



*Knife sharpener*

# P A R I S

PHOTOGRAPHS ACROSS TIME

FROM AN ISLAND IN PARIS

MARY ALICE JOHNSTON

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TEXTS, RICHARD JOHNSTON

WESTERN EYE PRESS



*Morning along the Seine*

# THE CITY OF LIGHT (& SHADOW)

FOREWORD BY LITO TEJADA-FLORES

MARY ALICE JOHNSTON discovered Paris and photography at the same time. And what a time it was: the end of the long nightmare of German occupation. And if that weren't enough to celebrate, Paris was also celebrating the two-thousandth anniversary of its founding—a big birthday for the City of Light ... Some of that light was captured in Mary Alice's twin-lens reflex and fixed in grains of silver on film in her improvised darkroom in a small apartment on the île Saint-Louis, then as today, the best address in Paris.

How did Baudelaire put it? "*Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves, où le spectre en plein jour accroche le passant.*" Swarming city, city full of dreams, where ghosts in broad daylight grab the passerby. Mary Alice Johnston too grabbed those passersby with her camera, with her wide-open eyes, filled to the brim with both the novelty and the timelessness of Paris. Like so many Americans, writers and artists, Johnston saw Paris fresh and new and true, not through the European filter of schoolbook history and cultural myth. And today these ghosts of long-ago Paris, the Paris and the Parisians that she caught with her camera still grab us. A city swarming with workers, strikers,

young priests, *clochards*, bums under bridges, kids in parks, barges plying the Seine.

Mary Alice loved Paris and, looking at her photos, you know Paris loved her. Everyone is treated gently in these images. There is no awe, no condescension, no snobbery, no posing—just life, starting up again after the war, Parisians waking up after the war: teachers and students, pilgrims leaving town to walk to Chartres, newspaper girls, a blind hurdy-gurdy man, street people, cleaning ladies and tired laborers, old gossips, even expats in front of Shakespeare and Company on the Left Bank looking for Henry Miller or Hemingway. Everyone and every street corner, every quay and courtyard, photographed with patience, with discretion, with love. Mary Alice and her husband, Richard, historian and head of the American school in Paris, dived into their new Parisian life and savored every minute of it. You will too, as you share a Paris too good to last, almost too good to be true. A Paris generations have dreamed about. "*...cité pleine de rêves...*" City full of dreams.

*Viens! Come!*



*Paris by night: la Seine, l'île de la Cité & l'île Saint-Louis*

# ARRIVING IN PARIS

IN THE SUMMER OF 1950, Mary Alice Johnston and her husband, Richard, stepped off a train onto a bustling platform of the Gare Saint-Lazare, one of the cavernous national train stations spaced around Paris. The Gare Saint-Lazare was a great hub of movement where throngs arrived daily on boat trains from Le Havre and Calais. The reunions of people who had been scattered around the world by the war, turned this station, a remarkable building in its own right, into a continuous stage of human drama. As far back as 1877, Claude Monet had exhibited impressionist paintings of this railway station. Mary Alice too was smitten and would often return with her camera to the Gare Saint-Lazare.

Mary Alice and Richard settled into a small apartment overlooking the river Seine on the île Saint-Louis. Here in the heart of historic Paris, photography became Mary Alice's full-time vocation as she explored her new home. After dinner her tiny kitchen turned into a darkroom where, under amber lights, the faces of Paris emerged amidst aromas of fixer and garlic. She did not have far to look for subjects. The île Saint-Louis was a favorite haunt of ragmen with their carts and bells, artists, organ-grinders, and even stray tourists spilling over from the Quartier Latin and Notre Dame on the neighboring île de la Cité. But living on the île Saint-Louis

from 1950 to 1958, Mary Alice could photograph faces and places tourists rarely saw.

Life after the war was hard for everyone, from *clochards* sleeping under bridges to residents of luxury apartments. But the sense of a new beginning generated a vitality expressed in the melody of bicycle bells, the chants of sidewalk vendors, and the tunes of street musicians, all in harmony with the unhurried tempo of the river Seine wending its way through the metropolis. Paris was a city of small shops and face-to-face commerce, like the neighborhood *boulangeries* where Parisians bought their daily bread, oven-fresh and crusty.

