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Exhibition Review

Paris Itineraries: Photography by Eugène Atget. Art Gallery of Ontario.

L. Jill Delaney

Between 1892 and 1927, Eugène Atget created an extraordinary and enduring photographic document of the historic streets and buildings of central Paris. The exhibition "Paris Itineraries: Photography by Eugène Atget," at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), on view between February 28 and May 27, 2001, was a remarkable reconstitution of this French photographer's fin-de-siècle project. Independent Canadian curator David Harris carefully selected more than 180 images from the more than 5000 that Atget created to focus on his systematic and exhaustive approach to representing not only the streets, courtyards, parks, and buildings of *le vieux Paris* (pre-Revolutionary Paris), but also the spaces they framed. Harris has reinvested Atget's work with a large measure of its original documentary purpose (in contrast to the successful campaign of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and Berenice Abbott to incorporate Atget into the world of fine art), while also emphasizing the spatiality of the work.¹ Through the exhibit and catalogue – the latter is in french only – both photographic and urban historians can appreciate the oeuvre as well as the unique manner in which Atget's images document the spatial practices manifested in *le vieux Paris*. As argued by the brochure accompanying the show, Atget "approached architectural and urban photography as a progressively unfolding description of spaces." The visual argument presented by Harris does slightly manipulate viewers into thinking they are viewing an objective recreation of these spaces, but it is a very appealing manipulation, and not without merit.

Jean-Eugène Atget was born in 1857 in Libourne, France. In 1892, he quit a not very successful career in the theatre and established himself as a professional photographer in Paris. In his first few years, Atget provided documentary photographs of landscapes, buildings, and character types to academic painters in Paris as an aid in the preparation of their works. By 1897, however, he had found a new niche, specializing in detailed views of old buildings and streets in the historic quarters of the city.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the educated bourgeois of the city were experiencing a fin-de-siècle nostalgia for Paris' past life and form. In 1898, the Commission municipale du vieux-Paris was created, and historians sympathetic to the conservation of eighteenth-century architecture were hired at the Musée Carnavalet (the museum of the city of Paris where this exhibition originated in 1999). Atget took advantage of this burgeoning market and created images 'on spec' selling thousands of copies to architects, craftsmen, archaeologists, historians, and connoisseurs. He also sold more than 15,000 prints, often assembled into albums, to various cultural institutions in Paris, including the Musée Carnavalet, the Bibliothèque nationale, the Musée du sculpture comparée, the École des beaux-arts, and the Musée des arts décoratifs. However, his sales fell dramatically as a result of World War One, as Paris emerged as a different and decidedly modern city more concerned with moving forward than looking back. Nonetheless, after selling more than 2,000 of his negatives to the Musée des beaux-arts in 1920, Atget continued to photograph the city, creating new series on the apartment buildings, courtyards, and parks of Paris. He also re-

turned to places he had photographed earlier, restocking his inventory and documenting the changes wrought on the old fabric of the city during his career. After his death in 1927, his estate donated 2,000 of his negatives to the Administration des monuments et des sites historiques and sold the remaining images to photographer Berenice Abbott in 1928.²

The exhibition at the AGO was divided into two sections, the first dealing with Atget's photography of the urban typologies of *hôtels particuliers* and courtyards, streets and intersections, and quays: the second part addressing Atget's frequent return to re-photograph sites that may have changed over the years, as well as his extensive record of the church of Saint Séverin and the surrounding area between 1898 and 1923. These sections loosely follow Atget's own cataloguing system, in which he ultimately created three series on the city: *L'art dans le vieux Paris*, *Paris pittoresque* (organized in 1898), and *Topographie du vieux Paris* (begun in 1906).

The photographs included in the exhibition reconstituted, in whole or in part, the manner in which Atget moved through a particular space with his camera and tripod. As the photographs were primarily intended to form a catalogue of images from which various professionals could draw both information and inspiration, our appreciation of the works, as guided by David Harris, may be somewhat different from that of Atget's clientele. The photographs have been arranged in groups (almost exactly) according to their original order of exposure and created the uncanny impression that you are moving through the space yourself, looking at the buildings and occasionally approaching an interesting detail to have a closer look. Atget always placed the camera at an angle to the buildings, allowing for a greater sense of the space itself and adding depth to the details of the subject.

