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| **Atget, Jean Eugene Auguste (1857-1927)** |
| Eugene Atget |
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| Eugène Atget employed one of the defining instruments of modernity—the camera—to produce a comprehensive photographic record of what modern city planning was about to destroy: Old Paris. Between 1897 and 1927 he made approximately 10,000 glass negatives from which he printed an estimated 25,000 albumen prints that gave an extensive view of Paris and its environs. Next to palaces and parks he captured the capital’s back alleys and shanty towns. He also took a keen interest in the city’s people and portrayed its salesmen and traders as well as its rag-and-bone men and prostitutes. Atget’s achievement was, at a time when a large part of pre-Revolutionary Paris had already been lost to the plans of Georges-Eugène Haussmann, to systematically document what was left of the city. Rather than just describe what he saw, Atget used, especially in his later work, various techniques such as asymmetric framing and the juxtaposition of light and shadow to imbue his compositions with a range of moods: a sense of magic in the case of his Versailles prints, a sense of loss in the case of many of his Paris prints. While the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris and the Musée Carnavalet, the City of Paris’ history museum, had already bought some of Atget’s photographs in 1898, it was only in the 1920s that the Paris-based American photographer Man Ray and his assistant Berenice Abbott, a talented photographer in her own right, recognized Atget’s true artistic genius and labelled the autodidact the father of modern photography.  Born the son of a carriage builder in Libourne, a market town in South West France, in 1857, Atget was orphaned at the age of five and raised by his maternal grandparents in Bordeaux. After a brief stint in the merchant navy, he settled in Paris in 1878 to pursue a career in acting. Although he was admitted to the Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation, his ambitions were hindered by military service obligations. Still, he remained in Paris, and in 1882 joined a group of travelling players with whom he performed in the city’s outskirts as well as in the provinces. It was at this time that Atget met the actress Valentine Delafosse-Compagnon who would become his lifelong companion. In 1887, he gave up acting and moved to the provinces. Atget tried his hand at painting without much success, and instead turned to photography. His first photographs of Amiens and Beauvais date from 1888. Two years later in 1890, Atget returned to Paris and set up as a professional photographer specializing in ‘documents for artists,’ or in other words, photographs. His photographs often depict flora or rural scenes, and informed the work of many painters, sculptors, and set designers during the period. From 1897 in Paris there were fierce debates about the modernization of Paris and the construction of the Métro in particular; during this period, Atget’s work increasingly focussed on Old Paris. His dedication to documenting the city was steadfast, for photographing the city was by no means a light task. It meant lugging a heavy 18 x 24 cm view camera with glass-plate negatives and a wooden tripod around the capital; it is estimated that Atget’s equipment weighed no less than 15 kg.  Atget generally worked on several series, usually classified by theme rather than date or place, at any one time. Some of these, such as the systematic photographic record of old buildings in Paris, were commissioned by the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris. Others, such as the famous series ‘L’Art dans le Vieux Paris’ (‘The Art of Old Paris’), compiled between 1901 and 1907, were of his own making. In a latter series, Atjet depicted the staircases of important townhouses in Paris. A particularly fine example from this series is *Escalier, Hôtel du Marquis de Lagrange, 6 rue de Braque, Paris* from 1901. Sold by Atget to the École des Beaux-Arts, it is one of his rare signed photographs.  Later in his career, having almost given up photography during World War I, Atget focussed on representing shop window displays. His *Magasin, Avenue des Gobelins, Paris* from 1926 impresses an effect that seems to animate the mannequins in the photograph and integrate them into the street with its many reflections. It was Atget’s willingness to transgress audience expectations that appealed to the Surrealists and encouraged Man Ray to print four of Atget’s photographs in the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1926*.* In the same year Delafosse-Compagnon died. This marked the end of Atget’s creative life; the following year, after a bout of illness, Atget died.  Bernice Abbott, who first met Atget on the recommendation of Man Ray in 1925, was a large proponent his work who is often credited with bringing Atget widespread recognition as an artist. Abbott actively sought to interest other artists in the photographer’s work, and following his death in 1927 acquired 1,300 of his glass negatives and 5,000 of his prints, which now reside in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Atget’s work was not exhibited during his lifetime; however Abbott showed several of his photographs in exhibitions in 1928 and 1929 and also published The World of Atget in 1964. |
| Further reading:  Adam, H. C. (ed.) with an essay by A. Krase (2001), *Eugène Atget's Paris*, Cologne & London: Taschen.  Aubenas, S. and G. Le Gall (eds.) (2007), *Atget: Une Rétrospective*, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France (exh. cat.). See also http://expositions.bnf.fr/atget/infos/01.htm.  Barberie, P. with an essay on the photographic materials by B. A. Price and K. Sutherland (2005), *Looking at Atget*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press (exh. cat.).  Nesbit, M. (1993) *Atget’s Seven Albums,* New Haven: Yale University Press  Reynaud, F. and J.-B. Woloch (eds.) (2012), *Eugène Atget - Paris*, Paris: Musée Carnavalet (exh. cat.). See also http://www.carnavalet.paris.fr/fr/expositions/eugene-atget-paris.  Szarkowski, J. and M. Morris Hambourg (1981-1985), *The Work of Atget*, 4 vols., New York: Museum of Modern Art. |