

# A CREATIVE LEGACY

In the early 1900s Paris' Montparnasse was a haven for artists, intellectuals, and writers. What was it about this area that stimulated their creativity? Is there somewhere that still holds on to the spirit of that era?



**MORE SUPERLATIVES HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT PARIS** than any city on earth. But beyond the well-deserved accolades of beauty and grandeur, Paris has a fascinating social history of which many visitors are unaware. It's a history that has changed the face of Western culture.

Eighty years ago, George Orwell wrote *Down and Out in Paris and London*, recounting his time as a dishwasher in the hotels of Paris. While I have no desire to repeat his experience of working 18 hours a day in a room he describes as a "furnace", his ode to the people, cafés, and bistros of Montparnasse stirs my imagination.

From around 1915, an astonishing list of artists, intellectuals and writers gathered in the bars and cafés of Montparnasse, creating some of mankind's greatest works of art and literature. It was a period known as *Les Années Folles* [The Crazy Years]. I want to understand what caused this great congregation of talent, and to find out if any vestige of it still exists today.

**IN ORWELL'S TIME, HE WOULD HAVE HAD TO TAKE A** train from London to the South Coast, a ferry across the English Channel, and another train to Paris. Today, the two cities are linked by the Channel Tunnel and the Eurostar whisks you from one city centre to another in just over two hours. On arrival, first-time visitors to Paris often feel that they've been here before: the city features so often in film and television that views and vistas seem familiar, like the memory of dreams. The city itself is shaped around the plans of Baron Haussmann, civic designer to Napoleon III. His rebuilding of the city in the 1860s, made the streets safer, more sanitary and less prone to rebellion.

With Paris' long history of street revolutions, Napoleon III asked Haussmann to incorporate long, wide streets into his plans – too broad for rebels to barricade, and along which troops could move quickly and coherently to crush insurrection. The magnificent boulevards that march across the city are the realisation of this strategy. But their aesthetic appeal is just as significant: they afford grand vistas to inspiring monuments, allowing the famous Parisian light to bathe the architecture in a liquid richness. It is said to be this very light that first drew artists to the city. Cheap rent and decadent entertainment made them stay, and the bars and lodgings of Montmartre became their favourite haunts. By 1910, Picasso, Modigliani and numerous other impoverished artists were living in the area's communes, meeting to form artists' associations; sharing ideas, techniques and philosophies.

In Montmartre today, the hill that besiegers once used to bombard Paris affords magnificent views across the city. Wandering the narrow streets around La Basilique du Sacré Coeur, a mix of locals and visitors throng cafés and artists still offer to sketch portraits nearby. But The Crazy Years flourished elsewhere in Paris. To find out why, I will need to follow in the footsteps of the greats.

Around 1915, many artists and writers moved to Montparnasse, on The Left Bank of the Seine. Montmartre had become increasingly expensive, the home of dandyism and snooty refinement. Those in Montparnasse were on the opposite side of the river – and at the opposite end of the

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economic spectrum. Penniless writers, artists, sculptors, and poets came to live in artistic communes, where cramped and squalid living conditions meant residents spent as much time as possible in the area's cafés and bars.

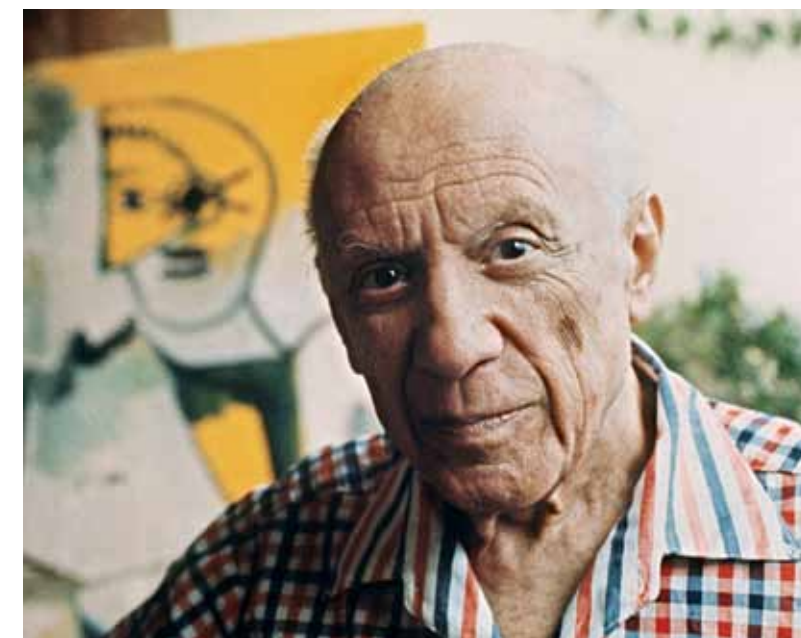
Dalí, Picasso, Hemingway, Beckett, and so many more were drawn to the area that became home to "the most interesting people in the world," according to Carlos Baker, who published a well-regarded biography on Hemingway. But what was it about Paris, and Montparnasse in particular, that engendered such artistic creativity and associations? And can I still find somewhere that holds onto the spirit of that era?

