

The Museum of Modern Art

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John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, announced today the acquisition of the largest and most significant body of work created by Eugène Atget. The collection, which consists of several thousand original prints and many negatives, has been purchased from Berenice Abbott and Julien Levy with the assistance of a gift from Shirley C. Burden.

"The work of Atget has come to serve as both touchstone and benchmark for those who, after him, have discovered and explored the modern documentary esthetic. His creative achievement has in large degree defined the direction of photography's endeavors. The acquisition of this collection extends enormously the Museum's ability to study and hopefully illuminate photography's continuing self-discovery," Mr. Szarkowski said. "After the collection has been catalogued it will become a unique archive not only for scholars of photography but also of French culture, as well as a rich source of exhibition and publication material."

The Museum's photography collection, begun in 1933, now numbers some 10,000 prints by photographers from all parts of the world. The material is available for study in The Edward Steichen Study Center, part of The Lillie P. Bliss International Study Center of the Museum.

Born in Libourne near Bordeaux in 1857, Atget had been a sailor, actor, and painter before he turned to photography. When he died in 1927 he had spent thirty years photographing Paris and its environs. As Miss Abbott has written, "Atget lived in the world of his private passion - his love for Paris and its environs. This love was as deep as that which other individuals experience in romantic personal love. His dream was of the streets and sights and types and spectacles of the city he loved the more because his language for the expression of that love was the visual one of photography."

Above all, Atget was concerned with the substance of the old Paris which, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was slowly dissolving and changing. His subjects

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range from crude wagons to ornate facades, from store windows to neo-classic statuary, from great trees to morning-fresh flowers, and people - especially the working people of Paris.

With his very simple equipment; a large view camera and printing-out paper toned with gold chloride, he combined technical mastery with an ability to choose meaningful aspects of his world. As a result his subjects often appear to be archetypes, the perfect representatives for particular categories of subjects.

These photographs were organized by Atget into numerous series such as "vehicles" or "the small trades." Each series contained hundreds of prints which he sold as "documents for artists" from his two room darkroom apartment in Montparnasse. His notebook records meagre prices, ranging from one-and-a-quarter francs to five francs with only an occasional higher fee.

His customers were varied. Among the many architects who bought prints were the firm of Sue and Villers and the prolific builder and critic, L. C. Boileau. Publications which reproduced his work included the very popular Journal L'Illustration, the Hachette Guides Bleus, and the English publication Studio. Individuals who bought prints were often designated in Atget's notebook as painters, sculptors, decorators, etchers, or, sometimes, just "rich amateurs." Ten Rothschilds are listed.

In 1926 his pictures began to appear in La Révolution Surréaliste. It is allegedly at Atget's own request that he never received acknowledgement for the work which appeared in this early Surrealist periodical and which brought him to the attention of the avant garde painters and writers of the period. One of these was the painter and photographer Man Ray, who was among the first to recognize his importance. But popular success eluded Atget, whose work was radically photographic at a time when much of the medium's most admired accomplishment was still dominated by the esthetics of drawing and painting.

Berenice Abbott, later a prominent photographer and teacher in her own right, became acquainted with Atget's work in 1925, while she was a student in Paris. Her excitement at seeing the pictures caused her to seek out their maker. She found an old

man, slightly stooped, his work clothes worn and patched. He impressed her as being "tired, sad, remote, appealing." She bought several prints and had others set aside until she could afford them. The friendship between Atget and Abbott continued to develop through her subsequent visits until the time of his death. Afterwards she was successful in purchasing all the prints and negatives remaining in his studio. During nearly four decades, through books, articles, and exhibitions, she has sought to achieve for Atget the deserved recognition which he never received during his own lifetime. She made his prints available for important exhibitions in Paris at the First Independent Salon of Photography in 1928; in New York at the Weyhe Gallery, 1930; the Julien Levy Gallery, 1931 and 1936; The Museum of Modern Art, 1950; The School for Social Research, 1951; and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1951. Today Atget's work is represented in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale, The George Eastman House, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and The Museum of Modern Art. The powerful influence which Atget has exerted upon the course of photography is evidenced by the continuing exploration of the potentials of documentary photography as seen in the work of Berenice Abbott, Andre Kertész, Brassai, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, and many others.

Yolanda Hershey, formerly on the staff of the French Institute, has been appointed archivist in charge of the organization and cataloging of the collection.

Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.