

PRESS KIT -

Robert Doisneau
Gentilly

from 19th september 2025 to 15th february 2026



Robert Doisneau **Gentilly**

from 19th september 2025 to 15th february 2026

Curator

Michaël Houlette, director of the Maison Doisneau and Lavoir Numérique

With the support of Atelier Robert Doisneau, Montrouge.



Opening exhibition

Thursday 18th september 2025 at 6 p.m.

at Maison Doisneau, Gentilly

Guided tours

Thursday 2 october 2025 and 29 january 2026 / 7 p.m.

Sunays 30 november 2025 and 11 january 2026 / 2 p.m.

by reservation

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Robert
Maison Doisneau
de la Photographie Gentilly

a cultural facility in the Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre region



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Gentilly

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EDITO

At the same time as Robert Doisneau, *Instants donnés*, the major retrospective at the Musée Maillol, comes to an end on October 12th, the Maison de la Photographie Robert Doisneau will be showcasing Robert Doisneau's career-long interest in his hometown, Gentilly.

The exhibition will run from 19th September to 15th February and present an ensemble of 76 photographs, many of which were printed by Doisneau himself. Most of the work on show will be new to the general public, or even previously unseen.

This exhibition and the accompanying book pay tribute to an unfinished project focusing on Gentilly on which Doisneau was working before he died in 1994.

From many points of view, Robert Doisneau's photos of Gentilly are a veritable case in point. Their story begins in this town in the suburbs of Paris where Doisneau was born and comes to an end some sixty years later at the end of a truly exceptional photographic career marked by its richness and longevity. Although Doisneau often photographed Gentilly and the working-class suburbs of Paris in general, these were not his sole subjects of interest. Even if he was often described as a "photographer of the suburbs" or someone who was "in love with the suburbs", these reductive labels oversimplify his complex relationship with the area. It would in fact be more accurate to talk about his biographical, emotional and artistic roots, a relationship in which familiarity met critical distance.

If Doisneau chose to turn his eye on the working-class suburbs of Paris from early on in his career, it was first of all because of how well he knew these places, their rhythms and the faces of their inhabitants. He was also aware of the extent to which this area was visually underrepresented, how much it was ignored and abandoned and it was from this perspective that he set about photographing these areas in the 1940s.

Forty years separate the first group of images on show here and the final photos Doisneau took of Gentilly in the 1980s. In the space of these four decades, the town underwent a complete



Rue de la Division Général Leclerc, Gentilly, avec, au fond, la future Maison de la Photographie Robert Doisneau], 1990. © Atelier Robert Doisneau

transformation. The "muddy" suburb of Doisneau's childhood, a place where tuberculosis was rife and running water a luxury, had changed through and through. As he lived for many years in neighbouring Montrouge, he was able to witness first-hand this metamorphosis that was part of a larger trend affecting all the towns around Paris. In 1992, at a time when Gentilly was celebrating with great pomp the 80th birthday of Robert Doisneau, the town council was in informal discussions with him about a book and exhibition project that would bring together all the photos he had taken of the town. The idea was to hold the exhibition in the soon-to-be opened "Maison de la Photographie Robert Doisneau". Unfortunately, Doisneau died in 1994 before the centre had opened its doors to the public.

Thanks to the hundreds of negatives conserved at the Atelier Robert Doisneau in Montrouge, we can look back at the story behind these images. The photographs, many of which were printed by Doisneau himself, reveal that he was making his first selection, however we will never know for sure if this part of the work was finished or still ongoing. The current exhibition and accompanying book pay tribute to this unfinished project and to Doisneau's exploration of the town that was both his birthplace, a source of raw material and a mirror for his thoughts.

