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A Long Exposure

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The pioneering French photographer Hippolyte Bayard has lived in the shadows of his more famous peers. A new exhibition brings him into the light.

J. Paul Getty Museum

Hippolyte Bayard: *Self-Portrait in the Garden*, circa 1845-1849

Can the same big inspiration strike different people at the same time even if they're not in contact? Indeed so. It's called multiple discovery—also known as simultaneous invention—and supports the hypothesis that new concepts can arise concurrently among independent researchers. Famous instances of this far-from-random phenomenon include the independent discovery of calculus by Newton and Leibniz during the seventeenth century;

the identification of the element oxygen by Priestley and Scheele during the eighteenth century; and the theory of evolution expounded by both Darwin and Wallace during the nineteenth century. These findings speak not only to the spread of the scientific method with the Enlightenment but also to interrelated sociological and economic forces that on occasion can prompt great minds to think alike with uncanny synchronicity.

Similar examples also occur in the arts, although such turning points tend to be comprehended later than more practically applicable developments in the sciences. (The Guggenheim's 2018 retrospective on the mystically inclined Swedish artist Hilma af Klint asserted that she created the first abstract paintings in 1906, five years before Kandinsky, who is usually credited with that breakthrough. Whether her diagrammatic compositions qualify as true abstraction is another matter.) Although it took until the late twentieth century for photography to be widely accepted as an art form rather than a scientific process, credit for its discovery was disputed from the outset. This modern miracle was proclaimed doubly during January 1839—first by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre in France, and again two weeks later in Britain by Michael Faraday, the so-called father of electricity, on behalf of his polymathic but reclusive friend Henry Fox Talbot.

This was a decisive turning point in a saga that began a dozen years earlier, when the French inventor Joseph Nicéphore Niépce used a camera obscura (an optical aid employed by artists since the late Renaissance to plot point perspective) to capture the first lasting photographic image on a chemically treated plate of silver-coated copper. He dubbed the technique *héliographie*—"sun writing"—but his rather fuzzy pictures could be neither reproduced nor widely disseminated. Expanding on Niépce's experiments after he died six years later, his much younger business partner Daguerre—a theatrical designer who contrived the diorama format for displaying wraparound painting, a popular entertainment at the time—devised an improved method for making sharper and more durable photographic likenesses,Fwhich he immodestly named the daguerreotype. But the main problemFpersisted: it could not be reproduced.

In 1834 the British aristocrat Fox Talbot made his first "photogenic drawings" on chemically salted paper, and in due course he fine-tuned the process until multiple prints could be replicated from the original. However, with the typical diffident languor of the Victorian amateur naturalist, he did not trumpet his discovery. It was common practice for early photographic researchers to share their information in learned journals and at conferences, but it took the commercially savvy Daguerre —a go-getter who recognized that the new medium could pay off by replacing painting as the primary vehicle for portraiture—to catapult photography into the general consciousness.

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J. Paul Getty Museum

Hippolyte Bayard: *Flowers in a Vase*, circa 1845-1846

Lost in this scramble for glory and gold was the Paris-based Hippolyte Bayard (1801–1887), who began his own photographic experiments in the very month of the medium's public debut. He was friendly with friends of Daguerre's, so his sudden interest in the emergent technology was likely no fluke. Yet this preternaturally intuitive, self-taught newcomer made such rapid headway with techniques all his own that very soon he was on a par with the most advanced experimenters in the nascent field. With the aid of a camera obscura he embedded direct positive images on paper that eliminated the need for a negative, unlike Fox Talbot's photogenic drawings, in which light and dark values were reversed. He also steadily reduced exposure times—a necessity if photographic portraiture was to be endurable for fidgety sitters. And during the summer of 1839 he became the first photographer to have his work included in an art exhibit, a benefit held at a Paris auction house to aid earthquake victims in the French colony of Martinique.

Why, then, is Bayard now far less renowned than his fellow pioneers? Unsurprisingly, the answer has mainly to do with money. Unlike the independently wealthy Fox Talbot and the enterprising Daguerre—both of whom could afford to concentrate their full energies on the new medium—Bayard plodded away at the bureaucratic post he filled for nearly four decades in the national finance ministry, where he worked as a clerk. While the well-connected Daguerre received generous compensation from the French government for his efforts, Bayard got a far smaller amount, which could not assure his financial freedom. He used his 600-franc award to buy a new lens. Daguerre, in exchange for the rights to the daguerreotype method, was given a lifetime pension of 6,000 francs per annum.