Yves Montand sang: "*J'aime flâner sur les grands boulevards, 'y a tant de choses, tant de choses, tant de choses à voir ...*" I love to loiter down the *grands boulevards*, there are so many things, so many things, so many things to see ... That song captured the spirit of the daily Parisian theater played out in the parks, shops, railway stations, and streets of a city believing itself to be once again the culture capital of the world. There was time, time for two-hour lunches, for endless conversations in bistros and on park benches, and even for fishing in the very center of *la Grande Ville*.



*Returning train crew,  
Gare Saint-Lazare*



*Alms lady,  
Gare Saint-Lazare*





*Cleaning women,  
Gare Saint-Lazare*



*Rapidité, Exactitude, Sécurité — Speed, Precision, Safety — Gare Saint-Lazare*



*Shakespeare and Company, the American bookstore on the Left Bank*



*Gargoyles atop  
Notre Dame Cathedral*



*Gargoyle Number Three*

# THE ISLAND

## *L'ÎLE SAINT-LOUIS*

WITH THE SYMMETRY of its 17th century architecture and the absence of overhead wires, the île Saint-Louis was a mecca in the 1950s for movie producers seeking historical backdrops for their films. They would induce the police to distribute bulletins asking inhabitants not to park on the island's streets during filming, making the island even more beautiful (and cars in the 50s were scarce in any case).

Each August, Mary Alice and Richard witnessed an evening procession celebrating the founding of the île Saint-Louis and its founder, King Louis IX. Led by young priests carrying a wooden platform bearing a bust of the sainted king, many hundreds of people with lit candles, not just nuns and priests, followed the statue from l'Eglise Saint-Louis. They walked around the island singing and waving to spectators while priests hurried alongside chanting in Latin. Celebrants ranged in age from children in their mothers' arms to the elderly on crutches or in wheel chairs. The sight and smell of so many candles took one back to medieval times.

In the year 52 A.D. Caesar's men came upon a small Celtic settlement of *Parisii* living by a shallow crossing on the river Seine. The Romans called

the site Lutetia. Two small natural islands were located nearby. One would become known as l'île Notre Dame and the other as l'île aux Vaches (or Island of Cows). Priests from Notre Dame would row their boats to the other island to milk the cows. In the 12th century an artificial, filled-in third island, l'île aux Cygnes (or Island of Swans) was built to accommodate the construction of Notre Dame Cathedral. Today that island is called l'île de la Cité.

In the 17th century, the engineer Christophe Marie connected the two original islands, to create the île Saint-Louis. Working for King Louis IX, who subsequently became the island's patron saint, Marie also built a bridge, the eponymous pont Marie, connecting the île to the Right Bank.

The île Saint-Louis, now a residential neighborhood, is like a village dropped into the City of Light, with narrow streets and 17th-century town houses, many of which have been converted into modern apartments.. Islanders feel a double identity as Parisians and as members of this small community. Residents who live and work on the island spend the major part of their lives among neighbors, sharing communal bonds in an area with a life all its own.



*Cat rescue, Quai d'Anjou. île Saint-Louis*





*Courtyard*



*Card players*



*Bijouterie (in front of the jewelry shop)*



*Boulangerie  
(bakery)*



*Procession*



*Festival of the île Saint-Louis*



*Seine Folklore Festival (during the visit of Queen Elizabeth II)*



*Seine Folklore Festival*





*Early morning walk*



*Organ-grinder*

# THE STREETS

## *LES RUES DE PARIS*

AS MARY ALICE JOHNSTON QUICKLY DISCOVERED, the streets of Paris were theaters overflowing with life. Often these theaters were not just metaphorical, but genuine open-air stages where vaudeville performers, musicians, dancers, and magicians entertained crowds of pedestrians. There was, and still is, a vitality to Paris streets that stimulates the pulse and turns daily shopping or a simple stroll into pure entertainment. Street vendors, *marchands de quatre saisons*, banter with the passing public. Street artists chalk colorful images on the pavement and on walls. Artists set up easels to capture and record the activity. *Bouquinistes* (open-air booksellers) line the streets by the Seine to sell books, maps, pictures and old post cards. Musicians on the street and in the Metro stations provide a soundtrack for the theatrics of city life. Parisians love to gather in the streets to celebrate events, to protest political policy, or to strike for better working conditions.