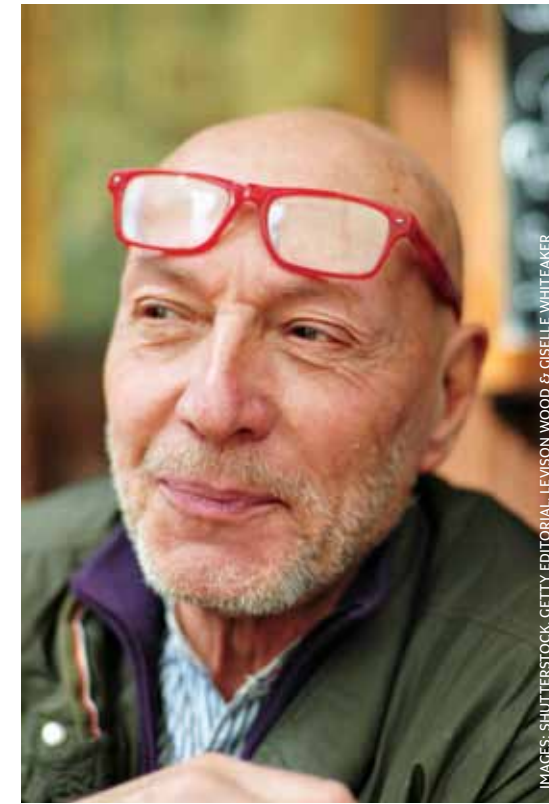
**WANDERING THE STREETS OF THE 6TH ARRONDISSEMENT,** we pass an area of cafés with large terraces, busy with gesticulating conversationalists – the sort of cafés that fomented the 1920s movements. I start towards one, eager to be part of the throng. My guide, Charlotte, puts a hand on my forearm. "Not here," she says. "They are too touristy, not *typiquement Parisien* [typically Parisian]. I will take you to a place that is exactly what you are looking for, where you will unlock the secrets of Les Années Folles."

Following her through back alleys, we arrive at a café on the corner of two inconspicuous streets, hidden from the tourist thoroughfare. A sun-bathed terrace, full of people sipping rosé and nibbling on charcuterie, is shaded by a flowering arbour. The walls are dotted with memorabilia of past patrons. The waiters greet us enthusiastically and usher us to our seats.

"Parisian cafés are more than somewhere to just eat and drink," explains David De Jesus, proprietor of La Palette. "They are the heart of a community and neighbourhood."

LEFT TO RIGHT: The inspirational Parisian cityscape taken from Montmartre; Pablo Picasso was drawn to the area that became home to, "the most interesting people in the world".





IMAGES: SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY EDITORIAL, LEVISON WOOD & CISELLE WHITEAKER

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While the terrace is packed, and people are queuing for available seats, the tables next to us, up against the café, are empty and marked with signs saying “Reservé.” I ask him who has reserved them. “We have,” he responds, “They are for those who have earned them.

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We keep them for our regulars – when they turn up they know they will always have the best seats, just like in their home. These seats are sacred. They take time to be earned.”

“This quarter, the Latin Quarter, is special,” says David. “In France, writing and art are noble professions that give you status. This area is full of art schools and galleries. They all come here, whether they are students or teachers, artists or buyers. It becomes their home. Our identity, and introducing people into our community, is important to us, so that is what we defend. That is why we Parisians have a reputation for being prickly. But once we know you, we open up.”

I look along the row of “Reservé” seats. Two dandyish gentlemen play cards (art dealers apparently); four generations of a family eat lunch (they have been coming here since the great grandfather, a sculptor, was young). Next to me a smiling gentleman finishes off his steak tartare, pours me a glass of rosé from his bottle, and asks me why I am taking notes.

