



SHOWWEI CHU

A protégé of the masters teaches **SHOWWEI CHU** to focus on the city’s spirit during a 10-day photo workshop

My own private Paris

PARIS

Rue des Guillemites, where photographer Peter Turnley resides in Paris's fashionable Marais district, is more alley than street. There is no number on his 17th-century building — only a pair of iron doors that lead to a tiny courtyard. And to get to Turnley's penthouse suite, visitors must choose either a closet-sized elevator or a flight of narrow stairs.

I was there to seek the guidance of Turnley, whose Streets of Paris workshop — offered in the spring and fall since 2003 — would help inspire me as I explored the city with my camera, much in the way as I imagined the quintessential Parisian photographers, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Doisneau and Willy Ronis, would have done in their heyday.

When I reached Turnley's apartment, I was rewarded with a panoramic view of Paris and the happy shrieks of unseen birds and preschool children. His flat, though small by North American standards, was awash in light. Black-and-white prints by Turnley's deceased friends and mentors — Cartier-Bresson, Doisneau and other famous photographers — were assembled at one end of the living room, as if on an altar. Those images would be a constant reminder of the purpose of my pilgrimage to Paris.

After the other 11 participants had arrived, Turnley, clad in a dress-shirt-and-jeans ensemble with motorcycle boots, started off by explaining his approach: His workshop would include lectures and critiques of the previous day's work in the mornings, and personal photo-

graphy outings in the afternoons.

To practise street photography, he urged students to anticipate the drama that can unfold around every street corner. "A very good basketball player has a good sense of the court," he added metaphorically.

But the key idea Turnley tried to convey that day, and over the rest of the workshop, was one borrowed from Cartier-Bresson, who spoke of the instant when all the elements of an image come together, the so-called "decisive moment."

Turnley also emphasized the importance of observing and sharing through photography our own passions, and encouraged everyone to choose several areas in the city to reinterpret on a daily basis.

I headed to the quay along the banks of the Seine in the fourth arrondissement, the Luxembourg and Tuileries gardens, and central Paris's two islands: Île de la Cité and Île St.-Louis.

At first, I was somewhat nervous about pointing a camera at strangers without asking their permission, which explained why in the beginning I had only one or two contact sheets to show Turnley, despite being told to shoot at least four rolls of film each day.

"Be less conservative," he said during a critique on his balcony. "Work around the subject."

At another session, he encouraged me to "be less timid," adding that he doesn't see evidence of me walking the streets of Paris.

I told him that I was, but that I didn't want to take pictures indiscriminately. He became pensive for a moment, and softened his criticism by telling me that Edouard Boubat also took relatively few pho-

tographs.

The moments I did capture on film included ordinary people absorbed in their day-to-day lives: Old men fishing along the Seine, couples canoodling by the bridges, and musicians busking in the Marais — all shot against some spectacular backdrops.

Of the encounters I had, the most memorable included a squatter living in the walls of the quay on the Left Bank, a woman taking her cat to visit the flower market where birds and small animals are also sold on Sundays, and a restaurant patron trying to console a grieving stranger in the Jewish quarter.

With the squatter, it was the door to his makeshift home I photographed initially. When I first strolled by, it was chained and padlocked, and when I passed by a second time, it was open and houseplants were sunning themselves on the "front porch."

When I finally caught up to him, the man was sweeping the porch. He was gracious and eager to give my francophone partner and me a tour of the place. The room was small and dank with no light or heat. Old wood shelves lined the back wall and there was a bed in one corner with a table in the other.

He didn't break into the place, he explained, but found it empty that way and moved in a year earlier. It's probably a former storage room for the barges that once used the river to ship merchandise, he said.

As he posed for me by the front door, it crossed my mind that he had the same waterfront view as the Parisians who lived above him in expensive apartments. By then, I was in better form, feeling less inhibited



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Schoolchildren crossing the street in elephantine fashion, top, and the arching interior of the Cité Metro station, left, prove worthy photo subjects.

were still alive, Turnley would have invited them to speak at the workshop. Instead, he provided access to other living legends in Paris such as John Morris, the first executive editor of the Paris-based Magnum Photos agency and a former New York Times picture editor; and Voya Mitrovic, the master printer to Josef Koudelka and Cartier-Bresson.

To hear Morris speak, we gathered one afternoon at the elderly man's elegant home near Place des Vosges, Paris's oldest square. Later, we all dined together at nearby Auberge Chez Rosito, a tiny Corsican restaurant whose chef, Franck Merton, had just been awarded a Michelin star.

Between sumptuous courses of peasant soup and stuffed artichokes, I thought about Turnley's earlier comment that he personally sought meetings with Parisian photographers he admired — not because he wanted something material from them, but because he wanted to be touched by their spirit.

In many ways, I felt I had done the same thing in Paris.

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