

By Amy Cottingham

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# Berenice Abbott

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Personal study



In my project I am going to be discussing how Berenice Abbott compares the difference between contemporary and traditional buildings. I will be focusing on different architecture images taken by Abbott, mainly taken in New York City (NYC) and how her work is now documented as olden history.

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“Photography can only  
represent the present.  
Once photographed, the  
subject becomes part of  
the past.”

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-Berenice Abbott



Photo by Berenice Abbott taken in Fort tyron park on December 20th 1934 between 4:30pm and 5pm. Photo is called night view.

# Analysis



The image is taken from a high vantage point and looks down onto the streets of NYC. To take this photo Abbott left a camera hanging off the edge of one of the upper floors of the empire state building. The city looks very different in this photo than it does now because it was taken almost a century ago in the 1930s, although the city is still well developed for the 30s. The image is in black and white which makes the photograph look neater because it gets rid of all the colours making the buildings dark and the lights brighter. The image is black and white as it is an old photo and coloured film had not yet been invented in the 30s.

The top half of the image is more eye catching because there is more detail such as the lights making it brighter whereas in the bottom half there are less lights making it darker. The roads act as leading lines leading towards the buildings and giving the image a higher depth of field. The image contains tall buildings, skyscrapers and roads with lots of cars. The photo was taken at night because the lights in the windows and on the streets are very bright and there is a big contrast between the different tones of black and white. The image looks like it has a long exposure as the lights on the road are blurrier than the lights in the windows suggesting that the exposure must have had time for the cars to move. The bright lights make the mood of the city more awake and loud although the streets look quite quiet for it being a big city.

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“Photography doesn’t  
teach you to express  
your emotions; it  
teaches you how to  
see.”

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-Berenice Abbott

# Richard Wentworth/ Eugene Atget

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These other photographers link to Berenice Abbotts work as they also photographed modern buildings which are now seen as photos of old history.

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One of the main subjects to photography in this time was ragpickers which are houses of people who collect waste and rubbish as a living. These photos were taken around 1912 at the porte d'ivory which was a popular place in the early 1900's. Another old history photo was taken at Rue des Angles in 1902-1903.

All of these old history photos were taken in the time of the great depression.

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Ragpickers photo from early 1900's

# Richard Wentworth/ Eugene Atget



This is a photo of a quiet street in the early 1900's taken by Atget. You can tell that it is an old photo as the person in the background is wearing clothes that people used to wear at this time and the building is old and traditional as it uses a lot of dark woods and traditional fonts.



In this photo by Atget the buildings are also traditional as they are made from stone rather than brick. There are also more shapes in the building suggesting that it is old and all of the images are black and white.



In this image, the streets looks abandoned and quiet and is not well maintained. It looks like an area where there would be a lot of crime and broken windows because of this.

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“The city in these pictures looks cleared out like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been likened to the scene of a crime. But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime?”

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-Walter Benjamin





The photo above, taken by Berenice Abbott, uses the rule of thirds to show that the spiral building on the right takes up one third and the tall buildings in the back take up two thirds of the image. The mood of the image is very dark and old which suggests that it could have been taken in the early 1900's when the Great Depression took place. The image is looking upwards as it has a low point of view which suggests that for it to be taken a camera was held from the ground, looking up at the buildings. This photo was also taken in black and white as coloured film has not been invented. The building to the right is more of a traditional building as it has old patterns and designs whereas the buildings in the back are contemporary as they have more windows and are taller and more modern than the others.

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“I don’t get precious about the pictures I have taken. Its not the first time people have taken pictures of this stuff or dealt with it. What’s more important is how it connects and how to deal with a bigger narrative.”

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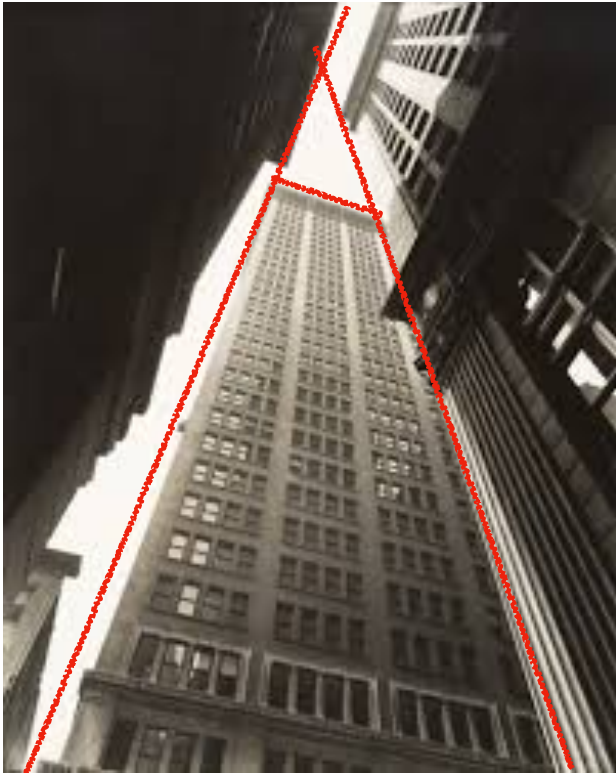
-Richard Wentworth

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“A good photograph  
is like a good hound  
dog, dumb, but  
eloquent.”