Unlike the American cities Mary Alice had known, Paris in the 1950s enjoyed a rich mixture of residential and commercial use in the same areas and same buildings. Les Champs Elysées, from l'Arc de Triomphe to la Place de la Concorde, was packed with offices, stores and markets at street

level but the upper floors were all apartments. Concierges, Paris' ubiquitous doorkeepers, had living quarters in some businesses and many official public buildings.

Art was everywhere in the City of Light from art history to contemporary art, from window displays to signage in the streets and Metro stations, from *haute couture* (high fashion) to the architecture of cathedrals. After the war, the streets of Paris showcased a civic culture mediated by the love of art.

Mary Alice started to record impressions with her camera in her immediate neighborhood, the Latin Quarter, just across a bridge from the île Saint-Louis. She admired the resilience and often self-mocking sense of humor of her French friends who had lived through the brutal war and equally brutal Nazi occupation. Inevitably, rather than photographing Parisian chic and fashion, she turned her attention, and her camera, to capturing the challenges and stories of ordinary people, ordinary Parisians, and daily Parisian life, paying special attention to the unselfconscious and creative behavior of children.



*Busy bench*

*After the party*





*News from the Left*



*Balloon lady*



*Peanut vender*



*Sleeping it off*



*Le Parisien*





*On strike*



*"Raise our wages"*



*Medieval hotel*



*Once a new hotel*

# THE SEINE

## *LA RIVIÈRE AU COEUR DE PARIS*

“PARIS IS A GIFT FROM THE SEINE,” writes Henry-Louis Dubly in his book *Les Ponts de Paris* (The Bridges of Paris). Meandering through Paris from east to west, the Seine divides the city into areas, *quartiers*, with altogether different histories, and hence altogether different characters: the more bohemian Left Bank (*la rive gauche*) and Latin Quarter where Latin was once the everyday language of streets filled with university students; and the more commercial Right Bank (*la rive droite*) and the Marais, where commerce developed adjacent to the waterway connecting the interior of the country to the Western Hemisphere via the Atlantic Ocean.

The Seine, the very blood stream of Paris, has been celebrated in poetry and song as the trysting place of lovers and the Seine herself, pictured as a lover, *une amante*, courting with restless energy her adored city. But the bards also tell us the course of true love never did run smoothly, and thus the Seine strokes with gentle currents and buffets with raging floods the island heart of her beloved Paris.

The river carries a heavy load of traffic: tugboats towing loads of freight,

passengers, tourists, and pleasure craft. The *berges* (the paved banks) of the Seine supported a diverse population: from homeless *clochards*, sleeping under the bridges, to workers unloading river freight, to lovers embracing beside the water, to ever-optimistic fishermen, to nuns picnicking around small campfires. Along the banks the un-housed inhabitants of the *berges* would wash their laundry in the Seine.

Sixty-seven bridges, each with a life of its own, span the Seine. Each bridge has its own neighborhood, its locals, its distinctive architecture and always long lines of land and water traffic. Mary Alice’s island claimed five of the Paris bridges. From her windows in the early morning she watched the river awaken, shedding its night blanket of mist. She would take splendid solitary early-morning walks along the banks, careful not to disturb the sleeping inhabitants with all of their household goods in two-wheeled pushcarts. Along the Seine in the shimmering mist of dawn, she could imagine herself in a world of childhood fairy tales.