“Dalí?” he says, introducing himself as Maurice Marty. “Oh, yes. I knew him. I made some furniture for him once.” My jaw drops, but this is no idle boast. A painter, sculptor, and artist, aged eighty but looking sixty, Maurice was a contemporary of many of the greats in the years after the Second World War.

“I lived in Montparnasse and we all went to college at the École des Beaux-Arts. We used to hang out in the bars together,



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Parisian cafés are the heart of a community and neighbourhood; La Palette reserves seats for their regulars; Maurice Marty talks art and life; posters for plays, bands and other messages adorn the walls of Montmartre today; art lines the streets of Paris today; Salvador Dalí; street artists painting in Montmartre.

so we knew each other and collaborated. I worked with César – his sculpture *Le Centaure* is not far from here.”

There is more. “Serge Gainsbourg – what a character!” he says. “I designed his apartment for him – all black and white. ‘Maurice, you can shake my hand,’ he said. ‘Talent is not infectious – you risk nothing.’” It is astonishing to be sitting in the Parisian sun conversing with a man who worked with the greats of Parisian art and culture.

Suddenly, I understand what Charlotte meant – it was cafés like La Palette that fostered the open culture of sharing and collaboration that created Les Années Folles. The chairs in the Reservé are all cheek-by-jowl, all facing outwards, with mere



inches between you and your neighbour. And so, conversation is inevitable, friendships are made, and movements are born.

“The proximity makes people equal,” explains De Jesus. “In these seats, your position melts. You would not know if the person sitting next to you is a student, the French Spielberg, or the president’s wife. They come with friends and know they can just be themselves. *Égalité* [Equality]. That proximity of chairs is like promiscuity for conversation, a true exchange between neighbours. You feel you know them, and conviviality flows.”

**PARIS’ REPUTATION FOR ARTISTRY, EXTRAVAGANCE, AND** decadent parties continued well beyond the 1920s. In the foyer of Hotel de la Trémoille, a photograph from the 1960s evokes another great era: the jazz musicians Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong wave from their hotel rooms to musicians below. The American greats would come to play in Le Caveau de la Huchette, which is still open today.

But beyond the echo of former glories, is there a Paris for today’s hungry writers and artists to continue the tradition? A place where the next generation of Hemingways and Dalís can gather to share drink, conversation and ideas?

In one of the oldest streets in Paris, perched on cobblestones opposite Notre Dame, sits a higgledy-piggledy bookshop, like a set from a Harry Potter film. Shakespeare & Company is the namesake of the bookstore in which Ezra Pound met Hemingway, and whose owner published James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Outside I meet Flic, a jobbing journalist who moved to Paris to pursue her dreams to be a writer.

“They still let the Tumbleweeds stay here,” she says. Tumbleweeds? “In the 1950s it was a haven for Beat poets and writers in search of Bohemian enlightenment. They tumbled in, stayed for weeks, or even months, while writing, and then tumbled out again. Whitman [George, the founder] called them his ‘Tumbleweeds.’ I stayed here when I first came to Paris. In return for a few hours work each day, you can stay in the shop overnight. It’s magical – you feel part of this legacy of literary Paris.”

The bookshop is a sanctuary for waifs and strays who, having read the tales of their icons, come to meet others with the same dreams of love, art and writing. But where to go from here? Is there a modern-day Montparnasse?

“Of a sort,” says Flic. “On Rue de Rivoli, the government has bought a building called the Aftersquat so that artists can stay there for next to nothing. Most of the expats here seem to be creative, and all around Oberkampf, in the 11th, where I live, there are cafés where we meet and bars with open mic nights. Perhaps it’s a bit more contrived than the Paris of the 1920s, but people come because of the heritage, and you do get a sense of inspiration and creativity.”

**AS I HEAD BACK TO GARE DU NORD AND ON TO LONDON,** I feel enchanted and intrigued; enchanted by the stories, charm and communality of La Palette, and intrigued by the new generation of “Tumbleweeds” carrying on the legacy of hungry creativity.

This won’t be the end of my Parisian story. The city has cast her spell on me, and I have a sneaking suspicion that before long I’ll be tumbling back across the threshold of Shakespeare & Company in search of my own *Années Folles*. ☺

WORDS ASHWIN BHARDWAJ