

Cultural Daily

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Ceruti's Dignified Beggars; Atget's Mysterious Paris

Stephen West · Thursday, September 14th, 2023

The history of Western art, for better or worse, is mainly about the rich and powerful and divine. Ordinary people were mostly ignored or portrayed in generic terms.

A remarkable [exhibition](#) at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles makes the case that the first artist to paint working-class and poor people extensively, with empathy as well as realism, was Giacomo Ceruti (1698-1767). Born in Milan, Ceruti worked mainly in nearby Brescia and in Venice. Amazingly, it's still not known why he focused so much attention on the down and out, or who commissioned most of the works.



Giacomo Ceruti, *Women Working on Pillow Lace (The Sewing School)*, about 1720–25, oil on canvas, private collection; photograph: © Fotostudio Rapuzzi, Brescia, Italy.

Ceruti's paintings make it clear that in the 18th century you could have a full-time occupation and still be very poor. In one of the earliest works in the show, *Women Working on Pillow Lace (The Sewing School)* of about 1720-25 (above and detail in top image), the seamstresses are modestly dressed in clean clothing. One young girl reads a book and another looks out at the viewer. These women aren't starving, but they all seem deeply sad, as if they understand that they face a repetitive life of limited possibilities. Only the youngest girls convey any sense of happiness.

The *Sewing School*, like all of Ceruti's works in the show, is painted in a limited range of grays and tans and browns. The simple wooden chairs sit on a brown floor, in front of a nearly black, featureless wall. It's a visual strategy that makes you focus on the faces.

Other pictures in the show — there are only 17 in total — include a scruffy-looking religious pilgrim at rest; a woman spinning yarn; two young porters with their woven baskets playing cards; a seated woman mending socks; and two cobblers sitting at a small table while a customer tries on a clunky shoe. All of these working-class people, despite their often ragged clothing, retain a sense of dignity.



Giacomo Ceruti, *Two Beggars*, about 1730–33, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, Italy.

That's even true of the half-dozen works depicting tramps and other presumably homeless people. In *Two Beggars* of about 1730-33, the barefoot men sit around a small table with a jug of wine, a deck of cards, and some tobacco. The older man on the left wears a worn, military-style cloak and cradles a tiny kitten in his hands. The younger man gets ready to snort a line of snuff on his fist. The exhibition catalog suggests that the older man may be a discharged soldier, who were regarded in the 18th century more as vagrants than veterans.

Yet Ceruti portrays the pair as sensitive people who haven't fallen into despair. The older man obviously cares deeply for his kitten, while the younger one even projects a slight sense of humor, or drunken good cheer. They haven't given up.



Giacomo Ceruti, *Beggar*, about 1735–40, oil on canvas, Gothenburg Museum of Art; photograph: Gothenburg Museum of Art/Hossein Sehatlou.

The same is true of *Beggar* of about 1735-40. This close-up portrait of a bearded, aging man in tattered clothes shows how much Ceruti had refined his painting skills over the 15 to 20 years since *The Sewing School*. The man's worried face almost glows against the dark background, and the precisely rendered details of his clothing are astonishingly real. It's a masterpiece.

Giacomo Ceruti: A Compassionate Eye was organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum with the Fondazione Brescia Musei and was on view earlier this year at the Museo di Santa Giulia in Brescia, Italy. The show runs through October 29 at the Getty, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. A scholarly catalog is published by the museum.

Ancient Streets of Paris

Eugene Atget (1857-1927) was one of the pioneers of documentary photography, best known for

his views of Paris. Using a cumbersome view camera, he often worked in the early morning hours, before the streets were crowded. He created a record of the historic city even as it was changing radically in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

His work helped define documentary photography in a way that later influenced artists such as **Diane Arbus**, who brought a similarly direct, unembellished eye to portraiture in 20th-century America.

To celebrate the acquisition of a group of his works, the Getty has mounted *Eugene Atget: Highlights From the Mary & Dan Solomon Collection*. The best of the 35 photographs in [the show](#) display a quiet elegance and simplicity — a park, a street, a store window — with no people at all. They also show the almost medieval state of some Paris neighborhoods only a century ago, compared to the spiffed-up city that tourists see today.



Eugene Atget, *Old St. Gervais and St. Protais Mortuary*, rue Francois Miron, 1900, albumen silver print, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

In *Old St. Gervais and St. Protais Mortuary*, rue Francois Miron of 1900, a narrow cobblestone street curves out of view as it recedes in the center of the frame. St. Gervais church, with its grimy stone walls and round turret on the left, looks more like a medieval fortress than a place of

worship. An apartment building on the right is covered with fading posters on the ground floor and shuttered windows above. It's an eerie scene, with not a single human being visible in the picture.



Eugene Atget, *Boulevard de Strasbourg*, 1912, gelatin silver chloride print, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Along with empty streets and parks, Atget was fascinated by store windows. In *Boulevard de Strasbourg* of 1912, for example, he presents a window full of women's corsets. The headless white figures sport impossibly thin waists and are stacked in rows, one on top of another, like hams in a butcher shop.



Eugene Atget, *La Villette, rue Asselin*, 1921, albumen silver print, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

One of the few works in the show featuring an actual person is *La Villette, rue Asselin* of 1921. In it a stocky middle-aged woman with short hair sits outside the dark entrance to an ancient stone building. It's not obvious from the photograph itself, but the image is one of a series by Atget about the brothels of Paris, and the woman is probably the madam of the establishment. But it seems appropriate that this picture, with its air of mystery, hides such a secret.

Eugene Atget: Highlights From the Mary & Dan Solomon Collection runs through November 5 at the Getty Museum.

Top image: Giacomo Ceruti, *Women Working on Pillow Lace (The Sewing School)*, detail, about 1720–25, oil on canvas, private collection; Image © Fotostudio Rapuzzi, Brescia.

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