“This idea of a faithful reproduction has attracted great artists at all times. Have I not seen Girodet apply himself to drawing a large number of his compositions on lithographic stones and follow the progress of this new technique with a lively interest? Lithography fascinated him, he said, just because it allowed him to reproduce his own work without the help of an interpreter and with his own hands. Similarly, I saw my relative Hersent [a Neoclassical painter and lithographer] at the end of his career apply himself with fervor to the newborn photography, because he saw nature reproduced by herself without the help of an interpreter.”

The foregoing footnote appears unexpectedly in an 1872 monograph on the sixteenth-century painter Jean Cousin, written by Ambroise Firmin Didot, a scholar and a member of the great family of printers and publishers. It suggests many things: the importance of the new techniques of reproduction for Romantic aesthetics, the double claims of direct self-expression and the multiplication of images for popular diffusion, the equivalence of the exact transcription of natural appearance and the exact transcription of the artist’s style and personality, and, finally, the way that photography developed as an integral part of the graphic arts.

Photography appeared to realize one of the Romantic dreams: the immediate transmutation of reality into art without the intervention of an interpreter, a code, or a tradition. No artistic medium was so controversial during the nineteenth century. It was an object either of wonder or of contempt—often of both at once. Many artists and critics affected to despise the new invention until, as André Jammes has remarked, they decided they wanted photographs of their mothers. In an introduction to a selection of Nadar’s photographs (Paris, 1982), Jammes, one of the greatest authorities on nineteenth-century photography, quotes Baudelaire’s letter to his mother of December 1865, written after the poet’s famous onslaught on photography in the Salon of 1859. He
wrote that he wished to have her picture taken and defined what he considered a good portrait: "The face must be at least one or two inches large. Paris is almost the only place where one knows how to do what I would like, that is, an exact portrait but one that has the softness [le flou] of a drawing." As Jammes remarks, this evidently refers to Nadar's portraits. Nadar, who was Baudelaire's friend, himself defined the task of the portrait photographer:

Photography is a marvelous discovery, a science that occupies the most elevated intelligences, an art that sharpens the most sagacious minds — and the application of which is within the reach of any imbecile... Photographic theory can be learned in an hour; the first notions of practice, in a day.

I shall tell you what cannot be learned: the feeling for light — the artistic appreciation of the effects produced by different and combined sources of light ["les jours divers et combinés"] — the application of one or another of these effects according to the nature of the physiognomy that you must reproduce as an artist.

What can be learned even less is the moral understanding of your subject — the instant tact that puts you in communication with the model... and which allows you to give, not an indifferent plastic reproduction, banal and fortuitous, within the reach of the merest laboratory assistant, but the most familiar and favorable resemblance, the intimate resemblance. *

For Nadar, evidently, the portrait photograph differed from a painted or lithographic portrait only in its medium. The artistic problems were the same: the use of light to compose, to uncover physiognomic structure and create texture, the revelation of quintessential character by pose and gesture. Photography was, for Nadar, a graphic medium like any other: it had its own technique and its own methods, but it was a form of art as much as etching or painting. The ease of its use was almost irrelevant to him. He had begun as a draftsman and was known for his caricatures before he moved to photography.

Historians of art generally discuss photography in terms of painting and of the influence of one medium on the other: they try to show that photographers made photographs that looked like paintings, or that painters made paintings that looked like photographs. This, however, obscures what was happening even when it most seems to be true — as in the case of Nadar, whose photographs do, indeed, resemble paintings or, more often, lithographs. The similarity of many of Nadar's works to portraits by Ingres and, above all, by Devèrèia is striking — and only to be expected, as they were all working in the same genre although in different media. The portrait had its traditions, its conventions, and its code of meaning: all of these had been expanded in the nineteenth century, but the genre was a relatively stable one. Nadar, in short, was not imitating paintings but making portraits.

As for the undeniable influence of photography on painting, the significance of this has been considerably undermined by the realization that artists had been making paintings that looked like photographs for more than a half-century before the invention of photography. This insight of the late Heinrich Schwartz was developed in a valuable and stimulating exhibition organized by Peter Galassi. He explored one thesis: that the photographic vision, the informality and directness of approach that we admire in photography, had been already prepared in painting from the late eighteenth century on, particularly in painted studies or sketches of landscape. * In Galassi's view, the freedom and directness of photography, in order to be communicated, depended on certain modes of presentation, certain methods of cropping and points of view, that were already developed earlier in a particular kind of painting and taken over by photography.

We sometimes hear that the perspectives and lighting effects we associate with photography were simply the result of the technical invention of the camera in the 1830s and 1840s and made their way into painting only later, with Degas and the Impressionists. But few students of the nineteenth century will find Galassi's point either surprising or difficult to accept. These ideas have been current for many years, but no one has stated them so clearly.