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-Eugene Atget

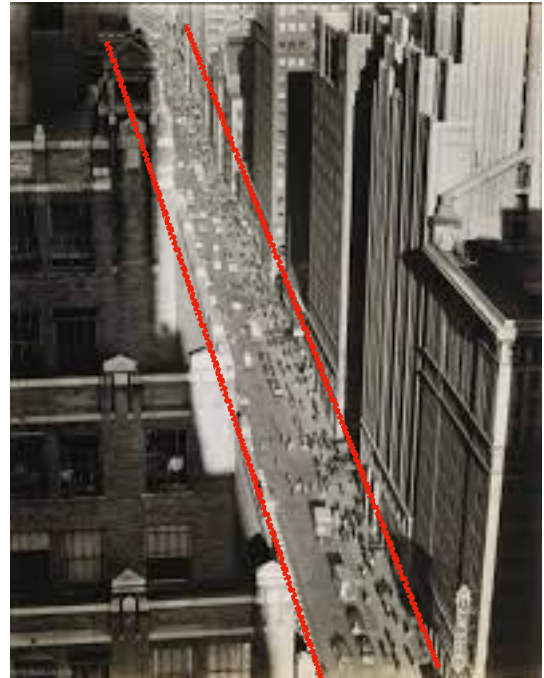


In the image taken by Berenice Abbott, the buildings form leading lines leading towards the sky. The lines create a right angle as shown on the annotated image above. The photo is taken at a very low point of view which suggests that Abbott took this photo standing on the ground and looking upwards between the buildings.

The mood of the photograph is exciting as she took the photo in the centre on a big city with tall buildings. It is also quite dark as it looks as if it was taken from an alley way in-between two buildings.

From the old colour scheme and the fact that it was taken by Berenice Abbott, we know that the photo would have been taken in the early 1900's as her work was most popular at this time and coloured film hadn't been invented. It also looks like it was taken casually with a camera from an angle from the ground with a low vintage point and a view point looking upwards.

Both of these photos were taken by Berenice Abbott on Seventh Avenue.



In both of these photos the streets are very busy and full of cars and people which makes the mood of the images loud and busy. They both also use leading lines as the buildings and the road act as lines leading towards the end of the photo and the sky. They are both taken from a high vantage point and viewpoint looking down onto the street. This suggests that the photos were taken from one of the highest floors of one of the skyscrapers as the place where the photo was taken is higher than the other buildings on the street. Abbott could have used the same technique as she did with her night view photo where she left a camera on the side of the building for a few minutes. The photo has a low exposure as there are no lines of movement where the cars are driving past. In the second image the leading lines from the road are parallel from one another whereas in the first image the lines join into a point.

# About Berenice Abbott

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“The camera alone can catch  
the swift surfaces of the cities  
today and speaks a language  
intelligible to all.’

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-Berenice Abbott

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Abbott was born on July 17th 1898 and died  
at the age of 93. She is known for her  
photography and her most famous work  
was taken in the 1930's in New York City.

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Abbott did a photoshoot in New York called changing New York.  
This is because after eight years in Europe, Abbott returned to  
New York City for a planned short visit. During her absence from  
the city dozens of 19th century buildings had been raised to  
make way for dozens of skyscrapers. She took this as an  
opportunity to do a photoshoot showing the difference between  
old and new, New York which now in the modern day these are  
both seen as older parts of the city.

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# Conclusion

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Bernice Abbott used to photograph modern buildings such as skyscrapers in New York City whereas now her work is seen as olden history as her photographs were taken almost 100 years ago. This shows the difference between contemporary and traditional buildings as well as the difference between time. In this study I analysed multiple pieces of her work including her most famous piece which is called 'night view' and linked her work to other older photographers work such as Richard Wentworth and Eugene Atget's ragpickers photos. This suggests that as time goes on the photos will get older and older as the city changes making it more modern. The city in the photos will soon become unrecognisable due to the changes in the future. These photos become more valuable historically as they start to show proof of time.

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