Introduction

The origin of these studies, which examine the experiences of artists at the fall of the French Empire, began in curiosity about Jacques-Louis David’s final artistic phase in Brussels, his place of exile from 1816 as a proscribed revolutionary regicide. The work of his final Belgian period has been underestimated when not disparaged for its seeming awkwardness and incongruities, as if his gifts had deserted him. No more than a first level of examination, however, reveals David taking remarkable liberties with the accepted rules of painting in the period—protocols he had done as much as anyone to define—in order to figure the changed circumstances of his existence, while mordantly reflecting on the immense historical processes that had left him to one side.

Looking outward from this one instance of a defining cultural figure displaced to peripheral status, unexpected movements across old boundaries—whether geographical, religious, national, or social—came into focus as transforming the cultural networks of the period. Alongside human actors, art objects were likewise set in motion; the restoration of the works of art transported to Paris by Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies made for a drama in itself. Their fate uncertain, the great Vatican antiquities—the Laocoon, the Belvedere Apollo, the Belvedere Torso—loomed large in the pan-European imagination as symbols of all the larger attempts to restore the pre-Napoleonic status quo. Venetian sculptor Antonio Canova assumed the role of roving diplomat pursuing their repatriation. In that capacity, he linked himself to a new set of patrons in England and struck up a close relationship with Thomas Lawrence, their portraitist of choice, who was setting out for the Continent on an unprecedented commission to commemorate the victory of the allies in a mammoth suite of individual portraits.

Key to this part of the inquiry are the pendant portraits that Lawrence painted on arriving in Rome, one of Pope Pius VII and the other of his chief minister, Cardinal Ercole Consalvi. Taken together, these paintings mark an unexpected pinnacle of quality and complexity in Lawrence’s capacities as an artist, belying the persistent perception of his output as superficial flattery. The very fact of pope and prelate being portrayed by an English artist at all, in light of the anti-Catholicism deeply engrained in English law and custom, bespeaks a deep unsettling of old orders. These canvases would not have taken their accomplished form—arguably the premier ecclesiastical images of the era—were it not for the rapprochement of an elite British circle, Whig in orientation and close to the prince regent, with a brand of administratively enlightened Catholicism open to foreign and even Protestant allies.

As the Vatican representative in the cross-European negotiations surrounding the Congress of Vienna, Consalvi had won friends in
London, subsequently becoming a central figure within a remarkable colony of expatriate British aristocrats who took up residence in Rome shortly after hostilities were over. Highly consequential in a number of domains—from the return of the Vatican’s artistic treasures to the restoration of the old Papal States by Austria under successful British pressure—this Anglo-Italian network represents one visible instance of a larger relational field that emerged from the confusion of interests and affinities that followed Waterloo.

As Consalvi set about transforming the fabric of Rome in line with its function as key meeting ground for the post-Waterloo network of European culture, the large community of foreign artists in the city established their own micronetworks, frequently across confessional boundaries, that paralleled the large, cross-European connections that frame this study. The young J.A.D. Ingres, once a David pupil but by this point a conservatively minded Roman expatriate, greeted the pope’s return with a sense of vindication. He sent to Paris a depiction of Pius VII enthroned amid pomp in the Sistine Chapel, a small but dense riposte to the pontiff’s symbolic humiliation as depicted in his master’s gargantuan, teeming *Coronation of Josephine*.

David and Pius VII, as it happens, had formed a surprising personal bond during the latter’s sittings for the *Coronation*, and the artist kept a papal portrait near at hand during his Brussels years. As David’s young Belgian followers made their way to Rome, however, their master would doubtless have been dismayed to witness his protégé’s attraction, alongside Ingres, to the eccentric piety of the German Nazarene artists. At the same time, Théodore Géricault, the most consequential artist to come of age in this moment, stalked the city virtually unnoticed, drawn as much to raw aspects of plebeian existence as to the monuments he had made his pilgrimage to see—in this an unwitting echo of the distant, disaffected Francisco Goya, a David contemporary likewise fallen from favor. After returning to Paris, the youthful Géricault would transform what was possible in the art of his time. Not only did the profoundly important *Raft of the Medusa* emerge from his labors, he would also anticipate that watershed canvas with three monumental landscapes, grimly enigmatic, dystopic, and off-putting to most observers, but unexpectedly cogent in light of unseen causes. No one in Europe then had any inkling of the titanic eruption in April 1815 from Mount Tambora in the Java-nese archipelago, but a great many suffered from the global climate changes engendered by it.

Traveling across the Alps to Rome in the autumn of 1816, returning a year later in the same season, Géricault had ample opportunity to witness and endure the storm-borne privations induced by natural catastrophes across the continent, deepening when not overtaking the pervasive disquiet induced by darkly portentous political events.
His art encompassed manifold facets of the Restoration, condensing and exemplifying the wider currents from which it emerged. Much the same can be said of the five other narrative threads that make up this book: David’s art and pedagogy in exile; the vicissitudes of the campaign to restore the art expropriated by the French; Lawrence’s painted constellation of Restoration grandees; Ingres’s campaign to reconcile religious art with contemporary mentalities; and the brief ascents of youthful stars like the French Antoine Jean-Baptiste Thomas and the Belgian François-Joseph Navez, whose scintillating artistic moments came and went with the political turbulence. The hereditary rulers of European states—abetted by their generals, ministers, and sundry advisors—were united in the conviction that changes effected from the French Revolution of 1789 to the abdication of Napoleon in 1814 had to be rolled back. But artistic change is never so accelerated or unpredictable as when forces gather to stop it, still more when those in authority make a concentrated effort to put things back to some prior, irrecoverable state of affairs.

At certain exceptional moments, the flux of change itself makes an appearance in a work of art. In 1814, Géricault had enlisted in the reconstituted royal guard surrounding the new monarch, Louis XVIII, scion of the restored Bourbon dynasty. That commitment left him some time for making art, which Géricault used to sketch a potential painting of the king reviewing the artist’s fellow guardsmen maneuvering on the Champ de Mars from the steps of the national military academy (l’École Militaire) (frontispiece; fig. 2.16). He placed the figure of Louis XVIII, not so obviously obese as he was in life, between the columns at one side, his precise delineation of the seated monarch giving way in the foreground to massed horsemen dissolved in a fluidly indistinct cloud of half-rendered possibilities.

Finished works of art produced in settled circumstances mask the disparate fragments from which they are fashioned. When disruptive events intervene, as they dramatically did around 1814, established formations and expectations break apart and the liberated fragments can be released to go their own way—much as they appear to do on the left side of Géricault’s composition. Observing the ways in which these wayward components could be resynthesized into cogent new works is the closest thing we have to capturing change on the wing, and understanding change is the essence of any history worth the name.