*The Seine,  
Quai de Bourbon  
in winter*





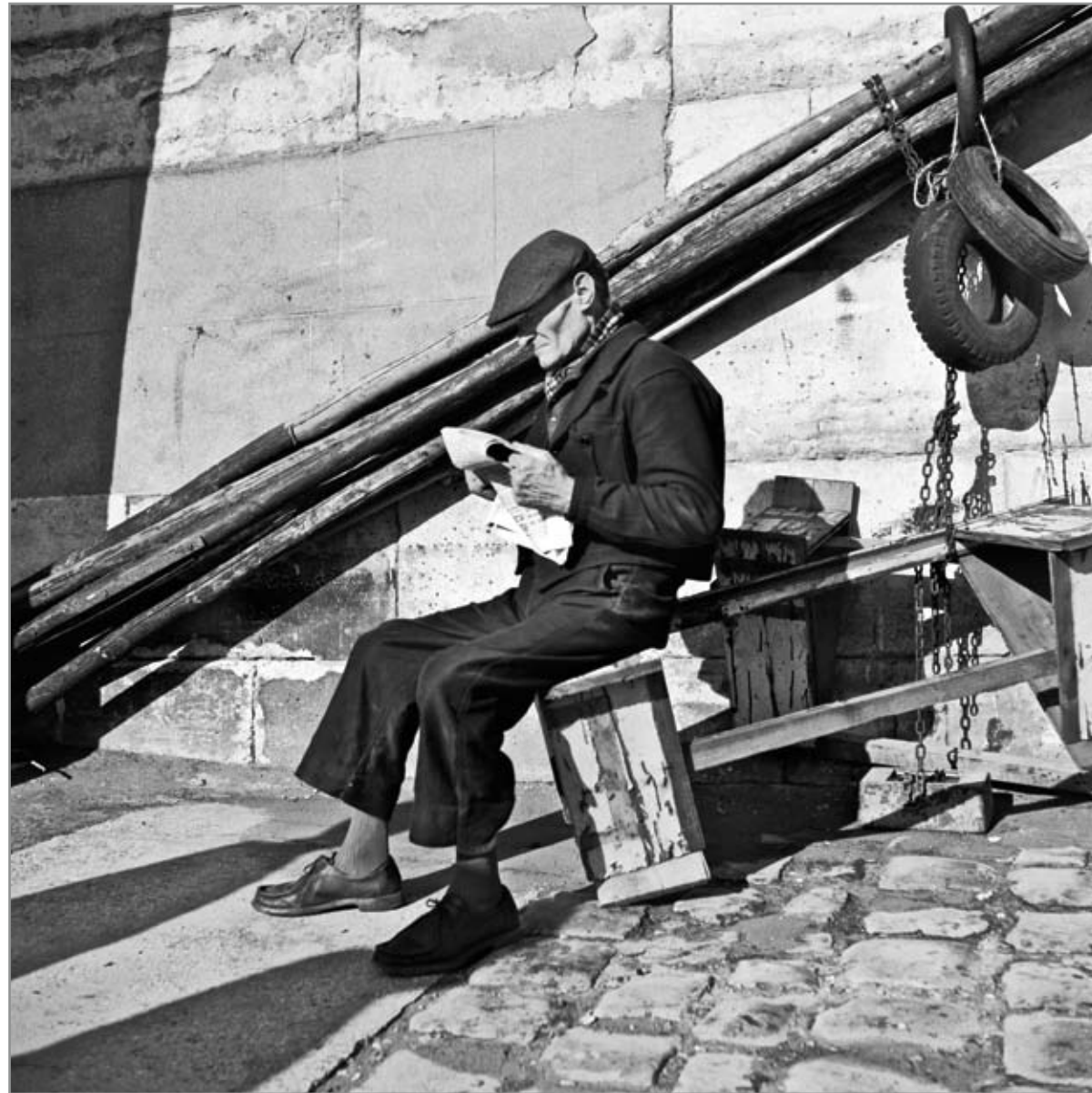
*Morning walk  
along the quay*





*Moored peniches  
(river barges)*

*Morning news*



*Rising water*





*Morning on the Seine*



*Anchored boats*



*Street artist above the Seine*



*Fishing floodwaters*





*Pont Marie  
lit by lightning*



*Morning in Paris, Quai de la Tournelle*



*Morning laundry*



*River watch*

# SCHOOL DAYS

## *LES JEUNES DE PARIS*

DURING HER PARIS YEARS, Mary Alice taught part time in the American International School of Paris, a school that taught students from nine different countries.

