

Exotic pattern in Chiswick House Gardens



English mist in Chiswick House Gardens

# BILL BRANDT HENRY MOORE

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Yale Center for British Art, New Haven  
Yale University Press, New Haven and London



## Britain at War

The British government imposed a blackout on September 1, 1939, two days before the official declaration of war against Germany. The blackout had a transformative impact on civilian life—as the government itself admitted in a publication made for American audiences in 1945, it was “the wartime condition that many people found the most relentlessly depressing of all.”<sup>1</sup> The comment was accompanied by Bill Brandt’s photograph of an extinguished streetlamp on a deserted street, an apt emblem of the blackout.

The same picture had been published earlier, at the height of war in 1942, as part of a *Lilliput* story on Brandt’s nighttime photography. Here the dismal ordeal of the blackout is turned into an elegiac photographic opportunity, the subject appearing seamlessly aligned with the “sense of mystery” Brandt created with his camera. The article also featured Brandt’s photograph of a bombed building, with a caption explaining that the “white tower was once a house,” but now, bombed out, “its shape is echoed by the real church in the background”—a formal pictorial composition born from a scene of destruction.

The same *Lilliput* article opened with Brandt’s picture of St Paul’s Cathedral at night. The impressive shape of the famous building, silhouetted against a dark sky, appears to rise up—unharmed—from a tangle of rubble, the remnants of a nearby bombed building. St Paul’s, the most recognizable of London’s landmarks, became a symbol of urban resilience during the war. Protected by a special civilian fire watch, it suffered minimal bomb damage but had many near misses, which were avidly reported in the press. Its apparently miraculous survival was a morale-boosting source of inspiration which photographers and artists repeatedly pictured.

It is possible that Brandt made this picture in 1942 especially for *Lilliput*’s article. It is not to be confused with another view of St Paul’s published in 1939, also in *Lilliput* and also part of a photographic essay on the evocative beauty of the blackout. Seen from across the waters of the Thames, the cathedral is again shown as a black silhouette against the night sky. The caption emphasizes not civilian experience but the eeriness and “spirit of the blackout,” as captured by “one of the most brilliant of English camera-artists.”

A month later, on New Year’s Day 1940, the same photograph was used by *Life*, similarly to illustrate a story on the blackout. In contrast to *Lilliput*, *Life* focuses on the bleak reality of the blackout: “London is becoming a depressed area. Sensitive people are developing nausea, lassitude, irritability, and the inability to concentrate from ‘blackout blues.’” The article is explicit about the harmful social impact, inconvenience, and unsettling of the normal order of life: “any man with a uniform” could now enter the home of an ordinary Englishman and “turn out his lights and send him to bed or take him to jail.”

