Eugène Atget and the Fin de Siècle
Interior: Revelatory Excess

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Fig. 1. Eugène Atget, *Worker’s Interior, Rue de Romainville* (Intérieur ouvrier, rue de Romainville), image from page 28 of the album *Intérieurs Parisiens*. This version is one photograph of a portfolio of 20 printed by Berenice Abbott from glass negatives made by Atget. Gold-toned gelatin silverprint, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1974/1.109.
In 1910 Eugène Atget photographed various private interiors, some of which he assembled into an album entitled *Intérieurs Parisiens, début du XXe siècle, artistiques, pittoresques, et bourgeois*. In doing so he added to the imagery, ever increasing in nineteenth-century France and elsewhere, of the domestic interior. Though from a slightly later period, Atget’s photographs display the accumulation of furniture, objects, and styles that were characteristic of fin de siècle French interiors. The interior was often praised as a site of self-expression, but in its late nineteenth-century guise—as a site of unfettered accumulation—it provoked many critiques. In relation to these issues Atget’s album proves to be dialectical, at once seeming to present the interior as a signifier of human life, personality, and individuality, even while undermining such notions and exposing them as illusory. Accumulation, by its very excess, becomes revelatory under Atget’s lens: it is both subject and critical tool. Once collected together, Atget’s photographs yield small, uncanny signs indicating the interior’s enlivening of the object and deadening of the human subject.

Just as Atget’s images shed light on fin de siècle conceptions of the interior, so too do these conceptions provide a framework for approaching the album. I will therefore begin by evoking this interior and its myriad associations. As is so often the case with nineteenth-century France, Walter Benjamin (2002b, 20) provides a way in:

*The interior is not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his etui. Ever since the time of Louis Philippe, the bourgeois has shown a tendency to compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city. He tries to do this within the four walls of his apartment. It is as if he had made it a point of honor not to allow the traces of his everyday objects and accessories to get lost... He has a marked preference for velour and plush, which preserve the imprint of all contact. In the style characteristic of the Second Empire, the apartment becomes a sort of cockpit. The traces of its inhabitant are molded into the interior.*

This passage contains two closely intertwined ideas: the interior as the repository of the traces of the bourgeois inhabitant and the interior as the inhabitant’s mold. As the last phrase of the citation makes clear, the mold in fact stems from the traces, since it is the interior’s ability to guard the latter that transforms it into a mold. As such it becomes a kind of sculpture in negative of the inhabitant, one thought capable of revealing his or her personality or subjectivity.

Benjamin’s characterization of the bourgeois interior may seem fantastical, but its echo can be found in numerous nineteenth-century texts. In Edmond de Goncourt’s preamble to his idiosyncratic inventory of his home and collections—*La maison d’un artiste*—he refers to his home as “a nest,” paralleling Benjamin’s “etui” (1898, 1). The idea of the nest,
as well as that of the trace and the mold, can be seen in the painter and writer Gustave Droz’s exhortation to wives, “That your nest be cozy, that you be felt in all of these little nothings.” ¹ He uses a vocabulary of literal impression to discuss the expression of the individual in their interior. The architect Viollet-le-Duc employs much the same terms when criticizing “these large apartment buildings in which the individual’s personality is erased and where it is scarcely possible to feel the love of home.” ² Honoré de Balzac’s œuvre dates from earlier in the century but is nevertheless a paradigm for the bourgeois sensibility described by Benjamin. When introducing the porter Cibot and her husband in Le cousin Pons (1847), Balzac wrote that “they got used to their loge, the loge became for them what the shell is for oysters.” ³

Balzac is also a fount of descriptions evoking the human trace in the interior. In the short novel Ferragus (1834) the narrator describes how the typical woman, arriving home from a ball, takes off various parts of her clothing and accessories, from her robe and wilted flowers to her corset, such that “the entire false woman is there, scattered.” ⁴ Such traces are visible throughout Atget’s interiors, in the form of papers or items of clothing (see figs. 1 and 3, for example). A more literal form of the trace can be seen in the wear and tear visible on chairs or other pieces of furniture. This type of trace is dramatized in Balzac’s La Fille aux yeux d’or (1835). Describing a murder scene, the narrator dwells on the signs of the struggle on the interior rather more than on the body of the victim: “Paquita’s hands were imprinted on the cushions... Entire strips of the fluted hanging were torn away by her bloody hands... The marks of her naked feet were all along the back of the divan, upon which she had no doubt run.” ⁵ Nothing could reveal more strikingly

¹ Droz 1872, 115: “Que votre nid soit douillet, qu’on vous sente dans tous ces milles riens.” All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. Droz’s book, originally published in 1866, is a collection of articles he wrote for La Vie Parisienne.

² Viollet-le-Duc 1986a, 304: “ces grandes maisons à loyers dans lesquelles la personnalité de l’individu s’efface et où il n’est guère possible d’admettre l’amour du foyer.”

³ Balzac 1973, 67: “ils se sont faits à leur loge, la loge est devenue pour eux ce qu’est l’écaille pour les huîtres.

⁴ Balzac 1988a, 131: “toute la fausse femme est là, épars.” It is interesting to note here the example of “Degas, who reminded himself to ‘include all types of everyday objects positioned in a context to express the life of the man or woman—corsets that have just been removed, for example, and that retain the shape of the wearer’s body’” (Rapetti 1995, 187).

