Between Art and Artifact: The Photography of Abel Boulineau

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the function, classification, and re-contextualization of historical photographs as they are understood and digested by art museums. The Abel Boulineau *French Regional Life* collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), which I researched, re-organized, and re-attributed during the summer of 2010, provides a case study for this topic. I investigate the contingencies of meaning surrounding late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century photography, and the inadequacy of art historical models for interpreting works not originally created as aesthetic objects. I explore how museums must understand and grapple with its early photography, and the implications of re-contextualizing such collections within its institutional discourses. The work of producing an attribution places necessary emphasis on photographs as historical entities, and recovers information about their original creation and circulation. Surveying the *French Regional Life* collection reveals both the pragmatic and theoretical issues involved in making an analysis of early photography.
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Finally, I am blessed to have the support of my loved ones. I dedicate this work to them, and to those who are no longer with us.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

My thesis explores the function, classification, and re-contextualization of historical photographs as they are understood and digested by art museums. The *French Regional Life* collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), which I researched and re-organized as an intern in the summer of 2010, provides an extended case study for considering this topic. Comprising 1702 eight-by-thirteen-centimeter gelatin silver printing-out-paper prints, the collection depicts rural and town life across several regions in France, spanning from 1897 to 1916. The AGO acquired the works through a private donor in 2005. At that time, the anonymous collection was dubiously attributed to Émile Fréchon (1848-1921), but I made a definitive attribution to Abel-Marie Nicolas Boulineau: an academic French painter who is completely unknown in the history of photography. During my internship I identified three prints in the collection that he used as source documents for his art work – two of which he re-created in their entirety as large scale oil paintings.

Building upon this earlier research, my thesis investigates the contingencies of meaning surrounding late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century photography, and the difficulty – if not futility – of using art historical models to interpret works not originally created as aesthetic objects. There is no physical or archival evidence indicating Boulineau exhibited the *French Regional Life* prints. And unlike his paintings, the prints are not signed, which suggests he did not consider them art objects. Attributing the archive to Boulineau was the first step in recovering some of the missing information regarding the circumstances of its production and circulation. But an attribution alone cannot address how a museum must understand and grapple with its early photography, and the implications of re-contextualizing those collections within its
institutional discourses. How does an art gallery begin to process and categorize a large, anonymous, early collection of photographs? What are the limits of what museums can know and make known about such collections? How does the institutional function of photographs affect the creation and regulation of their meaning?

My thesis takes the following shape. The following chapter, the literature review, discusses the theoretical background of my project, paying particular attention to research applicable to the function and classification of historical photography within museological contexts. Chapter III characterizes the arrival of the *French Regional Life* collection at the AGO, and analyzes three texts written about the body of work *before* the acquisition took place. It also addresses the institutional history of the works, including the reasons why it was acquired; how the museum dealt with the collection physically and intellectually; and what was expected from the intern assigned to the project. Chapter IV synthesizes the research I conducted over the course of my internship. It provides an outline of Boulineau’s biography, and also traces the scope and provenance of his collection. What subjects did he choose to document? How are they represented? What do the photographs themselves tell us about Boulineau’s life and work? This chapter takes up the attribution question while attending to the relationship between photography and painting in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter V locates Boulineau in the history of photography as a contemporary of Eugène Atget, who obsessively documented Paris and its environs with his camera, amassing an archive of over 10,000 works. Three photography scholars independently compared Boulineau with Atget, and so this chapter unpacks the parallels between them. The challenges of interpreting Atget’s photographs and the inconsistencies in his oeuvre offer fruitful ground for considering similar issues associated with the *French Regional Life* collection. The last chapter returns to Boulineau, and the exhibition of
his photography organized at the AGO following the attribution. It explains why classifying Boulineau’s complex body of work presents practical questions on how we are to understand photography in the museum context.

One of the most striking aspects of the *French Regional Life* collection is the multiplicity of readings the work invites. A strong case could be made for its categorisation as early travel photography, for it records the daily activities and itineraries of a leisure-class excursionist whose delight in nature is palpable. At the same time, the work appears proto-documentary in the recurrence of portraits of France’s working poor, and the sympathy with which the photographer captured them. There also remains the connection between Boulineau’s photography and his paintings, and the importance of positioning his name within the history of photo-based artists’ studies. Surveying the *French Regional Life* collection thus reveals both the pragmatic and theoretical issues involved in making an analysis of early photography.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review identifies and interprets published research applicable to the function, classification, and contextualization of historical photographs, with particular attention to how they are organized and understood by art museums and related institutions. The books and articles used in this review reveal the theoretical scope of scholarly writing on this topic. The review has been divided into three sections: “Photographic Collections and Institutions” examines the unique place held by photographic collections in the museum context, and begins to give shape to the theoretical and pragmatic issues that arise when working with such collections; “Photography and Discourse” analyzes the work and methodological approaches of the major theorists who consider the effects art historical discourses have had on photographic collections. “The Materiality of Photographic Images” reviews one of the seminal texts on object-based research and interpretation of photographs. It is the theoretical framework that most strongly influenced my primary research on the French Regional Life collection.

2.1 Photographic Collections and Institutions

The relationship between photographic collections and the repositories that aggregate them speaks to the multifaceted significance of photography. Museums such as the Smithsonian Institution in the United States have collected photographs for a number of reasons, as outlined in the introduction to At First Sight: Photography and the Smithsonian (2003). The institution houses over thirteen million photographic records, which include documents of biological specimens, geological surveys, astronomical views, motion studies, as well as fine art prints. The authors Merry A. Foresta, director of the Smithsonian Photography
Initiative, and Jeana Kae Foley, photo-historian, explain the multiple functions photographs have served in the museum context: to document collections of objects in institutional archives, to complement existing material displays, or to substitute for primary objects “too big, too far away, or too ephemeral” to retain within the museum. ¹ At First Sight is a helpful resource for beginning to grasp the multiple – and at times conflicting – values ascribed to photographic collections in museums, and it contains an impressive number of beautifully-reproduced images. But it fails to elucidate the more complex issues involved in amassing and interpreting photographs in such astonishing numbers.

The Museum and the Photograph: Collecting Photography at the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1853-1900 (1998) – a catalogue written by photo-curator Mark Haworth-Booth and nineteenth-century photo-historian Anne McCauley – offers a more detailed account of one institution’s photographic collecting practice. The institution’s first director, Henry Cole, enlisted the services of photographer Charles Thurston-Thompson to document and produce visual supports for its collection. Cole then began to acquire “artistic” photographs, extending the concept of documentation to include landscapes and architecture, nudes and portraits. McCauley usefully contextualizes mid nineteenth-century museological practices and activities in Western Europe by analyzing contemporaneous acquisition policies of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and those of several French repositories. She also outlines the analogous development of museums as collecting institutions, alongside the growth of the photographic medium.

Myths about artistic genius have been reaffirmed by the museum itself, argues Douglas Crimp in his essay “The Museum’s Old/The Library’s New Subject”. He posits that museum

¹ Smithsonian Institution, At First Sight, 14.
curators such as John Szarkowski have contrived a modernist, subjective position for the medium of photography, and in so doing, have ignored the “plurality of discourses in which photography has participated”. Crimp explores the ‘museumification’ of photographic works through the institutional case study of the New York Public Library, where art librarian Julia van Haafken discovered that the repository owned a large and valuable collection of vintage photographs in its book collection. After preparing an exhibition of the library’s most exceptional prints, van Haafken was promoted to director of the Photographic Collections Documentation Project, which is in the process of reclassifying the institution’s photographic materials according to artist, rather than subject. Crimp criticizes the flattening and reduction of photography to its aesthetic function; doing so dismantles the medium’s usefulness within other discursive practices, such as “information, documentation, evidence, illustration, and reportage”. Where Foresta and Foley merely acknowledge the rapidly changing nature of photographic collecting to reflect a more aesthetic impulse, Crimp views this institutional phenomenon as an attack on our understanding of the medium.

2.2 Photography and Discourse

One of the most important theorists to analyze photography in relation to discourse is Allan Sekula, who, in his essay “The Traffic in Photographs”, argues that the “tacit beliefs and formal conventions” situating our responses and attitudes toward the medium are determined by


and contribute to larger cultural, political, and economic forces. He claims photography is ‘haunted’ by two spectres – science and art – which, respectively, reduce the world to a series of knowable and possessable facts and objects, and satisfy a bourgeois conception of artistic subjectivity. Arguing against the ubiquitous claim that photography is a universal language, Sekula insists that photography rather depends on specific discursive conditions, “an overt or covert text”. The original context and meaning of photographs are suppressed upon their incorporation into archives and museums; it is the responsibility of photo-historians to expose the missing contexts in which photographs are created.

Writing one year after Sekula, Rosalind Krauss also insists on the primacy and recovery of the photograph’s original context. She selects two images with which to begin her argument: one an example of an art historical construction of landscape photography, and the other a photolithographic copy of the first, used to illustrate a Systematic Geology textbook. Both works, argues Krauss, convey two distinct strands of knowledge and “operate as representations within two separate discursive spaces” – one of science and the other of art. She finds fault with photography scholars who appropriate nineteenth-century photographic materials within the


6 Ibid, 16.

7 Krauss, Rosalind, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View”, 311.
institution of the museum, and who decide “ahead of time” that the “fundamental concepts of aesthetic discourse will be applicable to this visual archive”.

Writing nearly 30 years after Sekula and Krauss, Geoffrey Batchen takes a different approach to the relationship between photography and discourse. In “Snapshots: Art History and the Ethnographic Turn”, he asserts the vast majority of photographs are predictable, conservative, and repetitive in form and content, and are therefore unsuited to the art historical narrative ascribed to them. Using the study of snapshots within the history of photography as a metonym for the study of photography within art history, Batchen explores the “methodological questions that arise when art history is forced to confront the spectral presence of its other”. It is photographic discourse itself that requires change, and that must include a shift away from the creators of photographs to their owners – a re-conceptualization of history that would account for the medium’s circulation and reception. Batchen looks toward visual culture methodology as a means of erupting the history of photography from within, and transforming its parameters altogether.

2.3 The Materiality of Photographic Images

*Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004) is a collection of essays edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart. By examining the material properties behind the intention, creation, distribution, and consumption of photographs, Edwards and Hart

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8 Ibid, 315.


posit that the object-hood of photographs is essential to our understanding of them. The book’s contributors range academically from art historians, visual anthropologists, and photo-historians, but as a collection edited by the head of Photograph Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum and the head of Research at the London College of Communication, University of London, it favours an anthropological and post-colonial approach to its topic. It contains essays on photo-objects emerging from specific socio-cultural circumstances: photographic playing cards within Dutch colonial life, the photo-archive of a Portuguese diamond company in Angola, photographs as devotional icons in Tibet, and contemporary Print Club photography in Japan.

Photographs have been privileged for their image content as their primary defining characteristic, and histories of the medium have suppressed, in large part, a consideration of photographs as three-dimensional objects existing in space and time. Beaumont Newhall’s *The History of Photography* (1949) imposed an art-historical narrative on the medium that defined a canon of prime works premised on an aesthetic appreciation of images. Causal approaches to the history of the medium defined photography in terms of an abstract discourse related to state control. While technical histories of photography have approached a conceptual basis for thinking about the image as a material entity, they have not considered its life and trajectory after the moment of creation.

Edwards and Hart argue for the study of photographic images in tandem with their material forms, which comprise the technical and physical properties of the works, such as paper type and medium, and the presentational structures surrounding them, such as albums, mounts, and frames. The authors’ critical framework borrows from material culture analysis as well as social biography, stating that objects should be “understood as belonging in a continuing process
of production, exchange, usage and meaning”. ¹¹ Photographs contain traces of their histories – changes of ownership, physical location, or material interventions – and such traces have invested the objects with different values over time. ¹² These traces become “vital clues for understanding the historical potency of the image,” particularly as they “intersect with discourses of knowledge and power”. ¹³


¹² Ibid.

