

# *On the Realistic Significance of Documentary Photography from EugÈNe Atget's Paris Series*

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**Abstract:** We often think of recording as a simple matter, but Eugène Atget's visual talent prevents him from being trapped in the quagmire of the subject and the object. This does not mean that his photos are completely objective. Eugène Atget's real excellence lies not only in his documentary, but also in his unparalleled intuition and fusion of documentary. No matter where the photography goes, we can always look back and see Eugène Atget's shadow.

## 1. Introduction

Photography was once popular as a substitute for portrait painting, but it paid a heavy price for it. Technological innovation and theoretical progress failed to make it quickly enter the threshold of art. For a long period of time after the invention, its main function has been to record, not to explain or express. However, today, it is ubiquitous and it can be said to be pervasively involved in our lives. That long-standing proposition has no longer been paid attention to, and it has even protested against the art that once wanted to be attached to. The development of photography to this day obviously cannot prevent it from expanding to a broader field. Just like countless photographic works nowadays, the time and energy left for shooting is only a small part, and more time is given to the early stage, including the conception and arrangement, and the complicated revision and perfection in the later period. It has shifted from mere recording to expression. There are still many photographers who continue to practice Bresson's capture of "decisive moments". They are more like observers and recorders, convey to us the stories that happen every moment in every corner of the world. However, no matter how it changes, the best works of early photographers are still popular today, such as Eugène Atget.

## 2. EugÈNe Atget 'S Growth History

As the originator of documentary photography, Eugène Atget took up to 8,000 photographs in his life. Although in the society at that time, fantasy photography such as "freehand" was popular, but Eugène Atget, who had his own style, always silently insisted on his creation of the documentary style. Eugène Atget's life is tragic. He was born in Libourne, France in 1857. Both his parents died at an early age and were raised by his uncle. He went to the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Paris in 1879, and later played a small role in an itinerant theatrical troupe, and had not had a big development in his acting career [1]. In 1897, he tried to paint but failed to become

famous. The following year, when he was 40 years old, he began to engage in photography creation. However, until Eugène Atget's later years, his works were still not paid attention to by the world. In 1927, Eugène Atget passed away and his works were published by a friend. They aroused social attention and were recognized and appreciated by many people. After Eugène Atget's death, his works were included in the exhibition of modernist works, and his first collection of photographs was also published in 1931. In 1969, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which collected Eugène Atget's work, held an important retrospective for him. This exhibition truly established Eugène Atget's position in the history of modern photography.

### **3. The Influence of Eugène Atget's Work**

#### **3.1 The Influence on the Development of Photographic History**

If you look at the photos of Eugène Atget, you can find that he really recorded everything he saw, without adding any symbolic logo, without deliberate design of hard thinking, the vision is pure and simple. Whatever the state of things was, he showed them as they were. Eugène Atget's work had a great influence on the later documentary photography, so he was hailed as the originator of street photography [2]. In my opinion, Eugène Atget's work has no gorgeous pictures or superb skills. It is so ordinary as a door lintel, a window, a tree, or just a sculpture in a park, a hawker on a street, or a bed in a room. If you don't know Eugène Atget's photographic background very well, you can easily have this question: What is the meaning of his photos? What is so good about his photos?

Eugène Atget is not the first photographer to take pictures of Paris systematically. In the wet edition era, his outstanding predecessor Charles Marvell once photographed the streets of old Paris [3]. Eugène Atget loved this fertile city. It is conceivable that in countless mornings with low morning light and few pedestrians, he was burdened with heavy photographic equipment and photographed Paris almost everywhere. There are livelihoods in it, but who can deny that there is no affection? Otherwise, why did he shoot for more than 30 years before and after? Thanks to Eugène Atget's perseverance, museums, galleries, collectors, painters, etc., have the richest material in Paris. Many painters, including André Delang, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Picasso, etc., bought Eugène Atget's works, so that he was later called "a naive genius" by the Surrealists in the 1920s. The excitement of Eugène Atget's works is not because he avoids emptiness and shallowness, but because he shows us a strange world, which is full of rhythm and resonance that we have never heard of, and is full of the allusion of experience that we have almost forgotten.

#### **3.2 The Influence on the Development of Documentary Photography**

Hundreds of years later, when we explore their meaning by analysing Eugène Atget's works. It can be seen that they are empty, quiet, rigorous, clear, and even solemn. However, no matter whether it is documentary, landscape, typology, or surrealism, we can learn from him. The initial shadow is found in his works. John Szarkowski believes that "he used a better quality 'sieve' to sift out a unique 'precious metal' from the ore." This "precious metal" was the real Paris hundreds of years ago presented by Eugène Atget. This is even his spirit of his love to record this city for thirty years. Eugène Atget used film directors' way of shooting to create photography, shooting close-up shots, telephoto lenses, details, and shooting from different angles, different times and light environments. The two-dimensional world in his lens can experience the test of time. He created more than 10,000 works, including shop windows, building entrances, arcades, street scenes, public places and private gardens, as well as crowds on the streets and workers engaged in daily labor, or life in the upper class. The Paris in the work is also dreamy and fantasy, but they are absolutely real. Moreover, documentary photography and art photography do not form an opposition in Eugène