⁵ Balzac 1988b, 287: “Les mains de Paquita [the murdered woman] étaient empreintes sur les coussins... Des lambeaux entiers de la
the belief in the domestic interior’s ability to guard the trace of its occupants—their literal impression—which was then imbued with the metaphorical impression of their essence.

The concept of the mold and the trace can be used to encompass more prosaic manifestations, as, for example, in the emphasis on comfort and soft materials: Gustave Droz, dining at home, described himself as having “the happy look of a man who is in a warm room and who has on his feet good slippers trimmed with flannel, the soles of which sink into a thick rug.”6 In the case of seating, plush materials and a lot of stuffing became the rule. In 1883, the writer Guy de Maupassant found even wood problematic: “For furniture, is not wood the carcass, horsehair the flesh and fabric the skin? The skeleton is only man when covered with flesh. A piece of furniture is only an armchair once padded.”7 Le Bouteiller, in his *Journal de l’Industrie et des Arts utiles* (1840), condemned springs using a similarly carnal vocabulary, writing of a type of chair that “possesses all the qualities of a sprung chair without having its drawbacks; this is not one of your mechanical contraptions with entrails of iron.”8 The elements of the private interior take on the pliability of the human body in order to better receive its traces. Nothing so resistant as hard wood or metal springs is to be tolerated.

In this light, just as Droz recommended, the interior becomes a kind of cozy nest. Like a bird, the interior’s denizen surrounded him or herself with heterogeneous bits and pieces, resulting in the dense massing of objects and ornamentation characteristic of the late nineteenth-century interior. The latter was made possible by the industrial revolution, which had brought with it a consumer revolution, resulting in a “seemingly unlimited profusion’ at once ‘real’ and imagined” of relatively low-priced goods (Watson 1999, 6). Small objects—like those visible throughout Atget’s album, covering desks, mantelpieces, shelves, and other surfaces (figs. 1–3)—began to infiltrate every space of the room. It is such a context, argues Janell Watson (1999, 5), that explains the popularity of the

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6 Droz 1872, 223–224: “l’air heureux d’un homme qui est dans une pièce chaude et a aux pieds de bonnes pantoufles garnies de flanelle, dont la semelle s’enfonce dans un épais tapis.”

7 Maupassant 2003a, 644: “Le bois n’est-il pas la carcasse du meuble don’t le crin est la chair et don’t l’étoffe est la peau? Le squelette n’est homme que vêtu de chair. Le meuble n’est fauteuil qu’une fois rembourré.” In order to avoid awkward phrasing, I have taken a fair amount of liberty with this translation.

word *bibelot*, a catch-all term for everything from the expensive treasures of a collector like Goncourt to “the cheapest industrial kitsch.” Only such an expansive term could encompass “a group of disparate items gathered together under the auspices of superfluousness, gratuitousness, heterogeneity, and accumulation” (Watson 1999, 6)—exactly the kind of grouping that increasingly characterized the interior as the century progressed.

Other elements of the décor also participated in this dense massing: chairs, which only lined the walls in the early nineteenth century, moved into the central space. They congregated around one another, reflecting their users’ social habits (this effect is quite prevalent in *Intérieurs Parisiens*). Also like their users, they came in all kinds of shapes, sizes, and appearances. They were accompanied in this movement by tables, cushions, and other types of small furniture. Other elements, such as drapery and rugs, added to the accumulation. It is this increasing presence of the décor that gives it the potential to interact with the resident and become his or her mold.

Benjamin’s indexical trace can also be left in a more conscious, voluntary fashion. The accumulation of furniture, ornament, and objects described above was ideally the result and the source of individual choice, which in turn offered the tantalizing possibility of personalizing and differentiating one’s interior. Viewed thus, each element in the interior becomes a sign of the inhabitant’s hand. This is no doubt why Henry Havard, who produced a four-volume *Dictionnaire de l’Aménagement* (1889–1890), characterized *mobile* decoration (as opposed to *fixe*) as more intimate and personal (Thornton 1984, 212; Watson 1999, 49). This type of decoration tended to dominate in the fin de siècle interior and, as Havard’s term implies, was easier to move. The manipulation of such mobile elements, whether drapery or *bibelots*, was thought to be a form of self-expression, particularly for women (Thornton 1984, 224; Vernes 1995, 17). In the words of Émile Cardon and Claude David, writers of *l’Art au foyer domestique* (1884): “all this *[bibelots]* isn’t bought in a heap like apples. [The object] is encountered, searched, found, tomorrow one, in fifteen days another. The *bibelot* is only interesting in this sense.”

Style was also implicated in this form of expression,

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9 An appropriate translation for *bibelot* might be “knick-knack” or “tchotchke,” though neither of those terms has the same range of value.

10 Maupassant’s linking of the human body to that of the chair invites such comparison. Michel Vernes (1995, 14) also makes it, based on other texts of the period.

