

LESSON TWO: Rise of the Modern City



IMAGE THREE: Hector Guimard. French, 1867–1942. *Entrance Gate to Paris Subway (Métropolitain) Station*. c. 1900. Painted cast iron, glazed lava, and glass, 13' 11" x 17' 10" x 32" (424 x 544 x 81 cm). Gift of Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens



IMAGE FOUR: Eugène Atget. French, 1857–1927. *Coiffeur, boulevard de Strasbourg*. 1912. Albumen silver print, 8¹³/₁₆ x 6⁷/₈" (22.4 x 17.5 cm). Abbott-Levy Collection. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden



IMAGE FIVE: H. Blancard. Untitled (construction of the Eiffel Tower). February 10, 1888. Platinum print, 6¹/₈ x 8¹¹/₁₆" (15.6 x 22.1 cm). Purchase



IMAGE SIX: H. Blancard. Untitled (construction of the Eiffel Tower). April 1888. Platinum print, 6¹/₈ x 8¹¹/₁₆" (15.6 x 22.1 cm). Purchase



IMAGE SEVEN: H. Blancard. Untitled (construction of the Eiffel Tower). June 1888. Platinum print, 8¹⁵/₁₆ x 6¹/₈" (22.4 x 16 cm). Purchase



IMAGE EIGHT: H. Blancard. Untitled (construction of the Eiffel Tower). August 1888. Platinum print, 8¹⁵/₁₆ x 6¹/₈" (22.4 x 15.6 cm). Purchase

INTRODUCTION

The turn of the century in Paris, known as the Belle Époque, was a time of modern invention, intense art production, and relative peace for France and its neighbors. The new subway system and the Eiffel Tower are among many exciting projects undertaken in Paris at this time.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to two new mediums: industrial design and photography.
- Students will consider the ways in which art, architecture, and design affect their everyday life.
- Students will consider the impact that the creation of public monuments has on a city and its citizens.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Begin the conversation by asking your students to think about any recent changes that have been made in the landscape of their city or town. These could range from additions like a light rail system or a new museum to a new or enlarged shopping mall. What sort of impact do these projects have on the look of the city? How do these projects affect the way people think about the place in which they live?
- Show students the four photographs of the Eiffel Tower being constructed (Images 5–8). Ask your students to react to the construction based on the photographs, and to imagine what it might have been like to be a citizen of Paris while the Tower was being constructed. Do they like the Tower? Do they think everyone in Paris liked it when it was first built?
- Give your students some background information on the Eiffel Tower while continuing to discuss various reactions the public might have had to the changing nature of their city. The Eiffel Tower was named for Gustave Eiffel, who founded and developed a company specializing in metal structural work. The primary focuses of the company were railway bridges and stations, but Gustave Eiffel is also known for designing the Statue of Liberty's structural support.

The Eiffel Tower was conceived of during preparation for the 1889 World's Fair in Paris. The Tower was begun in July 1887, and it took five months to build the foundation and twenty-one months to assemble the metal pieces (of which there are 18,000).

There was a strong reaction to the Tower from the general public, as well as from artists who thought it was unsightly and a “stain” on the Paris cityscape. One critic called it “a truly tragic street lamp.” Gustave Eiffel responded to the criticism in a newspaper interview, saying, “For my part I believe that the Tower will possess its own beauty. Are we to believe that because one is an engineer, one is not preoccupied by beauty in one's constructions or that one does not seek to create elegance as well as solidity and durability? [. . .] Moreover, there is an attraction in the colossal, and a singular delight to which ordinary theories of art are scarcely applicable” (www.tour-eiffel.fr).

Initially, the plan was to demolish the tower after the 1889 World's Fair, but it gradually became a defining icon of the Paris cityscape. Many artists embraced the Eiffel Tower as a symbol of modernity and the *avant-garde*.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students *Entrance Gate to Paris Subway (Métropolitain) Station* and ask them to spend a moment looking closely at the image. Ask them to come up with one word that describes the object. Have each student share his or her word.
- Inform your students that the object is an entryway to the Paris Métro—or subway system—made in 1900, the year that the subway was completed. The Parisian architect and designer Hector Guimard was commissioned to make *Entrance Gate to Paris Subway* not only in order to mark entry to the new subway but to help make this new mode of transportation appealing to Parisians.
- Ask your students to consider how Guimard designed the entryway so that it would stand out. How is *Entrance Gate to Paris Subway* different from subway entrances, bus stops, or street signs that you see today? What devices did the designers use to capture your attention? How does Guimard’s design capture your attention?

Entrance Gate to Paris Subway is designed in the style of Art Nouveau, created as an international style of decoration and architecture in the 1880s and 1890s. Nature was an important source for Art Nouveau artists and designers, and the entryway’s curvilinear lines and patterns were inspired by vines.

- Now that students have discussed and are familiar with *Entrance Gate to Paris Subway*, ask them to come up with another word to describe the entryway and write the word on a piece of paper. Then divide the students into groups of four or five, and direct them to create a sentence describing what it would be like to see the entryway on the street, using all the words that they have written down. Students may add as many other words as they like to form their sentence. Ask the students to read the sentences out loud.
- Continue the exploration of the streets of Paris by showing your students *Coiffeur, boulevard de Strasbourg*, by Eugène Atget. Give your students a moment to look closely at the image, and then ask them what they think is going on in the work.
- Ask them what they think attracted Atget to photographing this storefront window.
- Ask them where they think he was standing when he took the picture. Ask them what they think it would have been like to encounter this shop window when walking down the street.
- Ask them to compare the framing—how the image fits into the picture—with the framing of *At the Milliner’s*, by Degas. In what ways are they similar? How are they different?

Eugène Atget spent thirty years documenting Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century, creating thousands of images. After his death a number of artists and journalists commented on the artistic and decidedly modern way that Atget had captured the city of Paris. An article that ran in New York newspapers referred to Atget as “the first photographer to formulate the theory that the camera was an artistic instrument rather than a mere machine.”²

- Not much is known about Atget. Some people think that he was a documentary photographer who took pictures that were only later considered modern and interesting. Others think that he was an artist who had discovered how to use a camera in an inventive and imaginative way.

2. John Szarkowski, *The World of Atget* (vol. IV: Modern Times) (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 10.

- **Divide the class into two teams. Ask one team to defend the position that Atget was a documentary photographer who was not interested in creating a photograph that would be considered a “work of art.” Ask the other team to defend the position that Atget was an artist who was using photography to capture many of the same ideas about modernism that the class explored in the previous lesson. Have each team present their argument.**

ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS

Research the development of other transit systems, such as the London underground and New York subway. How did these cities entice riders to use their systems?

Document an existing building or renovation site, or research the creation of a civic symbol or landmark. What is the history of the building/site/landmark? Why was it created? What is its function? What does it commemorate? What was the public’s reaction to it when it was first completed?

Think about how a piece of sculpture or architecture can change the look of a neighborhood or even a city. If you wanted to design something to change the way your city looks, what would it be? Think about what you would make and why. Where would it be located in the city? Write a statement like Gustave Eiffel’s (p. 9), about your vision for your creation.

The Paris Métro improved life in the city by making transportation cleaner and faster. Think about ways in which you might improve your city or neighborhood. If you did create something new, how would you entice people to use it? Design an advertising campaign for your new idea for improving life in your city or neighborhood.

Research other projects that Gustave Eiffel was involved in, such as his design for the interior structure of the Statue of Liberty.