

Eugène Atget



Modern Photographer

Eugene Atget. 1857-1927

Atget, born in 1857, was the exact contemporary of my grandfather Ellery. It is said that his wealthy uncle paid for a good Catholic education. Nevertheless, his first job was as a seaman; secondly he worked as an actor and stuck at this for some years. When he gave it up there was the problem of earning a living. He tried photography and began to sell to institutions which wanted records of old Paris. His manner of work was to rise early and take pictures from first light onwards. His equipment was of his time, heavy to carry around and he never adopted a smaller format than 16cms by 24cms. There are said to be, or to have been, 10,000 negatives. Curiously, there is considerable overlap of pictures in the two small books on him which I have.

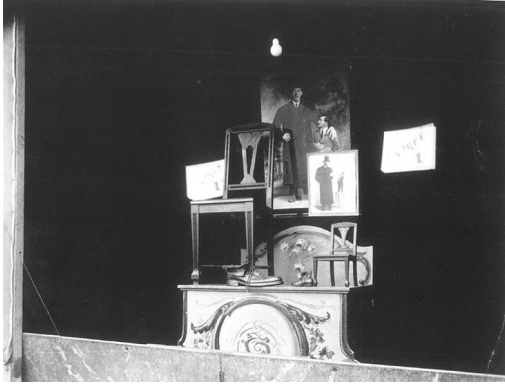
His work has obvious value as social history and as records of streets and buildings which have long disappeared. For me, he has some additional interest. Several of his pictures in these two books are about, or contain, windows. They will be added to my work on the subject. There is in several of the pictures a strong air of surrealism; his pictures are interpretations; the work of an artist, seldom 'mere' records. In some of the pictures there are early, perhaps the first, manifestations of subject matter and composition which have become familiar in other people's work. There seem to be reflections of the work of some painters of the day. His work was not well known so it is unlikely that the influence was the other way round. Here are some notes on a few of the pictures which I have picked out as having relevance for me. One of them is reproduced in Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* although the derivation is not acknowledged. (Cover picture.)



Several of the portraits of shop windows are well known; they are also records; for example of the corsets worn by the women of a particular quarter of Paris This one is 1912.

There are others of milliners', cobblers', second hand clothiers' shop windows. Some, shuttered or blankly dark windows have that edgy, uneasy quality which is to found in many of the images.

I have chosen a few.



What was this strange collection of oddments? An auction house?

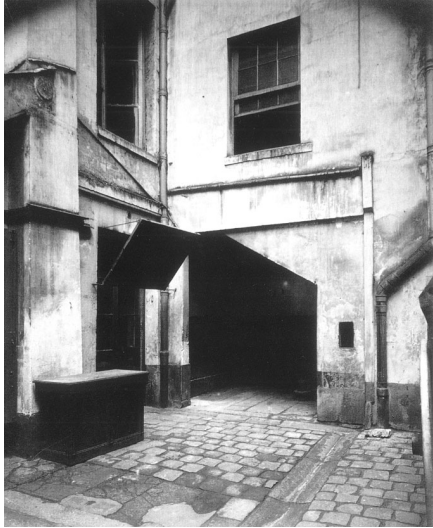
Shuttered windows seem to be a contradiction in terms, mysterious. These look terminally shut.

Others are to be found in courts or yards; closed, secret places. There used to be some in Cambridge; Wray's Court and Jordan's Yard for example; now gone.



At first sight the tricycle in the foreground may seem intrusive, but Atget knows about foreground, as we will see. The open drain snakes its serpentine way into the distance.

Two gaunt, apparently empty spaces. There are signs of life in the one on the right, but only the open window in the left hand picture suggests that someone might be at home.



Other yards are more friendly, even if no person is present. The climber over the two doors below suggests domesticity.



There are, I think, two cats in the right hand picture. Both look as if the owners have just popped out for a moment.



Here the interest is in the decay in the foreground and in the composition, the poles pointing into the picture.



The car is a Renault tourer and the year is 1922. The buildings are a great deal older and in much worse repair.



Both these pictures would be at home in a book of 'art' photographs, but Atget keeps them real; no studio tricks here. The left hand tree roots seem to predict many later compositions by other photographers, while the one on the right could have inspired Rackham's threatening fairy tale trees.





This extraordinary picture of the haystack was taken on the Somme



I think there is more to it than just the shape of the haystack. The fact that both artists thought the stacks worthy of study and the emphasis on time of day. Atget with his usual dawn patrol, Monet sitting there all day and painting the changing light. Maybe the stack itself was less important for Monet than for Atget.

The date is 1900 and the farm is near Abbeville. Monet's haystack pictures were made in Normandy. Atget's is 'before 1900' Monet's were in the 1880's to 1890's.



There are so many other subjects one could go on and on. Here is one last example; one with people. It was made in the Champs Elysees in 1898. A period sometimes thought of as a golden age of European civilisation. In Vienna, the Secession artists, Klimpt and Egon Schiele; Adolf Loos' architecture; Mahler was conducting and composing. In Paris, Picasso and Braque. To mention these is to demonstrate the extent to which Atget was concerned with old Paris and not with current developments.

More Manet than Monet, this picture shows a flair for composition all the more impressive for its being taken with the clumsy apparatus which Atget lugged around. It does not seem posed.

Is he a creature of the past? Is his reputation changing? Surely there is a new understanding; his working habits may have been dominated by routine, but the results are anything but that.

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