Many Parisian children, including those at the American school, were exposed to the Art of Silence inspired by master mime Marcel Marceau. When the children attended puppet shows in kindergartens and public parks, they encountered language not only in oral form but also through the actions of mimes and marionettes. Every year, Betsy Very, head mistress of the international school, planned a day of silence for the entire school. Only the secretary was allowed to talk when she answered incoming phone calls. Teachers and administrators performed their duties in silence, even during the lunch period. Some Paris public schools sent entire classes along with their teachers and schoolbooks to the French or Swiss Alps for a period of ski instruction in winter. But such physical education in the French public

schools had nothing to do with competition. Competitive sports were supported by Sports Clubs financed separately by the Minister of Culture.

After completing a course in French for foreigners, “*Cour de Civilisation Française*,” Mary qualified for a diploma in a regular Sorbonne program preparing students to teach French abroad.

Her son Donald was born in Paris and began his education in French schools. Even kindergarten was an unusual, and very French experience. Every day, Donald, and his fellow students, would shake hands with every other classmate, exchanging a proper formal greeting. Mary Alice delighted in visiting his school on the days when professional puppeteers performed. She enjoyed the shows and the way the children reacted, as if the puppets were real people. And she always managed to photograph the young students in a completely unobtrusive manner—a sensitive, invisible presence behind the camera, in the classroom and out.



*American International School, Neuilly*



*Tongue down*



*Lips extended*





*Pour patinage  
(for skating)*



*Learning is fun*

*Where in the world?*





*Just for kicks*



*Who wants to play?*



*Once upon a time*

# PARKS

## *LES PARCS DE PARIS*

PARIS HAS HUNDREDS OF PARKS including le Bois de Boulogne, a forested park to the west; le Bois de Vincennes, a forested park to the east; and large inner-city parks like le Jardin des Plantes and le Jardin de Luxembourg on the Left Bank of the Seine, both with generous spaces for children—always one of Mary’s Alice’s favorite photographic subjects. In le Jardin de Luxembourg an inclined lawn above a pool for sailing toy boats provides a splendid view of the Luxembourg Palace. During our years in Paris, families would bring their children there on weekends and holidays to share toys, sweets, and al fresco lunches. Children filled the parks. And in a small park on the east end of our île Saint-Louis, a sign made it official: “RESERVED FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS ACCOMPANYING CHILDREN.”

These parks offered a virtual library of nature for city dwellers, especially children, accustomed to living in small apartments or town houses of even more restricted space and permanently limited to subdued levels of noise and action. The parks of Paris offered a panorama of human drama for random audiences enjoying a kind of urban freedom under open skies.

The parks of Paris were also theaters of encounter for child actors playing

in sand boxes; for grandmothers reading, knitting, or dozing in chairs and old men playing chess at tables or benches; for children in motion, shouting while running races or playing tag, chasing butterflies, feeding pigeons, pursuing or trying to feed the squirrels, the birds, or fish in the ponds; and often for knots of totally unrelated strangers discussing literature or arguing furiously about politics. Of course this theater involved romance. The parks of Paris, perhaps more than in any other city, were (and continue to be) trysting places, rendezvous for young (and sometimes not so young) lovers, like those immortalized in the classic song by French poet and balladeer George Brassens: “*Les amoureux qui se bécotent sur les bancs publics...*” The lovers who smooch on public benches...

For many Parisian children, the parks were not only a metaphorical theater but a first encounter with classic theatre, outdoor puppet shows, and performing gymnasts, jugglers, and acrobats—*funambules*. For us, it’s impossible to remember the parks of Paris without also remembering a favorite Marcel Marceau mime show at the Ambigu Theater, entitled, of course, “In the Park.”



