

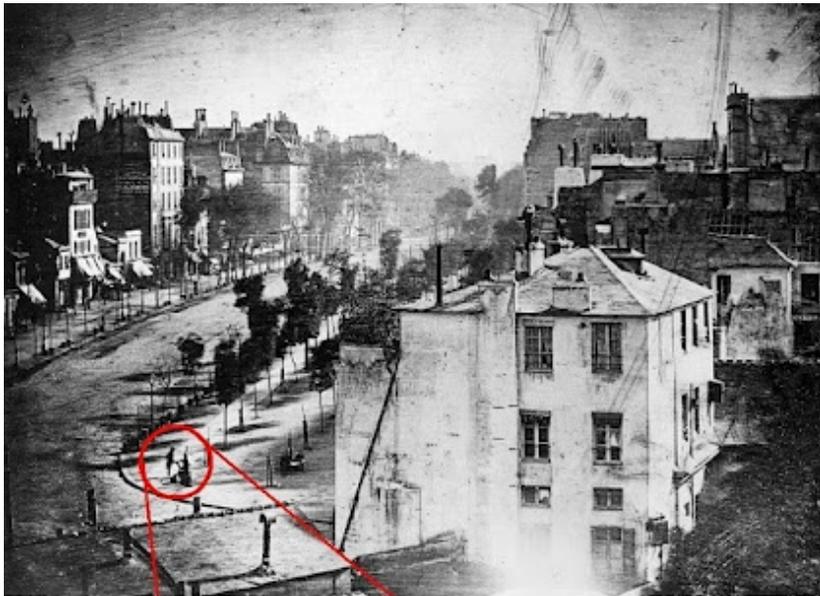
## Week 2 Lecture: The History of Street Photography

By Eric Kim

For week two, we will focus on the history of street photography—with an emphasis on three pivotal figures: Eugene Atget, Jacques-Henri Lartigue, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. They all had much in common (they were all French) and were shooting street photography from the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although all had a passion for shooting in the streets, the way they operated was quite different. Atget worked more as a historian on the streets of Paris, dedicating his life to document the architecture and urban landscape while it was in a state of flux. Jacques-Henri Lartigue would be a bridge and use a much smaller and portable camera to take photographs of things in his everyday-life that interested him, particularly beautiful women. Henri Cartier-Bresson would soon use his passion for street photography to be one of the fathers of modern-day photojournalism, and one of the founders of Magnum—the international photo cooperative.

### **The invention of photography**



Photography was invented in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the first process ranging all the way back to the 1820's with early-chemicals. The first large break-through was by Louis Daguerre, who first invented the daguerreotype—a silver and chalk mixture which darkened when exposed to light.

In 1838, Daguerre took what one may consider the first “street photograph” by taking a person of a pedestrian in Paris getting his shoe shined. The first process was very long, taking several minutes for the long-exposure. (See image above)

### Enter Eugene Atget



(Photograph by Eugene Atget)

Historians regard Eugene Atget as one of the pivotal street photographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which he dedicated his entire life to taking photographs of the streets of Paris with a large view-camera. His photographs included mostly scenes of the streets of Paris, focusing on architecture and the empty streets. Some of his shots would include people, but they would be simply background actors in his images.

Atget originated from Bordeaux, and settled in Paris in the 1890s'. While scrambling to figure out what he wanted to do, he discovered photography as a modest source of income—being able to sell the photographs of “documents for artists”. Taking photographs of “documents for artists” was essentially taking photographs of scenes—that painters would use as reference to paint later.

Between 1897 and 1927 Atget made a decision to photograph and document parts of Paris in which he felt deeply connected to. Around the time many old buildings were being demolished,

and he wanted to have a history of what he envisioned as the beautiful things of Paris through his images. Naturally his subject matter was very romantic. He would show much of the “picturesque” side of Paris, which included narrow lanes and alleys, old buildings about to be demolished, stairwells, architectural details, and bridges.

### **Jacques-Henri Lartigue and the change of technology**

As time progressed, technology in cameras progressed and a new class of “socially elite” photographers emerged— Jacques-Henri Lartigue (1894 –1986) as being one of the principal photographers. He was from a wealthy family, and would simply make snapshots of things he found interesting in his life in Paris. Having a smaller camera than Atget allowed him to be much more mobile, and constantly shoot things around him.

Lartigue took a variety of photographs—from eccentrically dressed women in parks, to automobiles, and to airplanes.

