

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

ATGET

Wall Label

Eugène Atget became a photographer in 1898, when he was forty-one years old. Before that he had been for a dozen years an actor -- a player of secondary roles with provincial troupes. Earlier still, since being orphaned as a boy in his native town of Libourne (near Bordeaux), he had been a sailor.

It can be conjectured but not proved that Atget's first two occupations provided in sum and education that nourished the work he was to do as a photographer. The sea might have taught him of the world and of commerce; the stage might have taught him large thoughts, and a taste for eloquence.

Why he chose to become a photographer is and will probably remain a mystery, except as an answer might be deduced from his work. His pictures make it evident that Atget was a man with a profound and catholic interest in his world, and a love of using his eyes. Seventy years ago, as now photography would have been the most natural and accessible technique available to one who wished to describe his environment visually, with acuity and in depth.

If his motivation is problematic, his success was astonishing. In the thirty years in which he worked as a photographer, Atget produced a body of work that is unique on two levels. He was the maker of a great visual catalog of the fruits of French culture, as it lived or survived in the first quarter of this century. He was in addition a photographer of such authority and originality that his work remains a benchmark against which much contemporary photography can be measured.

His originality was not easily seen, for it did not depend on technical invention. On the contrary, Atget as a middle-aged novice in photography adopted a technical vocabulary already obsolescent: a large tripod camera with a slow lens; glass plates; a cumbersome and refractory printmaking process. He did not progress beyond this old-fashioned formula, and by the time he died in 1927 Atget was, from a technical standpoint, very nearly

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an anachronism.

Nor was his originality evident in pronouncements and explications, for he neither wrote nor lectured about his work; the sign that identified his modest workshop claimed only that he was a maker of documents for artists.

He was nevertheless a complex artist and a man of high ambition. He was a primitive in the sense that he had no truly useful precedents. Other photographers had been concerned with describing given facts (documentation) or with exploiting their individual sensibilities (self-expression). Atget intuitively transcended both approaches when he set himself the task of understanding and interpreting in visual terms a complex, ancient, and living tradition.

The pictures he made in the service of this concept are seductively and deceptively simple, wholly poised, reticent, understated, dense with experience, and true.

Shortly before his death Atget received public recognition of a sort when in 1926 a few of his pictures were reproduced (without their maker's name) in La Révolution surréaliste. It is understandable that the surrealists should have been fascinated by certain aspects of Atget's work, for many of his pictures realized ideas that for the most part remained theoretical tenets for the surrealists themselves. In traditional terms, the work seemed unselective, accidental, mechanical, and often obscure in purpose; above all, it lacked conventional regard for the hierarchy of iconographic and artistic values. Atget's own reaction to the surrealists' attention is unrecorded. It seems obvious, however, that if aspects of his work were of interest to them, surrealism was of no interest to Atget, for he had not suffered the weight of a dying academic tradition.

In the end, Atget remains an enigma. One selection of his prints could prove him to be an artist in the conventional Western sense, whose object was to reconstruct life in his own image. Other selections would prove him to be an historian, or a critic, or a compulsive collector of records, or a commercial tradesman who responded as best he could to the needs of his customers. But the work as a whole rejects these standard categorical distinctions.

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What Eugene Atget was, without doubt, was a photographer: part hunter, part historian, part artisan, magpie, teacher, taxonomist, and poet. The body of work he produced in his thirty working years provides perhaps the best definition we have of what a photographer might be.

John Szarkowski

The present exhibition has been selected from the very much larger collection acquired by the Museum last year from Berenice Abbott and Julien Levy. Miss Abbott, as a young photographer in Paris, had known Atget and had collected his work before his death in 1927. After his death she purchased his entire collection, and preserved it fundamentally intact for forty years. The Museum acquired the collection with the assistance of a gift from Shirley C. Burden. Because of the size and complexity of the total collection, this exhibition should be considered as a **first report**, rather than a definitive interpretation. The exhibition was directed by John Szarkowski, assisted by Yolanda Hershey.

All of the pictures in the exhibition are original prints by Atget.