The exhibition's presentation of these series was very seductive, offering a glimpse into the typical ordering of spaces in the old city in more than plan form. There is a filmic quality to some of the sequences; for example, in a group of photographs from his *Topographie du vieux Paris* series taken in 1910. In it the camera moves along rue Visconti, turns into the *porche d'entrée* of the Hôtel de Ranes, a hotel typical of the pre-Revolutionary period, moves through into the courtyard and then turns to look back at the *porche d'entrée* from the inside.³

In certain instances, Atget added to the spatiality of the sequence by capturing the passage of time as well. While this aim certainly would have been secondary to his main intent of documenting the space as effectively as possible for his clientele, it adds to our own appreciation of his methods and talents. In the sequence taken on the rue de Sévigné in 1911, the photographer began his documentation in clouds. By the time he reached the rue de Jarente the streets are wet, and as he completed the sequence the late afternoon sun has broken through, casting heavy shadows into the street and onto the buildings. Once again, the camera is placed at an angle to the buildings, sometimes more acute than others, so that the viewer can experience both the details of the facades and the space of the street.

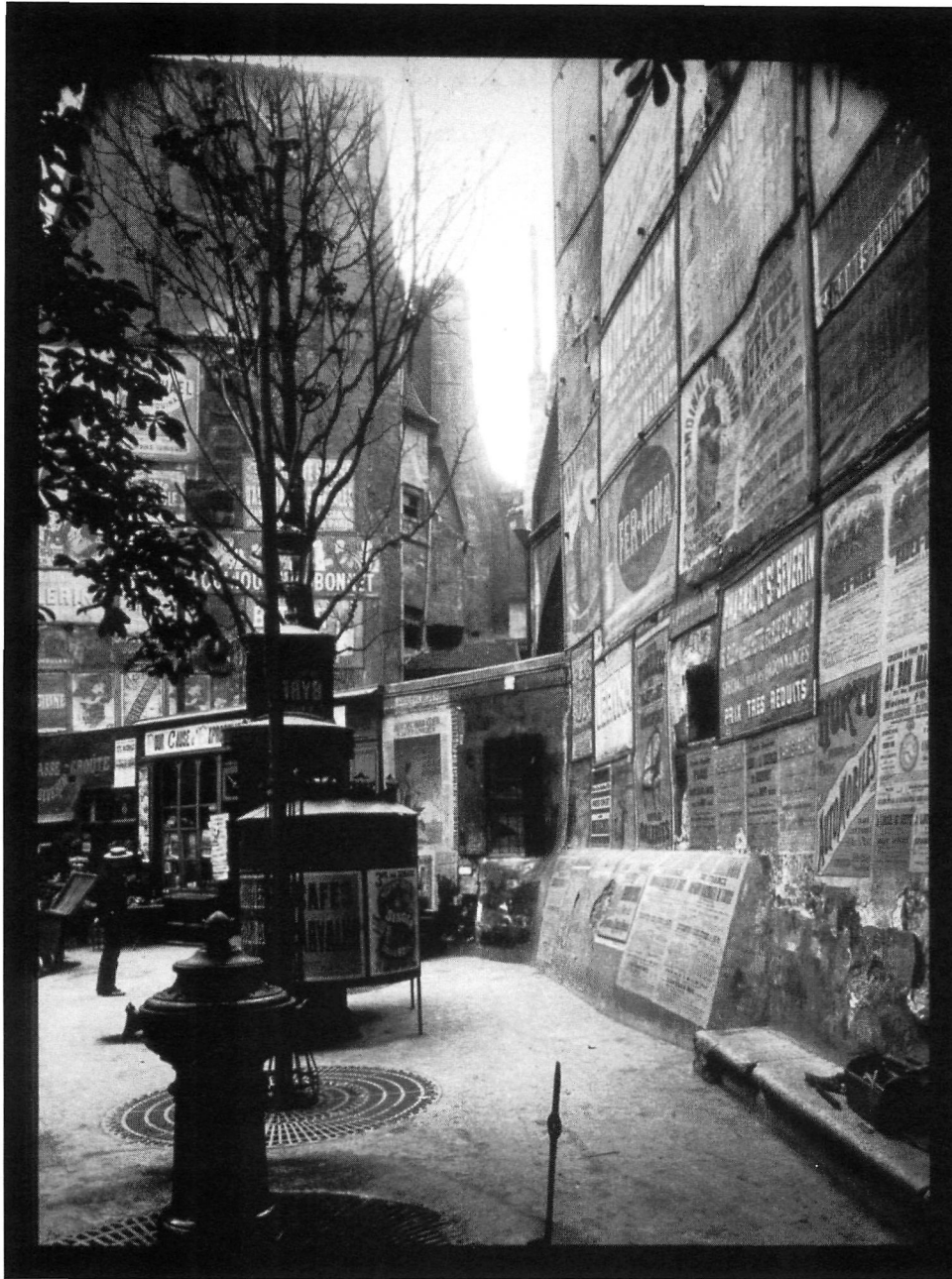


Figure 1: Rue Saint-Jacques, murs d'immeubles occultant l'abside de l'église Saint-Severin, circa 1899, albumen print. Source: Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