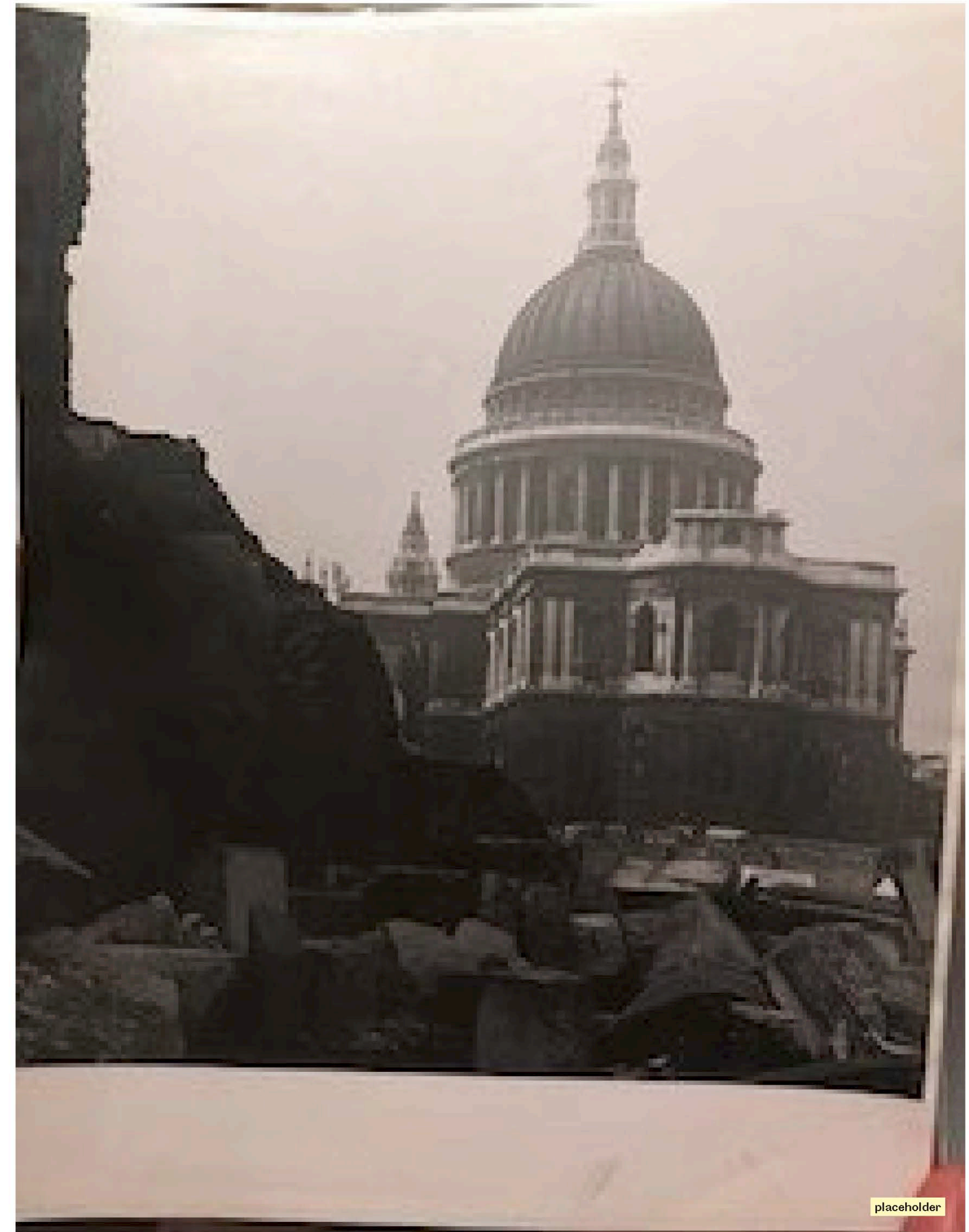
As *Life* reminds its readers, the blackout represented a form of social control, an intolerable restriction of liberty, but it also represents a necessary sacrifice that the people are willing to make: “having gone to so much discomfort, every Englishman is now determined to rid the world of Adolf Hitler before he settles back into comfort again.” This is a message is about social consensus: the blackout could only succeed through public cooperation and to achieve it, an explicit relationship had to be drawn between the behavior of the individual and the survival of the nation.<sup>2</sup> If *Life*’s article at first seems at odds with *Lilliput*’s aesthetic framing of the blackout, in the end there is a core alignment in the message of both magazines: common experience, common suffering, and the common good. Through the visual poetry of Brandt’s pictures, both magazines contributed to the promotion of the blackout as a necessary reality of a united home front.

Moore, too, created a visual response to the blackout and bombings. A number of drawings made in 1940 react directly to the devastation and horror of war. Destroyed buildings became symbols for the dead. In *Eighteen Ideas for War Drawings* a series of small vignettes are arranged on a single sheet, reminiscent of the photographic spreads in illustrated magazines. Moore evokes the eeriness of an altered reality: “searchlights,” “flashes from the ground,” “Nightmare,” “Burning cows” and “Bombs bursting at sea,” are among the captions scribbled next to the drawings, recording the new experiences war has introduced to daily life, a new rhythm where nighttime was characterized by blackouts and bombings, and daytime by the aftermath. In several vignettes the scene has been drawn in two halves, as “contrasts of opposites”—figures representing “peaceful normal” life in the daytime emerge from the “sudden devastation” wrought at night by bombings.