11 The French were known for their luxurious and complicated drapery. See Thornton 1984, 224.

12 Cardon 1884, 53: “tout cela ne s’achète pas en tas comme des
since by the end of the century it too had become heterogeneous, bits and pieces being culled from diverse regions and periods, according to one’s taste. In *Ferragus*, Balzac encapsulates this aspect of the trace with the following passage, written in reference to a private interior:

_there is in the arrangement of these things a cachet of personality that gives to such and such ornament or detail an inimitable character. Today more than ever reigns the fanaticism for individuality. The more our laws go towards an impossible equality, the more we’ll distance ourselves by our habits._

The narrator thus implies that individuality, frustrated in other areas, insists on manifesting itself through the arrangement of possessions.

Toward the end of the century, just as the number of styles and bibelots multiplied in the interior, so too did the critiques. These objections were often based on the same grounds used to justify the praise. Common complaints held that, rather than expressing their inhabitants’ individuality, interiors revealed that society as a whole had no style of its own. The archaeologist Édouard Didron, as secretary and jury member for the Decorative Arts section of the 1878 Exposition universelle, had this to say in his report:

_Since the beginning of civilization, each people has given to its art, and even to the various objects it uses, the imprint of its customs and tastes. In shaping all things according to its mindset, [a people] created its own style, one that suffices, with the help of history, to sum up for us the conditions of its existence. Only the present century has shown proof of a nearly total impotence by limiting itself to copying the works of the past._

—Didron 1882, 4: “Depuis qu’il existe une civilisation, chaque peuple a su donner à son art et même aux divers objets consacrés à son usage l’empreinte de ses mœurs et de ses goûts. En façonnant toutes choses d’après les tendances de son esprit, il a créé un style qui lui appartient et qui suffit, avec l’aide de l’histoire, pour nous résumer les conditions de son existence. Seul, le siècle actuel a témoigné d’une impuissance presque complète, en se bornant à copier les œuvres du passé.” Similar remarks were made by many others. See,
This critique, with a slight variation, was extended to the question of class. Viollet-le-Duc articulated it in this manner:

\"it is a curious thing to observe in France that the middle class, the vital force of any modern society, does not have an appearance and customs of its own. This is no longer the bourgeoisie of the old days; lately it has applied itself to imitating as best it can the appearances of an aristocracy of new money.\"  

According to such thought, inappropriate ostentation separated appearances from essences, thus leveling society to the lowest common denominator. The only escape was a consciousness that

\"True luxury is one that, in the guise of simplicity, displays an elegance that cannot be reproduced with the help of vulgar means. It is what, in society, is called distinction, a way of being sensible, discreet, and simple, that is the prerogative of some, independently of wealth and rank.\"  

A lack of this distinction resulted in \"[a]partments very ordinary in terms of general composition, but upon which have been lavished gilded paste, fake paneling, hangings of a mean nature, and a whole set of knick-knacks that smell of the kept woman\'s boudoir.\"  

Other complaints were along the same lines: Didron wrote that \"today, everyone . . . wants to surround himself with the elements of vain sumptuousness that industrial art . . . places extravagantly at the disposition of modern society\"; Guy de Maupassant\'s version was \"[e]verybody collects today, everybody is or thinks he is a connoisseur; because fashion has gotten mixed up in it. Practically all the actresses have contracted the rage of collecting; all the great houses resemble museums encumbered by filthy fetishes.\"  

for example, Viollet-le-Duc 1986c.

16 Viollet-le-Duc 1986b, 300: \"c\’est un fait curieux à observer chez nous, que la classe moyenne, force vitale de toute société moderne, n’a pas une allure et des mœurs qui lui appartiennent en propre. Ce n’est plus la bourgeoisie d’autrefois; elle s’est attachée, en ces derniers temps, à imiter du mieux qu’elle pouvait les dehors d’une aristocratie d’argent.\"

17 Viollet-le-Duc 1986c, 209: \"Le vrai luxe est celui qui, sous une apparence de simplicité, montre des élégances que l’on ne saurait imiter à l’aide des moyens grossiers. C’est ce que, dans le monde, on appelle la distinction, une manière d’être sensée, discrète et simple, qui est l’apanage de quelques-uns, indépendamment de la richesse et du rang.\" The opposition of a true and false luxury is a theme found in many fin-de-siècle texts.

18 Viollet-le-Duc 1986c, 211: \"Des appartements très ordinaires comme composition générale, mais où l’on a prodigué les dorures sur pâtes, les fausses boiseries, des tentures d’un effet mesquin, et tout un mobilier de brimborions qui sentent le boudoir de femme entretenue.\"

19 Didron 1882, 11: \"Aujourd’hui, chacun . . . désire s’entourer des
Many of these criticisms are linked in one way or another to the notion of promiscuity, the fact that anything could be had by anyone provided they had the money. The courtesan/actress and the *nouveau-riche* are recurring figures in such discourses, and it must be remembered that both are images of commodification. The former sells her body, converting flesh into cash (or other form of payment); the latter takes part in a hierarchy based on money, thus putting a price tag on the supposed bastions of rank and respectability. Juxtaposed against these figures is that of the collector, he (it is invariably a he) who possesses a finely tuned sense of Viollet-le-Duc’s *distinction* and who is capable of saving the interior from its descent into indiscriminate mediocrity. It is useful to recall Benjamin’s (2002b, 19) insistence that

> *The Collector proves to be the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the idealization of objects. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them. . . . The Collector delights in evoking a world . . . in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful.*