*Park in spring*





*Street game—checkers or le jeu de dames*



*Chess match*



*The first tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*



*Le Jardin des Plantes*



*Taking the world in stride*



*Lap work*

# THE SPIRITUAL LIFE A PILGRIMAGE TO CHARTRES

*LA VIE RELIGIEUSE*

*UN PÈLERINAGE À CHARTRES*

THE GREAT CATHEDRALS OF PARIS are more than architectural landmarks. Over the centuries, religion and the Catholic Church played an important role in shaping the social and political organization of the city and thus of France. In the early 12th century, philosopher Pierre Abélard challenged the Catholic orthodoxy, contending that one must understand in order to believe, disputing the orthodox view that one must first believe in God to understand what life is about. Thus began a truly Parisian argument and what was to be a continuing dialectic between orthodox and liberal French Catholics to the present day.

In the 1950s the two main contending political poles for the young generation were the Catholic Church on the one hand and the Communist Youth Organizations on the other, with the traditional Socialists somewhere in between.

French poet Charles Péguy, a Catholic Socialist idealist, was of the faction critical of the church. In 1912 when his son was seriously ill, he made a lone pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral. Two years later Péguy was killed at the Battle of the Marne during World War I.

The next year fifteen of his friends honored him by repeating his pilgrimage. Eventually they established the pilgrimage as an annual event that grew by 1958 to a record 14,000 participants in two waves of 8,000 and 6,000 pilgrims. With her camera in hand, Mary Alice accompanied a Parisian friend in the first group of pilgrims, walking for two days, one in soaking rain, and camping overnight in roadside fields. She was enchanted by the beauty of Chartres Cathedral and fascinated by its adjoining historic village, preserved as a park.



*Church window—  
sacred or secular?*



*Pilgrimage to Chartres*





*Sharing the load*



*Pilgrims*

*Goal in sight*



*Post-pilgrim review*





*Pilgrimage reunion,  
Jardin de Cluny,  
Paris*



*Near the goal*



*Hide and seek,  
Chartres Cathedral*



# MODERN TIMES

## *LES TEMPS MODERNES*

ONLY CHANGE IS PERMANENT. So said Heraclitus twenty-five hundred years ago, telling us that you cannot step twice into the same river. (Or live more than once on an island in the river Seine.)

After almost a decade in Paris (1950–1958) Mary Alice and her husband moved back to the United States, but over the years she would return frequently with her camera to document the evolving and always changing Parisian cityscape. The ever-increasing tempo of change during the past half-century is reflected in Mary Alice's more recent photographs.

The people, the parks and the winding streets are still there but Paris has changed profoundly during the more than five decades since Mary Alice and

Richard left. Gone are the riverside *habitués*, driven from their cobblestone premises by speeding automobiles along the new river routes. Rollerbladers and cyclists thread their way through heavy city traffic. Sidewalk bistros are now encased in glass to protect patrons from the noise and fumes of passing motor traffic. The street life has a quicker rhythm and much of the human drama has been transferred to other settings. Previously open courtyard entrances are now hidden behind locked doors. But there was no protection against hurricane-strength winds that ravaged the City of Light early on the morning of December 26, 1999.