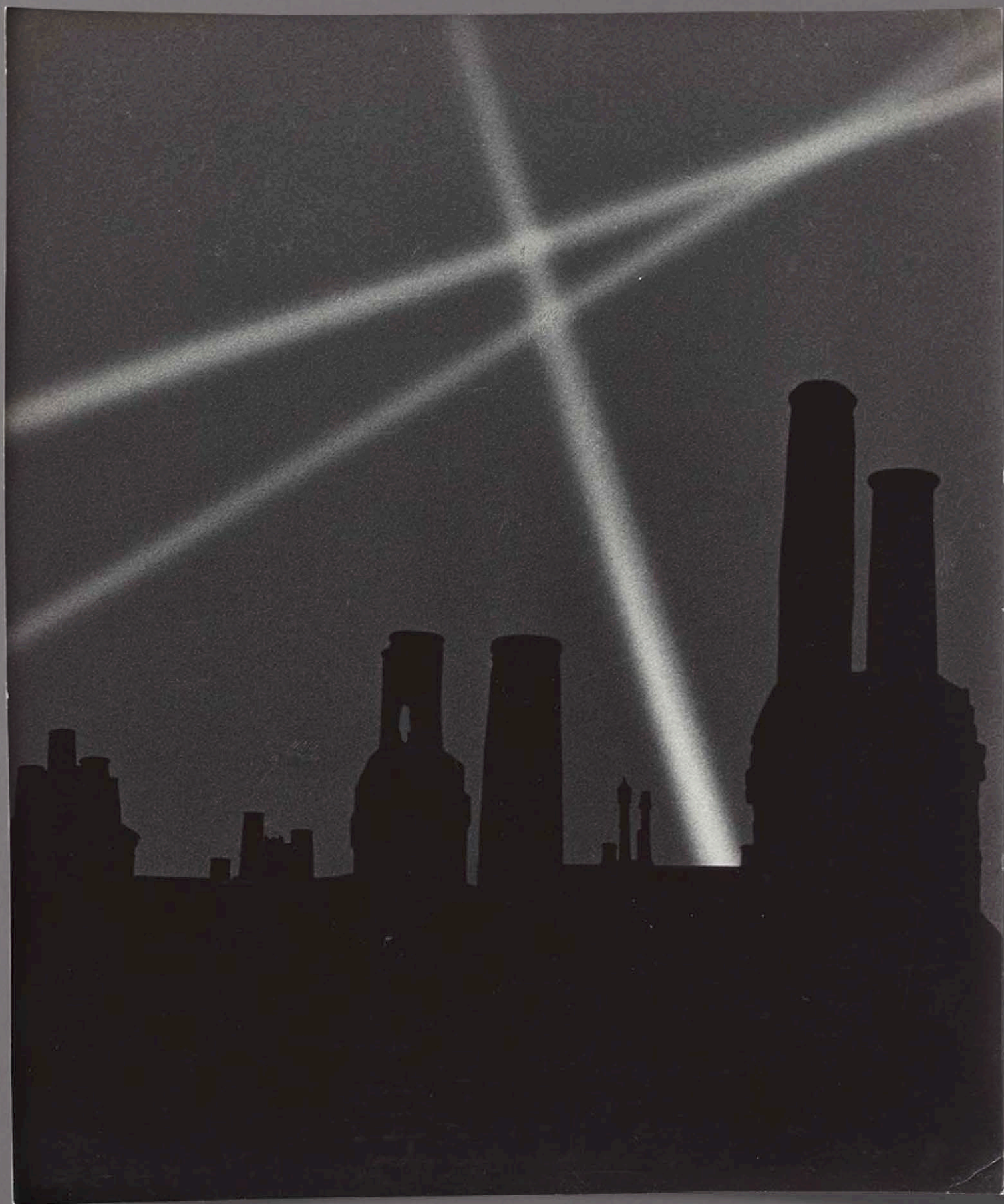
Moore elaborated on some of these scenes in other drawings, showing the destruction of the urban fabric (x,x). In this pictures he seems to picking his way through a new visual vocabulary of shocking events and unnatural sights, both witnessed in reality and seen through the filter of news and photographs. It was not until he turned his focus away from the bombings and towards the disconcerting new normalcies they introduced to civilian experience, that he found a channel for expressing his vision of war. MD

### Notes

1. *Britain against Germany 1939-1945: A Record in Pictures*, Published December, 1945, by British Information Services (An Agency of the British Government), New York, p. 21.
2. Marc Wiggam, *The Blackout in Britain and Germany, 1939-1945*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018