The interior was supposed to be isolated from the effects of commodification. Once objects or other elements entered it, they supposedly left the realm of the market in order to perform the higher task of expressing the self. But the effects of accumulation were capable of undermining such divisions; it was up to the collector to avoid such an eventuality through the proper choices and arrangements. Maupassant’s proposed antidote to crass materialism was Edmond de Goncourt: though Goncourt too was possessed by “the passion for the *bibelot*”—described by Maupassant as “a mania, an incurable sickness,” “this beloved vice, ruinous, gnawing, that everyone carries within himself”—he knew beauty when he saw it, and bought it “without haggling [sans marchander].” Price tags, Maupassant implies, are meaningless for the true collector, who sees the object’s intrinsic qualities. This does not, however, prevent him from mentioning several times that the pieces in Goncourt’s collection would

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éléments de somptuosité vaniteux que l’art industriel . . . met prodigalement à la disposition de la société moderne.” Maupassant 2003a, 641: “Tout le monde aujourd’hui collectionne; tout le monde est ou se croit connaisseur ; car la mode s’en est mêlée. Les actrices ont presque toutes la rage de bibeloter ; tous les hôtels particuliers semblent des musées encombrés de saletés séculaires.” English translation of this passage from Apter 1989, 14.

currently fetch astronomical sums, society having finally recognized what the collector knew all along.

Goncourt, on the other hand, was not so sanguine about his passion. He displayed a certain ambivalence, though perhaps exaggerated for effect, toward the fruit of his collecting: “my eyes roving over all the bric-a-brac that surrounds me, I often question myself about this passion for the bibelot that has rendered me miserable and happy all my life. And . . . finding in my memory those feverish days of insane buying from which one walked away still unsatisfied, feeling like one had been up all night gaming and suffering that bitter taste in the mouth . . . I would ask myself if this sickness were an accident, an evil contracted by chance, or whether it were rather some kind of hereditary illness, a contagion similar to madness or gout.”

This vocabulary of sickness is one of the reasons why Goncourt is a paradigmatic figure in Emily Apter’s “Cabinet Secrets: Fetishism, Prostitution, and the Fin de Siècle Interior.” In this article Apter, following a line of thought present in certain late nineteenth-century circles, links the “hyperbolic accumulation” of the fin de siècle interior to the notion of érotomanie, characterized as a “virulent form of attachment to things” (Apter 1989, 16, 14). The term was appropriated from medical discourse: érotomanie was a pathology created in the 1880s to designate an unreasonable, even violent attachment to another person (Apter 1989, 14). Unsurprisingly, the shift of the term—from one meaning excessive desire for a person to one meaning an excessive desire for objects—is paralleled by Goncourt’s explanation for the collecting craze: having explained that, in contrast to the very public life of the eighteenth century, that of the nineteenth revolves primarily around the private interior, he wrote that

In this enclosed, sedentary life, seated by the fireside, the human creature . . . has been led to want the four walls of his home agreeable, pleasant, amusing to the eyes; and these surroundings and this decor of his interior, he naturally searched for and found it in the pure art object or in the mass-produced art object, more accessible to everyone’s taste. At the same time, these less social habits brought with them a lessening of the role of women in masculine thought . . . man’s interest, straying from this charming being [woman], largely transferred itself to pretty inanimate

21 Goncourt 1898, 354: “les yeux errants sur tout le bric-à-brac qui m’entoure, souvent je me suis interrogé sur cette passion du bibelot qui m’a fait misérable et heureux toute ma vie. Et . . . retrouvant dans ma mémoire ces journées maladives d’achats déraisonnables, et dont on sort inassouvi, avec l’émotion d’une nuit de jeu, et une bouche amère . . . je me demandais si cette maladie était un accident, un mal attrapé par hasard, ou si ce n’était pas plutôt une maladie héréditaire, un cas semblable à la transmission de la folie ou de la goutte.” Translation from Apter 1989, 16.
objects, the passion for which assumed some of the nature and character of love.\textsuperscript{22} I think that this shift of the term is highly significant in that it establishes an important linkage/opposition: that of the living and the inanimate. This opposition is perhaps symptomatic of a deeper reason underlying the ambivalence, often veering toward outright distaste, of many people toward the late nineteenth-century construction of the domestic interior. It seems that they may have sensed that the accumulation and the plush surfaces indicated an assimilation of the person with the object. This idea of assimilation is central to Karl Marx’s description (1977, 164–165)—one that mirrors Goncourt’s remarks in some ways—of the fetishism of the commodity:

\textit{The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves. . . . It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.}

Such conflation, along with the way in which furniture, bibelots, and other elements moved into the interior’s space, may even evoke an enlivening of the object—when Marx evokes the object’s transformation into the commodity, the object sprouts feet and a head—and a consequent deadening of the human inhabitant.\textsuperscript{23} This would of course negate the idea that the interior could express its owner’s identity; in fact, the interior could be seen as subverting this notion, provoking a loss of identity.