Chapter 3

*French Regional Life: Intellectual and Institutional History*

3.1 The French Regional Life Research Reports

Three texts were written about the *French Regional Life* collection before it was acquired by the AGO. One was meant to facilitate its circulation within the commercial art market, and two were written to enhance and expand its institutional accessibility. Taken together, these texts reveal some conflicting interpretations as to the nature, meaning, and value of the collection. This chapter explores the subjects and modes of interpretation that are emphasized and de-emphasized within the textual substructures of the archive, and the implications for the ways in which it was understood and contextualized over time. Examining the written records associated with *French Regional Life* offers a sense of how the collection was characterized at distinct moments by different people and institutional entities.

On 19 November 1997, the collection was auctioned through Christie’s in London, South Kensington. The lot description listed Émile Fréchon as the artist responsible for the works, which were aggregated under the title *French Country Life*, and dated circa 1900. The auction record’s overview statement offered a cursory summary of its contents: “A collection of more than 1100 gelatin silver prints including some duplicates, each approx. 7 x 5 in. or the reverse, the majority titled and dated in pencil and again on typescript labels on verso, in brown cloth filing box”. ¹⁴ Around the time the collection was auctioned, then, it had not been fully documented, nor had its scope of 1700 works been correctly estimated.

¹⁴ Christie’s, “Émile Fréchon: French country life, circa 1900”.

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The auction record’s lot notes presented a more compelling sketch of *French Country Life*, beginning with key details about Fréchon – the supposed artist. It states he was “best known for his monumental portraits of peasants and fisherfolk in Northern France, many of which were exhibited in ‘The Real France Explored by Émile Fréchon’ at the Royal Photographic Society in 1987”. The notes expand from the photographer’s exhibition history to his aesthetic, which is characterized as “straight photography” recording “the everyday life of the peasants in the subtle light of Northern France”. Even though *French Country Life* was not definitively attributed to Fréchon, the Christie’s auction record depicted it as such, and in this way, amplified the prints’ status as collectible art objects: products of a single creator with a distinct personal style. By highlighting the Royal Photographic Society’s Fréchon exhibition in the lot notes, Christie’s created an aura of artistic value and desirability about the works. At the same time, the selective inclusion of specific subjects Fréchon photographed – notably, there is no mention of his popular Algerian images – presented a logical genealogy between his known works and the prints in the lot of “cotton-spinners, steel-workers, washer-women, farmers milking their cows, potters… kitchen scenes, group portraits at the seaside, several market and café scenes, and images of children playing”. 

The anonymous donor, who purchased the collection at this auction with an eye to donating it to the AGO, made some physical and intellectual interventions on the archive. Prior to making the donation, it was necessary to account for the full scope and contents of the works

15 Ibid.

16 Christie’s, “Émile Fréchon: French country life, circa 1900”.

17 Ibid.
and arrange them accordingly. At the same time, the donor had to re-position them from a haphazard group of prints in a ‘brown cloth filing box’, to an institutionally attractive collection. The 1700-odd prints were divided between 10 burgundy box albums containing approximately 170 works each. Importantly, the donor took some steps to legitimize the collection’s attribution to Fréchon. The quaint designation the collection received from Christie’s – *French Country Life* – was re-christened in French to the weighty *L’Enquête Photographique de Fréchon et son Équipe*. This phrase was repeated on the title pages that appear in each volume, as well as on black labels embossed gold lettering attached to the spines of the volumes.

In terms of intellectual interventions on the archive, the donor commissioned a short, descriptive essay about *French Regional Life* from Ian Jeffrey. Jeffrey is an art historian who has written two popular introductions to photography intended for general audiences: *Photography: a Concise History* (1989), and *The Photography Book* (2005). His text served two different functions. First, it created an internal order and coherence for the collection, even if the order did not reach far beyond the aesthetic. His short essay “L’enquête Photographique de Frechon et son Équipe,” written sometime between 1997 and 2003, is included in the first volume of the archive. It is printed on the same thick beige paper as the collection’s title pages, which note the name and volume number of each of the ten albums. The essay and title pages together present the *French Regional Life* collection as a unified, institutionally accessible entity with a particular antiquated – and very beautiful – appeal. They are documents that would be seen by curators, researchers, acquisition committee members, and other select individuals related to the art and museum community.

The second function of Jeffrey’s text was to offer a preliminary sense of the collection – the types of works it contained, what they look like, and how many there were – and the reasons
why it may be a desirable acquisition for an art museum. For this reason, his essay focuses
mainly on the aesthetic qualities of the pictures, rather than on their historical significance, and it
elides over the trouble of the attribution question – as I discuss in the next chapter. Jeffrey
specifically emphasizes the “European aesthetic of the era” (the Belle Epoque, or the Edwardian
Age) manifest in the works, which he typifies as an engagement with the world through the
senses. 18 He continues, “As an ideology it held that we were sentient beings deeply implicated in
all things auditory, edible and visible”. 19 Our material and natural environments informed this
aesthetic, which was disseminated in the works of artists such as Gustave Courbet. 20

Attending next to the French Regional Life images themselves, Jeffrey understands the
works as crystallizing the “traditional sights and sounds” of provincial France: “clog-making,
knife-grinding, hand-washing in the banks of streams, marketing and conversing”. 21 He asks,
“Wherein then does the art of these photographs lie?” 22 In addressing this question, he turns
briefly to the genius of the photographer himself, who, he writes, “chose well or was drawn over
and over to the kind of site which delivered up contemporary experience” – sometimes within a
single scene or gesture. 23 For instance, a series of pictures documenting a trek through the
Pyrenees is punctuated amusingly with an image of walkers queuing up for a drink of milk from

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
a cow, visible around the back of the kiosk. Jeffrey also notes the aesthetically satisfying quality of the images of washing-houses and market scenes; these views are rich in detail and rewarding in their configuration of groups, which, Jeffrey argues, are the artist’s best photographic subject.  

The most interesting and insightful part of the text concerns the photographer’s attention to landscape, and of our spatial relationship with the world. Jeffrey describes such pictures as an expression of “distance to be travelled”:

They are not exactly landscapes, rather parts on a continuum: a section of road leading into the distance, or a piece of a town thoroughfare. It is an art of the finite, of delimited experience on measured roads. On many of these roads you will find a figure walking or just standing. Obviously the figure is to give some sense of scale, but it is also there to suggest that a place or stretch of landscape exists as a site which might be sensed, traversed and experienced.  

The importance of travel to the views in French Regional Life is a key way to interpret the works. Jeffrey could have added that the photographer himself was travelling such roads and landscapes while assembling this collection, and it is therefore unsurprising the works reflect the nature of that experience. He also may have developed the idea of a “distance to be travelled” in terms of the aesthetic pleasures of the landscape expressed in tourist photography. As historians such as Peter D. Osborne (Travelling Light: Photography, Travel and Visual Culture), James R. Ryan, Joan Schwartz (Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination), and


Rebecca Solnit (*River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*) have demonstrated, the later nineteenth century was an age characterized by an increase of encounters with previously inaccessible places, and photography offered a means of preserving a record of landscapes about to disappear under industrial expansion.

The third text about *French Regional Life*, written by vintage photography dealer and photo-historian Ken Jacobson in 2004, was also commissioned by the anonymous donor. Jacobson had been researching Emile Fréchon for a book on Orientalist photography, and had requested permission to view the donor’s collection of alleged Fréchon prints.\(^{26}\) The donor agreed, and Jacobson was able to examine the works for one day.\(^{27}\) Perhaps as an informal exchange, the donor asked Jacobson to produce a short essay about the collection with regard to the Fréchon attribution, and his research into the collection’s provenance formed part of the basis of his report.\(^{28}\) When Jacobson wrote the report, he was not aware of what purpose it would serve or who – beyond the donor – would study it.\(^{29}\)

Unlike the first commissioned essay, Jacobson’s text pays great attention to the facts that can be gleaned from studying the collection. Where Jeffrey argues for the aesthetic quality of the prints, Jacobson sees their uniqueness as historical objects as their principle strength. To him, the collection represents “one of the most remarkable pre-World War I photographic surveys of rural

\(^{26}\) Jacobson, Personal correspondence, 7 September 2011.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

\(^{28}\) Such an exchange may have been tipped in the favour of the donor, since researching a collection can increase its value with the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (CCPERB).

\(^{29}\) Jacobson, Personal correspondence, 7 September 2011.
life in any country”.

Jacobson quickly outlines the geographical breadth covered within the archive, alongside the typical subjects and themes found in the work. Like Jeffrey, he makes note of the key market scenes and studies of washerwomen the photographer returned to time and again. He concludes, “These are motifs useful to an artist and it would be surprising if the photographer(s) was not either an artist or had the interests of artists in mind”.

Jacobson’s work for his research report stemmed not only from scrutinizing the prints themselves, but also from a significant amount of digging into their provenance, which included identifying and speaking with the previous owner of the collection. This conversation gave him important insights into the history and function of the French Regional Life prints before they were acquired by the donor. Jacobson was therefore well-equipped to address the problematic nature of the photographs’ authorship, and in particular, the Fréchon attribution. Tracing the genealogy of the collection to its earliest known owner, Dynevor Rhys – an eccentric artist and Francophile who “produced a number of fashion illustrations… for the Delineator Magazine in the early 1930’s” – allows him to consider the archive’s connection to Fréchon, a friend of Rhys. Jacobson states, “Because of this known friendship, there had previously been an attribution of the rural photographs to Fréchon,” adding that “it now seems unlikely” the photographs were actually made by that photographer.

Jacobson attends to the Fréchon connection for two reasons: first, that exploring his friendship with Rhys might “illuminate a sense of the circle of friends and artistic interests” of

the latter; and second, to unravel the dissimilarities between Fréchon’s known work and the contents of the Rhys archive. In terms of the photographs’ materiality, Jacobson carefully notes that Fréchon “printed on an artistic laid paper in various shades of bistre and rust”, typically eight by ten inches in size.34 By contrast, the French Regional Life photographs are gelatin silver printing-out-paper prints, and seven by five inches in size. Many of them are dense and dark, with tones ranging from greys and browns to almost purple. Jacobson remarks that Fréchon did not use professional models when photographing rustic life and rural workers, and he had a talent for arranging large groups of his subjects “into relatively relaxed and artistically harmonious compositions”.35 These configurations appear palpably formal and inert when compared with the more spontaneous gatherings of people who appear in French Regional Life. While there are some images that clearly have been composed by the photographer, there is frequently a sense that the subjects are unaware of the camera’s presence.36 Ultimately, Jacobson concludes, “the photographs of Émile Fréchon and those in the [former] Rhys Collection form two of the most notable groups of French rural life,” but beyond that, a connection between the two bodies of work has yet to be discovered.

3.2 Institutional History

Maia-Mari Sutnik, former Curator of Photography at the AGO (and presently the Curator of Special Photography Projects), first became aware of the French Regional Life collection through the anonymous donor, who was based in the United Kingdom. The two arranged for

35 Ibid.
Sutnik to view the collection in person, and after doing so, she immediately agreed to move forward with the acquisition. Before the AGO took possession of the works, the archive was reorganized. Employing a registrar to assist with the project, the donor re-housed the 1,702 photographs in mylar album sleeves secured within ten four-ring box volumes. At Sutnik’s suggestion, the registrar began to organize the collection by region and date, according to the inscriptions on the versos of the prints. But this task proved impossible to complete within the time allotted to the project; many inscriptions were nearly illegible, and the dates were inconsistent. The result was that the collection arrived at the AGO in a partly-organized, partly-random configuration.

