

# The Museum of Modern Art

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

NO. 79B

## ATGET'S TREES

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

Edward Weston, Daybooks, 1938

Since any photograph (or indeed, any work of art) is among other things a document, a precise definition of the term documentary photograph has remained elusive. Nevertheless the basic thrust of Weston's comment on Atget seems reasonably clear: it suggests that the content of Atget's pictures would be equally accessible to us if we could see the 'subject' itself -- that his photographs 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 naïvete. 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:

(more)

Atget was acutely aware of the literally infinite number of images that are potential in a given 'subject', and he knew also that none of them was true, in the sense that it shared a privileged identity with the object photographed. The subtle variations in framing included among the six plates of the Beech Tree, St. Cloud (numbers 1 - 6) make it clear that Atget did not confuse the subject with the object. He understood that the true subject is defined by (and is identical with) the picture.

Atget's decisions were apparently based not only on intuition but on a conscious analysis of his own earlier work. Variant treatments of the same motif, presumably sometimes made on the same day (numbers 19 and 20; 30 and 31; 45 and 46), but often on widely separated occasions (numbers 24 and 25; 26, 27 and 28; 39 and 40) exist throughout Atget's work, but perhaps in no other area as often as they do in his photographs of trees.

It is interesting to note how seldom Atget included the entire tree in his picture. As in the case of his work with other types of subject matter, the structure of the picture is justified by its interior coherence and logic, rather than by reference to supposedly intrinsic requirements of the object photographed.

Although the breadth of Atget's interests reminds us of the Encyclopedists of the Enlightenment, the quality of his sensibility seems prophetically modern. His remarkably complex mind was non-Platonic in its perspectives: he worked not from but toward a formal ideal (idea). His conception of form was not nuclear but galactic: relative, plural, dynamic, provisional, and potential.

John Szarkowski

NOTE: Atget's negative numbering system was not a simple serial structure, and as yet no relationship between negative numbers and chronology has been established which would allow the assigning of approximate dates to the photographs shown here. It is assumed that he photographed trees throughout his thirty year career as a photographer, beginning in 1897.

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