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## «Those thousand ties, back then, to an ambiance»

### *Marcel Poëte's Iconographic Archive*

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**Abstract.** *This paper presents a recently discovered episode in the intellectual history of urbanism. It concerns theory and practice in the field in the first decades of the twentieth century when it was in the process of establishing itself as an academic discipline and a profession. I will demonstrate how the idea of ambiance as we understand it today can serve as a point of departure for questioning certain ideas and developments of that time. In doing so, I will seek to contribute to current research on urban ambiances by addressing the question of ambiance as a subject of historical inquiry. I will present an archive of iconographic documents, photographed on glass slides under the direction of Marcel Poëte (1860–1950), an archivist and historian working in Paris as of 1906 who soon became a central figure in the emerging discipline of Urbanism. In doing so, I will emphasize the manner in which the visual documents were used to develop dense, historical descriptions of urban life in the spaces of Paris, depicting them with extreme historical accuracy and, at the same time, through a form of empathetic reactivation of their sensual qualities.*

**Keywords:** *Marcel Poëte, image, memory, archive, iconography, urban history, historiography, urbanism, Paris, urban experience*

This paper concerns a research and planning tool created between 1907 the mid-1920's: a substantial image archive, in the collections of the Historical Library of the City of Paris which had remained virtually unknown for at least fifty years<sup>1</sup> It is comprised of 18,000 visual documents reproduced photographically on glass slides. The majority of the images are eye-level views of the built urban form and inhabitants of Paris, dating from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century up to and including the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the archive itself was being created.

As early as 1906, when Marcel Poëte became the Chief Archivist and Historian of the Historical Library of the City Paris (*Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris*, or *BHVP*), he began developing transfers of knowledge, methods and questions from his original disciplinary field (archival conservation and history) to the domain that would by 1913 be known as urbanism. Today he is known mainly to specialists and

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1. *Unexamined for decades, this author's research has begun to explore the history of its creation of its uses (Melemis 2014).*

to francophone historians, architects and city planners for such works as the *Introduction à l'urbanisme* and *Une vie de cité. Paris de sa naissance à nos jours*.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his career, in addition to his research activities, he was a founder and director of research and educational oriented institutions both for historians and for future urbanists, and was a key participant as of 1912 in discussions about future transformations and urban extensions that would ultimately give birth to what we now call Greater Paris. Poète chose to focus on the principle of adaption of inhabitants to the urban *milieu*, and, inversely, of that milieu to their needs; thus to an idea of urbanism as a continuous process of social *evolution*. As I will show, one of important motivation for creating the image archive was to provide a vehicle for exploring the sensual qualities of the urban milieu. I will argue that, while extremely different from contemporary approaches to, and definitions of, urban ambiance, the archive project bears a strong relation to them. At the same time, I will insist upon the unique, thoroughly historical approach to urban ambiance that the iconographic archive allows.



Figure 1. "Urban life in its frame" (cadre)  
4 glass slides of lithographs depicting Paris Boulevards  
made between 1820 et 1850

2. Respectively, (1929), Paris, Alcan and (1924-1932), 4 vols, Paris, Picard.

## Paris reactivated

As they were collected, the images were referenced topically and topographically in a card catalogue, most often with mention of the date of creation of the photographed original. Poëte and his collaborators could use the projections as a tool to minutely observe a given place, make connections between different places and/or times in history, between important or minor events and scenes every life, etc. Yet beyond this, sequentially viewing large numbers of projected engravings and drawings would have created the illusion of actually *being in* the represented spaces, particularly given that these were often earlier states of places well known to the viewer from his or her everyday experience. Plunged into the city's spaces through such sequences of images, one would have had the sense of being able *move around* in them, and in doing so to bring their intrinsic sensual qualities *back to life*. In a time that when many historians were obstinately defending a vision of their discipline as a new 'science',<sup>3</sup> Poëte did not shy away from the writing of evocative historic narrations seeking to translate or interpret the experiences reactivated by the images. It would be difficult to avoid connecting Poëte's particular use of sequences of projected fixed images as of 1906 to contemporary events such as the creation of cinematic image, in France less than ten years earlier.<sup>4</sup> What can be said with certainty is that the *chartiste* was an attentive reader of Henri Bergson who must have known the famous passages by the French philosopher defining concepts as 'creative evolution', the *image-souvenir* or the 'cinematic mechanism of thought'.<sup>5</sup> Poëte clearly saw the philosopher's writings, as well as those of Gabriel Tarde, as offering some fresh reasons to consider the writing of history as a means of engaging with the future.