Sutnik had several reasons for acquiring the collection for the AGO. It presented valuable possibilities for “scholarly study, research, debate, and future exhibitions”.\(^\text{37}\) French Regional Life also filled a substantial gap in the AGO’s photography collection; before the acquisition, the museum had “no material of this kind” – that is, French material from the turn of the twentieth century.\(^\text{38}\) Moreover, the collection represented to Sutnik the changing nature of the photography industry, from the commercial production of studio photographers, to the artistic, self-motivated production of amateur photographers.\(^\text{39}\) Sutnik commented on this shift in the research report she wrote about the collection for the AGO’s photography acquisition committee. Both the geography of the collection and the type of photographic activity it represented, then, made

\(^{37}\) Sutnik, Maia-Mari. “Emile Frechon.”


\(^{39}\) Sutnik, Maia-Mari. “Emile Frechon.”
*French Regional Life* a significant addition to the AGO’s collection, and it would allow such holdings to expand.40

Once the acquisition was approved by the AGO’s photography committee, Sutnik submitted her report in an application to the Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board (CCPERB): an independent tribunal of the Department of Canadian Heritage that certifies cultural property for income tax purposes. The governmental web site about CCPERB states that, in this role, it makes determinations with respect to the "outstanding significance and national importance" and the fair market value of objects or collections donated or sold to designated Canadian museums, art galleries, archives and libraries”. 41 Cultural property certification puts a limitation on the circulation of such objects, and also conveys significant tax benefits to the donor. CCPERB’s functions and activities are not unlike those in other nations and contexts, such as the Ministry of Culture and Communication in France.

When writing her research report, Sutnik admitted to being skeptical about the possibility that Fréchon was the maker, but insisted it was necessary to approach the collection with this attribution in mind when beginning the research process. Fréchon offered a useful entry point into the works because, at some instance in the collection’s history, he was believed to be the principle photographer responsible for the project. Investigating the Fréchon connection was also

40 A Eugene Atget acquisition, Sutnik suggested, would be a logical next step to continue filling this gap in the AGO’s collection. Sutnik, Maia-Mari. Personal conversation.

41 Canadian Heritage, “Canadian Cultural Property Export Review Board”.

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important because at some point he may have owned the archive – which could explain why he was credited with its creation.  

The questionable nature of the attribution enabled Sutnik to consider the dialogue between commercial and independently-motivated work. She composed the report on the premise that the pictures had been created by Fréchon, while also taking into account and analyzing the differences between the photographer’s picturesque, tourist images of Algeria, and the body of work he produced of rural France, which were “rendered with much greater subtlety and unmannered observance”. Acknowledging the uncertainty of the Fréchon attribution, Sutnik presented the case that photographers who make work commercially will often produce very different personal material – both in terms of style and content. On the basis of its aesthetic and historic significance, as well as the interest it would generate in further discussion, debate, and study, the board decided to certify the collection as cultural property.

While Sutnik began defining the collection’s historical and conceptual framework, a registrar at the gallery accounted for its physical structure. He assigned temporary AGO identification numbers to the works, and inserted corresponding labels into the album sleeves with the photographs. (This task was never completed, however – the prints in the last two volumes were unlabeled when I began working with the collection in 2010.) The registrar also inventoried the collection using an Excel index, which was later imported into the AGO’s database. The inventory included shortened versions of the photographs’ French inscriptions, listing Fréchon as the artist. Once the objects in the collection became certified cultural property,


43 Sutnik, Maia-Mari. “Emile Frechon.”
the registrar assigned accession numbers to the works. These numbers signified the collection’s position among the institution’s permanent assets.

After the collection was physically accounted for and documented, the next step would have been its full cataloguing. But as Sutnik explained, the AGO did not have the resources to devote to the project.\(^{44}\) She asserted that the *French Regional Life* volumes did not lie dormant in the Prints and Drawings collection. They were brought out occasionally for informal viewings and examined for educational purposes – to demonstrate, for instance, the printing-out-paper photographic process. Even though nothing occurred with the collection at an official institutional level, Sutnik noted, about “four or five” of the photographs were displayed in wall cases for an educational exhibit about French painting.\(^{45}\) Sutnik explained that in her role as curator of photography, she was not involved in planning this exhibition, which rather fell under the jurisdiction of the education department. She was able to confirm, however, that the prints would have been displayed under Fréchon’s name, because he was listed as the artist in the AGO’s internal records.

While the *French Regional Life* collection did not remain a passive entity within the institution, its function was limited by its lack of internal cohesion. Physically, the structure of the collection was imperfect. Attempts to organize it by date and region had not been completed before the AGO accessioned the material numerically, in the order by which it had arrived at the gallery. Intellectually, the collection was understudied. Research into the scope, content, and authorship of the prints had been relatively superficial in treatment. The result was that it was

\(^{44}\) Sutnik, Maia, Personal conversation, 25 January 2011.

very difficult to access the material in any meaningful way. For this reason, the photography curators at the gallery determined that it would be an ideal project to be undertaken by an intern, who would catalogue the material, confirm or otherwise engage with the attribution question, and organize the prints in a more accessible way. 46

Chapter 4

The French Regional Life Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario

In the summer of 2010, I interned at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) as a Collection Information and Research Assistant, under the supervision of Sophie Hackett (Assistant Curator, Photography) and Maia-Mari Sutnik (Curator, Special Photography Projects). The initial 12-week internship project was to research and reorganize an anonymous collection of photographs titled French Regional Life – activities that would prepare the collection for full cataloguing at a later date, and that would allow me to assess its future exhibition and publication possibilities. My work was particularly focused on researching the attribution, with the hope of positively identifying the photographer(s) who created the collection. This chapter describes the provenance, scope, and content of the collection, and outlines the primary research I conducted during my internship. It details how a single inscription on the verso of a print led me to make a positive attribution to the photographer, and the effect this attribution has had on the way the AGO would approach and make sense of the works.

4.1 Provenance

French Regional Life, which once belonged to Dynevor Rhys, consists of 1702 five-by-seven-inch gelatin silver printing-out-paper prints dating from 1897 to 1916. The photographs are contact printed from glass plate negatives, which have not survived with the collection. Depicting rural and town life across several regions in France – Brittany, Haute-Savoie, Haute-

Marne, and the Midi-Pyrénées, to name a few – the photographs feature people and trades, women and children, tourists, market scenes, and landscapes. In his research report, titled ‘The Dynevor Rhys Collection of French Rural Life’, Jacobson states that Rhys gave the collection to his close friend Harold Nelson, a French literature professor at Cambridge.\(^49\) The travel writer Noel Barber later facilitated the loan of the archive to the Popper photographic agency, likely during the 1960s, so that Nelson “might earn some money from selling the reproduction rights”.\(^50\) Founded in 1934 by the Czech journalist Paul Popper, the photographic agency amassed a vast collection of press-related photography. The Popper agency’s holdings represented one of the largest photographic collections in the United Kingdom, and they were acquired by Getty Images in 2007.\(^51\)

The origins of *French Regional Life* were unclear. Prior to its arrival at the AGO, the collection had been dubiously attributed to Rhys’ friend Émile Fréchon (1848-1921), a photographer known for his commercial views of Algeria, and also for his stylized compositions of villagers and mariners in northern France. The latter images earned Fréchon the accolade, in the *Revue de la Photographie*, as the ‘Millet of photography’\(^52\) – after Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875), a painter famous for his scenes of peasants and rural life. When the AGO acquired *French Regional Life* from the anonymous donor in 2005, it took the form of ten burgundy box


\(^{50}\) Ibid., 2.


\(^{52}\) Sutnik, “Émile Fréchon,”2.
volumes housing approximately 170 prints each. Jeffrey’s short descriptive essay, included in the first volume of *French Regional Life*, does not identify Fréchon definitively as the author of the collection. But he does allude to the possibility in the last paragraph of his text:

> Who the photographer is for certain only time will tell. There is plenty of evidence on which to work for many of his subjects are named and even his home is identified. There are also pictures of photographers at work, including an Abbe Feldmann taking pictures in the Pyrenees. The Royal Photographic Society owns 57 pictures by Fréchon. These seem to be the work of a rural Atget. Their virtue is that they have a lot of Atget’s objectivity about them.  

Earlier in the report, Jeffrey draws a comparison between Eugène Atget and the anonymous maker of *French Regional Life*, stating that Atget’s work offers an urban counterpoint to the rural views in the collection. By concluding his analysis with a strikingly similar Atget-Fréchon association, Jeffrey indirectly suggests that Fréchon is the maker, while simultaneously validating the aesthetic value of the collection.

### 4.2 Physical Properties

Nearly all of the photographs were titled by the maker in pencil au verso, indicating the region, place, names, and professions of the people depicted. Some of the notations include the subjects’ addresses, along with the words ‘Á Envoyer’, suggesting that the photographer sometimes sent duplicates to his subjects (or clients). The amount of detail and immediacy of these notations, which would have been written in the presence of the people and landscapes he was describing, indicates they were not added at a later time by another person or institution.

53 Jeffrey, “L’enquête photographique de Frechon et son équipe,” 4-5.
Moreover, the consistent penmanship of the inscriptions suggests the collection was created by a single maker, or at the very least, assembled by a single person.\(^{54}\)

The artist included inventory numbers preceding his notations, which are generally located in the upper-left corner of the prints’ versos. These numbers are not exclusive and do not follow a chronological sequence. In a set of photographs documenting the town of Annecy, for example, approximately five prints might be inscribed ‘1 – Annecy’, followed by another five titled ‘2 – Annecy’, and so on. Occasional gaps in the numbering sequence suggest the archive is incomplete, and that in its original form, it would have been much larger. (Notably, Jacobson’s research reports states, “The Rhys archive was said to be originally twice as large but half the collection somehow went missing”\(^ {55}\).) The earliest prints in the collection, taken in the Guingamp region in 1897, contain inventory numbers reaching into the 40s, but those numbered in the 20s and 30s are not accounted for among the 1702 prints owned by the AGO. Other undocumented *French Regional Life* prints may exist elsewhere in private or public collections, or they may be lost altogether.

Approximately 430 photographs have adhesive labels affixed to their versos.\(^ {56}\) These labels, which vaguely relate to the artist’s inscriptions, appear to have been added by a non-French speaking institution. Marked with the identifying initials, ‘PP/RHY’, they most likely originate from the Popper Photographic agency, to which Harold Nelson loaned Rhys’ collection

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\(^{54}\) Further research into the collection led me to revise this assumption, which I address later.

\(^{55}\) Jacobson,“The Dynevor Rhys Collection of French Rural Life,” 2.

\(^{56}\) The adhesive presents a serious conservation issue for the images, and the photo conservator at the AGO is currently in the process of removing some of the labels.
during the 1960s. The labels were composed on a typewriter, and contain several misspellings, or otherwise incorrect and incomplete information. It is clear the primary cataloguer attempted to translate portions of the artist’s notations, but where it was impossible to decipher them, simply invented a caption. For instance, a print titled by the maker in barely legible script, ‘‘à vieux Pauze’’ – located in the Pyrénées region – is labeled ‘Returning from a Mountain Tour’. These labels were treated as factual titles by the first person at the AGO to begin inventorying French Regional Life, and as a result, the AGO’s database contained inaccurate information. An important part of my internship, therefore, was to fact-check all information, and reassign accurately-translated English titles to the object records.

Most of the prints are dated individually au verso with the year, and often the month, of their creation. A smaller portion of the prints note specific dates. Only the months between April and September are accounted for among the photographs in the collection, suggesting that the maker made excursions every summer to document regions across France. The collection includes thick yellow index cards slipped into the Mylar album sleeves, which state the region, towns visited, and dates in large, inked, upper-case letters. Where dates are absent from the prints themselves, the index cards offer some insight into the chronology of the photographer’s travels. Because the cards contain information not always included in the inscriptions proper, they were probably assigned to the collection by the maker, though perhaps much later in his life. The variance in spelling of place names (Charolles vs. Charollen, for example), along with the occasional inaccuracy of dates (the index card for Barbazan is dated an impossible 1809), suggests they were added well after the time of the photographs’ creation.

