

Lumière | Paris in Pictures

By [ELAINE SCIOLINO](#)

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Shoe and Eiffel tower, for Stern, 1974. Frank Horvat, courtesy of Taschen

Weighing in at 10 pounds and 624 pages, “Paris: Portrait of a City” is too heavy to cuddle up with on the couch. This latest tome in Taschen’s series of bigger-is-better photography books on great cities needs to spread out on a coffee table of its own.

Why another photo book on the most photogenic city in the world, you might ask? One answer is that [Taschen](#) has already published similar photographic portraits of New York, Los Angeles and Berlin; London comes next.

Another is that this book is a photographic study of more than 160 years of the city’s history through the eyes of Jean Claude Gautrand, a 79-year-old photographer and photo editor who is one of France’s most eminent experts on photography. Gautrand spent three and a half years deep in the archives, libraries and private collections of Paris, sifting through hundreds of thousands of files, searching for unknown images by anonymous photographers to pair with what he calls “the greats.”

“I was born here. Paris is in my roots. It’s my universe,” the slim, goateed Gautrand said in an interview in his modest apartment on the eastern edge of Paris. It is decorated with dozens of antique cameras he bought at flea markets and hundreds of photography books, some of them written and edited by him, including Taschen’s wildly popular “Paris, Mon Amour.” “And Paris happens to be the first city in the world to acquire a photographic record of itself.”

The city has indeed been a visual banquet throughout Gautrand’s professional lifetime. The 20th-century photographer Willy Ronis, “a great pal,” he said, lived across the street; Georges Brassai, another 20th-century master, was “more than a pal, he was a real friend.”

Gautrand chose more than 500 photographs, most of them black and white, for his opus. It documents the

transformation of the Paris landscape with ambitious building projects, as well as many of the monumental events of the city's past: the 1870 proletarian revolt known as the Commune; the construction of the Eiffel Tower; the Nazi Occupation (including a photo of Hitler posing in front of the Eiffel Tower) and the Liberation; and the riots of May 1968.

It illustrates the before-and-after effect of Baron Haussmann's demolition of 20,000 houses and entire streets and *quartiers*, as well as the destruction of Baltard's cast-iron masterpiece, Les Halles, in 1971 (the subject of a book of photographs by Gautrand himself).

And who knew that Emile Zola took hundreds of photographs of the Universal Exposition of 1900 from the top of the Eiffel Tower? One photo shows the Iena bridge and the Romano-Moorish Palais du Trocadéro, razed in 1938 to make way for the Palais de Chaillot.

Yet the books also captures more intimate moments, scenes of everyday pleasure, routine and suffering: on the streets, park benches and bridges; in the cafes, nightclubs, strip joints, parks, artists' ateliers. One daring undated photo between the two world wars shows women — some of them elegantly dressed as men — socializing in a popular lesbian nightclub.

The book also celebrates the technical achievements of the French, starting with the shadowy images of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, who invented photography when he succeeded in fixing an image formed inside a camera on a silver plate. (His high-contrast 1839 photograph of the Boulevard du Temple at 8 a.m. needed an exposure time of 20 to 30 minutes. It shows the first human silhouette ever captured by a camera.)

An 1860 stereoscope of bare-armed laundrywomen, their bosoms partially exposed, evokes a sense of both immediacy and movement. A 1907 view of a Paris street by the Lumière brothers using the Autochrome technique they developed is one of the world's first color photographs.

The book also includes familiar images by the most well-known of Paris photographers: Robert Capa's Dior models; Robert Doisneau's "The Kiss in Front of the Hotel de Ville," taken for Life Magazine in 1950. Marville, Atget, Lartigue, Brassai, Kertész, Ronis and Cartier-Bresson are also represented.

Yet Gautrand is more proud of the photographs by anonymous or little-known photographers. "They were instinctive, expressive, working in the present, very unlike those who were more experienced and aiming for an aesthetic look," he said. "But those images sometimes make you feel as if you've walked into a museum."

The photo of the funeral of Victor Hugo, a procession that was attended by 800,000 people, is, for him, "an extraordinary thing — someone on the street took it." So is the photo of one of the most spectacular accidents of the day: a steam train careening through the platform and facade of the Montparnasse railway station in 1895. Likewise a 1900 photo of a goat milk vendor on a city street with his goats serving milk to two little girls, and a 1929 photo of the unemployed lining up for food.

Gautrand said he had intense discussions with the publisher Benedikt Taschen about some of the choices. "He wanted a more aesthetic approach; I was the Parisian," Gautrand said. One disagreement focused on the cover: Helmut Newton's 1976 color photo "Bergström Over Paris," which shows the model Gunilla Bergström reclining, in nothing but strappy, gray high-heeled pumps, diamond-and-pearl earrings and heavy makeup, in front of a plate-glass window. She gazes into her reflection in a mirror. Unexceptional Paris buildings lay below. "The editor wants to sell," Gautrand said with a smile. (At \$69.99, it's a deal.)

An enormous poster of the cover hangs in [Gallimard](#), the elite Paris bookstore on the Boulevard Raspail,

even though Anne Ghisoli, the manager, has her doubts about it. “This is a super-beautiful book with breathtaking photos,” she said. “But the cover has nothing to do with the contents of the book. It’s a bad cliché.”

It also may come as a disappointment that the book virtually omits photography over the last four decades. The only 21st-century entries are a photo of a grim-faced Karl Lagerfeld in a sports car and a fanciful picture of a woman held aloft in the Paris sky by a bunch of balloons. “We don’t have the historical distance to judge, to reflect,” Gautrand said, explaining the gap. “After the 1960s, Paris has been asleep culturally. The last great photograph of Paris was taken ... in 1968.”