

The people of Paris, 1926-1936

Through the lens of population censuses

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Au Réveil Matin, Maison Bénazet, café restaurant, 113, avenue Jean-Jaurès, 19th arrondissement, circa 1935, photo postcard
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Taking three Parisian population censuses as a starting point, the exhibition “The People of Paris” offers a fresh perspective on the Parisian population during the interwar period.

Since the start of the 19th century, the Parisian population had kept on growing steadily, reaching a peak in 1921 (2.89 million inhabitants), unmatched ever since. The capital was a densely populated, dynamic and evolving city. It attracted large numbers of new residents, mostly single young adults, from French provinces, the French colonial empire or foreign countries.

To know the size and breakdown of its population, Paris, like any French commune, held a census every five years, resulting in the publication of statistics. However, unlike other communes, the capital had never compiled nominative lists of individuals before 1926, meaning that the three censuses of 1926, 1931, and 1936 were of particular interest. Compiled in 80 Parisian districts divided into 20 arrondissements, these registers prompt an unprecedented investigation into the Parisian population from one hundred years ago.

Based on the specific general structure of the Parisian population, portraits of Parisian men and women will be drawn up, from place of birth and citizenship, to professional occupation, family status and distribution within each district and building in the city.

CURATORS

Valérie Guillaume, Director of the Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris

Hélène Ducaté, Scientific Project Coordinator for the Musée Carnavalet - Histoire de Paris

Sandra Brée, Research Fellow for the CNRS at the Rhône-Alpes Historical Research Laboratory (LARHRA), guest curator

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

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Anne-Cécile Tizon-Germe, Deputy Director of the Archives de Paris

Out of the most diverse life stories, a mosaic emerges in a whirlwind of memories and emotions. This exhibition invites us to better understand and appreciate ourselves, both individually and collectively.

We will thus meet La Goulue (Louise Weber), a shorthand typist, Josephine Baker, Charles Aznavour, Kiki de Montparnasse (Alice Prin), a female police agent, Edmée de la Rochefoucauld, a taxi driver, Edith Piaf (Edith Gassion), Fernandel (Fernand Contandin), a telephone operator, unemployed people, residents from the Parisian belt (called the 'Zone') thanks to a database specifically designed by a team of CNRS researchers between 2020 and 2025.

Alongside these unique stories and collective trends, several graphics specifically designed for this project will provide further insight. Moreover, the artworks on display – most of them being exhibited for the first time – will offer an opportunity to explore several themes such as children's rights, family policies, migration, the freedom to love, social laws, urbanism, housing, the history of work or unemployment. Questions that remain relevant today.

The exhibition is thematically structured around the following sections:

The Parisian population, then and now

This opening area compares the demographic data from the interwar period with that of today. It also clarifies the definition and goals of censuses.

"Paris is my home"

This section, with its title quoting the American collector Gertrude Stein, explores the personal relationship with Paris evoked by each testimony, while touching on a variety of fields of activity: politics, economy, industry, sciences, media, entertainment, fashion, cinema, literature, etc.

Paris, the city of lovers

The reputation of Paris as the "City of Love" may be due to the particularly high number of single people there. This section explores romance, as well as the places where you could meet new people and have fun in the capital.

Parisian children

In Paris, half of married couples had no children. This low number of children caused some people to fear "depopulation". French family policies promoted natality, but they also came with repression, as the law gradually penalised abortion.

Parisian districts: The Centre and Eastern Paris

Paris was a densely populated city. The fight for public health was one of the main challenges of the time, this section also mentions the scandal of the Violette Nozière case.

Parisian districts: Western Paris

The daily life of households and their servants lies at the heart of this section. With the rise of documentary films, Paris became an open-air movie set, with Western Paris representing its most prestigious area.

Professional dynamics

The majority of the Parisian population were employed and labour laws underwent some changes, but at the turn of the severe economic crisis of the 1930s, unemployment went up, notably in 1936. The ten most common professions are featured here, alongside a section dedicated to female employment, which evolved at that time.

Unemployment and poverty: Social realities of the 1930s

The Seine department had the highest density of unemployed people, with women and migrants being the most affected. Significant changes due to the rise of the industrial and automotive sectors led people to rethink male employment.

In 1936, Charlotte Perriand exhibited a living room from a low-cost housing unit (HBM) and coupled this interior design with a critique of urban squalor in the form of a monumental photomontage: *The Great Misery of Paris*.

Mass media and mass culture

The power of the media relied on a robust integrated industrial organisation, with cinemas screening newsreel footage. News was also broadcast on the radio. Illustrated magazines experienced a spectacular growth during the 1930s, with photographs playing a major part in their appeal.

Paris is yours: Meeting the residents from 100 years ago

Within the last room of the exhibition, visitors can freely browse the census registers digitised by Paris Archives thanks to the first historical demographic database compiled with the latest artificial intelligence tools in order to look for men and women, famous or not, who used to live in Paris.

Alongside this device, the faces of merchants from the years 1926 to 1939 are displayed through a series of postcards: cafés, restaurants, ice cream parlours, butcher shops, greengrocer's, bakeries, etc.

A catalogue comprising essays by the curators and several other authors is published by Éditions Paris Musées.



Gyula Halász, known as Brassaï, *Kiki*
et ses amies Thérèse Treize de Caro
et Lily 1932
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