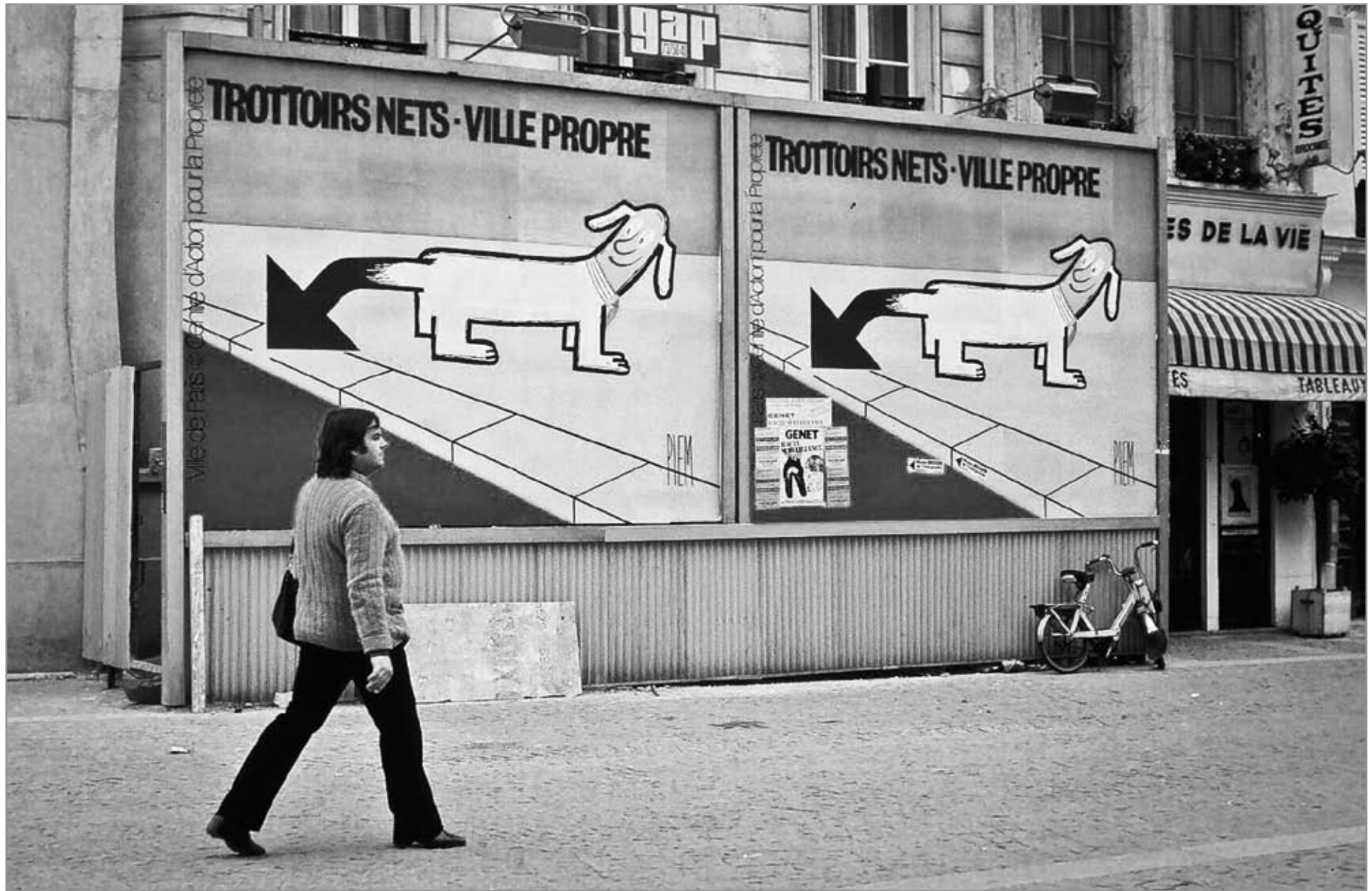
It's true, only change is permanent.



*Beneath Saint Eustache Cathedral, a new world*



*Attention: Dogs!*



*Tale of neatness*



*Tennis anyone?*



*Windy day in Paris*



*It's your fault!*



*Autos everywhere*





*Smart car*



# L'ETOILE D'ORIENT

**MENU à 38<sup>F</sup>**

ENTREE  
AVOCAT VINAIGRETTE  
SALADE MECHOUIA  
SEULE SUR MAYONNAISE

**SPECIALITES  
FRANÇAISES  
ET ORIENTALES**

**APERITIFS**

- Bière 10
- Pasta 10
- Anchoïte 10
- W 10
- Whisky 10
- Américain 10
- W 10
- W 10
- W 10



**chèque  
déjeuner**

*Evening rendezvous*

# THEN AND NOW

## *LE PASSAGE DU TEMPS*



*Quai d'Orléans, île Saint-Louis*

A BITTERSWEET VISION. Mary Alice Johnston returned after 50 years to many of her favorite haunts in Paris, to show us that progress isn't always progress, that you can't ever go back to the same river, the same city, the same Paris. But Paris is still Paris, *Adieu* Paris of yesterday, *Bonjour* Paris of today ...