What would have added depth to the exhibition and catalogue was the inclusion of the larger context of both the dramatic changes wrought on Paris as Europe struggled with the birth of modernism, and the photographic tradition followed by Atget. Harris presents Atget's work as if it were the product of an isolated man, rather than of a specific culture, excepting his reference to the impact of Baron Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, during his tenure as Prefect of the Seine. But in his documentary projects, Atget was follow-

ing a long line of French photographers who used their cameras to create topographic documents of Paris and of the world beyond the city. In 1851 the Commission des Monuments historiques chose five photographers to document important monuments throughout France. Shortly thereafter Blanquart-Evrard published a series of photographs of Paris as one of his twenty-four photographic portfolios which also covered areas such as the Middle East. Atget inherited a strong tradition of documenting the architecture and space of Paris in particular from

Charles Marville who photographed much of Haussmann's grand reconstruction project during the 1860s. Atget broke from Marville's approach, however, in both his exhaustive documentation of the unattractive elements of the city's spaces, and in his emphasis on the spaces as opposed to the buildings themselves.

Atget's personal and professional obsession with documenting the urban spaces of Paris (still under threat from Haussmann's plans) reveals the turmoil of the city at the time. In the 1890s the intellectual bourgeoisie of Paris was mourning the loss of the 'traditional' city, which had been in large part swept away by Haussmann's interventions and realignments of the previous several decades. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the population of Paris almost tripled, with several hundred thousand people moving into the city and its burgeoning suburbs and slums to find work in its industrializing economy. The romantic and occasionally *pittoresque* quality of Atget's work, perhaps intentionally appealed to the segment of the population that took up the work of historians and preservationists. Atget's particular techniques of always shooting a facade at an angle, of taking advantage of atmospheric or climatic conditions, and of occasionally taking advantage of people in the space, definitely gave his photographs a certain sympathetic sentiment. There is no documentation here of the wide and monumental boulevards that Haussmann cut through the city, or of the neoclassical monuments or institutions he highlighted. The subject matter is the intimate, yet public, urban spaces in which the population had long lived, worked, and worshipped.

The catalogue *Itinéraires parisiens* was published to accompany the original exhibition at the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, and therefore does not exactly mirror the version presented by the AGO. Nonetheless, Harris presents in it three short but useful essays on the manner and rationale of Atget's ambitious project. Following these is a series of seven 'studies' selected from the wide collection of Atget's photographs held by the Musée. Each study acts as an illustration of the typical urban typologies chosen by the photographer: the apartment building, the public square, a grouping or intersection of streets, quays along the Seine, and an important public building in its environment. Fi-

nally, there is a complete catalogue of all the series of photographs discussed in the previous chapters of the catalogue, consisting of a small image, a complete citation, and often a thumbnail plan of the streets or building depicted in the photographs. The photographs that accompany the essays and the studies are beautifully reproduced, most often as a single image filling an entire page. As a whole, the catalogue, like the exhibition, presents a strong visual argument of the documentary and spatial qualities of Atget's work, including in the process many images not produced in other earlier publications.

The exhibition and catalogue, "Paris Itineraries: Photographs by Eugène Atget," have achieved an important goal of reestablishing the documentary purpose of the Parisian photographer's career, while reaffirming the aesthetic vision that has made his work so popular. David Harris' thorough research clearly revealed Atget's dogged pursuit of the total document. For the urban historian, the exhibition's emphasis on Atget's unique method offered a fascinating spatiality to his work that has not been hitherto explored. Our understanding of the urban spaces, and the spatial practices that created them, as well as the rationale for documenting them, could have been heightened by situating the work within a broader context of the urban and photographic history of Paris. Nevertheless, both the exhibition and catalogue have given us an important opportunity to comprehend a certain cultural view of the traditional spaces of Paris at the turn of the century, and to imagine we are exploring those spaces ourselves.

Notes

1. The catalogue for this exhibition has a good bibliography on Atget, including the publications of MOMA and Berenice Abbott. David Harris. *Eugène Atget. Itinéraires parisiens*. (Paris: Musée Carnavalet-Histoire de Paris, 1999).
2. Abbott, an American photographer living in Paris in the 1920s, is credited with rescuing Atget from historical oblivion not only by purchasing part of his *oeuvre*, but actively promoting his work in the U.S. and Europe after his death, through exhibitions and publications.
3. Hôtel de Ranes, 21 rue Visconti, 6th, 1910. *Topographie du vieux Paris 1025-1030*, and *L'art dans le vieux Paris 5748*, Bibliothèque de la Ville de Paris.