One distinctive feature of the collection is that the silhouettes created by clips holding the paper in the printing frame are apparent in nearly all of the prints. This trait, along with the
vignetting effect often seen in the upper corners of the photographs, is reminiscent of work by Eugène Atget, who produced studies for artists and architects. As Jacobson notes, Atget made such studies during the same time period represented in this collection. He continues, ‘not only the documentary intention, but the breadth of coverage of rural France seems nearly comparable in quantity to that of Atget’s coverage of Paris’.  

For the most part, the images in *French Regional Life* are realized with compositional and technical excellence, containing a great deal of visual interest within the modest scale of the frame. Yet it is important to note the variance in the overall oeuvre when considering the collection as a whole. The artist was not an expert at making photographs. Without taking into account the many images that are slightly blurry, over-exposed, or under-exposed, there are over 30 prints made from broken negatives, or from negatives the photographer later destroyed, if his inscriptions are to be believed. These errors are not only present in the very early works, but rather seem to have persisted over time. What interests me about the inconsistent quality of the photographs is the preservation of such broken prints within the context of the archive. Their ability to communicate visual information is compromised, and yet the maker nonetheless elected to save them, such that they – like the better pictures – have survived in remarkably good condition. But why would any photographer – professional or amateur – preserve his mistakes? I believe the reason is that the collection stood, for him, as a sort of diary recording the people, places, and landscapes he had seen, nearly all of which he described in detail on the versos of the prints. In this way, the photographs function more like documents than aesthetic objects, though as I will demonstrate, some were certainly created with art works in mind.

4.3 Attribution

I began my research on the *French Regional Life* collection by methodically going through the volumes to decipher, transcribe, and translate the photographer’s original French notations. Two weeks into my internship, I discovered a rare first-person inscription: ‘*Auberive – l’Avenue de l’Abbatiale – où je suis né le 16 mars 1839*’. At that moment it was clear the collection could not have been made by Fréchon, who was born nine years later in Seine-Maritime.\(^5\) Knowing the birth place and date of the photographer, I contacted the Haute-Marne departmental archives, which houses registries of births, deaths, and marriages for all communities in the region. An archivist responded to my query about accessing electronic copies of Auberive’s parish records for the 1800s, stating that the registry had been scanned and made available on-line.\(^6\) The town had a small birth rate during the mid-nineteenth century, and consequently there was no question that the name of the infant born on that date was the name of the photographer – Abel-Marie Nicolas Boulineau.


\(^6\) *L’équipe des Archives de la Haute-Marne*, personal correspondence.
Abel Boulineau was born to parents Abel-Joseph Boulineau, aged 36, and Bathilde Chavet, aged 26, on 16 March 1839. His father recorded the birth in Auberive’s parish registry the following day. It appears the Boulineaus were an itinerant family, with roots spread across the country. Abel’s brother, Aristide Boulineau (1841-1912), was born on 22 October 1841 in Cozes, France, located some 700 kilometers away from Auberive. Both Abel and Aristide were artists and painters, and the latter attended the École de Dessin de Bordeaux, where Abel may have studied as well. Aristide debuted in the Paris salon in 1868, and he exhibited there in 1870 and 1876.

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60 Archives Departementales de la Haute-Marne, 1540-1932, E dépôt - d'Ageville à Chameroy.
63 Ibid.
The Boulineau family was politically and socially well-connected. Bathilde was likely related to Emmanuel Chavet, the mayor of St. Bonnet-de-Viellevigne, whom Boulineau photographed with his family when he visited St. Bonnet in 1904. Furthermore, an inscription on a photograph of Abel’s relatives indicates that Suzanne Boulineau – possibly Abel’s sister – married and had two children with Frederic de Selves, brother to the highly influential government official, Justin de Selves. Boulineau produced beautiful, intimate portraits of the young Jeanne and Henri de Selves, as well as Eugenie Balguerie (nee Boulineau), when he travelled to the family’s estate in Barbazan (see Figure 2).

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64 Assemblee nationale, France, “Chavet, Victor-Emmanuel.”

65 Wright, Anceau, and Hazareesingh, Les Préfets De Gambetta, 217.
Beyond his archive at the AGO, which has yielded several clues about his life and work, little information is available on Boulineau’s biography. The National Ministry of Education named Boulineau an officer of its academy in 1886.66 He then became an instructor of painting and drawing at the prestigious Association Polytechnique in Paris (now called l’Ecole Polytechnique),67 where he met his friend, mentor, and fellow painter Edmond Louis Dupain, also a professor at that institution.68 Dupain presented him as a member of the Société des Artistes Français in 1914.69 Nine years earlier, Boulineau had photographed his friend painting the Château Rouge in Conflans – a touching portrait that includes a small pencil sketch of Dupain at work, au verso (see Figure 3). As of 1914, and perhaps sooner, Boulineau had a Paris address at 15 Rue de Cherche-Midi.70


68 Bacon, Parisian Art and Artists, 88.


70 Ibid.
From what can be understood by the *French Regional Life* collection, after 1910 Boulineau’s photographic production seemed to wane, and there is no record of him making photographs after 1916. It seems he turned his attention more fully to painting after he became a Société member. With the society’s intervention in 1920, Boulineau received compensation for damage to his art work after his studio flooded.\(^{71}\) The flood may partially explain why there are so few Boulineau paintings in circulation, but more likely is that the works themselves are not

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\(^{71}\) Société des artistes français, 1920, *Compte-rendu des travaux de la Société des artistes français.*
exceptional. One of his better-known paintings, *Lavandières sur la Rance* (titled elsewhere as *Les Lavandières*), was poorly reviewed after its exhibition in Bordeaux in 1900. The reviewer stated Boulineau had conceived the composition well, but executed it without effect.\(^{72}\) It is unsurprising, then, that he only debuted in the Paris salon in 1926, at the age of 87. He exhibited there for the next two years.\(^{73}\) Boulineau’s last recorded address was in Neuilly-Sur-Seine.\(^{74}\) He died in 1934 at the Galignani retirement home there, and news of his death was published in the 1934 bulletin of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. The home communicated his death to the society in a letter on June 16, 1934.\(^{75}\)

Abel Boulineau is completely unknown in the history of photography. He was known only in his lifetime for painting and drawing – predominantly genre and landscape scenes very similar to his photographs. It is not clear where or when Boulineau learned photography, or whether he belonged to any photographic societies. The *French Regional Life* photographs bear no traces of having been mounted and framed, and it is therefore unlikely that Boulineau ever exhibited his prints. Certainly history does not remember him for his photographic work. I have not been able to locate any books, documents, or histories linking him with such societies as *La Société Française de la Photographie* or the *Photo-Club de Paris*. This is not to say Boulineau never was involved with photographic societies, but it is telling that we can only guess at such associations. By contrast, his membership in groups devoted to the fine arts and academic

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\(^{73}\) *Liste des tableaux et pièces de sculpture exposée dans la cour du Palais-Royal par Messieurs les peintres et sculpteurs de l’Académie royale*. 1876-1928.

\(^{74}\) Ibid.

\(^{75}\) *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, 1934, 46.
painting is firmly documented. Boulineau may not have considered his own photographic work as art, and his interest in the medium probably did not exceed that of an amateur.

As I mentioned above, only the summer months are accounted for in the Boulineau collection, which suggests he travelled and photographed between May and September, and remained in Paris teaching and painting for the rest of the year. He toured alone and with others, and moved freely between the wealthy and working classes of French society. Boulineau took portraits of the leisure-class excursionists he trekked with, and whom he encountered on his travels. For example, he seemed to be on familiar terms with the LaPeyre and Montaur families, as well as the Abbé Fellmann, who all feature prominently in his trip to Cauterets-Gavarnie in the Pyrenees. Yet Boulineau also photographed the hotel domestics, dairy workers, grass cutters, and a lone Spanish drifter he encountered on that trek. He frequently learned and recorded the names of such people – who were not exactly poor, but certainly members of the labouring class – and he appeared to share with them a degree of friendliness or sympathy. Evidence of Boulineau’s kindness endures in an inscription on the back of the photograph, Dinan – la Mère Gilbert, where he copied the Paris address of his subject’s daughter, to send her a copy of her mother’s portrait.

A small percentage of the French Regional Life photographs were created by two other makers. One architectural view is titled ‘Construction de la Foudre á Bordeaux, par M. Michaud from Dax’. Michaud may have sent Boulineau a copy of this print, or the latter may have printed it himself. One index card for Cauterets-Gavarnie indicates a portion of the views in that region
were made by the Abbé Fellmann \(^{76}\) (again, Boulineau may have printed the negatives). This explains the dramatic portraits of Abel Boulineau with his photographic apparatus and umbrella against the mountainous landscape in the Pyrénées.

![Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), [Self-portrait with photographic apparatus], c. 1899](Image)

**Fig. 4** Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), [Self-portrait with photographic apparatus], c. 1899
18 x 12.5 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/273

There are 13 photographs of Boulineau in the *French Regional Life* collection, including those likely taken by Fellmann. His portrait depicts a well-dressed gentleman, in excellent physical shape, with a palpable love of nature and the outdoors. Two distinctive physical features

\(^{76}\) Jacobson refers to him as the Abbé Feldmann in his report, surmising that he “was either a friend of the principal photographer or one of the main photographers on the project”. See Jacobson, “The Dynevor Rhys Collection of French Rural Life,” 1.
make Boulineau easy to recognize in photographs elsewhere in the archive: his incomparable white moustache, and his characteristic pose, lunging forward on one leg. While none of the prints in the collection are signed, the artist does self-identify in two of his portraits, one of which is inscribed au verso with his initials. His portraits always occur against stunning landscapes and natural scenery – notably in the mountainous Cauterets-Gavarnie region of the Pyrenees, and also in the Rhone-Alps, near rivers, waterfalls, and forests.

Two early prints feature Boulineau with his photographic apparatus, offering some information into the type of camera he used. One image depicts Boulineau in profile, his tripod balanced on a sloping hill, his camera facing the left side of the frame – a classic image of the photographer at work (See Figure 4). We can see that the camera was not too large and unwieldy to be transported on his excursions. This conjecture is confirmed in the second print, which depicts Boulineau with Dr and Mme Ceriziat on the Gavarnie bridge in the Pyrenees. Here, his lens is in an upright position, indicating that he was operating a folding view camera ideal for travelers photographing outdoors. This camera probably affected Boulineau’s choice of glass plate negatives roughly five by seven inches in size, which would produce contact prints of similar dimensions. That the size, medium, and clip marks of the prints in French Regional Life are all consistent (only a handful of photographs have been trimmed) suggest Boulineau used the same camera over the 19-year period he was photographing. There were several technological developments in photography in the early 1900s, meaning that both his camera and his process would have been nearly obsolete by 1916. This no doubt contributes to the sense of nostalgia that permeates the photographs themselves.
4.4 Abel Boulineau’s Artist Studies

In what ways is it possible to approach and make sense of a large photographic archive produced by an artist known only for his paintings? The first step was to carefully examine both bodies of work, and search for possible connections between the two. When I learned Boulineau was an academic painter, I began the process of locating online auction records of his paintings, a few of which have been traded within the last ten years. The connection between Boulineau’s paintings and photographs was immediately apparent – for he made genre studies of rural life, often returning to images of women washing clothing along streams of rivers: one of his favourite photographic subjects. While researching Boulineau the artist and his *French Regional Life* archive, I identified at least three prints in the collection that he used as models for paintings. In two cases, Boulineau re-created scenes he photographed in their entirety as large-scale colour oil paintings. In another case, he used a cluster of figures in a photograph as partial source material for a painting of a different region.