I will now return to Atget’s \textit{Intérieurs Parisiens, début du}

\textsuperscript{22} Goncourt 1898, 2–3: “Dans cette vie assise au coin du feu, renfermée, sédentaire, la créature humaine . . . a été poussée à vouloir les quatre murs de son \textit{home} agréables, plaisants, amusants aux yeux; et cet entour et ce décor de son intérieur, elle l’a cherché et trouvé naturellement dans l’objet d’art pur ou dans l’objet d’art industriel, plus accessible au goût de tous. Du même coup, ces habitudes moins mondaines amenaient un amoindrissement du rôle de la femme dans la pensée masculine . . . l’intérêt de l’homme, s’en allant de l’être charmant, se reportait en grande partie sur les jolis objets inanimés dont la passion revêt un peu de la nature et du caractère de l’amour.” Viollet-le-Duc (1986a, 305) expressed a related idea, though he took a much more benign view than Goncourt: “il est dans la nature humaine de s’attacher aux objets qui reflètent quelque chose de la personnalité. L’homme se prend toujours d’affection pour ce qu’il croit avoir créé, et cette affection, quand elle s’attache au foyer domestique, est saine.”

\textsuperscript{23} Marx 1977, 163–164: “It [a table turned commodity] not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.”
XXe siècle, artistiques, pittoresques, et bourgeois as a revelatory site in which these oppositions play themselves out.24 Atget sold this group of photographs, though not as an album, to the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris (BHVP) in 1910. Later that year the Musée Carnavalet would buy the photographs in album format, and the Bibliothèque Nationale (BN) bought a bound version in 1911. The subject matter was somewhat new for Atget: though he had produced documents for artists, architects, publishers, and other professions, he had been specializing in Vieux Paris—views of the historical aspects of the city—and the interiors were contemporary views. Their décor, however, is very fin de siècle. Although accumulation and eclecticism had peaked in the 1890s, the collections of bibelots, plush upholstery, and heavy drapery of this period are still visible in these photographs (Thornton 1984, 313).25 One even recognizes the same rants, as in one critic’s response to the 1910 Salon d’Automne:

one sees the same furniture everywhere, in the ministries, in the bourgeois homes, in the workers’ homes, in the brothels. The salon of le grand 16 resembles the boss’s office: the same arm-chairs, same consoles, same carpets, same Diane de Falguières. An epoch without style? But it all holds together, goes together: stamped furniture from Saint-Antoine and paste jewels from the rue de la Paix.26

The album is unusual for another reason: its empty interiors. In Atget’s Seven Albums Molly Nesbit (1992, 124) insists that

[n]ormally portraits like these, of unpeopled rooms, were seen in private places, in family albums alongside other views of the home and family life, each of which had special personal significance. Homes of celebrities appeared in public places for the prying eyes of the fan as an extension of the genre.27

Nesbit’s characterization of Atget’s photographs of interiors as

24 The information on Atget’s photographs of interiors comes from Nesbit 1982 and Nesbit 1992, particularly the section titled “The Second and Third Albums.”

25 For the opinion that Atget’s interiors seem to evoke the period between 1870 and 1880 rather more than that of 1910, see Reynaud 1982, 97.


27 There was certainly a long tradition in the nineteenth century—found in architectural and interior decoration publications—of depicting the interior without any figures (which Nesbit [1982; 1992] does in fact indicate), and by Atget’s time photography was increasingly providing these views. It is true, however, that views of interiors were most often associated with family photographs and that images appearing in journals and other public formats usually featured the inhabitants with their interiors (Plum 1995, 103; Robichon 1995, 63; Crosnier Leconte 1995, 67).
portraits is very compelling. The oblique angle used for most of these interiors is unlike the generally frontal view, which usually encompassed an entire wall of the room, of most interior decoration publications. Atget’s photographs also come much closer to the furniture and objects, centering upon them as one would a figure in a portrait. Such qualities result in a claustrophobic, one might even say oppressive and imprisoning, atmosphere. This is particularly true of the lower-class interiors.

For, indeed, these interiors were characterized by class. Instead of using the standard Monsieur F., Madame B., and so on, Atget included the profession of the resident in the caption, as well as the street on which they lived. *Worker’s Interior, Rue Romainville* (fig. 1) is one example, as is *Interior of a Dramatic Artist, Rue Vavin* (fig. 2). The only interior identified by the owner’s full last name is that of Cécile Sorel, a famous actress at the Comédie Française. The profession would attribute the inhabitant and their interior to a certain class; the address no doubt aided in this process. Yet, as Nesbit points out, turning the pages of the album, one is struck by the sameness of these interiors, a sameness produced by accumulation, a similar eclecticism of style, and even the same objects. According to Nesbit (1992, 120), “[t]he poorer interiors were furnished with less fine examples, but the idea was the same. Style had become more like a color or a pattern with historical connotations, a banalité susceptible in the end to dust.”

Even so there are visible differences, which Atget highlighted by juxtaposing interiors of different classes in several places. This included the juxtaposition of the dramatic artist’s interior—his own, as will be explained below—with that of Cécile Sorel, clearly the most luxurious of the interiors. Aside from the more expensive bibelots and ornaments, richer interiors benefit from more light and space, the latter particularly emphasized by views that reveal a succession of several rooms.

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28 For more on Atget’s tendency to concentrate on certain objects, see Nesbit 1982, 10.

29 For the opinion that Atget’s decision to characterize the interiors by class was partly motivated by a desire to make them more marketable as “moeurs,” a genre in which “typicality was tied to class,” see Nesbit 1992, 119.

