

# Cambridge's Rachel Yurman: See Marville Exhibit at Met before it's gone!

*Spending a day out of Cambridge?  
If you wish you were in Paris but  
can only make it to New York --  
take your dreams to the Met and  
see "Charles Marville:  
Photographer of Paris" and "Paris  
as Muse: Photography 1840s-1930s,"  
(both through May 4) and "The  
Passions of Jean-Baptiste  
Carpeaux" (through May 26)*



[Rue de  
Constantine]  
Charles  
Marville  
(French, Paris  
1813–1879  
Paris)  
Date: ca. 1865

Medium:  
Albumen silver  
print from  
glass negative  
Dimensions:  
27.3 x 36.8 cm  
(10 3/4 x 14  
1/2 in.)  
Classification  
: Photographs  
Credit Line  
Permission  
Requested:  
Purchase, The  
Horace W.  
Goldsmith  
Foundation  
Gift, through  
Joyce and  
Robert  
Menschel, 1986  
Accession  
Number:  
1986.1141  
)

**CHARLES MARVILLE AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART  
Fifth Avenue at East 79<sup>th</sup> Street**

**“ A bittersweet meditation on the meaning of nostalgia and  
the evolution of urban centers”**

[The Met's current exhibit of Paris street scenes by  
19<sup>th</sup>-century French photographer Charles Marville](#) is a  
revelation of memory and awareness that rebuffs the  
notion of nostalgia.

Marville (1813-1879), the son of modest tradespeople, used  
various techniques to document the destruction and re-

creation of Paris from the early 1850's through the 1870's. From 1862 on, he was the official photographer of the city of Paris.

The neighborhoods and buildings Marville captured in these wondrous and sad images are long gone, having made way for the Paris of Napoleon III and his chief architect and planner, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann. The gilded, historic Paris that many of us know – the Belle Epoque city of grand boulevards and the Palais Garnier – was born in Marville's time. Preservationism was evolving, as well, through the necessary process of repairing and cleaning such monuments as the great cathedral of Chartres, Notre Dame de Paris, and the Sainte-Chapelle.

The impulse to capture the past while obliterating it from sight is the beating heart of these photographs, which preserve the gritty city of Murger's *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* and Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In Marville's photos, the outskirts of this Paris still look rural, even desolate. Most of its streets appear to be empty, in part because images were taken very early in the day, but also because Marville's exposures weren't long enough to capture pedestrians and carriages in motion. The rare figures here and there were actually posed within the frame by the artist. The "Haussmannization" of Paris, a cramped, crowded, and less romantic city than the one we imagine, began in the 1850's under Emperor Napoleon III. In addition to clearing medieval slums, upgrading sanitation, building parks, and restoring public monuments, the creation of boulevards and wider streets was intended to thwart those who might build and mount barricades, as they had in the uprisings of 1830 and 1848. Marville recorded everything. The old buildings, covered with advertising and all kinds of *affiches* touting such modern conveniences as the folding umbrella. The glass-covered, shop-lined alleys called *passages*, soon to be overshadowed by the department stores, *les grand magasins*. The old industrial areas that dumped waste into the Seine tributaries and canals. The timeless stares of tannery workers. The emerging wonders of the city are displayed here, too. Haussmann's "street furniture," advertising kiosks, gas lamps, and – *mais oui* – public urinals, are respectfully and meticulously

documented by Marville's camera. Most remarkable, perhaps, are the photographer's views of the Avenue de l'Opéra as it was being built in the 1870's. Leading to the new Opéra, now called the Palais Garnier, the neighborhood is shown post-demolition and pre-construction, looking like nothing so much as a war zone. One of the final ironies is learning that Marville himself was a victim of Hausmann's grand plan. The photographer's own studios were demolished and, during the 1871 uprising after the Franco-Prussian War, the Hôtel de Ville came under attack and much of its archival material – including Marville's work as official photographer – was destroyed.

The exhibition is a bittersweet meditation on the meaning of nostalgia and the evolution of urban centers, whose periodic re-invention is both necessary and heartless. Nostalgia is a construct; there are many pasts beyond the ones we recall and imagine. The home that you long for may be just one of a cascade of images, seen for an instant in a series of receding mirrors.

—Rachel Yurman, Cambridge, MA

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