## Milieu, image, ambiance

'Limited both by the rules of the corporations and those related to the representation of religious subjects', Poëte writes one of his earliest published texts of 1906 on the rule-bound production of 'primitive' artists of the last century of the Middle Ages, 'the personality of the artist was also subject to particularities of milieu; attached by a thousand ties, of that time, to an *ambiance* (the italics are mine).<sup>6</sup> The word appears to mean something quite similar in that context to what it signifies to us today. Like many that would follow, the text suggests the importance of spatially situating a given protagonist and the objects surrounding him or her, in this case artists at work in 13<sup>th</sup> century Paris and their works, in order to understand the relation of mutual influence existing between the protagonist in question and the environment that he or she inhabits. The iconographic archive that will start taking

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3. *The idea of history as « science » was carried at that time by Henri Berr, editor of the Revue de synthèse historique, in collaboration with Lucien Lefebvre who go on to co-found the « École des annales ».*

4. *Poëte himself would develop several ideas for films, one of which, "Pour mieux connaître Paris", was realized in 1935.*

5. *In particular, the publication of L'Évolution créatrice in 1907 was of durable importance to Poëte, who would write about the « creative evolution » of Paris in the mid-1930's.*

6. *« Ainsi, limité à la fois par les règles des corporations et celles qui touchent à la représentation des sujets religieux, la personnalité de l'artiste l'est encore par les influences particulières du milieu ; par ces mille liens qui rattachaient alors étroitement à l'ambiance. » (Poëte 2006).*

form that year is clearly intended to build on the productions of artists that portray the city, using their works as point of departure for the broadest possible approach to everyday life.

In the many texts and public exhibitions on Paris that Poète will create or oversee between 1906 and 1915, the visual, sonic, kinesthetic, olfactory qualities of the city are often clearly *invoked*, if not always explicitly identified and analyzed, as captors and as agents of the city's "life". They are filled with dense descriptions of what the author called "urban life"; approached from the point of view of a person walking in the city, speaking of people (sometimes also animals) and objects in movement, of urban métiers in the street, forms of leisure practices, the sexual charge that could be felt in certain places etc. At the same time, the texts frequently offer detailed observations about what Poète called the "frame" or, more rarely, the "décor", for urban life, that is the urban landscapes that unfolded around inhabitants or visitors in movement. In constant interaction, urban "life" and "frame", constituted what Poète named over and over, using a vitalist terminology, the "physiognomy" of the "urban organism."

## The erudite and the popular

The photographed images of the collection served a basis for series of public lectures and exhibitions at the BHVP held annually as of 1907, up to and into the first years of the Great War, and then again after it.<sup>7</sup> Projections were used during the lectures, and the exhibitions mixed written annotations, paper prints of images or details from them and original documents. The images were arranged into thematic or topographic groups in such a way as to encourage the movement of the eye from any one view to the others immediately surrounding it. In accordance with the diversity of the audience the programs appealed to—amateur and professional historians, architects and urbanists, civil servants and amateurs of city iconography—the collection process for the iconographic archive suggests a quite consciously cultivated ambiguity. It is essentially the product of methodical and exhaustive search of enormous proportions, by trained *chartistes*. However it was also enriched with images loaned by a number enthusiastic amateur collectors of Paris iconography. Amateur collections of "picturesque" city scenes had been widespread in Europe as early as the 1830's, well before Poète decided to convince "serious" historians to consider them. Yet the phenomenon grew in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which saw an explosive development in image culture, mainly reflected in the success of illustrated magazines and newspapers. As of the mid-1890's, a prosperous company, the Société Molteni, sold a recently invented version of the magic lantern incorporating an electric bulb, as well as extensive collections of slides for use with it. The lantern slides of the iconographic collection were created by that company.

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7. Seven programs (exhibitions and conferences) were presented between 1907 and 1915, followed by one more in 1919.

