Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867)

“The Modern Public and Photography,” from Part 2 of The Salon of 1859

Baudelaire, now known primarily for his poetry, was an important art critic at midcentury and a powerful advocate for artists painting contemporary life.

Focus Questions:

1. Explain Baudelaire’s opinion of the new medium, photography.
2. According to Baudelaire, what are some useful applications for photography?
3. Comment on whether you believe Baudelaire’s assessment of photography has proven correct.

I am convinced that the badly applied advances of photography, like all purely material progress for that matter, have greatly contributed to the impoverishment of French artistic genius….Poetry and progress are two ambitious men that hate each other, with an instinctive hatred, and when they meet along a pathway one or other must give way. If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art’s activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally. Photography must, therefore, return to its true duty, which is that of handmaid of the arts and sciences….Let photography quickly enrich the traveller’s album, and restore to his eyes the precision his memory may lack; let it adorn the library of the naturalist, magnify microscopic insects, even strengthen, with a few facts, the hypotheses of the astronomer; let it, in short, be the secretary and record-keeper of whomsoever needs absolute material accuracy for professional reasons….But if once it be allowed to impinge on the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary, on anything that has value solely because man adds something to it from his soul, then woe betide us!