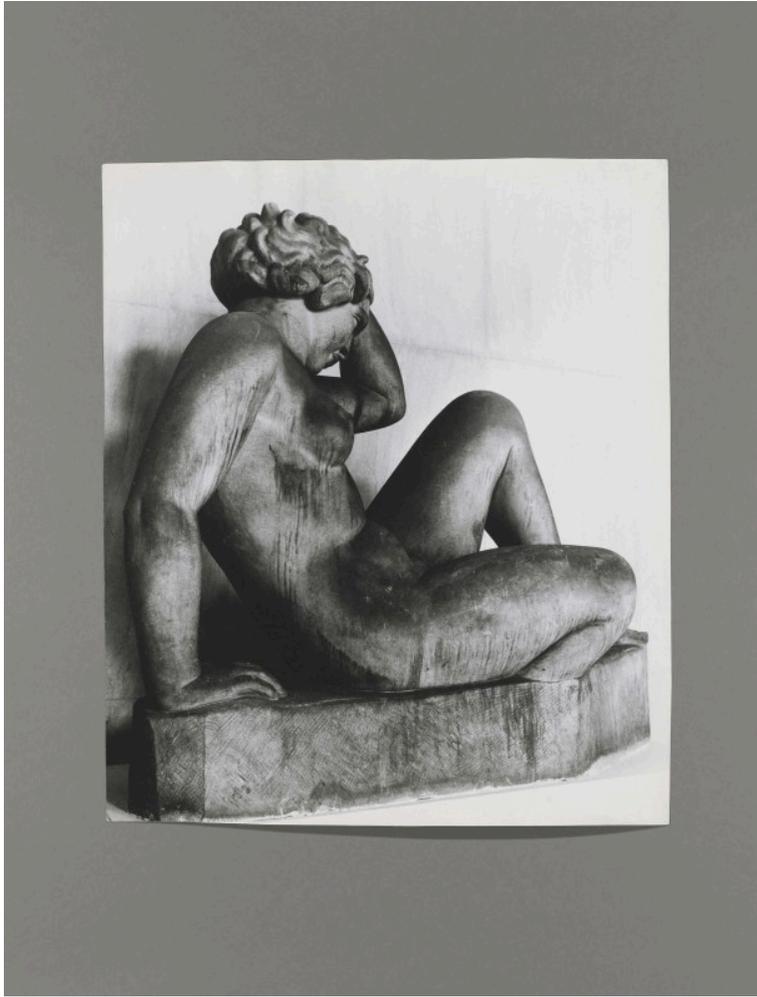


Figure 13.

Bill Brandt, Maillol, "La Montagne" (1937) (recto), printed circa 1961, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