30 *Intérieur ouvrier, rue de Romainville; Intérieur d’un artiste dramatique, rue Vavin.* These captions come from pages 28 and 1 of the album bought by the Musée Carnavalet, reproduced in Atget et al. 1982.

31 For the numerous examples of the same or similar objects appearing in different interiors, see “Notices des œuvres” 1982.

32 There are five places in the album where Atget placed contrasting (in terms of wealth and lack of it) interiors on facing pages. See Nesbit 1982, 16.
Fig. 2. Eugène Atget, Interior of a Dramatic Artist, Rue Vavin (Intérieur d’un artiste dramatique, rue Vavin), 1910, photograph (printed on albumin paper) inset into the first page of the Musée Carnavalet’s version of the album Intérieurs Parisiens. © Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris / Cliché inconnu.
This type of view, aimed directly at the walls and their open doors rather than at dark corners, is generally reserved for the wealthy interiors. As Nesbit (1992, 120) puts it,

"[The room lost all of its abstraction, its connotations of national genius and individual taste. These pictures were made for eyes that sized up other people’s homes, comparing the beauty of the décor, the number of square meters, and the amount of light (not to mention the ambiance, the neighborhood, and the number of windows and doors, which were taxed)."

"Class, the album asserted, was founded on real material differences, which could be expressed through the evidence of addresses, antimacassars, period styles, and available light" (Nesbit 1992, 123). Identity is therefore based on objects in these images and only secondarily expressed through them. The high-minded notion that individuals could show their personalities, their subjectivities, through their interiors thus reveals itself to be nothing more than a question of money, those who have it and those who do not. This supposed refuge from the logic of the commodity was thus based on the very principles that made that logic distasteful.

But what is perhaps most interesting about Atget’s association of the interior with class is that, in the instances where the actual interior can be identified, the captions are generally found to be misleading (Nesbit 1992, 120). Atget’s apartment, for example, played several roles, serving for all the views of the dramatic artist’s interior (figs. 2 and 3), for one view of that of the worker, and possibly for those of a kitchen—I cannot help but note the appropriateness, in this context, of the title of his main role in the album: dramatic artist, meaning actor (Nesbit 1992, 120, 23). 33 The masquerade involving the use of this title was actually a creative interpretation of the “truth”: Atget had listed himself on the electoral lists as a dramatic artist, an occupation he no longer held, in order to avoid paying taxes on his profession. 34 The captions are therefore eminently allegorical: the seeming certainty and transparency of the identity given therein is shown to be an illusion, revealing the instability of all types of identification with one’s interior. 35 In the Carnavalet album this slippage is fairly obvious: when reintroducing two views of his interior later in the album, the one associated with

33 Nesbit’s judgment that it may be Atget’s kitchen shown in Interieur rue Montaigne, la cuisine is based not on visual cues, as in the case of the other photographs identified with Atget, but rather on the numbers that Atget assigned to his negatives.

34 A dramatic artist was considered to be performing intellectual labor and was therefore exempt from these taxes; photographers were not. Nesbit 1992, 123.

35 For more on this conception of allegory, see “Allegory and Trauerspiel,” in Benjamin 1977.
Fig. 3. Eugène Atget, *Interior of Mr. R, Dramatic Artist, Rue Vavin* (Intérieur de Monsieur R, artiste dramatique, rue Vavin), 1910, page 3 of the album. © Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris / Cliché Joffre.
the dramatic artist, Atget mistakenly captioned it as belonging to the collector—perhaps a subconscious acknowledgment of the disjunction between the interior and its inhabitant, the inability to equate the two. Attentive viewers, however, could become aware of the slippage even in the BHVP or BN versions: through an open door in one view of the dramatic artist’s interior one can just glimpse the room with the washstand that will become an element of the worker’s interior; a similar sort of observation indicates that the interior of the apartment decorator and that of the collector are one and the same.

Even given these incidents, I think that there is still an odd way in which the objects and furniture of these interiors do come to stand in for the inhabitants. Unlike other figureless photographs of interiors, traces of the inhabitants are clearly visible: books and papers are scattered over a desk where the chair is pulled out as if someone could sit in it (fig. 3); shoes and even clothes can be seen (fig. 1); chairs show wear. All of these details indicate a past presence or, as Nesbit (1982, esp. 10 and 12) argues, a future one to be imagined by illustrators using these images as backdrops. However, the marketing of these images for illustrations is not sufficient to explain the visual play of the objects found throughout the album. Furthermore, for the illustrator it is the individual image that is important, but once in the album their effect as a group has an equal role. And it is really only when viewing them as a group that one begins to notice the objects behaving strangely, proposing a presence that is anything but human. The aforementioned desk chair (fig. 3), for example, is not placed to leave enough room for a body. Here the portraitlike shot discussed earlier compresses the space of the foreground such that very little of the floor makes it into the frame, and the viewer is rebuffed rather than invited (this is true of several of the images, such as figs. 1, 2, and 5). The desk chair’s angled position seems in response to the camera, as if it had itself been surprised in the midst of its papers. The second chair in this image has left a ghostly second imprint of the edge of its arm, as if it too has moved, even as the photograph was taken. Other views contain similarly sociable chairs, gathered around a table set up for coffee or juxtaposed as if in conversation with one another. The coffeepot visible on a tabletop on page 39 (fig. 4) has migrated into the image on page 41 (fig. 5), in order to take up an odd position under a different table. In one rather Grandvillesque image, the modiste’s hats seem to be examining themselves in the mirror (fig. 6).

