

Born outside the French city of Bordeaux, he was orphaned at seven and raised by his uncle. In the 1870s, after finishing his education, Atget briefly became a sailor and cabin boy on liners in the Transatlantic. After shipping on several voyages, Atget became an actor, more specifically, a bit player, for a second-rate repertory company, but without much success. He met and eventually married Valentine DeLafosse, an actress, with whom he spent the rest of his life.

He retained his bohemian affection for the working person and worried about the petty tradespeople and merchants threatened by modernization and the rise of big Paris department stores. He was said to be short-tempered and eccentric and in his 50s stopped eating anything except bread, milk and sugar. He and his wife associated with some of Paris' leading dramatists—though he left behind no known portraits of friends or associates.