

Your city, O Paris, is the world!  
Your people, humanity.

—H. Derville, *Paris Nouveau*, 1857

# Atget at a Glance



*Gobelins (Fête)*, 1899

actor. At that time, he took up the daily photography of Paris—specifically Old Paris—using an 18” x 24” view camera on a wooden tripod, and the photo print and negative materials of the time period. Atget chose to continue with these printed-out processes (albumen and gelatin) and glass negatives even when more modern materials were being introduced. The equipment he preferred didn’t allow him to capture fast action but it did create the look he sought.

In Atget’s early years as a commercial photographer, he sold his stock images—trees, animals—for the art world of Paris to use in their compositions. He soon moved to documenting quotidian Parisian street life—storefronts, beggars, parks, alleys, hotel fronts, and cafes. These images soon

**E**ugène Atget (1857-1927) is considered one of the modern masters of photography with an oeuvre of around 10,000 photographs, yet he remains an enigmatic figure in the modern history of art criticism. During his lifetime, Atget was a commercial photographer who has since been treated as an artist. An upcoming exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Looking at Atget*, will explore this paradox as it displays more than 100 newly acquired Atget images. The Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts is treating six of these images in preparation for the exhibition, which will be on view at the museum from September 3 to November 27, 2005.

Atget began making photographs in the early 1890s after spending years trying to make a successful living as an

led to Atget documenting the artistic elements of Paris—the door-knockers, the wrought-iron gates, the grillways, the fountains, and period stairways. For the next 30 years, Atget would make a photographic archive of Paris—the sometimes gritty, sometimes prosperous—city of contrasts and contradictions.

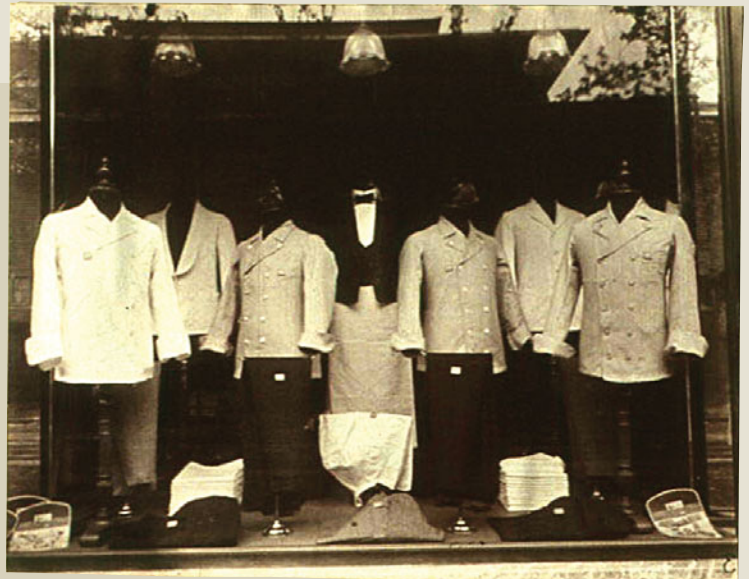
What makes Atget’s work so open to interpretation by curators and critics is Atget’s unemotional view of Paris. Are these images purely documentary? Or are they comments on the urbanization of Paris? Ansel Adams wrote of Atget in 1931: “The charm of Atget lies not in the mastery of the plates and papers of his time, nor in the quaintness of costume, architecture and humanity as revealed in his pictures, but in his equitable and intimate point of view....His work



Senior Conservator Barbara Lemmen testing for stability during treatment.

Barbara Lemmen, one of the Conservation Center's two photograph conservators, is treating six prints from the PMA's collection. Lemmen notes that the image on the top right is in very good condition.

Deterioration of the printed-out silver gelatin image, in the form of yellowing and fading, is only slightly visible at the bottom edge. However, the photograph is adhered with dry-mount tissue to a larger thin paperboard mount from which it has partially detached. The photograph is distorted where it is detached from the mount, causing unsightly raised areas or bubbles within the image area, making it unfit for exhibition in its present state. To conserve this image, Lemmen will unmount the photograph by mechanically separating the dry-mount tissue from the secondary support. She will remove the dry-mount tissue from the back of the print mechanically and reduce the residual dry-mounting adhesive on the reverse as much as possible. Along the top and bottom corners, under the dry tissue are adhesive and paper residues evidence of an earlier mount, possibly done by Atget. These will be removed with local applications of moisture. Lemmen will then humidify and flatten the print as much as possible without changing the gloss or the overall character of the print. Lemmen sums up her experience of working on the Atgets: It's always exciting and informative to work in conjunction with the curators and conservators at the collecting institutions. It increases knowledge on both sides.



Untitled, 1925




Rue Mazet, 1925

is a simple revelation of the simplest aspects of his environment. There is no superimposed symbolic motive, no tortured application of design, no intellectual ax to grind. The Atget prints are direct and emotionally clean records of a rare and subtle perception, and represent perhaps the earliest expression of true photographic art."<sup>1</sup>

Atget was unknown during his lifetime, but is now considered a giant among modern photographers (in the photography canon he stands alongside Alfred Steiglitz, Edward Weston, and Ansel Adams). We owe the rise of his American reputation to the photographer Berenice Abbott and the New York art dealer Julien Levy. Upon Atget's death in 1927, Abbott acquired his collection of photographs and dedicated much of her time as an artist to promoting Atget's work in the United States. She wrote, "He will be remembered as an urbanist historian, a genuine romanticist, a lover of Paris, a

Balzac of the camera, from whose work we can weave a large tapestry of French civilization."<sup>2</sup> The Philadelphia Museum of Art's group of Atgets comes largely from the Levy collection, who became Abbott's silent partner on the Atget collection, and who promoted Atget's photography through exhibitions in the 1930s.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art's exhibition on Atget will open next September. 

—Keltie Hawkins

Many thanks to Peter Barberie, Horace W. Goldsmith Curatorial Fellow, Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs, Philadelphia Museum of Art, for his contributions to this article.

<sup>1</sup> International Center of Photography, *Encyclopedia of Photography*, New York: A Pound Press Book, Crown Publishers, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.