Michaël Houlette,
Director of the Maison Doisneau

The place where it all began Doisneau and Gentilly

Robert Doisneau was born in 1912 at 21 Avenue Raspail in Gentilly. A commemorative plaque was installed in 1996 on this house that is now number 39. Doisneau's mother came from the town's petite bourgeoisie: his uncle, Auguste Gratien, would become Mayor of Gentilly and then departmental councillor, before going on to represent the constituency in parliament. His mother died when Doisneau was just 8 years old, in addition to which he had only recently met his father who had been away at the front. His father remarried and the young Robert grew up in this new household. His memories of this period are tinged with what could be described as a sort of melancholic lucidity: in his eyes, Gentilly represented "a drab childhood in a suburb made of soft plaster".

The décor of his childhood – growing up between the bourgeois family home and an area of wasteland where he was free to invent himself far from the expectations of society - would later be described by Doisneau as a sort of confused and pathetic mess. Just like the other working-class towns on the outskirts of Paris, Gentilly was not characterised by its architectural consistency or any clearly defined historical style. There weren't any remarkable monuments to speak of, except perhaps for its gothic church and the town hall. Visitors would above all notice the factories (in particular on the banks of the Bièvre) and a wide variety of densely constructed buildings built on opposite hillsides in the middle of which was a vast wasteland, the former site of a quarry where earth excavated from Paris had been deposited. And yet it was this unremarkable location (to which Doisneau had become attached in spite of everything) that crystalised his interest in photographing the suburbs.

Focusing on the fringes "La Banlieue de Paris"

When observing the world and transposing these observations into photographic form, we are first and foremost questioning what we see. It is a way of reflecting upon the reality of life and, through careful contemplation, succeeding in deciphering its meaning. In the 1940s, Robert Doisneau amassed a large number of photos of the working-class suburbs of Paris, some of which were taken in Gentilly. What started out as a solo project went on to meet with success when Doisneau joined forces with Blaise Cendrars to publish *La Banlieue de Paris* in 1949.



Cirque à Gentilly [HBM du 162 rue Gabriel Péri], 22 juillet 1949
© Atelier Robert Doisneau

The cover illustration was a photomontage by Doisneau of two of his photos: an emblematic view of the Eiffel Tower and the Habitations à Bon Marché (public housing for low-income families) at No "162", Rue Gabriel Peri in Gentilly. Below the HBM, a muddy slope that had been turned into a cyclo-cross track ran down to the large area of wasteland. The juxtaposition of these two images may seem surprising. It is not as if there were any notion of geographic continuity between the two, nor a plausible viewpoint that could bring them together. In this composition, the Eiffel Tower - an engineering masterpiece that is the symbol of the grandeur of Paris and an emblem of national prestige – towers over the housing blocks and their anonymous occupants. Two worlds are brought into confrontation: on the one hand, the monumental assertion of Paris's role as a capital of the arts, industry and the economy; and on the other, the humble day-to-day life of the suburbs, of labourers and office workers. The latter gather in spectator-like fashion in front of the functional blocks of flats built to house them and yet, without them, Paris's success would be no more than an illusion. By revealing the little-known, hidden life on the fringes of the city, the photos in *La Banlieue de Paris* set the balance right. The book emphasises the interdependence between the capital and its suburbs, between the glories of its much-vaunted centre and its industrious surrounds, two areas that seem the opposite from every point of view but which in reality are deeply interconnected.

A town transformed

A critical perspective

One of the most significant moments in Doisneau's relationship with the Parisian suburbs was the period between 1984 and 1989, when he was one of twelve photographers selected by the DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale) to document the landscapes of France. For his contribution, Doisneau chose to focus on the petite couronne (the three departments around Paris) and several new towns located further out. The images he produced were in complete contradiction with the clichés - "a photographer working in black & white" and "the humanist photographer" - often used by journalists, art critics and historians to describe him. These photos deliberately present a form of dehumanisation underlining the standardised nature and disproportionate size of these housing blocks and the predominance of the car.