To be sure, other major avant-gardists have supported their creative activities through traditional professions, among them the publisher T. S. Eliot, the pediatrician William Carlos Williams, and the insurance executives Charles Ives and Wallace Stevens. But although they might have been able to sneak in some versification or musical notation between office tasks, photography could not be done on the sly in the workplace until the advent of the iPhone. Bayard was thus only able to pursue his true passion during off-duty hours. That constraint makes the breadth of his achievement—which encompassed everything from striking personal likenesses and abundant floral still lifes to wide-angle city views and fine art reproductions—especially impressive.

His comparative obscurity might finally be at an end thanks to "Hippolyte Bayard: A Persistent Pioneer," a revealing exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles organized by Karen Hellman and Carolyn Peter. This scrupulous survey and its superbly illustrated publication, *Hippolyte Bayard and the Invention of Photography*, cast new light on an immensely gifted but paradoxical innovator who has long been honored in his native land but remains virtually unknown beyond its borders, except to specialists. He has wryly but aptly been said, as Hellman notes in the catalog, to be "perhaps best known as the least-known inventor of the medium."

Some of Bayard's first efforts closely resemble the work of his rivals, although how much was coincidence and how much was influence is now hard to determine. For example, his mid-1840s cyanotypes—a cameraless procedure in which flat objects are laid atop paper soaked in a preparation of iron salts and then exposed to ultraviolet light to bring up white images against a cyan background—are dead ringers for the contemporaneous images by the British botanist Anna Atkins, the first person to illustrate a book with photographs. Like his early peers, he shot a great deal of sculpture because it is obligingly immobile, though his award-winning *Bust of Charles Percier* (1841) conveys real force of character due to the lifelike way he angled and illuminated this portrayal of the Napoleonic architect. But by the end of that first decade Bayard began to develop a more personal style, conveyed most clearly in his portraiture by subjects who directly