* Quoted in the preface to André Jammes, *Nadar* (1982).
Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes, Study of the Sky at the Quirinal. Although his completely idealized landscapes are once again appreciated after a long eclipse, Valenciennes’s reputation is more firmly established today on his quick sketches, or pochades, which have great freshness and spontaneity. These pochades were studied and copied by young landscape painters in the early nineteenth century, were later completely forgotten, and have been rediscovered only in our time.

or demonstrated them with such cogency. They are illustrated by Galassi with some early photographs and with works by many painters, including famous masters such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, John Constable, Thomas Girtin, and Caspar David Friedrich. The catalogue also includes many enchanting views by lesser figures. The painted sketches of François-Marius Granet, especially striking for their boldness and sharpness of vision, are much too little known, while the views sketched in and around Rome by Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes in the 1780s are already widely acknowledged as landmarks in the history of art.

The paintings are representative of an important tradition, and many other artists or examples could have been added or substi-
tuted. Some of the early landscape studies of William Mulready before 1810 would have served as well as those of John Sell Cotman or John Linnell. Nature studies by Théodore Caruelle d’Aligny have what Galassi calls the “abrupt, frozen, refractory quality” of Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller’s wonderful landscapes, which makes them seem photographic.

Galassi also shows that the origins of the modern tradition in painting are more complex than many have thought. One of the most striking pictures in *Before Photography* is an Italian view by Léon Cogniet (1794–1880), a conservative painter best known for his large historical pictures. This is an early and private oil sketch, but it is very smoothly painted, not treated in a sketchy
Cogniet, At Lake Nemi, near Rome. This was one of the landscape studies painted in Italy, where Cogniet went on a Prix de Rome in 1817, and stayed until 1824.

Leon Cogniet, Tintoretto Painting His Dead Daughter. The painting had a great success at the Salon of 1843.

Texture. What brings photography to mind here is the change of values that takes place as a result of distance and the attenuation of hue. The picture is also cropped like a snapshot: in the right foreground in sharp focus is a small branch with leaves—hanging, we presume, from a tree, the rest of which is cut off by the frame; the background (a river and the opposite bank) is delicately blurred, as if out of focus. This study, poetic in its mood and its finesse, not only calls to mind photographs in which a tree branch or building near the lens sharply intrudes into a picture of a more
distant scene, but serves as a reminder that even cautious and conventional painters like Cogniet were not entirely outside the major developments of art and what was original in the vision of their time.

The little picture is fascinating, but it does not make Cogniet's later work more significant, or his public grandes machines more interesting. The present fashion for academic nineteenth-century style has not yet reached Léon Cogniet's serious productions. The real discoveries in nineteenth-century painting are to be made in other fields than the revival of faded reputations, above all in the interaction of social and technological change with the major artistic movements of the time.

Galassi places the continuity between painting and photography within the history of perspective and, more generally, within the changing conception of vision as it relates to the making of pictures. The theory of one-point perspective, as published by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435, is that of a window on the outside world, or in more technical terms that of the visual pyramid interrupted by a plane of projection which is the surface of the picture. But, for Italian artists of the Renaissance, perspective was as much a device for constructing images, a method of composition both on the plane and in an imaginary three-dimensional space, as it was a way of catching the appearance of the outside world. Galassi sees a progressive development from the image-constructing of the Quattrocento to the view-catching of photography and of painters like Degas, which was a way of reducing the three-dimensional world to a two-dimensional pattern. "Gradually," he writes, "over a period of centuries, Uccello's procedure of logical construction gave way to Degas's strategy of selective description."

There is a weakness in this historical view; it disregards the empirical type of representation developed in Flanders by Jan van Eyck and others early in the fifteenth century, a technique already geared to the catching of appearance. It should be added that the use of perspective to construct pictures never lost its claim on painting during the nineteenth century, as witness Jacques-Louis David and Georges Seurat (to name painters just before and just after the invention of photography). But this reservation does not invalidate Galassi's main argument, that photography belongs to the history of pictorial representation.

In the remarkable pages he wrote on photography in Painting and Society (1952), the French art historian Pierre Francastel insisted that the camera was an apparatus to produce pictures according to pictorial perspective. Photographs that did not conform were usually discarded, as when vertical parallels—the piers of a cathedral for instance—seem to converge. Today we have lenses that "correct" such "distortions." Francastel's point only reinforces the claim that photography belongs firmly to the history of pictorial representation. After all, the two main inventors of photography, Daguerre and Talbot, were both painters.