Ken Jacobson, who studied the collection before the attribution question was solved, noted that

Certain themes [in the photographs] are almost obsessively repeated and are usually very successfully realized. Those include animal studies, striking market scenes and women washing clothes in streams and rivers. These are motifs useful to an artist and it would be surprising if the photographer(s) was not either an artist or had the interests of artists in mind.\(^77\)

Artists’ studies typically fall into two categories: photographs that replicate painted models or emulate painterly techniques, and photographs made for artists’ training. Aaron Scharf’s *Art and Photography* (1969) and Van Deren Coke’s *The Painter and the Photograph: From Delacroix to Warhol* (1972) have demonstrated the degree to which nineteenth-century painters relied on photographic models. And similarly, the vast scholarship on pictorialism conveys how important painterly precedents were to early pioneers of photography. French painters from the mid- to late-nineteenth century regularly employed photographs as source documents in producing more life-like images, or as an aide-mémoire to fill out details in painted scenes. It was common for photographers such as O.G. Rejlander to create tableaux vivants while producing compositions that aspired to fine art models from Baroque paintings and sculptures.

Because Boulineau is an unknown and unstudied figure in the history of photography, it is important to establish him as another one of those painters who recognized photography’s usefulness to artists, and yet who, somewhat atypically, created his own source documents for his paintings. The collection at the AGO does give us some understanding of Boulineau’s motivations for producing and amassing a collection of 1700 photographs – the most obvious being that he travelled widely through France and recorded his excursions with his camera. Boulineau’s biography elucidates his strong affiliation with an artistic practice centred on painting – a highly traditional, academic-based painting that would not have been particularly innovative in turn-of-the-century Paris. Not only did he choose conventional subjects in his artistic practice, but he executed them in an out-dated manner by seeming to rely on photo-based artists’ studies as source material for his paintings. Considering Boulineau’s work through the history of photographic artists’ studies offers a more nuanced way of understanding his dual, but linked processes as an artist and a documentarian.
The history of photographers who produced studies for artists is difficult to chart. There is little information available about early practitioners, and their names tend to be absent from history and from artist records. There was also a degree of secrecy surrounding artist studies in the mid-nineteenth century. Ken Jacobson states, “The small quantities of the studies which survive and the paucity of information on photographers involved in their production, might be better appreciated in the light of a secretive artistic establishment which decried not only photography, but even paintings which were too photographic”.  

Prints used as study pieces were often disposed of by artists during their lifetimes, or by the executors following their deaths. The work of study photographers who made landscape, nude, animal, or still life studies was distributed by editors and dealers who specialized in artists’ studies. Many of these firms were located close to the École de Beaux Arts in Paris in the 1870s. By the early 1880s, the use photographic studies was occasionally advocated in the public record, for the simple reason that this technique saved time and money for long sessions spent with models, as well as long journeys to sketch landscapes from life. For example, in *The Elements of Drawing in Three Letters to Beginners*, John Ruskin “advises the student of drawing to turn to photographs as models from which to copy”, particularly with regard to drapery, landscapes, and areas of detail. Working with and from photographs would also allow artists to document fleeting compositions that momentarily struck them for their aesthetic potency. By

80 Quoted in: Thomas, *Canadian Painting and Photography*, 27.
the 1890s, the use of photographs by artists was widely admitted in print, and the dry plate process made it easier for artists to make their own pictures.

Eugène Delacroix, a romantic painter and member of the Société Héliographique, was an early advocate for the creative aspect of picture-taking and its value to artists. But he cautioned against painters becoming too reliant on photographic images as models from which to copy. Delacroix stated, “the daguerreotype should be seen as a translator commissioned to initiate us further into the secrets of nature; because in spite of its astonishing reality in certain aspects, it is still only a reflection of the real”. With his friend Eugène Durieux, Delacroix made daguerreotypes of nude models, from which he later sketched. In a singular case, he used a study of one such female figure to paint an exotic Odalisque in 1857.


83 Ibid, 41.

Where Boulineau differs from image-makers such as Rejlander and Delacroix, who recapitulated Classical fine art compositions photographically, is that he was drawn to make photographs of people posed informally, going about the tasks of everyday life. One of Boulineau’s more well-known paintings, *Les Lavandières* (Figure 5) is a near-exact reproduction of the striking photograph, *Dinan: Lavoir sur la Rance – à Lehon-Lanvallay* (Figure 6). The work highlights a trope the artist returned to and repeated throughout his painting and photography; *French Regional Life* contains 77 images of washer-women and wash-houses. *Dinan: Lavoir sur la Rance – à Lehon-Lanvallay* is a scenic photograph depicting a group of women washing garments along the bank of a river, one of whom is looking directly at the camera. She is flanked by three women, with white kerchiefs covering their heads, immersed in their work of washing, and seemingly unaware of the photographer’s presence. The washer-women kneel on boards protruding directly into the low tide of the water, and the banks of the river are at a slight
elevation behind them. To capture the central figure at this mid-angle shot, Boulineau would have had to crouch near the ground, as suggested by the wispy foliage extending upwards at the base of the frame. Partially obscuring the view of the figures are the large rocks on the left side of the frame, the dark curves of which are echoed in the body of the woman bending at her task. Light-coloured linens are piled behind the group of women, and others hang from two clotheslines attached to the trunk of a tree. A young girl in a dark dress, along with a slightly older girl holding an infant, looks on at the washer women, and other figures fill out the scene in the background, carrying about their business.

**Fig. 6** Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) *Dinan: Lavoir sur la Rance a Lehon-Lanvallay*, ca. 1898. Gelatin Silver printing-out-paper print 13 x 18 cm AGO: 2005/1624

It would have been out of fashion and also in poor taste for Boulineau to reproduce with near exact detail the photograph in his painting, *Les Lavandières*. As we examine the two images together, the limits of working from photographs become apparent. It was necessary for Boulineau to fill in the very dark areas of the water with ambiguous, muddy shades of green in the painting. Furthermore, the artist’s softer treatment of the figures, coupled with his
suppression of detail in the scene, detracts from the sharper photographic depiction of the women at work. The powerful quality in the photograph of a moment stopped in time is lost in the painting, which transforms the image into a generic, pastoral scene of late summer, illustrated with warm tones that create a note of romanticism.

Rather than replicate entire scenes from photographs, what was more commonly accepted was for artists to utilize photographs as a reminder of an element to be incorporated into a painting, or to fill in details missing from his or her repertoire. Boulineau did just that in another photograph of washer-women, titled Dax – Lavandières sur l’Adour (Figure 7), which he used as partial source material in the painting Vue sur le Tibre à Rome avec Château et le Pont Saint-Ange (Figure 8). Again, the painting lacks the liveliness and sense of spontaneity captured in the photographic study, and it also introduces new problems for the artist in achieving a realistic

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**Fig. 7** Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), *Dax: Lavandières sur l’Adour*, 1907.
Gelatin silver printing-out-paper print
13 x 18 cm
AGO: 2005/1319
sense of scale. Boulineau’s flattened treatment of space in the painting’s architectural details, as well as the vague quality of light, may have been the result of working from several photographs at once. Where the study did become useful was in the accurate portrayal of the folds in the models’ clothing – particularly those of the seated woman at the far left of the painting – something that was difficult to represent while working with live models, and the natural shifting that would take place during a sitting.

**Fig. 8** Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) *Vue sur le Tibre à Rome avec Château et le Pont Saint-Ange*, n.d. Oil on canvas 56 90 cm

**4.5 Boulineau’s Photographic Practice**

The artist studies explain the presence of certain unusual compositions in Boulineau’s archive. For instance, there are images of women posed on the ground, and holding sticks, as though they are fishing; or standing against brick walls, carrying potted plants – for no particular reason. It is also easy to detect a certain stiffness in some of Boulineau’s portraits of labourers,
when they are conscious of the camera, and have stopped, mid-task, to hold a pose (Figure 9). Such photographs stand in stark relief against the informal, spontaneous gatherings he captured, especially of vibrant market scenes (Figure 10).

**Fig. 9** Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) *Albertville – Knife-grinder*, 1905
Gelatin silver print
13 x 18 cm
AGO: 2005/434

One of Boulineau’s motives for creating and collecting photographic images, then, was as source material for his paintings, but he also may have worked commercially and for private clients. For instance, the collection contains approximately 50 views taken in Belgium, nearly all of which document canals in Bruges. These images are unusual in the context of the collection not only for their setting beyond France’s borders, but also for their homogenous content and curt, one-word inscriptions: ‘Bruges’. Unlike other photographs in the collection, the Belgian scenes do not convey a sense of Boulineau’s personal motivations and interests, and it would be surprising if they were not created as a commercial endeavour.
Boulineau’s composed portraits of leisure-class excursionists and local inhabitants of rustic towns are realized with equal skill as his informal snapshots of people, trades, and landscapes. As Ian Jeffrey and Ken Jacobson have noted before me, the unclassifiable quality of his work echoes that of Eugène Atget (as I will discuss later), whose photographs also functioned as source material for artists, rather than as aesthetic objects themselves. And similar to Atget, there is also an undertone of the obsessive in Boulineau’s work. This is not only because he photographed the same types of rural scenes, agricultural workers, small trades, towns and villages, and (especially) washer-women over a 19-year period, but also because of the indexical character of his project. He carefully documented the regions, towns, mountains, and rivers he visited – creating an inventory of images organized by place name – alongside the names, professions, and sometimes the addresses of his human subjects. Boulineau’s notations demonstrate a wish to gather information about France’s regions and inhabitants, even while his...
images create a highly subjective account of French life at the turn of the century: one premised on an intrinsic natural order uniting people and place.

Fig. 11 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) The Mother Jacquette le Baban, her daughter Cécile, and Mme. Toulon – with the buyer Marie le Borgue, 1897
Gelatin silver print
13 x 18 cm
AGO: 2005/1730

In their original context, some of the French Country Life prints would have functioned as artist studies for paintings intended to be displayed in academic, salon-style shows. Yet there is no physical or archival evidence indicating Boulineau exhibited the photographs, which were likely stored in boxes during his lifetime. Unlike his paintings, the prints are not signed, suggesting he did not consider them art objects, although as I have explained, some were created with works of art in mind. While Boulineau shared a preference for rural scenes and peasant subjects with the pictorialist photographers of the nineteenth century, he resisted pictorial optics and effects on his negatives – instead creating works with a documentarian’s eye for authentic representation. The artist’s photographic use of rural workers as distant, romantic subjects in his paintings reflects a
different – but parallel – desire to amass and interpret his surroundings, even as they became symbolic of a disappearing way of life.
Chapter 5
Abel Boulineau and Eugène Atget

Three separate photography scholars, each with distinct reasons and purposes, have associated the work of Abel Boulineau with that of Eugène Atget. Ian Jeffrey called the French Regional Life collection “the work of a rural Atget”; Ken Jacobson noted the aesthetic similarities between the Rhys archive and the “French documentary studies, made mostly for artists, by Eugene Atget”; finally, in conversation with me, Maia-Mari Sutnik suggested the AGO’s acquisition of this group of pictures could open up possibilities for further collecting in the area of early twentieth-century French photography – particularly by Atget. These researchers and writers all saw in Atget’s work a means of access into an otherwise unwieldy, anonymous collection. Motivated by this repeated association, this chapter addresses the similarities and differences between the two photographers. To what extent is it useful to consider the production, circulation, and reception of Atget’s photographs against the work of Boulineau? What qualities do they share and where are they divided along the lines of aesthetics, subject matter, and the nature of their photographic practice?