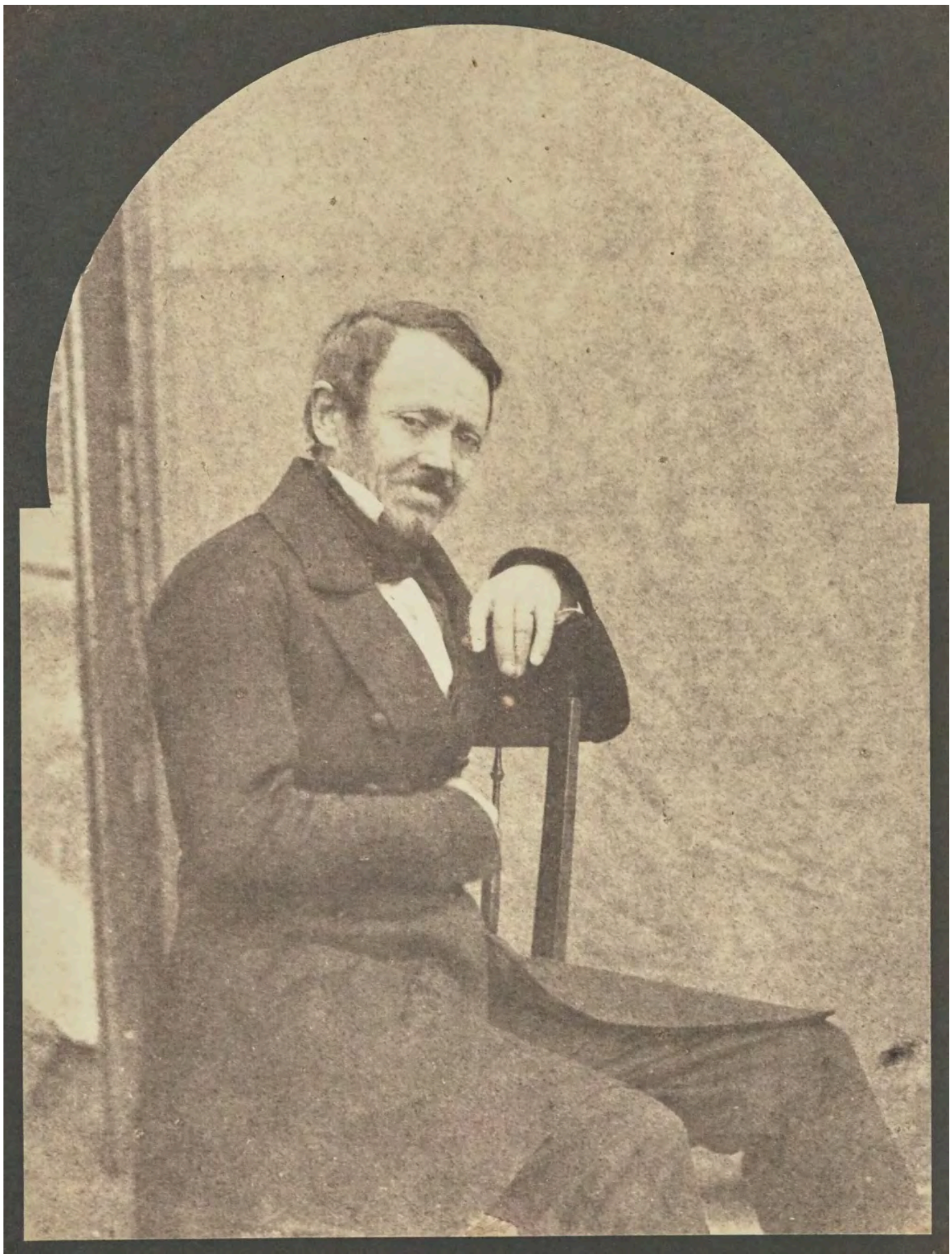
J. Paul Getty Museum

Hippolyte Bayard: *Lace Glove*, circa 1843–1846

return our gaze with their own, likely at the artist's direction. They engage the present-day viewer just as much as they must have done *à la minute*. (Having been unable to see "Hippolyte Bayard: The Persistent Pioneer" in person, I was all the more grateful for the extraordinary subtlety of the Getty catalog's illustrations.)

The insightful catalog essays by a distinguished international roster of contributors suggest that Bayard's success was deterred not only by the economics of his career but also by some self-defeating personality traits. His inhibiting perfectionism, unwarranted secretiveness, and penchant for grievance were likely contributing factors. So was a moment of inexplicable gullibility when, in 1839, a politician who was one of Daguerre's most strenuous promoters somehow persuaded

Bayard not to go public with his new discoveries. That episode clouded the final half-century of Bayard's long life and dimmed his posthumous reputation.



J. Paul Getty Museum

Hippolyte Bayard: *Unidentified Man Seated Before a Portable Backdrop*, 1847

To dramatize this injustice, in 1840 he staged his best-known photograph, *Le Noyé* (The Drowned Man), an allegorical self-portrait. It shows him stripped to the waist and with eyes shut, as if his lifeless body had been pulled from the Seine, a supposed suicide who died in despair. A wide-brimmed straw hat hangs on the wall next to him, a Platonic geometric shape that compresses the slumping subject into the lower right corner of the picture plane. This resonant picture recalls a wide range of sources, including depictions of Christ's deposition from the cross, Jacques-Louis David's modern-day history painting *The Death of Marat* (1793), and Daumier's politically motivated *Rue Transnonain, le 15 Avril, 1834*, a gruesome lithograph protesting the massacre of striking workers. It also prefigures the

postmortem photographs of posed corpses that would become a macabre staple of nineteenth-century mourning. On the back Bayard appended a maudlin text implying that he had been driven to self-destruction by Daguerre's deception and the French government's misplaced support of his nemesis.

To protect his rightful claims in the aftermath of this ordeal, Bayard started recording detailed descriptions of his latest discoveries—complete with step-by-step chemical "recipes" for how to repeat the procedures—and placed the information in signed, dated, and officially sealed envelopes that he deposited at the Académie des Sciences in Paris. When some other researcher would come forward with news of a discovery Bayard had already accomplished, he'd ask for the pertinent document to be opened as proof that he'd been there first. But by then it would be too late, and this sad sequence played out over and over again. A characteristic example of his dilatory revelations occurred in 1851, after others had figured out how to reproduce individual photographs in large quantities. Only then did Bayard direct the Académie to reveal his memorandum about how thousands of prints could be obtained from one image, which he had certified five years earlier.

As Hellman writes:

> Criticism of Bayard often points to the fact that his inventions were never implemented, whereas those of his contemporaries—the daguerreotype, the calotype, the waxed paper negative—were all published, taught, and practiced by photographers until the more commercially oriented processes using premade albumen paper were adopted starting in the 1850s. But this did not deter Bayard.

