

Yvon's Paris

ROBERT STEVENS



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One March day in Paris not long after World War I, a photographer was strolling along the banks of the River Seine with his large camera and a tripod looking for subjects. His attention was attracted to an old, bearded man wearing a wide brimmed, floppy hat, wooden shoes – sabots – and smoking a pipe. He was one of the many booksellers – bouquinistes – who sold their wares on the river. Behind him, across the river, accentuated by the light of the afternoon sun, loomed the great Notre Dame cathedral. The photographer wanted to make a photograph but the old man who was tired, cold, and anxious to return home would only stay if paid. The photographer agreed, giving him five francs, set up his camera and made what would become one of the best known photographs of Paris.

What made the image unforgettable was the photographer's uncanny ability to see an arresting scene and compose it at just the right iconic moment. The photograph had a nostalgic feeling of a slower, quieter time that was rapidly fading after World War I as the country catapulted into the 20th century. The bookseller looked like a man out of the past. The photographer who recorded this scene was named Pierre Petit, who loved to roam the streets of Paris looking for such moments.



The Parisians have a word *Flanerie* that, in English, is similar to strolling, promenading or roaming – walking the streets without appointments, destinations or deadlines. When a person walks the streets this way they make discoveries others would miss. Paris is a city

made for *flaneurs*. What could be more enjoyable than a stroll through the city from the avenues of trees in the Tuileries Garden, past the seemingly endless Louvre and the grand square in front of towering and stately Notre Dame Cathedral, through the Left Bank with its galleries and shops and into the Luxembourg Garden with its glorious central pond.

As he made his way around Paris one truth was abundantly clear, Pierre disliked photographing in the midday sun. It was like recording an image at the moment when the scene lacked character. He preferred making his images closer to sunrise or sunset when shadows

are most dramatic. The drama and character of clouds were important to his work and he tried to include them whenever he could. Sometimes he chose to record the way the streets looked during fog, after storms, in the shimmering afterglow of rain or the transforming whiteness of snow. These things made his images unforgettable.



Pierre was born Jean Pierre Yves-Petit in the French port city of Bordeaux on the 14th of March 1886, the year of the last of eight impressionist art exhibitions in Paris. Bordeaux was a city with a long history in the wine industry and from its port on the Garonne River goods were shipped to the West Coast and into the Atlantic Ocean and around the world. His father, Leon and mother, (name to com) were part of the upper middle class who had grown up during the industrial revolution. His father sold hats, umbrellas and rubber goods such as tires. In fact, with a friend he manufactured a tire for the first cars. His parents always had seats at the opera and

lived in a comfortable life in a large house.

When Pierre was four he contracted polio and was confined to his bed for two years. Polio left him with one foot smaller and deformed.

After he recovered he became a mischievous youth. In Bordeaux's open-air central food market, Pierre once undid the harness of a horse from its cart as it awaited the return of its family from shopping. When the horse was commanded to start it ran off without its cart and owners. He also fired his slingshot at ladies. Since his father preferred work to spending time on family affairs, the problem of discipline Pierre fell to his mother. When Pierre was eleven years old finally his mother left the family. After her departure his grandmother came to live with the family to help raise Pierre and his sister, Yvonne (who was older or younger? Checking). He became very fond of his grandmother and in his late teens when his father refused to help him, Pierre would write to her for financial help.

In 1898, in his twelfth year, Pierre's life was forever changed by his discovery of a camera in a Bordeaux shop. As a child he liked to paint but could not master the medium so the camera became his brush.

By 1898 photography had been fascinating the public for over a half century. The inventions of two Frenchmen, Louis-Jacques Mande Daguerre and Abel Niepce de Saint-Victor

With an eye for startling viewpoints and unusual weather conditions, Yvon photographed the city awakening at dawn, in the shimmering afterglow of rain, or seen over the shoulder of a gargoyle high atop a cathedral. *Yvon's Paris* reproduces more than one hundred of his loveliest images, many made from recently discovered glass negatives. This elegant and poetic collection captures the magic of Paris at its most photogenic—the way many of us romantically wish it still were.









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Photographs of the "City of Light" taken by a master photographer
in the early part of the twentieth century.

The photographer Pierre Yves-Petit, who called himself "Yvon," wandered the streets of Paris between the world wars looking for the moment when the shifting light and clouds would perfectly reveal the city's ephemeral, iconic beauty. The dramatic images of the city and its people that he made during those years would become the most popular postcards in France. They can still be bought today on Parisian quais and are eagerly sought by collectors.

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