THE WORLD OF ATGET

By A. HYATT MAYOR
Curator of Prints

An exhibition of photographs by Atget will be held in the print galleries in the south basement from February 29 to March 30. The photographs have been lent from the collection of Berenice Abbott. Most of them have never been shown before or reproduced anywhere in print.

Almost since the first announcement of photography in 1839 painters have changed the brush for the camera to make photographs as works of art that compete with paintings. But here and there remarkable photographs have been made by people who never painted. The strangest and most poetic of these “straight” photographers was perhaps Jean Eugène Auguste Atget, who fought his way against the main stream of his circumstances with the obstinacy of instinct. Soon after his birth near Bordeaux in 1856 his parents died. An uncle, the local stationmaster, brought him up until he shipped as a cabin boy on board various brigs and packets. At thirty he had left the sea in order to act minor parts in theaters in provincial towns or on the outskirts of Paris. Though he acted only for a few years he always saw his surroundings as a stage.

When he was about forty he gave up the unequal struggle with the theater. By that time he had acquired responsibilities, for he was living with an actress some ten years older than he, who stayed with him until her death a year before his. What was he to try next? He decided against painting but for some reason he pitched on photography. His venture into a field where he had no connections brought no results, until even his fund of stubbornness nearly came to an end. Then one day a friend from the theater bought a photograph for fifteen francs (three dollars) which was perhaps as high a price as he ever received.

From 1898, the earliest date on any of his work, until his death in 1927 he made over six thousand photographs of every conceivable subject within cheap traveling distance. Before sunup he would shoulder his bulky view camera and heavy tripod, lug them by bus or trolley across Paris in order to catch the early light on streets still empty or a park still silent. As the years went by, widely separated districts became familiar with this compact, durable man in the old round hat and shabby, loose overcoat, his hands roughened and browned with photographic acids.

He undertook to photograph whatever startled his imagination. Almost anything served him to make a haunting image—the wash basin of a chambermaid, the Seine beyond winter branches, a rococo park gate clutched in weeds, some battered cobblestones. France thronged too richly to be photographed in individual subjects but collected itself in whole series and sequences such as the statues at Versailles, street vendors, living rooms and dining
rooms, sculpture on Gothic churches, portraits of trees, fountains, ironwork, reflections in shop windows, buildings about to be demolished and much beside. Sometimes a single subject changed moods like a person and had to be rephotographed as a series in different lights and different weathers. Atget’s photographs make the best window that we have for looking at life in Paris from 1900 to 1925. Nothing short of the visible world itself was filed in orderly categories for sale in his upstairs studio above his modest sign DOCUMENTS POUR ARTISTES.

The artists who bought his photographs included Braque and Utrillo, for Atget had discovered poetry in the back alley, at the turn of the trolley tracks, where no one had noticed it before. He performed the poet’s miracle of “stripping the veil of familiarity from the commonplace,” and grafted a lens on our eyes that readjusts our vision thereafter. He must have stalked his subjects at all hours and from all angles as hungrily as a hunter who can spare only a single bullet to shoot his supper. Every object in his pictures falls into its place as precisely as though he had never spoiled a negative in all his life.

Although Atget affected painting, he did not, like most artistic photographers, imitate painting but got his vision out of poetry. His deserted streets and lonely parks are stages set for the entrance of some unexpected actor. The moods that he evokes are those of the French poets. His statues brood in Verlaine’s winter:

“Dans le vieux parc solitaire et glacé
Deux spectres ont évoqué le passé.”

His feeling for Paris is entirely Baudelaire’s:

“Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant.”

Often when he set up his tripod on some deserted curbstone at daybreak, he must have shivered, like Baudelaire, at a far bugle echoing in the courtyard of a barracks:

“La Diane chantait dans les cours des casernes,
Et le vent du matin soufflait sur les lanternes . . .
Comme un visage en pleurs que les brises essuyent,
L’air est plein du frisson des choses qui s’enfuient.”

To be able to fix an image of “the shudder of things in flight” was worth, perhaps, even the sharpness of such a solitude.
Parc de Sceaux. Photograph by Atget. Lent by Berenice Abbott

Sideshow, Avenue de Breteuil. Photograph by Atget. Lent by Berenice Abbott