

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

*The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera* by Adam Begley

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2018)

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Citation: Gabriel P. Weisberg, book review of *The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera* by Adam Begley, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2018.17.1.9>.

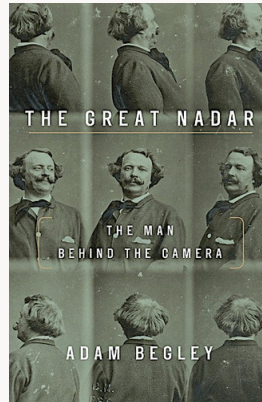
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Adam Begley,  
*The Great Nadar: The Man Behind the Camera*.  
New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2017.  
248 pp.; 128 b&w illus.  
\$28.00  
ISBN 9781101902608 (hardcover)

Who does not know the name of Nadar, one of the most creative, expansive individuals in France during the nineteenth century? But what people are not aware of, except for specialists, is that Nadar was much more than a photographer of the leading people of his time. He was a caricaturist, a lithographer, a hot-air balloon aficionado who championed the importance of aeronautical flight, an energetic self-promoter who believed in his own celebrity, and a restless soul who did all he could to establish photography as a medium where picture-takers would be respected and their work understood. To achieve his goals, Nadar became a master of publicity using his name to advance his photographic studio so that no one could miss the bold signage saying “Nadar” on the facade of his principal studio in Paris.

As Adam Begley unfolds the story of Nadar he examines him from every angle: he sensitively studies the photographs while showing these works against the background of events in Paris, and the personal debates that were waged in Nadar’s own family. While the book is small, it is concise; it opens up much new territory, which provides Begley with many ways by which to reach an uninformed readership. The text is clear, easy to understand, and not burdened by any unnecessary footnotes. Arranged chronologically, it presents Nadar’s life as a series of events.

The first chapter, “Nadar Aloft,” presents an overview of the man so that a reader can grasp his varied interests. He was clearly a celebrity and a radical who was a genius at self-promotion. From the outset Begley centers attention on photography as a means of promotion: how Nadar’s photo of himself in a balloon gondola created the suggestion that the man, dressed in a top hat, was actually in a balloon in the air. But on the following page of the book Nadar is brought down to earth. An uncropped image of the photograph shows that it was taken inside a studio with Nadar barely off the ground and a photo assistant standing at the right of the gondola. Using photography to create a bogus image, Nadar was

able to get his message across. Here he was, reality be damned, creating the illusion of his ascent at a moment in time during the 1860s when his career was moving upward. Of little matter was that huge balloons, which Nadar was supporting, were not always able to achieve flight. His career was launched as he sold the public on his art, including the message that ballooning was the most modern thing to do.

The second section examines how Nadar received his name since he was born Gaspard-Félix Tournachon. The pseudonym became his nickname, then an “emblem of his success; and then of his celebrity” (8). His parents had not married when he was born, but finally did so, although the family welfare was one of struggle and deprivation; these facts remained with Nadar all his life. Charting Félix’s movement through school revealed a restless, inquisitive mind and a personality that often involved the young Nadar in schoolyard scrapes. Finding it was necessary to earn money Félix took to writing for journals. When he returned to Paris from Lyon he tried writing for the *Journal des dames*—a publication which disappeared rapidly. For a dozen years he wrote for newspapers and minor magazines, developing friendships with young, penniless aspiring poets and painters living *la vie bohème* in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. During these years, he made the acquaintance of his primary mentor, Charles Philipon.

With the third chapter Begley’s book hits its stride. Involved in many of the most original gatherings of young creators, Nadar, as he was now called, lived in penury, in misery. If many of his bohemian friends are now forgotten, two are not: Gérard de Nerval and Charles Baudelaire. These writers remained honest to their craft although Nerval committed suicide because of it. The relationship with Baudelaire was reciprocal; when the great poet died, Nadar published an appreciative, glowing obituary in *Le Figaro*, one of the most widely read newspapers of the day. This chapter demonstrates the author’s comprehensive and deeply interpretive research into the placement of Nadar within this company of leading literary lights.

As a man of letters, Nadar wanted to remain the center of attention. He became the editor of a newspaper where his collaborators included a number of the preeminent writers of the day: Honoré Balzac, Alexandre Dumas, and Théophile Gautier, among others. The newspapers were helpful to him, but Nadar thought that he could become a significant writer of books. His failure to do this despite a fervent desire to succeed, led him to scale back his ambitions to write shorter pieces, which, if he had not later modified his direction, would have remained forgotten. Nadar’s evolution from a mediocre writer to an artist was slow. A few of his drawings were placed in publications where his articles appeared. Not until 1847 did he receive his first commission. He found the courage to submit a caricature to *Le Charivari* run by Charles Philipon, one of the primary socially significant publications of the era. He continued to write, but it was his caricatures that really made his name as a political satirist. The most famous of his visualizations were the images he created for *La Revue Comique*. Whether all his images can be understood today is questionable, although they meant much to those involved in the politics of the Second Republic and the dawning of the age of Louis Napoleon. Nadar was busy all the time, making the *Journal pour rire* one of the key publications of the day. But as press censorship increased under Napoleon III Nadar’s work stressed simplicity over complexity. Urged on by his mentor Charles Philipon, Félix understood the emerging significance of celebrity culture, although not everything he

completed, no matter how amusing, found an audience. Nadar was now an iconic force in the arts; by the time Charles Philipon died in 1862, everyone knew his name.