Atget's works, but are perfectly integrated, even without distinction between each other. This can be seen in the 100 works of the newly published book *Eugène Atget*. There is no lack of elegance in documentary images. Eugène Atget used an old-fashioned large-format camera. It is hard to imagine how he carried this big guy to take pictures every day. In his 30-year photography career, Eugène Atget took almost 10,000 photos. Ansel Adams wrote in 1931: "Eugène Atget's charm is not in his skillful use of the master plate and photographic paper at the time, nor in the beautiful costumes, buildings, and characters shown in his photos, but in his fair and cordial views... His works are concise revelations of the appearance of the simplest things around him.... His photos may be the earliest expression of purely photographic art. [4]" Eugène Atget's original intention for filming was that he wanted to record all aspects of the disappearing "old Paris" in different categories. This original intention allowed him to classify the content of the shooting, and to shoot in an objective and narrative way. This categorized, objective, and narrative approach provided a prototype for a very important branch in the later development of photographic art-objectivism. Before him, photographers put more emphasis on retouching their works. This modification includes the manipulation of the content and the artificial reprocessing of the picture. The pictorial photography we mentioned is the embodiment of this kind of artificial modification to its peak. The inherent feature of painting is that it can be manipulated by the painter at will. The content of the subject matter and the proportion of the characters are completely drawn on white paper by the brush. Therefore, objectivity and painting are inherently a contradiction. Objectivity is the inherent quality of the art of photography. Therefore, abandoning one's own characteristics and doing the opposite is the reason why pictorial photography has quickly come to an end, and photography must be "separated" from painting. About 10 years after the death of Eugène Atget, a new climax of this kind of objectivity was derived by a group of artists on the west coast of the United States, which is the "direct photography" represented by the F64 group. Their definition of photography in the F64 Group's founding declaration is: "Photography should be an unpretentious representation of the object being photographed." In Europe, the new objectivism represented by Bernd & Hilla Becher of the Düsseldorf Academy can also clearly find the "legacy" left by "Eugène Atget". They are divided into categories and taken from a serious perspective. Let the viewers think about the mutual relationship in a calm and objective picture. This also highlights the unique characteristics and advantages of photography.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, photography coincided with the independent period of photography. Photography at this time is like in its adolescence, formally breaking away from the shadow of other art, and carrying out a critical period of "personality independence and character shaping". Therefore, the sages who emerged during this period set the layout for the subsequent development of photographic art. During this period, photography gave birth to many new development directions, including landscape photography, documentary photography, objectivism, surrealism and even abstract art. And this period also coincides with the critical period of the transformation of painting art. To put it bluntly, painting officially broke away from the shackles of concrete realism and began to sublimate to the description of the spiritual level. From the emergence of Cubism to the development of Surrealism and even later Mondrian's style school were all born in this period. As a symbol of modern art, Marcel Duchamp's work *Spring* and the *Bearded Mona Lisa* were also born in this period. Photography scholar Ren Yue once said in an interview: "As time goes by, when the original functional content of news photos weakens and the ideological value of the photos gradually appears, it becomes easier to become a work of art, especially those photos with multiple levels of meaning will slowly release their value. The archival photos taken by Eugène Atget at that time were originally intended to be copied by painters, so as to be kept as archives in Paris. He did not expect them to become works of art. He is a very important documentary photographer, but his

photos make the surrealist school a soft spot. This is because his photos have a huge amount of information, and the shooting is not so utilitarian, so that the viewers can continue to discover many things in them. “This last sentence is what is still lacking in photography today, and it is Eugène Atget's most precious legacy left to us.

If Eugène Atget’s work opened up the history of photography, then the most precious legacy left to us must be his own “photographic consciousness.” Ansel Adams once said: “The charm of Eugène Atget does not lie in his skillful use of the baseboards and photographic papers at the time, nor in the beautiful clothing and accessories, buildings and humanity shown in his photos, but in his kind views and fairness.” In “The Essence of Documentary Photography is Humanistic Care”, the famous photography scholar Bao Kun believes that Eugène Atget is the first person who can use the term “documentary”. Of course, from the perspective of Western documentary photography, most of Eugène Atget’s works only pursue documentary, and other incidental humanistic spirit and photography philosophy are not clear.

#### 4. Conclusion

Eugène Atget once said: “Photography is the handprint of civilization”. I very much agree with this analogy. The invention of photography is a major advancement in modern human civilization because it was deeply branded with “civilization” as soon as it appeared. Although photography has been the “plaything” of the wealthy for a long time and has a noble pedigree, its uninhibited personality determines that it will eventually “run away from home” to fight. It has found its position and function in the vast and changing world. It caters to the mainstream direction of contemporary civilization and progress, and has strong vitality.

Photography is the freeze frame of real images and moments, and its characteristic is destined to be fundamentally different from other art. Photography is a moment that decides forever. Eugène Atget’s documentary photography fully expresses this point-the charm of photography lies in its reality and its moment. The story behind the photo, the thinking behind the moment. This is also the practical significance of the existence of photography.

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