There are several clear points of connection between these two photographers. First, they were contemporaries: Boulineau’s archive spans from 1897 to 1916, and Atget’s from roughly 1897 to 1927. Both were based in Paris, and maintained professional networks among the city’s

87 Sutnik, personal conversation.
artists and art affiliations. Boulineau actively participated in such circles - he taught painting and drawing at the École Polytechnique, and later became a member of the Société des Artistes français. Atget, on the other hand, sold documentary studies of people, trades, city views, landscapes, and decorative arts to individual artists, as well as architects, designers, and set builders. Finally, while the two photographers both died in obscurity, leaving behind little biographical information or signs on how to interpret their work, they also experienced an evolution in their reputations after their deaths, albeit on different scales. Atget’s oeuvre comprises some 10,000 pictures, compared to only 1,700 known works by Boulineau. Moreover Atget’s straight yet dreamlike photographs captured the attention of the Surrealists, and particularly Man Ray, who published four of his photographs in a surrealist magazine during the 1920s. Man Ray’s assistant, Berenice Abbott – who met Atget shortly before he died – was later determined to preserve, publicize, and exhibit his collection. Under her efforts, Atget’s photography shifted from serving a professional function within archives and libraries to serving an aesthetic function in art museums.

Fig. 12 Eugène Atget (1857-1927) Rue Lanneau, 1925. Source: www.moma.org
There are some important visual similarities between Boulineau’s photographs and those of Atget. They both operated view cameras, the bellows of which sometimes created vignetting effects in the upper corners of their prints (see Figures 12 and 13). Atget used a shorter focal length lens to create wide-angle views that incorporate as much visual detail as possible into the frame, while simultaneously amplifying the viewer’s spatial experience. Both photographers thus continued using nineteenth-century processes and techniques even as photographic technology and equipment became more modernized. The result is that Boulineau’s and Atget’s work is imbued with an antiquated or nostalgic air – an effect that is heightened by their choice of subject matter.

Fig. 13 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) A street at Moutiers-Salins, 1905
18 x 13 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/930
Atget’s subjects ranged from the decorative arts of l’ancien regime, the obscure streets and gothic architectural details of Old Paris, and traditional and modern street commerce. Influenced by the French topographical photographers of the 1880s and 1890s such as Baron Isidore Taylor, who documented early architectural monuments of France, Atget’s work was directed toward preserving and recording the Paris of an earlier time. He would often photograph the city’s streets and facades in the early morning, before they filled with people. Atget’s images of Paris convey emptiness – and indeed, desertion – prompting Walter Benjamin to write in 1931 that they are reminiscent of the ‘scene of a crime.’

Fig. 14 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) *Annecy – Notre Dame clock tower*, 1902
18 x 13 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/789

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By contrast, Abel Boulineau clearly favoured landscape views, often in rural locales, over city scenes. He had a fondness for streams and rivers, waterfalls, mountains, and forests with light filtering through the trees, as well as the wide-open spaces in the country and seaside. There are over 30 panoramas in the *French Regional Life* collection. When Boulineau did photograph street life, he deliberately sought out people in rustic towns and villages for his subjects. He made a number of market scenes crammed with buyers, sellers, and their wares, as well as more intimate portraits of the working poor and their dwellings. His aesthetic interest in the relationship between people and place (see Figure 14), and how the inhabitants of towns eke out individual livelihoods according to the nature of their locales, is one of the key factors that differentiates his treatment of place from that of Atget.

Fig. 15 Eugène Atget (1857-1927) *The Old School of Medicine, Rue de la Bucherie*, 1898.

But the latter was still alert to the stuff of modern life in Paris – particularly street commerce and small trades – and he did document such subjects with his camera. This is another
important parallel between his and Boulineau’s work. James Borcoman writes, “Beneath [Atget’s] lens, the small trades or petits métiers traditionally associated with the representation of urban life became metonymic figures of the city,” – a statement that could be easily applied to Boulineau’s photography as well.\(^9^0\) Both image-makers saw crowds and individuals “as though they are characters in a theatre of the streets”, and their shared ability to capture stories and personalities in straightforward, tableaux-like scenes, make such images highly compelling (see Figures 16 and 17).\(^9^1\)

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A notable distinction between Atget’s and Boulineau’s processes – evident in the pictures themselves – is the exposure times they used. The former used long exposures achieve the ambient sense of space in his scenes of Paris, Versailles, and Saint-Cloud, while the latter used shorter exposures, which offer an effect of instantaneity and liveliness. This quality is most evident in the presence of domestic animals that populate Boulineau’s rural and town photographs – particularly the chickens, geese, cats, dogs, goats, and sheep – and their amusing interaction with his human subjects (see Figure 18).
Fig. 18 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) Chambery – travelling hatmaker at Cornevin – near Aix les Bains – M. Duray, 1904
13 x 18 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/903

Ultimately, the aesthetic and material similarities between Boulineau’s and Atget’s work are limited. There are some notable points of connection between the two – their use of out dated photographic processes, and more importantly, their interest in capturing street life, small trades, and commerce. But such similarities begin to seem more coincidental when we consider the many other subjects Atget depicted with his camera: churches, doorknockers, facades, fountains, gardens and parks, interiors, metalwork, stairwells, and vitrines, to name a few. It is true that certain qualities in Boulineau’s photographs are reminiscent of Atget’s work, which is what led Jeffrey, Jacobson, and Sutnik to draw correlations between the two. But it is more interesting and useful to investigate the problems of authorship and oeuvre shared by these two photographers. As Rosalind Krauss has argued, the very notion of oeuvre assumes aesthetic unity and coherence
as a result of the maker’s sustained intentions. But do Atget’s and Boulineau’s activities as image-makers support such a notion? What is known about the nature of their photographic practices, and how has it affected the ways in which their collections are understood, positioned, and described by art institutions?

In Atget’s Seven Albums, Molly Nesbit convincingly argues that Eugène Atget conceived of and executed photography in terms of specific categories, addressing himself to distinct sectors of clients. Nesbit’s extensive archival research reveals a maker who had no notion of himself as an artist, but who rather declared that he produced documents for artists’ purposes. Nesbit states, “When Atget called his pictures documents he was explaining that they circulated in the closed channels of painters’ cartons, decorators’ folios, and libraries’ files, where individual pictures counted for little and the quality of the file was measured by its scope”.93 Early writers on photography, such as Charles Beaudelaire, considered the medium an objective way of expressing knowledge and making records. It was not understood as being meant for exploring creative processes of the mind and imagination.94 For Nesbit, Atget’s carefully composed ledgers of clients, their professions, and the albums of prints he assembled according to their functions, demonstrate that it was not his intention to put forth a unified oeuvre reflective of a specific personal style – and that, indeed, such a thing would have been impossible. The only written document in which Atget described his project of photographing Paris and its environs – a letter from 1920, to Paul Leon regarding the sale of his collection of prints and


93 Nesbit, Molly, Atget’s Seven Albums, 17.

94 Nesbit, Molly, Atget’s Seven Albums, 15-16.
negatives – is unconcerned with matters of the creative process. Rather, Atget explained the contents of his collection, as well as his awareness of its artistic, documentary and historical value to an archive.\(^{95}\)

While we lack parallel forms of archival evidence – such as personal correspondence, ledger books, or annotations – indicating that Boulineau produced commercially-motivated photographic work, it would be surprising if he never took on such projects. As I outlined in the previous chapter, the presence of handwritten names, addresses, and order numbers on the versos of some *French Regional Life* prints suggests Boulineau had private clients. He also produced a few photographic series, such as the fifty-odd views taken Belgium, which appear to be the products of commercial endeavours. Several of Boulineau’s subjects and motifs remain consistent across the temporal and geographical range of his archive – canals and rivers, markets, shopkeepers, and washer-women, for instance. But occasional groups and series stand apart from the rest – like the Belgian pictures, or a striking set of images of ships in Bordeaux – and make it difficult to articulate a coherent notion of Boulineau’s style and approach to photography. Like Atget, he did not limit himself to a single style or subject, the reason for which is likely that his work was motivated by a number of different factors – from private commissions, commercial projects, and his own personal and aesthetic interests.

Nesbit’s research on Atget uncovered a striking change within his conception and self-representation as an image-maker. In the 1890s, at the beginning of his career, he referred to himself as a photographer. Later, however, this shifted, and Atget changed his title to an *auteur-editeur* – a weighty designation that described both the “transitional nature of Atget’s

\(^{95}\) See Neal, Donald L., “The Sequential Photographs of Eugene Atget, Photographer of Paris,” 32.
photographic practice… [and] also made reference to Atget’s rights to that practice, his *droit d’auteur*, or copyright*. 96 Nesbit thus sees him as a commercial photographer who developed into a modern sense of an author; and his assembly of prints into albums and books, which were circulated amongst his clients, as commodities with multiple functions.

![Fig. 19 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) The mother Croz, grocer, 1897](image)

*Fig. 19* Abel Boulineau (1839-1934) *The mother Croz, grocer*, 1897  
18 x 13 cm  
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print  
AGO: 2005/1740

The absence of Boulineau’s name from the photo-historical record is also telling. Unlike Atget, he did not appear to have actively approached libraries, museums, archives, or salons to

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96 Nesbit, Molly. *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 88.
display or collect his photographic work. Furthermore, there is no mention of his photography within the records of the professional and artistic associations to which he belonged. He was known only as a painter, a teacher, and a landscape illustrator, which indicates he did not consider his photographs to be art objects intended for public consideration and attention. The only clue that he made photographs with an eye to aesthetics is the evidence that he produced his own artist studies.

It is here that the Atget and Boulineau parallels become more useful. As I mentioned above, Atget would not have regarded himself as an artist, but rather a maker of documents that might be incorporated into the work of painters, set builders, architects, and designers. Artist documents, Nesbit argues, rendered the visual world into a series of parts that fit within established artistic genres. Atget’s versatility as a photographer allowed him to produce studies that could work on multiple levels. His series of *petit métiers* (made between 1898 and 1900) worked well as artists’ models for portraits (see Figure 20), while his unfilled street scenes and landscapes were helpful backgrounds that could be incorporated into other elements of a painting. Describing a photograph Atget made of a mill in the Somme, later integrated into a military painting by Edouard Detaille, Nesbit states,

Atget’s mill did not suggest battle, of course; it was angled and framed so as to show the splay of the stair and its brace. The document was a wilfully incomplete composition that wanted filling; it could only suggest an appropriate place to begin, a decor. The decor could lie anywhere in the document: the surfaces of buildings, the hollows in the scene, the

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97 I was able to locate a library in France that owns a drawing by Abel Boulineau.

98 Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 33.
play of light across wood or stone. These details would be caught by the painter’s eye, considered, and if accepted, they would be transformed in the course of the painting.  

Fig. 20 Eugène Atget (1857-1927) Marchand de Paniers, 1899-1900.  
Source: www.moma.org

Atget’s studies thus anticipated the artist’s eye, and he left space in his documents to accommodate narrative, characters, and fully populated scenes. While using his own source documents for his paintings, Boulineau incorporated elements such as a group of figures into a distinct landscape, but he also reproduced photographic images in their entirety in the space of his canvas. It is not clear whether his studies were circulated amongst other artists, as Atget’s were. But the two do share a critical connection, in that – prior to their accession into museum and gallery collections – their photographic source documents would only have been examined within the hidden branches of archives and studios, not the aesthetic realm of the exhibition.

What effect, then, do institutional functions and processes have on the public reception of such photographers and their collections?