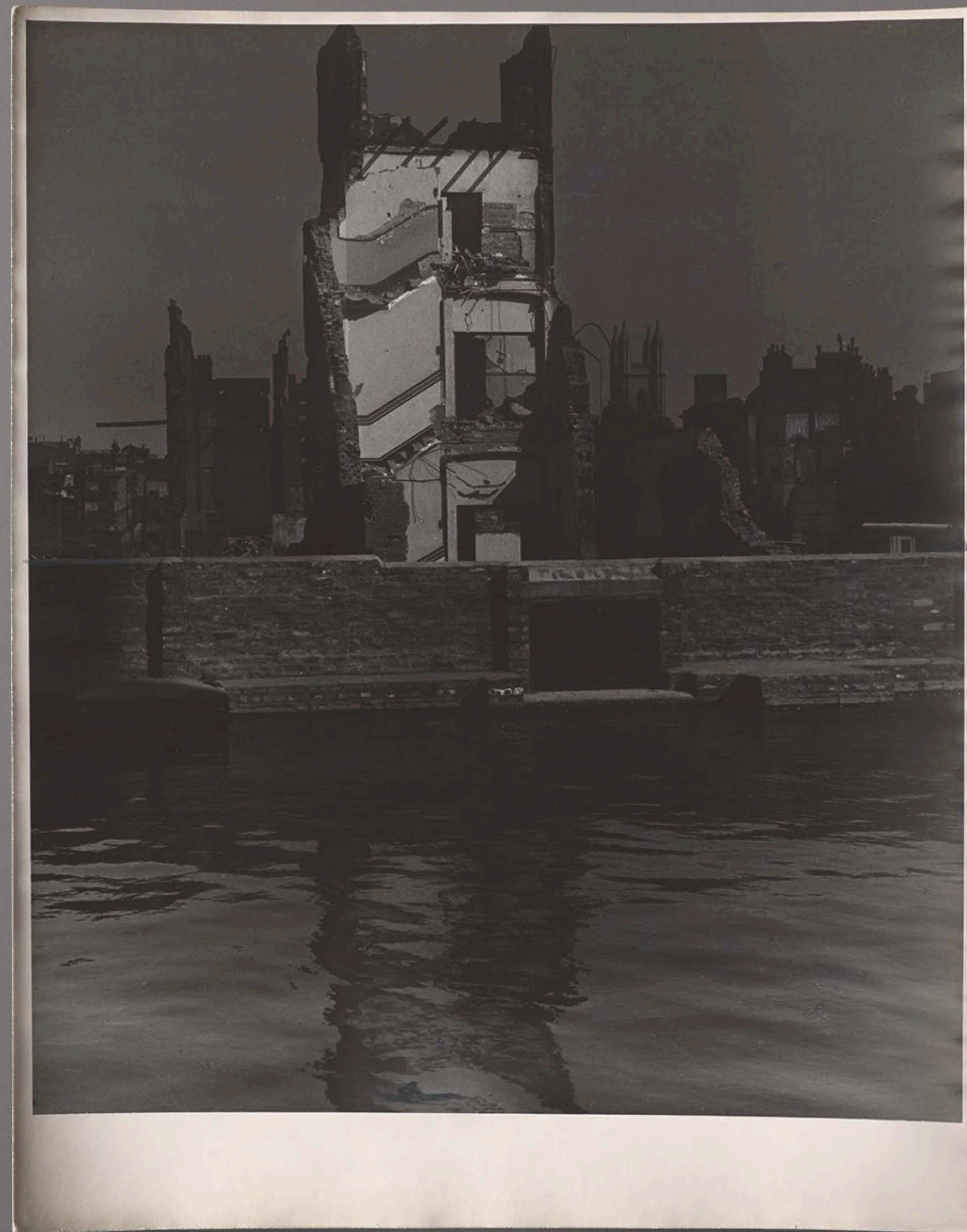




20.09

20.09 Bill Brandt, Search Lights over London.  
Gelatin silver print. Edwynn Houk.  
ABB-1011-0559

20.10 Bill Brandt, The Bombed City, 1942.  
Gelatin silver print. 23.1 x 19.7 cm (23.1 x  
19.7 cm). Edwynn Houk

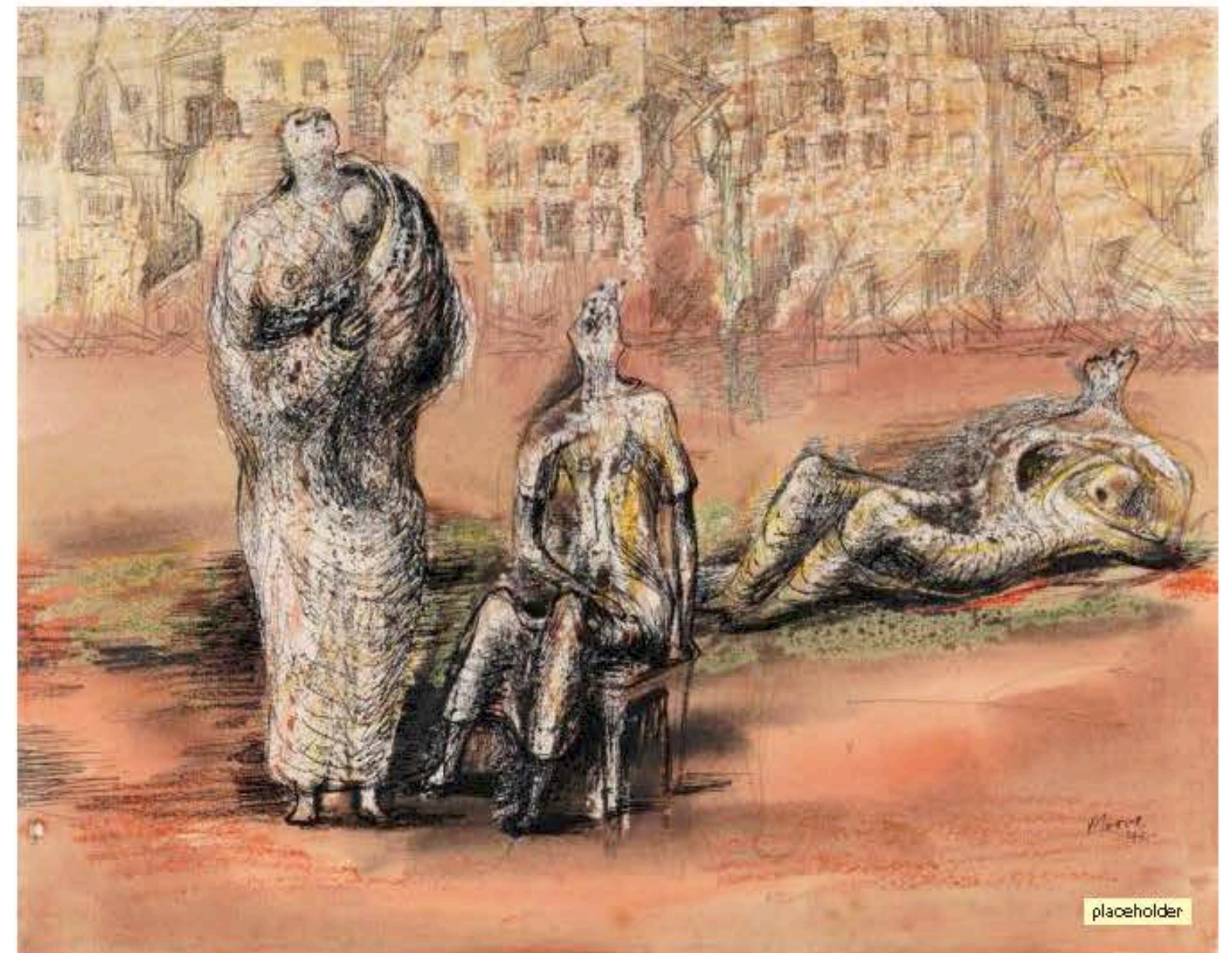


20.10



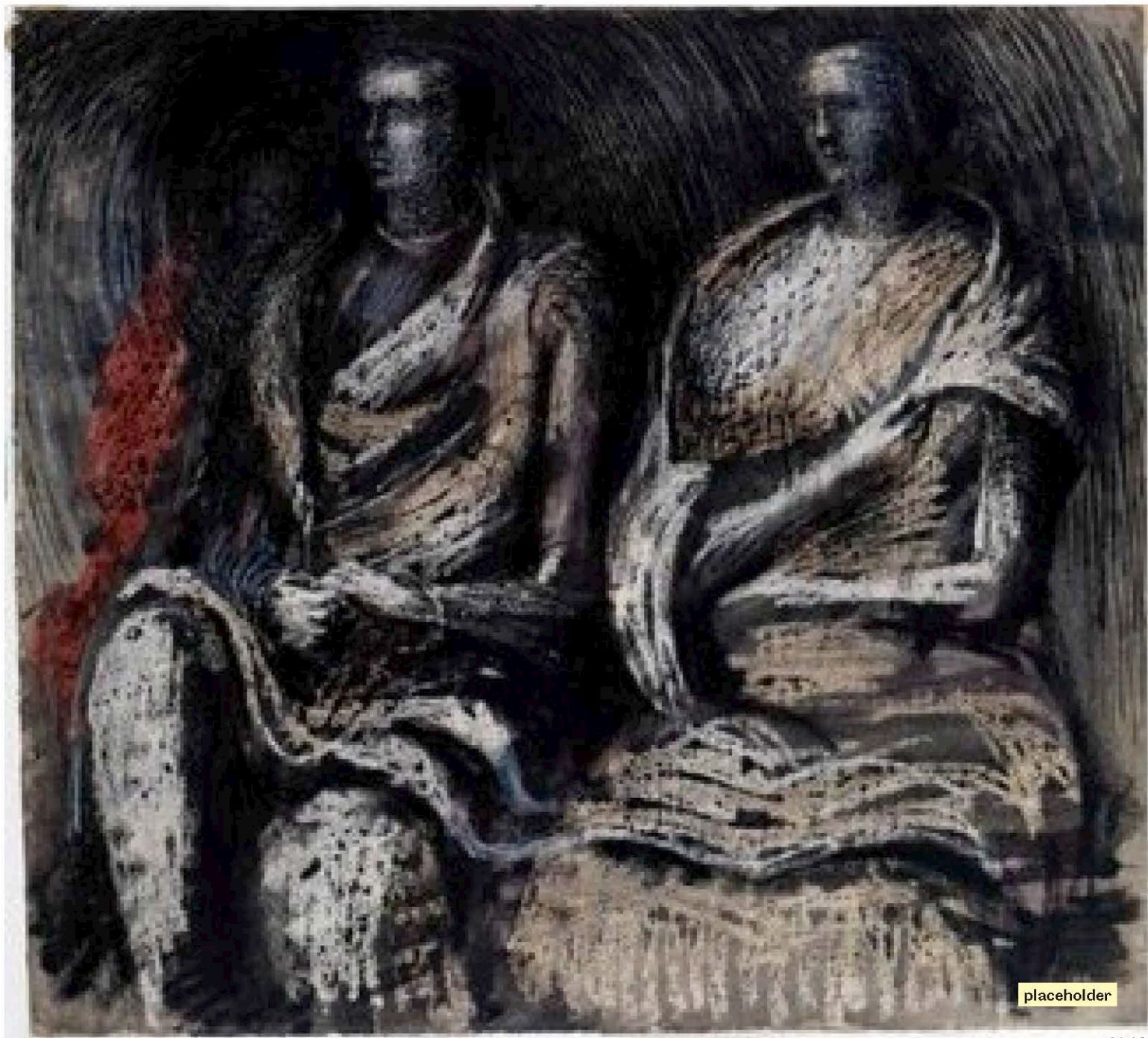


20.12 Henry Moore. *Eighteen Ideas for War Drawings*, 1940. Pencil, wax crayon, coloured crayon, watercolour wash, pen and ink, 23 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 24 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (62.5 x 61.2 cm). Henry Moore Foundation, HMF1553



20.13 Henry Moore, *Morning After the Blitz*, 1940. Crayon and gouache on paper, 24 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 22 in. (63.2 x 55.9 cm). Wadsworth Atheneum, 1947.364





30.06

30.06. Henry Moore. Air Raid Shelter: Two Seated Women. pencil, wax crayon, coloured crayon, watercolour, pen and ink. 1941. 16.3 x 19.8 in. (41.5 x 50.5 cm). Leeds Museums and Galleries (City Art Gallery, Leeds)

30.05. Bill Brandt. Spitalfield Crypt. Negative. 2x2. IWM

30.04. Bill Brandt. Spitalfield Crypt. Photograph. 1940. 9 x 7¼ in (22.9 x 19.7 cm). Edwynn Houk



30.05



30.04 →