There are also many explicitly figurative objects: statues, figurines, and paintings are present in nearly all the rooms.

36 That this was a mistake can be inferred from the fact that he “corrected” the caption in the BN version. Nesbit 1992, 231, n. 45.

37 This information is laid out in the “Notices des œuvres” 1982.
Fig. 4. Eugène Atget, *Interior of Mr. A, Industrialist, Rue Lepic (Intérieur de Monsieur A, Industriel, rue Lepic)*, 1910, page 39 of the album. © Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris / Cliché Joffre.
Fig. 5. Eugène Atget, *Interior of Mr. A, Industrialist, Rue Lepic (Intérieur de Monsieur A, Industriel, rue Lepic)*, 1910, page 41 of the album. © Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris / Cliché Joffre.
Often they are turned toward the light as if intent on the view (see fig. 1); sometimes they stare out at the viewer; sometimes a playful dynamic is present. All of these objects project a human presence, one that gives them life. Susan Sidlauska’s observation (2000, 7) that “[w]hen liveliness is projected onto what previously had been assumed to be inanimate objects and irrelevant spaces, the incontestable primacy of the human inhabitants is cast into doubt” seems very appropriate in light of these images. Moreover, the very objects that are most linked to human form, while stealing human liveliness, also remind the viewer of their inanimate status through their fragmentary nature: reproductions of the Venus de Milo, present in both the financier’s and the magasins du Louvre employee’s interiors, are of course missing their arms, and disjointed sculptural body parts appear in views of an amateur sculptor’s studio as well as in the dramatic artist’s interior (figs. 2 and 3). These objects, as well as others, thus slip back and forth between the animate and inanimate.

It follows that people, supposedly the most animate of creatures, can also, when pictured in their interiors, display the same kind of ambiguity. Sidlauska’s Body, Place, and Self (2000) evokes many of the instances in paintings where they do, as does Rodolphe Rapetti’s analysis of Caillebotte’s interiors and portraits in Gustave Caillebotte, urban impressionist (1995). However, it can be argued that photography is particularly prone to such confusion: in the nineteenth century the camera was obliged, for the most part, to freeze the living, animated body if it wanted to capture it. Is it so very difficult, then, to imagine a corresponding animation on the part of the frozen objects? The human figure can only lose in liveliness, while the object has the potential to gain in it. Roland Barthes puts it differently:

In Photography, the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this

Nesbit (1982, 12) points to the playful gestures that seem to be going on between a nude female statue and a shepherd figurine in one view of the dramatic artist’s interior.

Nesbit 1982, 10: “Small seductive faces and statuettes populate the edges of the rooms, standing in for a human population still to come.”
Fig. 6. Eugène Atget, The Living Room of Mrs. C, Hatmaker, Place St. André des Arts (Le Salon de Madame C, Modiste, Place St André des arts), 1910, page 17 of the album. © Photothèque des musées de la ville de Paris / Cliché Joffre.
Toward the end of the century journals began to accompany certain articles with photographic portraits of the subjects in their interiors. This image (fig. 7) of the poet and dramatist Edouard Pailleron is one example. One cannot help but notice the fixity of his pose as he suspends the paper eternally aloft. The bibelots that surround him capture much of the pictorial space and interest, particularly since they are often better defined than Pailleron’s face, washed out by the light. Pailleron becomes objectlike himself, “hit by . . . the funereal immobility” of the photograph.

As conceived in the nineteenth century, the private interior seems a clear case of what Michel Leiris calls “this true fetishism, that is to say the love . . . of ourselves, projected from inside to outside and clothed in a solid carapace” (Marx’s commodity fetish, as already mentioned, applies as well). Maintaining this self-love through the interior seems to have posed little difficulty until the “hyperbolic accumulation” of everything from objects to styles became the rule. What the critics of this excess may have sensed was that the accumulation was capable of toppling the whole structure, dispersing the illusion: the metaphor substituting the interior for self was dangerously taxed when attempting to incorporate the hyperbole of its fin de siècle counterpart. When accumulated, the status of objects as things tends to trump their capacity to signify as the

40 Barthes 2000, 78–79. “Dans la Photographie, la présence de la chose (à un certain moment passé) n’est jamais métaphorique; et pour ce qui est des êtres animés, sa vie non plus, sauf à photographier des cadavres; et encore: si la photographie devient alors horrible, c’est parce qu’elle certifie, si l’on peut dire, que le cadavre est vivant, en tant que cadavre: c’est l’image d’une chose morte. Car l’immobilité de la photo est comme le résultat d’une confusion perverse entre deux concepts: le Réel et le Vivant: en attestant que l’objet est réel, elle induit subrepticement à croire qu’il est vivant, à cause de ce leurre qui nous fait attribuer au Réel une valeur absolument supérieure, comme éternelle; mais en déportant ce réel vers le passé (’ça a été’), elle suggère qu’il est déjà mort.” Barthes 2004, 123–124.