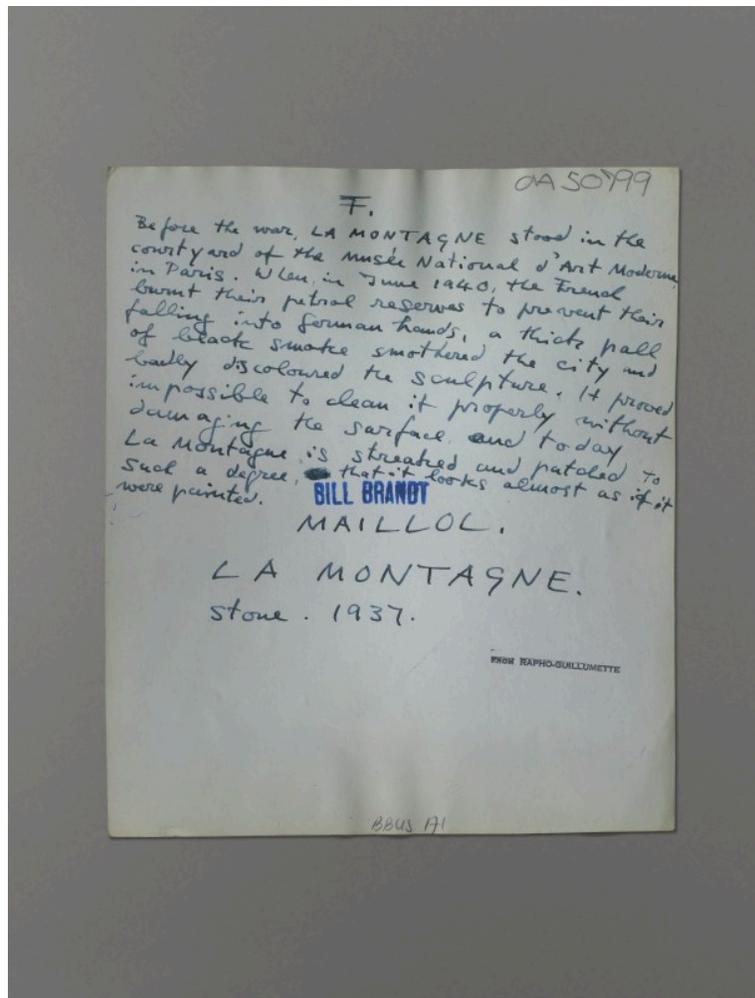


Figure 14.

Bill Brandt, Maillol, "La Montagne" (1937) (verso), printed circa 1961, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

Brandt photographed a number of sculptures by the French artist Aristide Maillol (1861-1944) around the time of the publication of his photo-book *Perspective of Nudes* (1961). In the preface, Lawrence Durrell wrote that Brandt "is to photography what a sculptor is to a block of marble".¹² This was no random comparison but one that Brandt himself encouraged. In 1961, he published an article in *Life* magazine to coincide both with his book and Maillol's centenary exhibition in Paris. In it, a selection of his nudes were juxtaposed with his images of Maillol's statues, provoking an intentional comparison of the human body with modern sculpture. The living bodies, notes the caption, are even "more unreal than the inanimate stone".¹³

In this picture, the accretions of soot on the surface of the stone create a kind of chiaroscuro that amplifies the sense of weight and volume (Fig. 13). A lengthy note on the verso in Brandt's hand reveals that the statue acquired its blackened surface during the war:

Before the war, La Montagne stood in the courtyard of the Musée National d'art Moderne in Paris. When in June 1940, the French burnt their own petrol reserves to prevent their falling into German hands, a thick pall of black smoke smothered the city and badly discolored the sculpture. It proved impossible to clean it properly without damaging the surface and today La Montagne is streaked and patched to such a degree that it looks almost as if it were painted (Fig. 14).

The letter "F" places this picture last in a sequence beginning with "A" showing different details from the same statue. All prints in the sequence carry a variant of the Rapho-Guillemette stamp on the back, indicating they were intended for distribution. Perhaps in a clever move to bring modest royalties to Brandt, the photo-agency capitalised upon the combined newsworthiness of *Perspective of Nudes* and Maillol's centenary.