When Berenice Abbott took possession of Atget’s photographic collection, she had no way of interpreting his mystifying cataloguing system. The limits of her knowledge and understanding of Atget’s work were reflected in the monograph she published, *Atget, photographe de Paris* (1930), which takes a meandering visual route through Paris without offering a coherent sense of the photographer’s documentary project and motivations. The complex task of sorting through and understanding Atget’s prints, negatives, and albums could only be realized within the context and through the resources of a large institution – the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, which purchased the Atget material from Abbot in 1968. During the 1960s and 70s, under the direction of John Szarkowsky, the photography department at MoMA undertook the full cataloguing of the archive. Maria Morris Hambourg deciphered the classification system Atget had developed for organizing his pictures: his numerical index referred to the subject-based structure used by libraries and archives. As Krauss states, “The Museum undertook to crack the code of Atget’s negative numbers in order to discover an aesthetic anima. What they found, instead, was a card catalogue”. 100 Atget’s production, then, was responding to commercial needs and markets, rather than being entirely self-motivated. He “certainly knew that archives were made for markets; by the same token he knew that his documents were commodities. His photographs moved in these circumstances, they actively participated in the business of the archive”. 101

100 Krauss, Rosalind, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View”, 317.

101 Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 81.
Identifying the method behind Atget’s ‘business’ of photographic production unveiled a new problem for MoMA: John Szarkowski was charged with positioning the work as art and presenting Atget as an artist – not just a great technician and commercial photographer. In 1981 Szarkowski curated the first of four major exhibitions of Atget’s photographs, each of which were accompanied by a hardcover catalogue, *The Work of Atget*. John Szarkowski’s influence meant that Atget’s work was received and subsumed through the lens of the modern American documentary tradition. In Volume IV of *The Work of Atget*, for example, Szarkowski emphasizes the art historical tradition to which Atget’s work belongs, pointing to an early reviewer of the *Premier Salon Independent de la Photographie* who compared Atget to Max Ernst and Giorgio De Chirico. 102 Szarkowski also discusses the photographer’s influence on Berenice Abbot (particularly her photographs of New York street life) as well as on works by Bill Brandt (*A Snicket in Halifax*) and Henri Cartier-Bresson (*Rouen*). 103 Through an art historical narrative premised on relationships that explain things through cause and effect, the world’s understanding of Atget progressed from that of an obscure commercial and architectural photographer to an essential cultural figure of the twentieth century.

Nesbit hints at the danger of this phenomenon when she describes Atget’s photographs as illusory “open texts”: archives from which we stumble, as though through a secret backdoor, on to art. 104 The same can be applied to Boulineau’s work, which, as Atget’s did at the MoMA, arrived at an institution lacking a coherent organizational structure and means of interpretation.

103 Ibid, 17.
104 Nesbit, *Atget’s Seven Albums*, 84.
My work on this archive formed a base for which the AGO could begin to make sense of the material, especially during the planning phase of the gallery’s 2011 exhibition, *Where I was born: A Photograph, a Clue, and the Discovery of Abel Boulineau*, which I discuss in the next chapter. While it may be too early to assess definitively Boulineau’s reception in the art and photography communities, the exhibition generated notable public interest and enthusiasm for his photography – especially because of its mysterious, undiscovered quality. The emphasis placed on Boulineau’s biography – a new personality in the history of photography – cultivated a notion of him as a romantic artist of the rural experience, who was drawn away from the pace of city life in favour of small towns, farms, and countryside.

The aesthetic and material similarities between Boulineau’s and Atget’s work run slightly thin upon close inspection, though the latter does offer a valuable entry point into the *French Country Life* collection. Atget becomes a useful figure against which to position the nature of Boulineau’s photographic practice; they were both makers of documents, the vast collections of which approach the monotonous, not the aesthetic, in their systematic recording of places and things at a particular time. Boulineau and Atget were also collectors of photography, and their collections were submitted to their distinct, opaque filing systems before being displaced, re-sorted, and given new meaning within institutional contexts. The reception of Atget’s work within multiple art historical narratives – Surrealism, modern American documentary photography – points to the ease with which the original framework of his documents might be erased and re-inscribed over time. It is an issue that is specific to working with photographic collections at the institutional level, and deserves further unpacking with regard to the *French Regional Life* case study.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

This paper so far has interrogated the theoretical and practical issues involved in working with and accessioning photographic collections in art museums. A number of theorists, critics, and art historians such as Geoffrey Batchen (“Snapshots”), Rosalind Krauss (“Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View”), and Douglas Crimp (“The Museum’s Old/the Library’s New Subject”) have laid out the central points for considering this topic. They have addressed the multiplicity of meanings that can be derived from studying photographs, as well as the difficulty of positioning and understanding vernacular images within the history of the medium – premised as it is on the history of art. Batchen in particular has suggested the discourse itself about photography is what needs to change. We have also seen how internal institutional forces can alter and mobilize photographic collections from classification systems premised on indexical or subject-based cataloguing to those reflective of the artistic genius of the maker. Atget’s photographs, for instance, were collected by libraries and archives before his oeuvre was purchased by the MoMA, which instigated the reception and interpretation of his work in the context of the modern American documentary aesthetic.

The Abel Boulineau French Regional Life collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario has been a fruitful case study for approaching the problem of photography’s discursive spaces – to borrow Krauss’s term – and also for observing the pragmatic difficulties of understanding, positioning, and describing such a collection at the institutional level. In order to successfully integrate the work of such photographers into their collections, and assimilate them into various institutional processes – cataloguing, exhibition, and publication – art museums are faced with
several challenges. The nature of the medium’s mechanical process means that photographic collections are often very large, sometimes containing multiples. Accessioning such vast and unwieldy collections presents practical as well as theoretical problems for museums when they establish appropriate organizational frameworks in which to work with these objects. How can we begin to deal with a collection whose numbers reach into the thousands, tens of thousands, or millions – in the case of some press photography aggregations, for example? What methods and approaches are appropriate for making sense of such acquisitions, and how do they affect the interpretation of photographic collections? In considering these questions, I have reflected back on the interventions I made upon the physical and intellectual ordering of the *French Regional Life* pictures – broadly speaking, the discourses and methods I was employing to make sense of the collection. Reorganizing the pictures into a chronological framework, I believe, had a notable effect on the way Boulineau was conceived as a new maker in the history of photography, and how his collection was ultimately interpreted.

An understanding of the materiality of photographic images informed my methodological approach to the collection. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart describe the value of thinking materially about photography, for it encompasses processes of “intention, making, distributing, consuming, using, discarding and recycling” to which photographs are subject. 105 By examining the material properties behind the intention, creation, distribution, and consumption of photographs, Edwards and Hart posit that the object-hood of photographs is essential to our understanding of them. More specifically,

Marks on the photographic object point to the history of its presentational forms and engagements with them... For photographs also bear the scar of their use... Handling damage, the torn and creased corners, fold marks, perhaps text on the back, scuffing and dirt point to the use of images, or indeed, neglect of images.  

My research into the collection would not have yielded as much had I only been concerned with the image content in *French Regional Life*, rather than the information encapsulated in its inscriptions, marks, labels, and presentational structure. And it was this object-based approach to the works that revealed several key signs about the collection: its geographical and temporal span, how it had been stored and used over the course of its history, and ultimately, who has responsible for creating and assembling this group of pictures.

A large part of my work on *French Regional Life* involved dealing with the inscriptions on the versos of the prints. The lack of information available about the collection meant it was necessary to decipher and translate the maker’s notes in order to better grasp the historical markers underpinning the images. Of particular importance to me were the dates and locations recorded on the prints, because the AGO’s photography curators, who were supervising the project, had given me the task of reorganizing the collection chronologically. By piecing together the information available on the versos of the prints and on the index cards in the collections – as well as through research into the geography of the regions described in the pictures – I was able to construct an itinerary of Boulineau’s excursions over the 19-year period he was working (see Appendix A). Pulling apart the existing structure and rearranging the works according to this chronology produced a distinct effect on the interpretation of the collection. It became possible

106 Ibid, 12.
to see how Boulineau’s style and photographic interests changed over time – most of his portraits, for instance, were made early on. Furthermore, the vast majority of the photographs in the collection were made prior to 1906; only two volumes out of ten represent later years. This means the collection does not reflect an even record of photographic production across its 19-year span.

Other patterns and discoveries also emerged as a result of reshaping French Regional Life chronologically. It became possible to navigate parts of the collection spatially, for instance, and to see where Boulineau photographed one street in the Perriere suburb of Annecy, gradually moving down the block, snapping images of dwellings, women, and children along the way. Similarly, we can better sense how he shot a market in Dax using both street-level and overhead views to compose a multi-dimensional experience of the space. I was also able to reconstruct a two-part panorama that had been separated between several volumes – an activity that may not have been possible had I been tasked with re-organizing the collection by some other framework (see Figure 21-22).

Fig. 21 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), Dax in two negatives, no. 1, 1906.
13 x 18 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/1275

Fig. 22 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), Dax in two negatives, no. 2, 1906.
13 x 18 cm
Gelatin silver printing-out paper print
AGO: 2005/1140
The institutional decision to create an exhibition based on this research affected how the works were interpreted for the public. There were many possible ways in which the exhibition could have been realized, and a large number of possible works to display. An entire solo show could have been devoted to Boulineau’s interest in and portraits of France’s regional workers, the petits métiers who appear over and over, but especially in the earlier photographs: washerwomen, knife-grinders, shoemakers, carpenters, potters, spinners, farmers, haymakers, and fishermen, to name some of the more prominent groups. This interpretive scheme would have produced an idea of Boulineau as a proto-documentary photographer with immense sympathy for the working poor. Alternatively, an exhibition could have been constructed around the aesthetic lure of the countryside at a time when Europe was becoming increasingly modernized. This would have an effect of depicting the photographer as a maker of important cultural documents who captured regional life at the dawn of the First World War, which forever altered Europe’s cultural landscapes. Still another possibility would have been a show delineating the symbiotic relationship between photography and painting in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. 107 This could have included genre and landscape paintings from the AGO’s permanent collection, as well as some of Boulineau’s paintings from private lenders.

There were several practical factors against realizing such choices. First, the exhibition had to come together within a relatively short time frame – between October 2010 and March 2011. Second, the gallery reserved for the project was fairly small in scale – a long and narrow

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107 The Chicago Art Institute recently hosted such an exhibition, titled: Souvenirs of the Barbizon: Photographs, Paintings, and Works on Paper.
space with low ceilings appropriate for a similarly modest show of smaller works, and not large canvases. For these reasons, it made logistical sense to structure the exhibition around the research that had already been completed: on the discovery of a new maker in the history of photography, and on the excursions he made to produce his photographic collection.

The exhibition, *Where I was born: A Photograph, a Clue, and the Discovery of Abel Boulineau* was divided into four sections in the gallery space; three were dedicated to the distinct regions where Boulineau travelled, and one was dedicated to works showcasing research into his biography, artistic career, and the narrative of the attribution story. The exhibition featured works representing the temporal and geographical span of the collection, from 1897, when Boulineau photographed in Brittany; the Rhône-Alps region, which he visited a few times in the early 1900s; and finally to Aquitaine, which he visited three times – in 1906, 1907, and 1914. As such, the AGO was able to offer visitors a glimpse into its research practices, and the work that goes into producing an attribution. At the same time, by exhibiting works from the first year to nearly the last year represented in the *French Regional Life* collection, the AGO put forth a totalizing sense of Boulineau’s oeuvre. But how truthful or accurate could it be, given the information available about his life and work?

Positioning the work within this structure generated a specific idea and narrative about the maker and his work: one, I would argue, premised on historical travel and tourist photography. Not only were the sections of the exhibition organized to encapsulate a sense of the excursions Boulineau made to three regions in France – Brittany, Rhône-Alps, and Aquitaine – but the exhibition also included several pictures reflecting acts of journey-making: images of trains, postcard stands, and steamships, for instance. Moreover there were two major points of visual interest that reinforced the notion of travel. Visitors entering from the west side of the
gallery faced a poster-sized wall panel of a historical map of France, on which the three regions were highlighted. And visitors who walked through the north entrance to the space had a long sightline to the title wall, with a mural-sized reproduction of one of Boulineau’s photographs, in which he poses on a bridge in the Pyrenees with his camera, satchel, and tripod, in the company of two friends (See Figure 23).