41 This image is part of the series “Nos contemporains chez eux,” by the photographer Dornac. A number of these images, among them that of Pailleron, accompanied a series of articles of the same name in Le Monde Illustré. Mallard 1999. For information on a similar series, see Crosnier Leconte 1995, esp. 67.

42 Barthes 2004, 17: “frappé de l’’immobilité . . . funèbre.”

Fig. 7. Dornac and Cie, Edouard Pailleron (from the series “Nos contemporains chez eux”), ca. 1890, photograph printed on albumen paper and mounted on cardboard. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
cherished item of Monsieur or Madame X. Furthermore, the probability that there will be overlap with the objects of others increases, as Atget’s album so aptly demonstrates (I imagine that Atget may have given probability a hand). When so many styles coexist, one begins to question how any style could be expected to express the essence of a period—meaning is emptied out, leaving Nesbit’s “dust.” Perhaps this is why Walter Benjamin believed that the collector, with his penchant for accumulation and arrangement, created dialectical, allegorical images, images that, even as they were a source of phantasmagoria, were also a source of awakening. Atget too was a collector, gathering together images of interiors that, in their accumulation, reveal, in many ways . . . nothing. They are opaque, and mute in their prosaic materiality. But is that—the inability of objects to express the self, their nature as commodities, as inanimate things—all that the fetishized interior was an attempt to disavow?

Benjamin (2003, 258) compared Atget’s photographs of streets, in their emptiness, to the scene of a crime. The way in which his images of “empty” interiors eschew glamour, refuse to impose order on their contents, and appear to record interrupted existences certainly recalls Bertillon’s shots of crime scene interiors (Sauvé-Astruc 1995). Another potential comparison is, appropriately enough, photographs of Edmond de Goncourt’s home in Auteuil, the one catalogued in La maison d’un artiste. Like Atget’s interiors, the views of Goncourt’s home are empty, and they were also given as a group to the BN and the Musée Carnavalet (Launay 1995, 33). Shortly after these photographs were taken in 1883, Goncourt wrote in his journal that “[i]t is, for me, a continuous occupation to live on after my death, to survive myself, to leave images of myself and of my home. To what purpose?” Once again we are brought back to the trace, and it seems important to ask Goncourt’s question: what purpose do all these traces serve, whether it be the bodily imprint, the hands’ arrangements, or light on a photographic plate? Goncourt’s obsession with cheating death

44 For Benjamin’s view of the collector as a revelatory figure, see Benjamin 2002a; also Wohlfarth 1986.

45 In this context, Atget’s use of old-fashioned interiors may signify more than stylistic continuity. Benjamin chose the arcades as the starting point for his life’s work when they were already in decline: “Because these decaying structures no longer hold sway over the collective imagination, it is possible to recognize them as the illusory dream images they always were. Precisely the fact that their original aura has disintegrated makes them invaluable didactically” (Buck-Morss 1991, 159).

46 Goncourt and Goncourt 2004, 1015: “C’est, chez moi, une occupation perpétuelle à me continuer après ma mort, à me survivre, à laisser des images de ma personne, de ma maison. A quoi bon?”
seems to provide the answer: the trace is preserved; it provides a memorial. I cannot help but read Atget’s interiors as a kind of memorial, in that they point toward death. Barthes would say that they do so inevitably, ontologically; there may be some truth in that, but I think it has more to do with all the factors mentioned above and others as well: the absence of people, the animate/inanimate objects, the fragmented figures, the sameness of it all (death as the great leveler). Goncourt’s album is clearly a memorial to himself and his home. It points to these two things in such an obvious manner that it obfuscates its relation to death, but Atget’s album has nothing to hide this connection beyond some vague captions. In the absence of any misdirection, one remembers that memorials serve as their own fetish, trying to trump their very reason for existence: “Previous societies arranged it so that the memory, substitute for life, was eternal and that at least the thing that spelled out Death was itself immortal.”

I will end with an episode that I find very evocative: the death of the title character in Balzac’s *Le cousin Pons* (1847). This collector of beautiful things becomes, in death, like an object in his collection, only rather less respected. The servant Sauvage prepares Pons for burial, “exactly like a shop assistant wrapping a parcel.” Pons is “treated like a thing.” Even then the indignities are not over: commodification occurs as merchants vie to embalm the body or to design a stone monument for the grave—all actions, it must be highlighted, that render the body fixed and thinglike. One might conclude that the interior, rather than being the ideal expression of its inhabitant’s individuality, personality, and subjectivity, is instead representative of the death of all three, and perhaps even death itself, the ultimate inanimate.

47 Barthes 2004, 146: “Les anciennes sociétés s’arrangeaient pour que le souvenir, substitut de la vie, fût éternel et qu’au moins la chose qui disait la Mort fût elle-même immortelle.” Think of Freud’s patient fetishizing the athletic sport belt: “This piece of clothing covered up the genitals entirely and concealed the distinction between them. Analysis showed that it signified that women were castrated and that they were not castrated. . . . A fetish of this sort, doubly derived from contrary ideas, is of course especially durable” (Freud 1995, 156–157).

48 Balzac 1973, 311: “absolument comme un commis fait un paquet dans un magasin.” Pons is “traité comme une chose.”