*A courtyard becomes a parking lot*





*Pont Marie from the Right Bank,  
now la voie Georges Pompidou*





*Bread endures:  
the same bakery 50 years later on the île Saint-Louis*





*La passerelle Saint-Louis,  
between the île Saint-Louis and the île de la Cité*





*Quai d'Anjou, on the north side of the Île Saint-Louis*





# TIMELESS PARIS

AFTERWORD BY LITO TEJADA-FLORES

AMERICANS HAVE ALWAYS FALLEN IN LOVE WITH PARIS. But they're not alone. Paris holds a special place in the collective imagination of not only the French but the whole world. Paris is an adventure waiting to happen. Much more than just the capital city of a fascinating, infuriating, endearing country. For many—for me and I know for Mary Alice Johnston and her historian husband Richard—Paris is the capital city of our imagination, a place where things, where life itself is more so. Where conversations are more literary, more stimulating, where food is more mouth-watering, where the streets are more animated, where history is more palpable and the present more present. Where life is more alive. Day and night.

As much as anything else, Paris is about walking. When Mary Alice and Richard arrived in Paris in 1950, cars were scarce. One walked. One still walks. But Paris encourages a special kind of walking. For Parisians the word is *flâner*, almost untranslatable, and just right, just what one does on a lazy Paris afternoon: a combination of strolling, loafing, loitering, wandering with no special goal, just passing by, soaking it all in, not rushing to get somewhere because you are already there. *Flâner* means always having the

time to sit down in a sidewalk cafe for an espresso or *un petit coup de rouge* (a glass of red wine), a conversation, a daydream, or two, or three. There is no better place on earth to walk with no particular destination, to choose a Metro line that you haven't ridden for months, to get out at a station that maybe you have never seen before, climb the stairs to a *quartier* (a neighborhood), whose secrets you can't even guess. To walk, and look, and imagine that just around this next corner, something amazing is about to happen to you. In Paris it often does. But it doesn't really matter whether anything special happens or not. The anticipation is always in the air.

Simply because Paris feels like an adventure, it is. Perhaps it's best to visit Paris when you are young, and then return a lifetime later and rediscover the same excitement. Richard and Mary Alice returned again and again. Now we can travel with them, every time we open this book, to the most romantic city in the world. We can learn to *flâner* with Mary Alice and her camera ...

Through time, across time, today, yesterday, tomorrow. Through Paris. Timeless Paris.

*Bouche de Metro, Paris at night*



## ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER



MARY ALICE JOHNSTON, born in Iron Mountain, Michigan, a land of forests and lakes, has always been motivated by both a passion for nature and for understanding language in all its forms. A keen sense of humor sustained her in her early life-roles as university student and registered physical therapist in the U.S. Army Medical Corps during World War II. After the war she took advantage of the G.I. Bill to complete her graduate studies at Columbia University in New York City where she acquired an M.A. degree and a husband—classmate and fellow G.I. Bill student Richard Johnston, who accompanied her to Paris for post-graduate studies.

Mary Alice's fascination with photography began in childhood with an Eastman Kodak box camera. As an adult, as a wife, mother, student

of language, peace activist, feminist, teacher of French and English, her ears were attuned to language use and her eyes focused (often through a viewfinder) on people. Endlessly curious about how we communicate, Mary Alice studied the interplay of words and deeds, actions and transactions, how we shape and are shaped by language. After arriving in Paris she continued her language studies, but soon the major part of each day was devoted to roaming the streets and quays of the enchanted City of Light with her cameras.

For information about archival digital prints of Mary Alice's classic images, please visit her web site [www.MaryAliceJohnston.com](http://www.MaryAliceJohnston.com)

*Mary Alice thanks her friends Rick Thompson and Judy Walden for reviewing different drafts of this work  
and Lito Tejada-Flores for his editorial advice and technical skill in creating the book.*

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*and Robert Granjon*

*in the middle of the 16th century.*

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# E N V O I

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