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| **Atget, Jean Eugène Auguste (1857-1927)** |
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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 showing Paris and its environs in its many architectural and social appearances. 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. |
| 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 showing Paris and its environs in its many architectural and social appearances. 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 still left. But rather than just describe what he saw, he 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 mood: 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 history museum of the City of Paris, 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 his true artistic genius and coined 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. Admitted to the Conservatoire National de Musique et de Déclamation, his ambitions, however, were cut short 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 and in the provinces. It was at this time also that Atget met the actress Valentine Delafosse-Compagnon, who was to become his lifelong companion. In 1887, he gave up acting, supposedly due to a laryngeal complaint, and moved to the provinces. He tried, without success, his hand at painting, without success, and 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’, in other words photographs, often of flora or rural scenes, that would inform the work of painters, sculptors and set designers. From 1897, coinciding with fierce debates about the modernization of Paris and the construction of the Métro, in particular, Atget increasingly focussed on Old Paris. It was by no means a light task, but meant lugging a heavy 18 x 24 cm view camera with glass-plate negatives and a wooden tripod around the capital. Indeed, it is estimated that Atget’s equipment weighed no less than 15 kg.  Atget generally worked on several series, 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. One of the themes explored in the latter series was the staircases of important townhouses in Paris. A particularly fine example 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 a rare signed photograph.  Later in his career, having almost given up photography during World War I, Atget focussed on shop window displays. His *Magasin. Avenue des Gobelins, Paris* from 1926 impresses with its many reflections, an effect that seems to animate the mannequins and integrate them into the street. It was this kind of transgression 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 and set an end to Atget’s creative life; the following year, after a short illness, Atget died.  Atget’s recognition as an artist is largely due to Berenice Abbott who first met the photographer at the suggestion of Man Ray in 1925. She actively sought to interest other artists in Atget’s work and, following his death in 1927, acquired 1,300 of his glass negatives and 5,000 of his prints, now in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. With Atget’s work not having been exhibited during his lifetime, she showed several of his photographs in exhibitions in 1928 and 1929 and also published *The World of Atget* in 1964.  File:EugèneAtget\_EscalierHôtelduMarquisdeLagrange.jpg  Figure Eugène Atget, *Escalier. Hôtel du Marquis de Lagrange, 6 rue de Braque, Paris*, 1901. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 21.9 x 17.3 cm. Institut national d’histoire d’art, Paris.  Source: <http://www.lineature.com/img/p/108-237.jpg>  File:EugèneAtget\_*MagasinAvenuedesGobelins.jpg*  Figure Eugène Atget, *Magasin. Avenue des Gobelins, Paris*, 1926. Albumen silver print from glass negative, 21.9 x 17.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  Source: <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/39485?locale=en> |
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