Some of these photos Doisneau produced for the DATAR were taken in Gentilly. The vast blocks of HLM (public housing) in neighbourhoods such as Frileuse, Reine Blanche, Chaperon Vert and Victor Hugo (built in the 1950s and 1960s to meet the growing requirements of the local population) had completely transformed the town. To illustrate its change of scale and densification, Doisneau would sometimes climb onto the rooftops of the housing blocks to find an original new viewpoint by photographing from up high. His views of these housing estates replied to the logic of their planning with a panoramic view in which buildings, streets, squares and parks were organised in an almost abstract geometrical fashion.

Saint-Saturnin church in Gentilly - which he photographed numerous times in this series and later ones to come - became a visual motif with a historical and symbolic role. Its narrow spire reaching skywards contrasts with the rigid, utilitarian orthogonality of the modern blocs hemming it in. It seems anachronistic, perhaps representing a form of resistance, i.e. not just a simple vestige of times gone by, but a discreet counterpoint to a modern world that is necessary, but singularly lacking in poetry from Doisneau's point of view.

Crisscrossing the town

The origins of the project

At the end of the 1980s, Robert Doisneau began to forge closer ties with Gentilly and regularly came back to visit the places he remembered from his childhood more systematically. He had just finished

a long project on Saint-Denis - a commission for the town's Museum of Art and History - and was satisfied with the result. That was when the idea for a similar project in Gentilly emerged: a book that would show what the town had become, as well as focusing on the people who lived and worked there. Without an explicit commission and therefore enjoying great creative freedom, Doisneau set about photographing scenes of everyday life in Gentilly. Working from 1989 to 1991, he gradually made a real connection with the town's inhabitants: many of the people he met called him by his first name, "Robert". Gentilly was still home to small companies and craftsmen's workshops that he was curious to visit. He attended local festivities, ceremonies and various moments in the life of the town. Stepping into the courtyards of apartment buildings, lingering in front of houses and taking pictures of their occupants, Doisneau undoubtedly had flashes of childhood memories, memories of the working-class and petit bourgeois environment in which he grew up, but which had changed almost to the point of becoming unrecognisable. However, as he explored these places so many years later, it is difficult to say exactly which reminiscences these places brought to the surface.



Les Deux Garagistes [Les frères Boyer], avenue Pasteur, Gentilly, mai 1990
© Atelier Robert Doisneau

Photographing the other A human relationship above all else

Throughout his life, Robert Doisneau was always both a man of his times and a man of action, one who remained faithful to a way of seeing the world and observing his fellow men. One of the constants that can be seen in many of Doisneau's photos of people resides in the obvious relationship he established with them, a relationship whose human quality is clearly apparent, in particular in the photos taken in the 1980s.

Doisneau possessed a rare ability to forge ties with his subjects, whether discreetly or in more assertive manner. These ties were sometimes ephemeral, but always sincere. In several interviews, Doisneau explained that when taking photographs of people in a bistro, you had to start by ordering a drink like any other customer. This recommendation is representative of a philosophy of discretion: blend in, put yourself at the same level as your subjects and become a familiar face. It is not just about being accepted, but about establishing an authentic proximity. And it was with this same courteous attention and total absence of posturing that he patiently and modestly went about his work in Gentilly from 1989 to 1991. Despite being a famous photographer, he spent three whole years taking several hundred photos, always driven by the desire to meet others on a human level.



Station RER B, Gentilly, 28 avril 1990
© Atelier Robert Doisneau

The other remarkable fact about Doisneau was his culture of spontaneity. Walking camera in hand, he crisscrossed towns, always ready to capture the scenes that chance brought to his eye. He made sure he was open to and ready for these random events by only carrying a simple camera and a few lenses, but nothing else. He was always willing to return to the same place, scrutinising over and over again a scene he had already observed and even photographed many times already. Doisneau's unique art was one of repetition, not with the idea of capturing an image for posterity, but all the better to find the one that would seem the most spontaneous, one that had appeared suddenly and quite naturally and which was, therefore, the most significant to him.

Michaël Houlette

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solely for the purposes of promoting the exhibition at
Maison Doisneau.**

**Documentary film screenings
at the Lavoir Numérique**
4 rue de Freiberg / Gentilly

FREE ADMISSION

Sunday 30th november 2025 at 4 p.m.

