SESSION 06 · UNIT 1 — LIGHT & OBJECT · Oct 27, 2026

Eugène Atget & Berenice Abbott

Atget 1857–1927 · French — Abbott 1898–1991 · American

A body of work that outlived its maker — and the eye that saved it



Eugène Atget · Berenice Abbott, 1927

> *"These are simply documents I make."*
>
> — Eugène Atget

KEY WORKS

- Corset Shop, Boulevard de Strasbourg, 1912 (Atget)
- Avenue des Gobelins, 1925 (Atget)
- Nightview, New York, 1932 (Abbott)
- Exchange Place, 1934 (Abbott)

CONTEXT

Eugène Atget spent nearly three decades photographing a Paris that was disappearing — shopfronts, courtyards, brothels, parks — working almost entirely alone and unrecognized, selling his prints as raw documentation rather than art. He died in 1927 with most of his roughly ten-thousand-negative archive unsorted and at real risk of being scattered or lost. Berenice Abbott, then a young American working in Man Ray's Paris studio, had met Atget shortly before his death, bought a group of his prints and negatives, and spent much of the rest of her career — decades of it, on her own time and money — organizing, printing, exhibiting, and eventually placing the archive where it could be preserved and studied. Her own major project, Changing New York (1935–39), documenting a city being torn down and rebuilt in real time, carries the patient, unpeopled, structural eye she learned looking at his negatives. Neither photographer worked in anything like a studio: both built their strongest work out of available light, long exposures, and whatever the street gave them that day.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Atget worked with a single lens, a tripod, and whatever daylight Paris gave him that morning — no gear list, no studio, no permission needed. Abbott is proof that a body of work isn't finished when its maker puts the camera down: it survives only if someone else decides it's worth saving. Today, improvising light out of a bounce card and a ceiling, remember that neither of these two ever waited for perfect conditions to make the image.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Atget called his own photographs “simply documents.” Abbott insisted they were art worth preserving at her own expense. Who was right — and does it matter who decides?
2. If you had no studio, no modifiers, only the light already in the room — like Atget on a Paris street — what would you have to change about how you see, not just how you shoot?

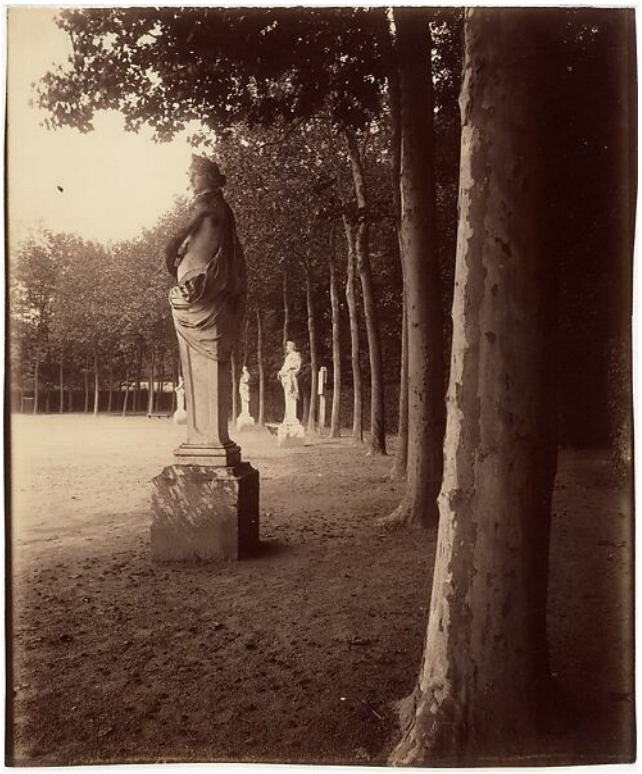
MORE IMAGES



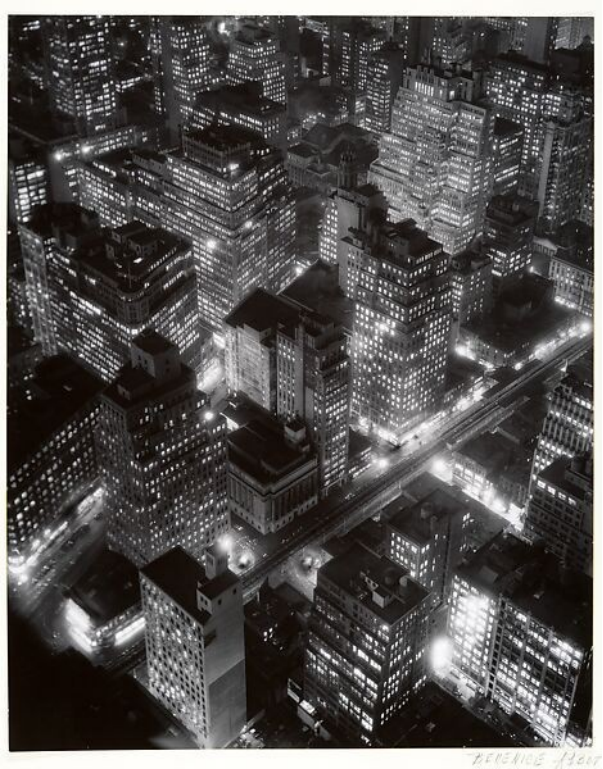
Avenue des Gobelins · Atget, 1925



Corset Shop, Blvd de Strasbourg · Atget, 1912



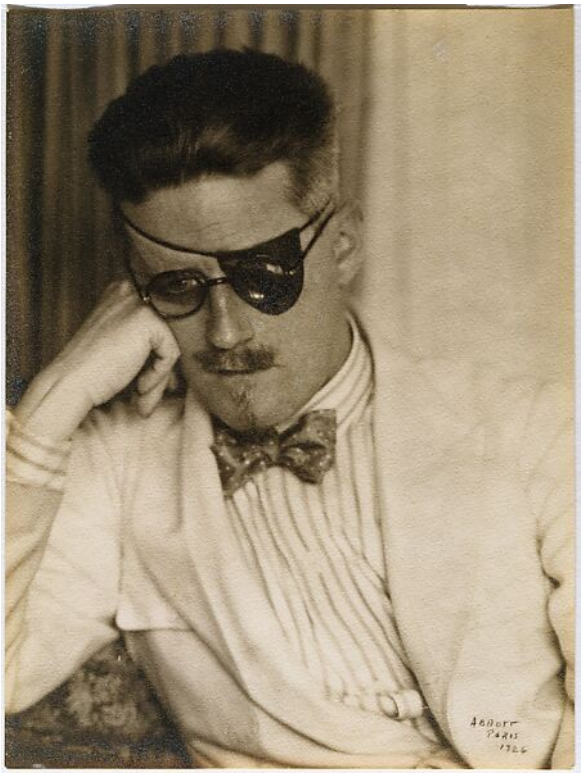
Versailles, the Park · Atget



Nightview, New York · Abbott, 1932



Exchange Place · Abbott, 1934



Portrait of James Joyce · Abbott, 1926