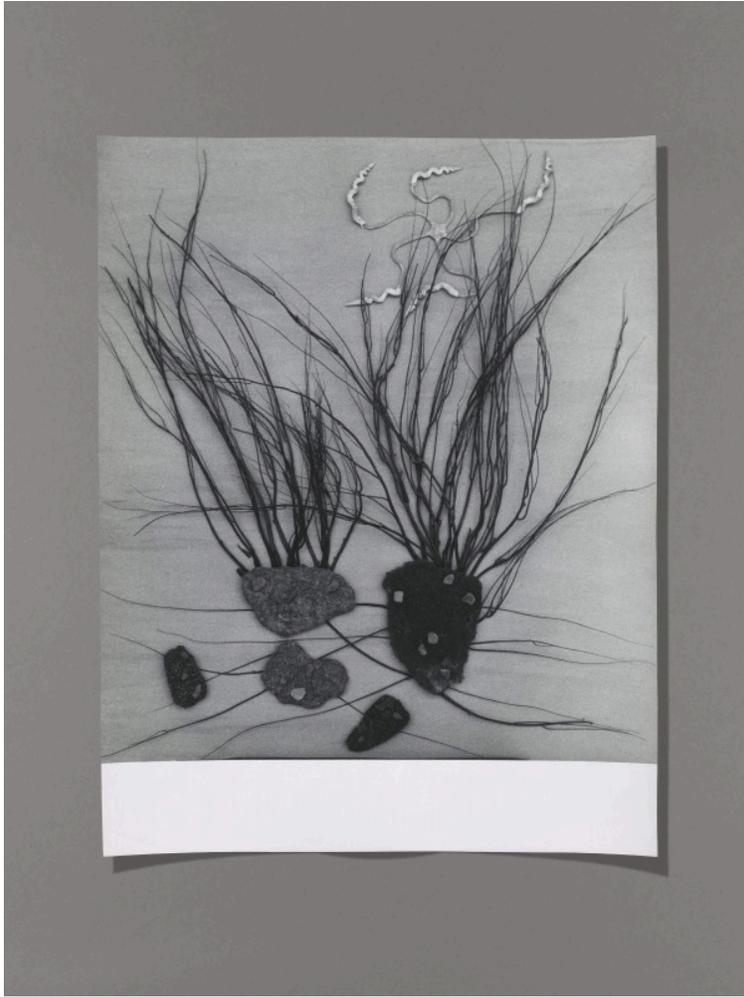


Figure 15.

Bill Brandt, *Monsoon Drive (Five) (recto)*, 1969, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

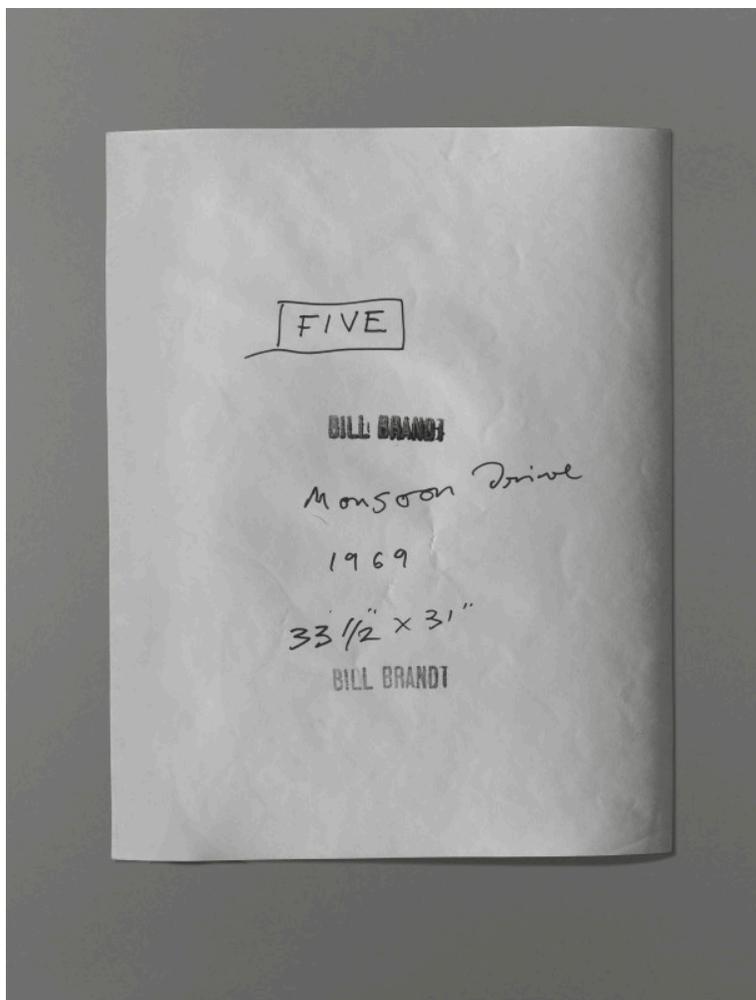


Figure 16.

Bill Brandt, *Monsoon Drive (Five) (verso)*, 1969, photographic print. Digital image courtesy of Bill Brandt and the Bill Brandt Archive Ltd. Photography by Richard Caspole and Robert Hixon.

In the late 1960s, Brandt began to create collages with found materials and natural objects, often assembled from marine flora and fauna gleaned on frequent visits to beaches, where he also photographed many of his nudes. Brandt arranged the found objects on boards painted in marine colours. Some were set up temporarily as still lifes for the camera. Others, including *Monsoon Drive*, were fixed in place and framed in plexiglas boxes as works of art to be hung on the wall. A colour transparency of *Monsoon Drive* preserved in the Bill Brandt Archive indicates that the board was painted in a blue hue, suggestive of an underwater scene. Brandt also photographed these colourful sculptural compositions using traditional black and white film, to create monochromatic prints such as the one shown here (Fig. 15). The collages and the photographs thus represent two distinct, if related, bodies of work.

