

The Museum of Modern Art

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ATGET AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

With a bulky view camera, large glass plates, and a single lens, Eugène Atget (1857-1927) recorded Paris and its environs at the turn of the century until his death.

One hundred and twenty photographs selected from the unique collection of several thousand prints and over one thousand plates acquired by The Museum of Modern Art last year from Berenice Abbott and Julian Levy with the aid of a gift from Shirley C. Burden, will be on view at the Museum from December 1 through March 22, 1970.

Trees and flowers, shop windows, architectural details such as doorknobs, a street merchant selling lampshades, Versailles and St. Cloud, sculpture, a prostitute in the shelter of a doorway, and the intimate streets of Paris are among the rich variety of subjects patiently explored by Atget. "His pictures are as plain and transparent and precious as water. Individually they are like short beautiful sentences made of small and common words. Collectively they are a testament to the simplicity of genius," according to John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, who selected and installed the exhibition ATGET.

Valuable reference sources for such artists as Braque and Utrillo, admired by the Surrealists, and records for historians of French culture, Atget's pictures became a model for documentary photographers. He explored the creative idea developed by his predecessors, later called 'documentary.' As Mr. Szarkowski points out:

A documentary art work must appear to be unmanipulated, literal, clear, complete, and easy; it must not allow its art to show; it must not be obviously elegant or ornamental; it must at least pretend to objectivity. To those who have explored and developed this aesthetic during the past forty years the work of Eugène Atget has served as both touchstone and benchmark--a standard against which to measure both the quality and the position of their own work.

The largest and most significant body of work created by Atget, the Museum's acquisition is being organized and catalogued by Yolanda Hershey, Archivist in Charge of the Atget Collection. As the prints are being catalogued according to specific subject classification, this unique archive will be of immense documentary value to scholars of French culture as well

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as of photography. One hundred duplicate original prints from the collection will be on sale at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery after the opening of the Museum exhibition.

Little is known about the life of Atget. Born in Libourne, near Bordeaux, in 1857, he first worked as a sailor. From a career in acting and then some painting, he turned to photography at the age of forty-one. A familiar figure in the streets of Paris, he worked diligently, often photographing early in the morning. Series of prints, organized by Atget in his small darkroom apartment in Montparnasse, were sold for modest fees as "documents for artists." Atget's notebook indicates that his customers were varied -- architects, designers, sculptors, decorators, and amateurs of old Paris. "Nevertheless it seems that much of Atget's work was done for no market," Mr. Szarkowski observes, "but simply to satisfy his own appetite as an artist. It would seem that his ambition was to record his place and time, completely."

He created no movement, and worked quietly and modestly with the techniques of his predecessors. Preservation of his work is due largely to Berenice Abbott, an apprentice in Man Ray's studio who later became a prominent photographer in her own right. A friend of Atget's in his later years, she collected what photographs she could afford and after his death purchased all the prints and negatives remaining in his studio. Atget's work has been exhibited in Europe and in New York, widely published, and is currently represented in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale, The George Eastman House, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art.

Atget's pictures have been a major influence on the continuing exploration of the potentials of documentary photography as seen in the work of Berenice Abbott, André Kertész, Brassai, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and many others. As Mr. Szarkowski suggests, however, "Perhaps their greatest value is as a record of the interior life of Eugène Atget. That life was rich because Atget identified himself with his world, and made its values his own."

Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Joan Wiggins, Associate, Press Services, Department of Public Information, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. (212) 956 - 7501, 7297.