The next section establishes Nadar's commitment to photography with a certain type of image: the portrait. It is in this section that Begley demonstrates his sensitive reading of photographs of people then famous, many of whom have now faded from consciousness. Among these are Nadar's early portraits of Philipon and that of the young artist Gustave Doré. Recognizing that he would have to mold photography so that he could make a living from it, Nadar did studies of members of his family, colleagues, and friends. At the same time photography became an art where he could discover the most important qualities of the sitter and reveal these in his photographs. The fact that there are no captions or dates under the photographs in the book, necessitates that a reader understand the text itself, as it relates clearly to the way in which any given photograph was used in the book. Among the best photographs are those of the writer Théophile Gautier and Nadar's own portrait. Here, the sense of intimacy with models he knew well, or in his self-portraits, reveal that formality was not what he wanted. He tried to convey the casualness of a personality in each of his photographs, and it is this quality that is brilliantly captured in Begley's text.

At the moment that he was achieving fame as a photographer his life was marred by a fierce family feud with his younger brother, Adrien. What precipitated the fight is not known, although it revolved around his brother co-opting Nadar's name so that he could build his own career as a photographer. Financial support for Adrien allowed him to win a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle (1855). Central to this discussion are a series of images of the figure of Charles Debureau as Pierrot, created with Félix's assistance in composing the image by setting the pose. Even portrait photographs, such as the very moving one of Gérard de Nerval bore the impact of the elder brother. The portrait of the young Doré, while stamped "Nadar jeune," was undoubtedly posed by Félix. All of this caused serious concerns over attribution, issues that have not fully subsided today. It is remarkable that Begley's lucid text so ably examines the rifts between the brothers, demonstrating how intense the situation was as authorial attribution cut to the heart of the family friction. Even when a model sat for both men, as was the case with the realist novelist and art critic, Champfleury, the way in which each brother went about the portrait setting is sensitively assessed by Begley in such a way as not to demean the creative powers of either man, while underscoring that Félix was the better photographer. What remains from this discussion is that the power of photography was real; only a few had the ability to raise it to the heights of Mt. Olympus.

With the next section, Begley's grasp of the artistic situation in Paris fully emerges. He situates other photographers, such as Gustave Le Gray, as crucial players in the photographic revolution of the time. Le Gray set up his studio in the heart of the city in order to capitalize on the sophistication of his audience. "Competition among professional photographers grew fierce in the second half of the decade (1860s) with new studios opening daily in the city" (102). Photography was everywhere, often practiced by those with little talent, who wanted to cash in on the commercial possibilities inherent in this new fad. Many of these photographers, such as Le Gray, crashed. Even Félix was touched by the mania to expand, to commercialize the medium, especially since he needed funds to take care of an ailing mother. He opened a new, larger studio at 35 Boulevard des Capucines, an expensive site that would become increasingly famous not only because of Nadar, but also because it was here

that the first Impressionist exhibition took place in 1874. Félix wanted to attract a new, prevailing clientele: the urban middle class. But he spent money freely in setting up the studio. Even the type of photograph produced inside the studio changed: he did polished portraits of some of the leading luminaries such as the young Sarah Bernhardt, images that carry an erotic charge appropriate for the atmosphere of the Second Empire's opulence. His portraits of George Sand were extolled by the sitter. But the luxuriance of the environment took its toll and by the mid-1860s when Félix had to sell off part of his collection of paintings and objets d'art. Whether he wanted to be considered in this light or not, Félix became a version of Baudelaire's painter of modern life, as a photographer of the people involved in setting the cultural tone of the time.

During this time Nadar became more and more obsessed with the idea of ballooning. He wanted to be the first person to take a photograph from the air as chronicled in a famous lithograph by Honoré Daumier. Why did he become so obsessed? As Begley states, Nadar saw it as a challenge, as something he needed to conquer in order to obtain considerable publicity for trying. He thought of himself as part "adventurer, part inventor," and "he resolved to become the first person ever to take a picture from the sky" (126). While he failed in this, Nadar's pursuit of new subjects led him to photograph the Paris catacombs and the city's sewers. He was determined to reveal the modernization of Paris as well as "playing on nostalgia for the old Paris gradually disappearing" because of improvements above and below the ground during the renovations implemented under Napoleon III. By reproducing photographs that show the sites Nadar was exploring, the reader develops a further awareness of how Félix's mind continued to expand; his focus on ballooning also brought him considerable publicity since the balloon itself was gigantic, even when it crashed.

The next section revealed the importance of Siege balloons used in sending mail and messages during the Franco-Prussian war. The aeronauts also used balloons to fly above the German fortifications, letting the flyers take notes that were to help them during the siege of the city. Nadar was in his element with the burgeoning importance of flight; balloons even helped Léon Gambetta, the most popular minister of the provisional government, to fly out of Paris during a daring moment that almost cost Gambetta his life. The last chapter, "The Long Goodbye," chronicles Nadar's declining fortunes and the shuttering of his studio, leading to his almost complete withdrawal from the photography business. Félix filled his time with taking some deeply moving photographs of his friends; in addition, he continued writing, completing nothing major, but managing to produce a number of fragmentary vignettes. When he died in 1910, Nadar had contributed to many of the most inventive movements of the time. But he had no idea of his totally remarkable achievements and what they meant to France.

The contribution of Begley's book is manifold. Since the author does not use footnotes, or have an annotated bibliography, the reader must accept Begley's narrative as it is. This is a very strong way to have a general reader become acquainted with Nadar; it is also an excellent way for a seasoned scholar to see how themes and ideas of the time are interconnected. By using the photographs by Nadar to reinforce the text, not only do the people of the time come alive but so does Nadar. Adding to the narrative is Begley's command of the history of the era. This enhances and deepens the ways in which the story is developed. In the end a reader wants to read more, and the history of this multi-talented

figure is presented with depth and versatility. It is a major accomplishment and achievement.

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