

The Museum of Modern Art

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

NO. 79A
FOR RELEASE:
JUNE 19, 1972

BACKGROUND NOTES ON EUGENE ATGET (1857-1927)

With a bulky view camera, large glass plates and a single lens, Eugène Atget recorded Paris and its environs at the turn of the century until his death. 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 he patiently explored. The largest and most significant body of work created by Atget is now part of the Museum's Photography Collection.

Little is known about the life of Atget. Born in Libourne, near Bordeaux, in 1857, he first worked as a sailor. After being an actor and a painter, 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

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in his studio. Atget's work has been exhibited in Europe and in New York and widely published. It is represented in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale, The George Eastman House and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as The Museum of Modern Art.

Atget was a great documentary photographer but is misclassified as anything else.

Edward Weston, Daybooks, 1938.

Additional information and photographs available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York, NY 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7501, -7504

do no more than transmit an aspect of subject matter that is somehow intrinsic, inevitable, and 'objective'.

Other distinguished commentators (such as Man Ray) while recognizing the intensely personal and radical quality of Atget's vision, have suggested that his genius was an accident, unrecognized by Atget himself, which conjoined in a merely fortuitous way with his intention. According to this reading, Atget's purpose, which was modest and utilitarian, was transformed into an artistic problem without his volition, through the agency of a wholly intuitive sensibility.

Both of the above theories are perhaps more easily defended on the basis of a small and diverse selection of Atget's work than if tested against a large body of work relating to a single family of subject matter. On the basis of a small and heterogeneous collection, the quality of effortless poise that identifies Atget's work might easily be read as naivete. A study of his repeated investigation of the same or similar subjects, on the other hand, suggests a conscious and sophisticated concern with the ultimately formal problems of picture making. The present exhibition, selected from one of the largest and richest sections of Atget's oeuvre, provides the opportunity to study more closely the nature of his intention and his photographic concern.

The pictures shown here would seem to justify the following general observations:

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