Fig. 23 Abel Boulineau (1839-1934), *Upstream from the Gavarnie Bridge* - Dr. And Mme Ceriziat and me – order no. 17, 1899. 13 x 18 cm Gelatin silver printing-out paper print AGO: 2005/1540
He looks directly into the lens of the person who snapped this picture, a slight smile on his face, clearly delighting in the scenery around him. The personality reflected in the image is that of an intrepid traveller with a passion for photography – one for whom the pleasure of journeying and the act of taking pictures are inextricably linked.

Positioned along such institutional lines of cataloguing, organization, and exhibition, Boulineau’s work begins to feel representative of the genre of turn-of-the-century travel photography. Indeed in some ways, French Regional Life exemplifies how middle-class excursionists from the nineteenth and early twentieth century used photography as an integral part of their enjoyment of travel and nature. The collection contains a proliferation of pastoral images that do not speak to the effects of modernization and industry on the landscape and its inhabitants. In part this was due to an anxiety that the countryside and its ways of life might disappear beneath industrial expansion projects. Rather, late-nineteenth century tourists taking pictures within their home country often gravitated toward rural locales that evoked an aura of the nation’s history and meaning. For these reasons, travel photography created a vital link between the past, present, and future. Boulineau’s body of work offers viewers a nostalgic record of distant locations at the cusp of modernity. And as an example of travel photography, his archive is equally representative of a lingering empirical impulse to collect, classify, and possess the things of the world.

The problem with classifying Boulineau’s body of work as travel or tourist images is that this category does not encompass the nuances of his collection. How do the artist studies align with this genre? Or the possible commercial projects, such as the views of canals in Bruges? What about the family photographs? The chronological framework by which the collection and the exhibition were organized was not the only possible way – nor the most ‘authentic’ way – of
interpreting *French Regional Life* and Boulineau’s photographic production. Rather, it was just one way.

Boulineau’s archive represents a liminal space between art photography and documentary practice – but neither of these categories adequately describes the nature of his project. There is an inherent tension in using such classifications to interpret works not originally created as aesthetic objects. The peculiar condition of photographic collections in the museum context is that they have been caught at the centre of two debates about the medium. Once considered non-precious, disposable, and reproducible objects bearing no aura of artistic process, photographic images have become recognized as artists’ products with particular aesthetic qualities. Textbook histories of the medium are modeled on an art historical trajectory – a story populated by technical innovations and the primacy of artistic agency. Yet the art-influenced photo-historical model is inadequate for understanding the work of certain fin-de-siècle photographers such as Abel Boulineau, who did not make photographs with an eye to the aesthetic realm of the exhibition. The work of producing an attribution for such anonymous photographic collections places necessary emphasis on the photographs as historical entities, and recovers parts of the missing context of their original creation and circulation, suggesting that it is, in fact, key discourses and institutions that construct meaning out of such collections.


Appendices

Appendix A: *French Regional Life* Itinerary

After transcribing, translating, and fact-checking Abel Boulineau’s notations, I assigned new English titles to the records in the AGO’s database. I attempted to attribute dates where they were missing, based on nearby locations that were dated in other parts of the collection. A major part of my internship at the AGO was to re-organize the collection chronologically, which means that the accession numbers assigned to the records are no longer in numerical order. I maintained a record of the collection’s original sequence, and am hopeful that the new chronological format will offer a fuller and truer representation of Boulineau’s geographical itinerary across France.
The earliest photographs in Boulineau’s collection of rural life in France are from the Brittany region during the summer of 1897. With Guingamp as his base, Boulineau would have made day trips to Bourbriac, Chateaulaudren, Graces, St Jean, Sainte Croix, Kernabas, and Roudourou. He may have taken a northern route via Pabu to the Pointe de l’Arcouest, from which he travelled west to Ploumanach in the Perros-Guirec region. Boulineau likely made a gradual journey south to Quimperlé and Saint-Goustan Auray, stopping in Huelgot-Locmaria, Carhaix, and Chateaulin.

A) Guingamp
B) Pabu
C) Keruel
D) Keribot
E) Traou Dour
F) Paimpol
G) Pointe de l’Arcouest
H) Perros-Guirec
I) Ploumanach
J) Lannion
K) Saint Sauveur
L) Huelgoat-Locmaria
M) Carhaix
N) Chateaulin
O) Croissant
P) Quimperlé
Q) Saint-Goustan Auray
Beginning in Granville, Boulineau would have made a day trip to the beach at Donville. He likely moved along the coast of the Baie de Mont St-Michel, stopping in Avranches to photograph the dungeon. Boulineau then travelled west to Cancale – perhaps by water – and the Saint-Servan district of Saint-Malo. He stopped in Dinard before going south to Dinan.

A) Granville
B) Donville
C) Avranches
D) Cancale
E) St. Servan
F) Dinard
G) Dinan
1899-1900

The index card marking the “Barbazan” series in Boulineau’s *French Regional Life* collection is incorrectly dated – indicating 1809 as the date of its creation. I believe Boulineau visited Barbazan in 1899 – the same year he travelled to the Cauterets-Gavarnie region of the Pyrenees. Boulineau may have begun his journey in Bordeaux, travelling south to Cauterets, and approaching the Spanish border in Gavarnie. From there, he could have proceeded north-east to Barbazan, where he visited relatives, and onwards to the town of Aubarede.

Boulineau returned to Cauterets in 1900 – perhaps never having left the south of France. He dated his prints from that region very sporadically, making it difficult to determine which photographs were created during which year. I therefore ordered the Cauterets-Gavarnie group of photographs according to the artist’s inventory numbers, penciled *au verso* on the upper-left corner of the prints.

A) Bordeaux  
B) Cauterets  
C) Gavarnie  
D) Barbazan  
E) Aubarede
1901

Boulineau photographed in his birthplace of Auberive in 1901. From there, he likely travelled south to Annecy and Cran, before moving east to Servoz and Chamonix-Mont-Blanc. He returned to the Annecy region afterwards, where he worked during the following year.

A) Auberive
B) Annecy
C) Cran
D) Servoz
E) Chamonix-Mont Blanc
In early June of 1902 Boulineau photographed in Aix-les-Bains, close to the south-eastern environs of the Lac du Bourget. He visited Tresserve and Viviers-du-Lac, and left Aix-les-Bains for Annecy at the end of June. During July and August, Boulineau documented several towns in the Annecy region, including Thones, Annecy-le-vieux, Cran, and the Zone de Vovray. He visited the Gorges du Fier in Lovagny, and the chateau in Duingt. Boulineau remained in Annecy through September of that year.

A) Aix-les-Bains  
B) Tresserve  
C) Viviers-du-Lac  
D) Annecy  
E) Thones  
F) Annecy-le-vieux  
G) Lovagny  
H) Pringy  
I) Zone de Vovray  
J) Cran  
K) Albigny  
L) Talloires  
M) Duingt
1903

Boulineau went south of Aix-les-Bains to the Chambery region during the summer of 1903. While there, he photographed places in the near vicinity of Chambery, such as Leysse, Cognin, and Bissy. He made day trips or small excursions to Pont-de-Beauvoisin. Boulineau also went south from his base in Chambery to visit Grenoble, likely stopping in Pontcharra along the way. He eventually travelled eastward to Albertville and Moutiers. Because only a fraction of the 1903 Chambery prints are dated, I have maintained the order of the artist’s inventory numbers, penciled *au verso* on the upper-left side of the photographs.

A) Chambery  
B) Leysse  
C) Bissy  
D) Montmelian  
E) Cognin  
F) Challes-les-Eaux  
G) Viviers-du-lac  
H) Pont-de-Beauvoisin  
I) Moutiers  
J) Albertville  
K) Pontcharra  
L) Grenoble  
M) Chambery-le-vieux
1904

Boulineau may have revisited the Chambery region in 1904 – or he may have never left after working there in the previous year. In July of 1904, he photographed Allevard-les-Bains, located just south of Chambery. He documented the River Breda extensively, and made day trips to St. Pierre d’Allevard and Le Buisson. From there, Boulineau likely continued south to Grenoble, where he made excursions to the caves of Sassenage. He then would have travelled north, past Lyon, to the Charolles region. He also visited relatives in nearby Saint-Bonnet-de-Vieille-Vigne, where he photographed the chateau de Velle.

A) Allevard
B) St. Pierre d’Allevard
C) Le Buisson
D) Grenoble
E) Sassenage
F) Charolles
G) Saint-Bonnet-de-Vieille-Vigne
In the summer of 1905, Boulineau returned to the Haute Savoie region, where he was based in Albertville. He made day trips to Conflans and short excursions to Ugine, Faverges, and Beaufort. Boulineau travelled south to revisit Moutiers, and he also went north, stopping in Flumet and La Giettaz, to St. Sigismond.

A) La Giettaz  
B) Albertville  
C) Ugine  
D) Faverges  
E) Saint-Sigismond  
F) Conflans  
G) Beaufort  
H) Flumet  
I) Moutiers
By 1906, Boulineau had left the Haute-Savoie region for Dax, where he made several photographs of lavandières at the wash houses along the Adour river. He may have travelled east to Bayonne and Biarritz during that year to document the coast of the Bay of Biscay. But it is equally possible that the Bayonne and Biarritz group of prints were made in later years. Boulineau returned to Dax in 1907, and again in 1914.

A) Dax
B) Tartas
C) Bayonne
D) Biarritz
1909

Boulineau photographed in Coutras on 3 July 1909, after which he began to travel north toward La Rochelle. He stopped in Pons on 4 July, and arrived in La Rochelle by 5 July. Boulineau then made his way south-east to Aubeterre in the Charente region, where he worked during July and August.

A) Coutras
B) Pons
C) La Rochelle
D) Aubeterre
1913-1914

There is no definite record in the collection of Boulineau’s photographic activity between 1910 and 1912. The death of his brother, Aristide Boulineau, in 1912 may partially explain this gap. In 1913, he visited Bruges, where he made the only prints in this collection documenting regions outside of France. From Belgium, he may have gone to Paris, before returning to the Bay of Biscay area. He revisited Dax in 1914.

A) Bruges
B) Dax
In the summer of 1915, Boulineau returned to the Haute Savoie region, where he photographed Aix-les-Bains once more. Several of his prints from Aix-les-Bains are not dated, and in the collection’s original order, the prints from 1902 were intermingled with ones from 1915. The artist’s inclusion of inventory numbers, which do not reflect a chronological sequence, makes it all the more difficult to establish a timeline for the Aix-les-Bains series. Moreover the extent to which Aix-les-Bains would have changed in the 13-year interim between Boulineau’s two periods of photographic activity in the area is unclear. Consequently, the dates I have assigned to this group are slightly arbitrary. They are meant to reflect the range of the artist’s sights and experiences during his travels. What is known for certain is that Boulineau photographed Aix-les-Bains in June 1915. From there, he made his way northward to Nantua, where he worked in July 1915.

A) Aix-les-Bains  
B) Nantua
In July 1916, Boulineau visited Bergerac, which is not far from Bordeaux. During August and September of that year, he moved between Bergerac and Saint-Astier. He worked in Saint Leon-sur-l’Isle, and photographed the cheateau at Neuvic. He also travelled to Crognac, located just north of Saint-Astier. There is no record in the collection of Boulineau’s photography after September 1916.

A) Bergerac  
B) Saint Leon-sur-l’Isle  
C) Saint Astier  
D) Crognac