## Towards an archaeology of the gaze

The vast majority of the images comprising the archive offer views that – in Poëte’s words – “resemble what the eye sees”.<sup>8</sup> They covered an historical period opening with the emergence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century of figural, “naturalistic”<sup>9</sup> representation of the population, built forms and spaces of cities, most often grouped into annotated atlases or collections. up to the moment when the collection itself was being formed. Alongside the unity of intention that is expressed iconographic archive, one could consider it as sort of collection of collections, each drawn, reproduced, sold and consulted in different eras, in different ways and by different audiences. It traverses three distinctly different modes of representation – roughly, the classical, the romantic and the “modern”. Each of the three modes is a particular codification of the city *as seen*. Yet it is safe to say that in each case what is depicted is a particular set of modalities of sensual experience affecting the body in movement which evoke, to different degrees, what would be heard or smelled or felt. Perhaps taking his cue from the images themselves, Poëte was constantly attentive to the emergence of walking in Paris – of the *promenade* – as a defined practice as of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, linked to a new sense of the city as a spectacle imbued with esthetic qualities and thus an opening to self-conscious experience. The promenade, or simply the experience of walking (or riding on horseback, or in a vehicle) in everyday life provides the discursive thread through which the historian unfolds a descriptive, empirical view of places and of the urban life they contain.

Artists such as Matthäus Mérian, Israël Sylvestre or Abraham Bosse produced sequences of views that define a visual promenade – they themselves use the term – starting with perspectival views depicting the city from a certain distance, often from a nearby hillside, then presenting exterior views from the visitor’s eye level as he or she approaches its gates (see Melemis 2014). These are followed by views of streets inside the city. Along with these came plans that represent the city as a sort of richly figural, three-dimensional, tilted surface. In his texts and study notes, Poëte constantly points out the uncertain status of many classical representations of urban landscapes, oscillating between the capture of the existing, the invention of partly fictitious scenes intended to distill their qualities, or to portray them as they might *ideally* be.

Following 1789 and above all through to the years of the July Monarchy, “romantic” artists refused to idealize urban spaces, preferring instead detailed historical scenes or vivid and picturesque everyday scene of street life. Sequences of engravings or lithographs by artists such as Louis Bacler d’Albe or Jean-Henry Marlet depicted, for example, series of views along the Seine or around the city’s walls. Irregular, unplanned aspects of the city’s form are seen as having positive esthetic value, especially where they offer traces of historical change. The rich interactions between

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8. The citation is taken from a manuscript of a lecture of 1912 found in the Poëte archives (BHVP)

9. The term refers to Philippe Descola’s writings on what he has named the « naturalist » visual régime.

historiography and visual art in this time, explored notably by Steven Bann<sup>10</sup>, were clearly a source for Poëte's evocative manner of writing history.

According to Poëte, the romantic representation of Paris dies suddenly by 1850, following the Revolution of 1848 but, more importantly for him, as a result of the effects of the daguerreotype on the urban imagination. The iconographic archive contained some of these, as well as numerous photographs by Marville and Atget. Their photographs and those of others existed in the collection alongside engravings and drawings of the same years, many of which were themselves reproductions made from photographs, most often in order to facilitate their use in publications. While imbued with an inherent theatricality, the more or less completely unpeopled photographs speak much more of the radical transformations that Paris and other cities were more and more subject to as of 1850, than of the effects of the concurrent changes to urban life. To perceive these, one needed to turn for example to caricatures (Poëte frequently used those of Daumier), advertising or commercial engravings that filled popular magazines.

The earlier exhibitions and series of lectures at the *Bibliothèque historique* presented chronologically distinct segments of the city's history and of its iconography. Later on however, the idea of walking (or the promenade) emerges as a transversal theme. Four hundred years of developments co-exist and interact, creating the urban substance of Paris in the present. And so a kind of reversal occurs, in which the history of the city seems to recede in favor of what one could consider an archaeology of the contemporary gaze. In the later exhibitions, more than ever, physical forms and forms of experience from the past are presented as interacting elements that mingle and affect each other in new and unexpected ways.

## Références

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## Auteur

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10. See Bann, S. (2011), *The Clothing of Clio*. Cambridge University Press.