He talks a bit about his inspiration to take street photographs of women in parks in one of his albums dated July 1907:

“A new idea: that I should go to the park to photograph those women who have the most eccentric or beautiful hats.”

In future diaries he also notes why he took photographs of them: “Instead of racing autos, lions or palm trees, I now [photograph] women. Women...everything about them fascinates me—their dresses, their scent, the way they walk, the make up on their faces, their hands full of rings, and above all, their hats.

He also describes an incident in which he is sitting at a park in Paris, sitting on an iron chair, and “...ready for action the moment I see someone really elegant coming along.”

Suddenly a woman appears:

“She: the well-dressed, eccentric, elegant, ridiculous or beautiful woman I’m waiting for... There she comes! I am timid... I tremble a little. Twenty meters...ten meters...five meters...click! My camera makes such a noise that the lady jumps...almost as much as I do. That doesn’t matter, except when she is in the company of a big man who is furious and starts to scold me as if I were a naughty child. That really makes me very angry, but I try to smile. The pleasure of having taken another photograph makes up for everything! The gentleman I’ll forget. The picture I will keep.

He also describes another incident:

“There comes a very, very beautiful one, with a little girl and another lady. She comes closer. I focus...and click! I hope the photo will be sharp, it was all so fast.”

### **Henri Cartier-Bresson: The forefather of photojournalism**

Arguably the most pivotal figure in all of street photographer was Henri Cartier-Bresson, a French photographer considered to be the father of modern photojournalism—and one of the best-known street photographers.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was also born from a wealthy family, and originally started off as a painter. However after looking at a photograph by Hungarian photojournalist Martin Munkacsy of the

silhouette of three naked young African boys running into the water of Lake Tanganyika titled “Three Boys at Lake Tanganyika” he realized “I suddenly understood that a photograph could fix eternity in an instant.”

Soon afterwards he acquired a Leica camera (the first compact 35mm camera) with a 50mm lens at Marseilles, and went out to the street.

Henri Cartier-Bresson progressed to shoot relentlessly, in places such as Berlin, Brussels, Warsaw, Prague, Budapest, and Madrid. His first major break was from an exhibition he showed at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York in 1932, and afterwards at the Ateneo Club in Madrid.

In 1934 was another pivotal opportunity in Henri Cartier-Bresson’s career, where he met a Polish photographer named David Seymour (nicknamed “Chim”) and through him, met a Hungarian photographer named Robert Capa. The three shared a studio in the early 1930’s and Capa once advised him at an exhibition, “You must not have a label of a Surrealist photographer. If you do, you won’t have an assignment and you’ll be like a hothouse plant... The label should be photojournalist.” From that moment forth, he would turn photojournalism into his daily profession—in order to keep a living.

In 1947, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and David Seymour (Chim) founded the photo cooperative, Magnum. The objective of Magnum was to make a photo agency that allowed continuous employment and by having more control over the copyright of their images. Through Magnum, Henri Cartier-Bresson would cover events such as the final days of British rule in India (which turned out to also be the assassination of Ghandi) as well as communism in China.

## **Conclusion**

To truly understand and appreciate street photography is to know a bit more about the background of these photographers.

Through history you can see that street photography doesn’t necessarily have to have people in them—shown by the work of Atget and the streets of Paris. Many of his photographs focused on the architecture and back-alleys of Paris, but still had the important defining feature of street photography—a sense of humanity.

Through the work of Jacques-Henri Lartigue, we were able to see how the change of technology of portable cameras allowed for much more flexibility in street photography. Lartigue was no longer restricted to the large view camera that Atget worked with (which the camera had to be carried around with a large tripod and one had to “wait” for the photograph to occur). Rather, Lartigue would go around his beloved Paris and actively seek out scenes that interested him—whether it be cars or beautiful women.

Above all, Henri Cartier-Bresson is arguably the most important figure of all the three. Not only did he create some of the most memorable street photographs in history, he also was the father of photojournalism as we know it. To once again clarify the difference between street photography and photojournalism is that street photography is focused on the unplanned and unexpected on the street—reminding us of our humanity. Photojournalism is much more structured in the sense that you will be going to a certain location with a certain story or agenda in mind—whether it be documenting the fall of the British empire in India or the effects of communism in China.

Therefore as we continue this course, consider how modern day life and technology has changed street photography. Think about the new and improved cameras we use (with live view, autofocus, and everything instantaneous) as well as the new social situations we live in (communicating via cell phones and Facebook, and using iPads to read or stay connected). Think about how society will change in the next 100 years, and how street photography can be used as an attempt to document it as well.