And yet there is something moving and exciting, something almost magical, about the beginnings of photography. Whatever the continuity between photography and the pictorial tradition, however much we may feel that the invention of photography was inevitable and perhaps even overdue, the invention marked a break, a watershed in the history of representation. This is due not so much to anything intrinsic to photography, or to its apparent objectivity (which, however, should not be underestimated, as criminologists and horse-race enthusiasts know), or to its more exact rendition of appearance. On the contrary, early photography was often unclear or ambiguous, and neglected a great deal of visual information, such as color, that painting conveyed much better. But, although some early critics of photography felt that it lied because it did not fit with their visual habits and their established pictorial codes, in the end photography, "the pencil of nature," as Talbot put it, carried conviction.

That photography not only does not, but cannot, lie is a matter of belief, an article of faith. It is not that a photograph has more resemblance than a handmade picture (many have much less, and what could be more like something else in appearance than a successfully painted trompe-l'oeil?), but that our belief guarantees its authenticity; to put it simply, we tend to adhere unquestioningly to the conviction that the photographic image is of something that was actually in front of the camera, in a necessary and deducible relation to it; we tend to trust the camera more than our own eyes.
From this, the photograph has acquired a symbolic value, and its fine grain and evenness of detail have come to imply objectivity; photographic vision has become a primary metaphor for objective truth.

It would be foolish to claim that this phenomenon is unrelated to the way a photograph is made, to the mechanical apparatus and chemical processes that largely replace the decisions and judgments of the picture maker. These characteristics of photography had great importance, both as potential and as limitation. But they could be overcome, as was shown very early by Julia Cameron, the celebrated English photographer: for better or worse, she turned photography into "Art" so successfully that her pictures seem the product of fantasy just as much as any painting of the time. The decisive break between painting and photography, in the end, is a mental and psychological one—not simply the result of a technical invention, but what was made of it. Although many of the finest painters, including Degas and Eakins, experimented with photography, the world of art, for the most part, rejected and banished it to the world of science. This ensured both its integrity and its power. If the history of art were now really to absorb photography instead of relegating it to a marginal status, that would entail a thoroughgoing revision of the discipline—and a renunciation of the idea that art is an autonomous activity with a consistent history of its own.

This is why Nadar is such a fascinating but, in the end, irrelevant figure. He is so clearly and consciously an artist, and his portraits are so evidently art in the most banal sense, that he can be integrated easily enough into the most conventional art history. This was already obvious at the time. There is a well-known caricature by Daumier that shows Nadar working his camera over Paris in an aerial balloon; the caption reads, "Nadar elevating photography to the level of art." This amiable and ironic work records Nadar's exciting experiments in aerostatics and aerial photography. But the caption refers to something else, to his artistic claims. The two men both worked in minor artistic media, but Daumier, who was almost secretly a great painter, practiced his job as a cartoonist with no pretension, and his importance is all the greater for it. Nadar's photographs perfectly sustain their claim to be accepted as high art, even great art—and are thereby condemned to be no more than art. His portraits had, of course, a documentary interest as a record of the great men of his time, but this is equally true of the medallions of David d'Angers and the lithographs of Achille Devéria.

Other photographers (the American Timothy O'Sullivan, for example) were much less art-conscious. They were the legitimate successors of the eighteenth-century topographic draftsmen and engravers, who were rarely considered artists in the full sense of the word but whose work was recognized—very early in the nineteenth century by Goethe, for example—as one of the chief sources of modern landscape painting. It is true that one can select the most "beautiful" works of these photographers and discuss and admire them as one would drawings or paintings, but this is a distortion and a reduction of their significance: it cuts these works off from their scientific and social functions.* After its origin as a new graphic medium, photography spilled over almost at once into science because of its incomparable ability to document, and into commerce and industry, especially as a way of producing the souvenirs demanded by the railroads' expansion of tourism. Today photography reaches into all activities of life—but then, so does art, and the failure to integrate photography into art and into the history of art was a refusal of artists and historians to abandon the distinction between high and applied art, to recognize that their own field had no real autonomy, only one that was professionally imposed.

Galassi has not done justice to the shock waves that photography produced in the history of representation. However, by stressing the very real line of continuity between painting and photography, he makes it possible for us to understand how photography and the effect of reality it produces came about within a large movement of ideas in the nineteenth century. The objective photographic vision depended paradoxically on means that stressed the

subjective elements of perception. The unfamiliar angle of vision, the seemingly random cropping, which developed before photography and were carried on by it, can be understood as ways of stressing the necessary presence of the distinctive perceiving subject, the peculiarly individual point of view. That such a development took place throughout the Romantic period, when the subjective perception of the outside world was at the center of thought, is understandable; and insofar as the camera eye—or camera-l—institutionalizes and enforces this authority of the highly personal “point of view,” it is indeed a fulfillment of the Romantic movement. The invention of photography was wonderfully timely.