

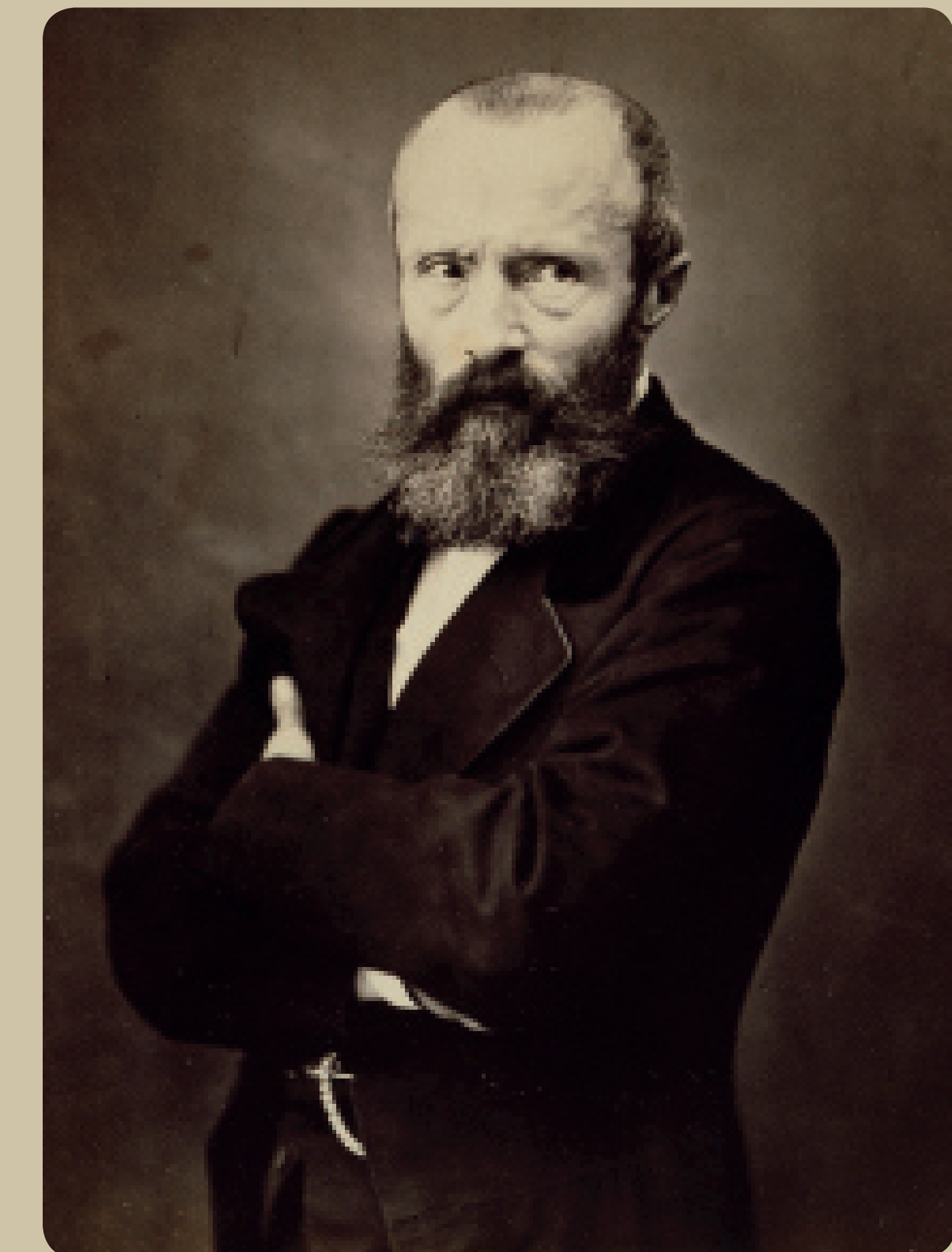
Taste and the Evolution of Knowledge

It is said that a work of true genius will always be appreciated. But is this really so? There are many instances in which the names of great masters have been forgotten, their works attributed to others, and the facts of their lives lost. Works of art celebrated by one generation are sometimes discarded by the next. The art of one political regime may be purposely cast aside—or even destroyed—in an effort to eclipse past glories and call attention to the present ruler’s accomplishments and artistic tastes.

Sometimes long-lost treasures are rediscovered and immediately hailed as masterpieces. In other cases, changing tastes cause people to reevaluate long-known works. The dedicated research of scholars occasionally serves to popularize the work of once obscure artists. For example, the

French art critic and writer Théophile Thoré’s reappraisal of Vermeer sparked new interest in the Dutch artist’s remarkable pictorial achievements.

What we know about a work of art does to some degree inform how we see that work. The psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud thought that fusion of a viewer’s personal history with what is known about a work of art could bring “confirmatory satisfaction.” That is, knowledge stimulates the imagination and contributes to our perception of the work as highly significant, a “masterpiece.”



Art critic and connoisseur Théophile Thoré

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