Robert Doisneau, le révolté du merveilleux

de Clémentine Deroudille (2015), 77 min

in the presence of Clémentine Deroudille,
Francine Deroudille et Annette Doisneau



© Clémentine Deroudille

Through never-before-seen photographs, video archives and interviews with his long-time partners, the film tells the story of how this child of the suburbs became one of the world's most famous photographers.

Directed by his granddaughter, Clémentine Deroudille, this film paints an intimate portrait of the man and the artist, of an unexpected Doisneau, fiercely determined to be a purveyor of happiness.

Sunday 11st january 2026 at 4 p.m.

Doisneau des villes, Doisneau des champs

de Patrick Cazals (1993), 63 min

in the presence of Patrick Cazals, Francine Deroudille et Annette Doisneau



Robert Doisneau et Raymond Grosset
©Patrick Cazals

A friend of Doisneau's for twenty years, Patrick Cazals made this film a year before Doisneau's death. His long-time companions Maurice Baquet and Robert Giraud, his English biographer Peter Hamilton, Raymond Grosset, his editor at the Rapho agency, and the actress Juliette Binoche all share their affection for Doisneau's world.

Each of the two screenings is preceded by a screening of ***Robert Doisneau, sans les photos*** of Bernard Bloch (1990), 8 min

in the presence of Bernard Bloch

In this film, Robert Doisneau took the director on a tour of Gentilly's abandoned wash-house and shower-baths (the future Lavoir Numérique). Robert Doisneau recounts with humour his memories of this establishment, which he frequented as a child.

ROBERT **DOISNEAU**



Gentilly

Robert Doisneau, Gentilly

Published by: Editions Maison Doisneau - EPT Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre, 2025

Texts by Francine Deroudille and Michaël Houlette

72 pages

Retail price: €15

Banlieue, territoire-fiction

from 19 September 2025 to 15 February 2026

Through a series of works projecting the Parisian suburbs into fiction, the exhibition aims to re-enchant the way we look at an often little-known territory.

By drawing on references strongly associated with the area, the artists blur the boundaries between dream and reality. They reinterpret the forms and materials typical of the suburbs: concrete buildings, transport infrastructure and areas undergoing transformation. These become plastic and narrative motifs, sometimes sublimated, sometimes questioned. The traces of this very real space become revelations of the issues, the challenges, but above all the beauty and poetry that permeate these places.

Come and take stock of a potential, but very real, suburb.

Artists on show: Julie Balagué, Nicolas Boone, Raphaël Dallaporta, Raphaël Guez, Aurélien Jeanney, and Kaspar Ravel

Curators: Lise Boulay and Lou Burillier

As part of NémO - Biennale internationale des arts numériques de la Région Île-de-France, produced by CENTQUATRE-PARIS



Stationnaires, 2027. © Raphaël Dallaporta

**Storytelling walks between the exhibitions at
Maison Doisneau and the Lavoir Numérique**

**Wednesdays 5 and 26 November at 7 p.m.
Saturday 13 December at 3 p.m.**

Free admission on reservation
www.courdescontes.com

The Maison Doisneau and the Lavoir Numérique

As cultural facilities of the Établissement Public Territorial Grand-Orly Seine Bièvre, the Lavoir Numérique and the Maison de la Photographie Robert Doisneau share common missions and are managed by the same team.

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Wednesday to Friday 1.30 pm / 6.30 pm
Saturday and Sunday 1.30 pm / 7 pm
closed on public holidays
free admission

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4 rue de Freiberg
94250 Gentilly, France
tél : +33 (0) 1 49 08 91 63
lavoirnumerique.fr

RER B, station Gentilly
Métro ligne 14, station Kremlin-Bicêtre - Gentilly
Bus n° 57, V5, arrêt Division Leclerc
Bus n° 125, arrêt Mairie de Gentilly
Tramway T3, arrêt Stade de Charléty
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