Despite all his resentments—and maybe propelled by them—he doggedly persisted, unlike his great British contemporary Roger Fenton, who, after producing some of the finest photographs ever, abandoned the medium and returned to practicing law. In 1860 Bayard and two partners (one of them silent) set up a portrait studio in a building a short walk from his office at the finance ministry. They named the business Bayard et Bertall, and within two years the firm's images won a medal at the International Exhibition in London. Few of the rather stiff examples included in the current exhibition, however, equal the cofounder's far more immediate portraits—including an unidentified man he shot in 1847, whose roguish glance reminds me of Steve Buscemi—doubtless because he likely knew many of those initial sitters better than the anonymous walk-ins to be expected in a busy commercial operation.

Even though Bayard's atelier never generated the éclat of the period's most famous French portraitist, Nadar (the pseudonym of Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), who had a hammerlock on Parisian celebrity portraiture, he kept tinkering with the medium to achieve cutting-edge

effects. Among them was a series of double-exposure self-portraits from around 1860 that show twin Bayards in animated conversation with each other, as well as a proto-Surrealist two-faced image of the photographer in the back-to-back guise of a top-hatted Second Empire Janus.

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The Getty catalog highlights yet another besetting problem with Bayard's troubled legacy: the extreme degree to which many of his photographs have faded over time, if they were ever very vividly toned to begin with. The three reproductions of slightly different versions of *Le Noyé* in the monograph—including a full-scale simulacrum on a page all its own—are less legible than a milk-foam leaf atop a Starbucks latte. To fully understand Bayard's original, you must consult an artificially darkened version of it.

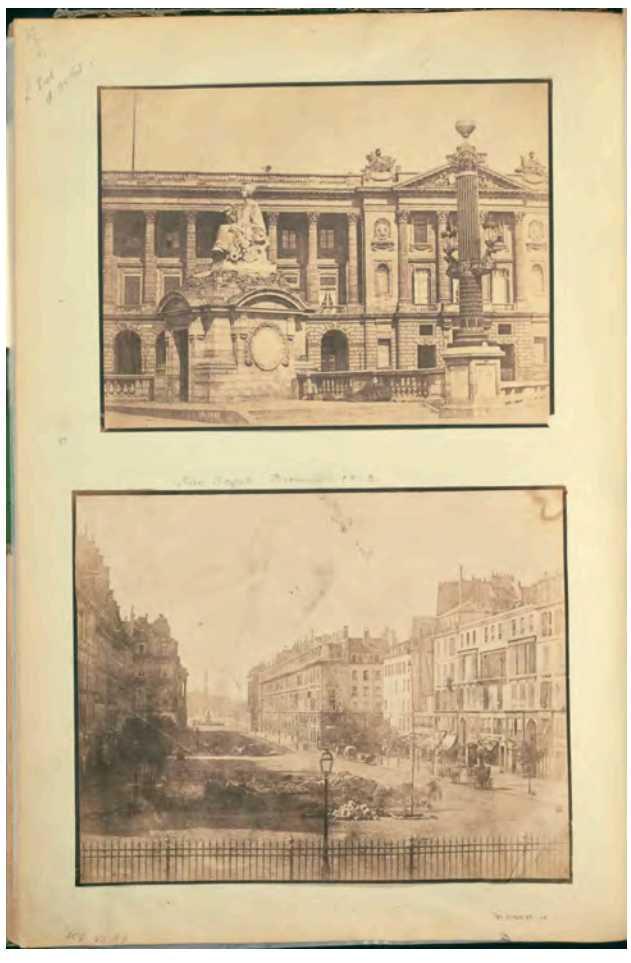
One chapter is devoted to the difficulty of displaying these unusually light-sensitive works, which makes the show's unhurried three-month run all the more notable. (Many works on paper must be rotated during exhibitions of even shorter duration.) The Getty's Bayard holdings—the world's most extensive save for the more than three hundred at the Société française de photographie in Paris—were subjected to painstaking microfade testing to determine which of them could be safely shown. Pieces deemed too fragile for exhibition were reproduced by various means and displayed in alternate formats, including facsimiles and interactive digital presentations.

