

The Museum of Modern Art

No.4
For immediate release

THE WORK OF ATGET SERIES CONCLUDES WITH VIEWS OF DAILY LIFE IN PARIS

MODERN TIMES, the final installment in The Museum of Modern Art's four-part exhibition series THE WORK OF ATGET, will go on view beginning March 14, 1985. The exhibition will be shown concurrently with Part III, THE ANCIEN REGIME, and together they complete an exploration of unprecedented depth into the art of turn-of-the-century photographer Eugène Atget.

The 117 pictures in MODERN TIMES, taken in the years 1898-1927, present Atget's view of the broad center of Parisian society as it moved into the 20th century. With their straightforward depictions of ordinary commerce and everyday amusements, the works in MODERN TIMES form a striking contrast to the lyrical views of chateaux and gardens once owned by France's aristocracy to be seen in THE ANCIEN REGIME.

THE WORK OF ATGET has been organized by John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography. It is part of the Springs Industries Series on the Art of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art and is supported by a grant from Springs Industries, Inc.

Eugène Atget (1857-1927) was a commercial photographer whose primary interest lay in documenting the historic quality of French culture--largely urban and rural views evoking the atmosphere of France in the 18th century. However his sense of history and the character of French life was not restricted to a remote past. According to Mr. Szarkowski, Atget throughout his career was "alert to the ordinary contemporary things as well, the importance of which was

camouflaged by their commonness." Anything that could elucidate the authentic character and spirit of his native culture was a potential subject for Atget's art: window displays in the new department stores, domestic interiors, cafés and carnivals, even the prostitutes and ragpickers living at the margins of French society.

Many of Atget's earliest pictures of contemporary life are candid views of Parisians as they bought and sold provisions, browsed in bookstalls or read on park benches. By 1899, he had begun his celebrated series on the "Petits Métiers" ("small trades"), which consisted of photographs of traditional street merchants--knife grinders, peddlers, window-washers--who already verged on obsolescence in the era just beginning. The loose, almost casual composition of Atget's early photographs disappeared as he posed his "Petits Métiers" subjects against the cobblestones of the street, exhibiting their wares or the tools of their trades with timeless, deliberate gestures. "The crux of this series," Mr. Szarkowski observes, "was a matter of costumes, tools, and stance," a suite of emblematic images concentrating on "the role rather than the individual."

Over the next fifteen years, Atget made photographic studies of a wide variety of subjects. In one such project he depicted the array of motorized vehicles in the streets of Paris which would soon make horse-drawn conveyances obsolete; in another, Atget focused on the gypsies and ragpickers who inhabited the no-man's land of tracks, shacks, fortifications and embankments at the city's edge. He subsequently turned his attention to different modes of organizing and displaying wares, producing pictures of kiosks, grocers' carts and sidewalk displays of second-hand clothes. Among his most intriguing works from these years are photographs of shopwindow mannequins whose mute, unsettling presence found favor with Surrealist artists and writers of the day, such as Man Ray and André Breton.

Atget's output dwindled during the war years of 1914-18, but it experienced an extraordinary flowering in the 1920s, when he returned to the themes that had occupied him early in his career. Maria Morris Hambourg, who has closely analyzed Atget's method, has described his post-war photographs of boutiques, cafes and domestic interiors as "droll, whimsical, ultimately ironic, possessing the knowing deadpan humor of perspicacious social observation." Through these and other studies of the scenes and materials of vernacular culture, Atget succeeded in expressing a veiled but distinctly personal comment on the nature of contemporary life.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum is publishing The Work of Atget: Modern Times, co-authored by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg. The 192-page volume features 117 plates and 80 reference illustrations. In his introductory essay, Szarkowski reviews the varying perceptions of Atget's achievement, from those of French critics of the 1920s to those reflected in the work of such major later photographers as Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Bill Brandt and Lee Friedlander. The essay concludes with Szarkowski's own summation: "I know of no other photographer who responded with Atget's boldness and imaginative intelligence to the new perception of range and flexibility that first came to photography around the turn of the century." Atget was "a conscious artist who knew in his last years, as his command of his craft became bolder, and his vision of the world simpler, more trenchant and surprising, the high exhilaration of discovering a new kind of order within chaos."

Like the three previous volumes of The Work of Atget, Modern Times was supported by a grant from Springs Industries, Inc. It is being distributed by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston in hardcover only, and sells for \$45.00.

After closing at The Museum of Modern Art on May 14, MODERN TIMES will travel to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (November 16, 1985-January 5, 1986), the Detroit Institute of Arts (May 13-June 29, 1986) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. (November 11, 1986-January 4, 1987).

Three noted authorities on the art of Atget will present lectures at The Museum of Modern Art on Tuesdays at 8:30 p.m. beginning March 19. The first talk, entitled "Hidden Narratives: Reflections on Atget" will be given by Robert Harbison, author of Eccentric Spaces. On March 26, Theodore Reff, Professor of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, will present a talk on "Atget and Cézanne." The series will conclude on April 16 with "Inheriting Atget," presented by David Travis, Curator of Photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.