Brandt exhibited his sculptural collages in London at Kinsmans Gallery in 1974 and at Marlborough Gallery in 1976, in both cases alongside photographs of more typical subjects, such as his portraits and nudes.¹⁴ In 1993, a number of the collages were published in *Bill Brandt: The Assemblages*, which juxtaposed posthumous colour photographs alongside Brandt's own black and white prints.¹⁵ These occasions aside, the collages are little known, as they have been routinely overlooked and omitted from assessments of Brandt's work. Yet, they represent a substantive part of Brandt's late oeuvre. In *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, we were able to draw renewed attention to them. As we sought to show, it is not a far leap from the photographs of nudes and natural sculptures on the beach to the marine collages that transmit Brandt's sculptural interests in three dimensions.

The title on the verso is accompanied by the word "FIVE" emphatically picked out in a box (Fig. 16). As with we have seen with other versos here, Brandt is indicating an order. Arranging plates in a sequence for essays and books was a consistent part of Brandt's practice. Many of the prints made for reproduction show evidence of Brandt working out and revising images in sequence. Whether or not Brandt had a serious intention to make a book, *Monsoon Drive* shows that his reflexive consideration of how his images would appear on the printed page persisted to the end.

Footnotes

- 1 The Museum of Modern Art exhibitions were *Diogenes with a Camera V: Bill Brandt, Lucien Clergue, Yasuhiro Ishimoto* (25 September–12 November, 1961) and *Bill Brandt* (15 September–30 November, 1969).
- 2 This is confirmed by correspondence in 1956 between Brandt and Edward Steichen, then director of MoMA's Department of Photography, preserved in the MoMA archive (Collections: MoMA Exhibitions. Folder: 569.5).
- 3 The exhibition venues are [The Hepworth Wakefield](#) (February–November 2020), the [Sainsbury Centre](#), Norwich (November 2020–February 2021), and the [Yale Center for British Art](#), New Haven (April–July 2021).
- 4 See John Tagg, "A Strange Country: Bill Brandt in Jarrow, 1937", in Martina Droth and Paul Messier (eds), *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore* (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art and Yale University Press), 146–149.
- 5 "Beveridge: The Fight is On", *Picture Post*, 6 March 1943, 8. See also Droth and Messier, *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, 20.
- 6 C.H. Gibbs-Smith, "The Hulton Picture Post Library", *The Journal of Documentation* 6 (1950), 15.
- 7 See Tagg, "A Strange Country", 149.
- 8 Bill Brandt, *Camera in London* (London: Focal Press, 1948).
- 9 "The Hardy Country: Photographed by Bill Brandt", *Harper's Bazaar*, March 1946, 154–155; and "Thomas Hardy's Wessex", *Lilliput*, May 1946, 411–418. See also Droth and Messier, *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, 25–29.
- 10 The photograph can be seen in this installation shot from the MoMA archives: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/3511?installation_image_index=13.
- 11 See Droth and Messier, *Bill Brandt | Henry Moore*, 28–29 and 165–167.
- 12 See Lawrence Durrell's preface in Bill Brandt, *Perspective of Nudes* (London: Bodley Head; New York: Amphoto, 1961).
- 13 "Nudes are Back", *Life*, 6 October 1961, 149–151.
- 14 For the Kinsman exhibition, see Mark Haworth Booth, "Bill Brandt Collages", *Connoisseur* 187, no. 751, September 1974, 74; and for the Marlborough exhibition, see William Feaver, "Changing mood of Bill Brandt", *Observer*, 19 December 1976, 21.
- 15 *Bill Brandt: The Assemblages*, compiled by Zeldia Cheatle and Adam Lowe (London: Kyoto Shoin, 1993).

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- Life (1961) "Nudes are Back". *Life*, 6 October, 149-151.
- Lilliput (1946) "Thomas Hardy's Wessex". *Lilliput*, May, 411-418.
- Museum of Modern Art (1961) *Diogenes with a Camera V: Bill Brandt, Lucien Clergue, Yasuhiro Ishimoto* exhibition (25 September-12 November)
- Museum of Modern Art (1969) *Bill Brandt* exhibition curated by John Szarkowski (15 September-30 November).
- Picture Post (1943) "Beveridge: The Fight is On". *Picture Post*, 6 March, 8.
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