Annenberg School for Communication/Wikimedia Commons

Hippolyte Bayard: *The Drowned Man*, 1840

The fact that so many of these delicate artifacts have come down to us in such relatively good condition is owed largely to the fact that Bayard himself placed them in an album he assembled during his first decade of involvement with the new medium. The volume—which contains 145 of his images along with twenty-two works by Fox Talbot and five other British photographers—descended through his family, who later sold it to their Normandy hometown of Breteuil-sur-Noye, and was ultimately acquired by the Getty from an American collector in 1984 as part of its ambitious and well-funded initiative to build a world-class photography collection. Just as it was common during the nineteenth century for Rembrandt etchings or Gilray caricatures to be mounted in

bound volumes rather than hung on walls, so there was a preference for keeping early photographic prints in scrapbooks—a serendipitous boon that similarly protected these later works on paper from the ravages of direct light.



A page from *Dessins photographiques sur Papier. Recueil No. 2* (the "Bayard Album"), including *Statue of Lille, Place de la Concorde, Paris* (1847) and *Rue Royale et les Restes des Barricades de 1848* (1848)

Bayard lived in Paris for nearly four decades, but he never fully left his provincial origins behind. He might best be compared with two contemporaries a generation younger, Courbet and Flaubert, the painter and the novelist (a fellow Norman) who during the 1840s and 1850s evoked the well-ordered torpor of bourgeois life in *la France profonde* with the same acuity and sense of place we find in the photographer's heavily atmospheric rural studies. Perhaps Bayard's Janus-like self-portrait also signifies his dual focus—looking back at a way of village life that had survived virtually unaltered for centuries, and ahead to the burgeoning new world of dazzling modern marvels that nineteenth-century Paris epitomized.

Flaubert had stressed how emotionally stultifying and morally tyrannical provincial existence could be. Not so Bayard, whose photographs of dilapidated farmhouses, barns, and stables speak to a growing nostalgia for the simple rural life in a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization. He would take photographs on visits back to his old family home in Breteuil, including a marvelous one of him and his sister Elizabeth-Mélanie sitting under an arbor in the garden. He looks up from his newspaper with a mildly quizzical expression—his face is blurred because he moved during the long exposure photography then required—and seems to invite the viewer to join them at the table for a mug of *cidre de Normandie*.

Because Bayard's job tied him closely to the capital city, most of his outdoor photography was done there. Fortunately he had a keen eye for the changing urban fabric of Paris as it began to make the dramatic shift from its cramped medieval confines to Haussmann's transformed metropolis of broad radial boulevards and the *flâneurs* who trod them. Vestiges of this metamorphosis are memorialized in Bayard's haunting *Windmills of Montmartre* (1842), which shows a quartet of the quaint structures with x-shaped sails that lined the northern heights of Paris before that outlying village was absorbed into the municipality as the eighteenth arrondissement. Sometimes the alterations were more contingent, as in his 1848 view of the rue Royale, the foreground of which shows piles of paving stones dug up for barricades and projectiles during the revolution that toppled Louis Philippe's monarchy that spring.

Hippolyte Bayard: *Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile*, circa 1847

The City of Light was an omnipresent visual resource for Bayard during the 1840s, when he set his lens on everything from the age-blackened cathedral of Notre-Dame to the still pristine Arc de Triomphe, which had been completed only a decade earlier. That he had an innate feel for architectural subjects was recognized by the government's Commission des monuments historiques, which in 1851 chose him as one of five photographers to document the nation's most important architectural treasures.

The Getty's canon-challenging Bayard project is akin to the rediscovery of a long-lost cornerstone that had been bafflingly absent from a venerable landmark. Now that the oeuvre of this underestimated master has been so persuasively reevaluated and rightfully accorded a foundational place in the annals of photography, the once-missing component imparts a gratifying completeness one had never anticipated. In hindsight this brilliant small-town boy seems to have been ideally suited to the immense task he undertook without

fully gauging its scope. Bayard's spontaneous command of his new medium was remarkable enough, but that it was amplified by the opportunity to record an equally new kind of public life makes it hard for us to see him as anything but a most fortunate beneficiary of history.

"Hippolyte Bayard: A Persistent Pioneer" is at the Getty Center through July 7. A catalogue, *Hippolyte Bayard and the Invention of Photography*, edited by Karen Hellman and Carolyn Peter, is published by Getty Publications.

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Martin Filler's most recent book is *Makers of Modern Architecture, Volume III: From Antoni Gaudí to Maya Lin*, a collection of his writing on architecture in these pages. (June 2024)

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