
H-France Review Vol. 19 (August 2019), No. 159

Thomas Crow, *Restoration: The Fall of Napoleon in the Course of European Art, 1812-1820*. Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. The A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Bollingen Series XXXV: Vol. 64. 208 pp. Notes, figures (160 color + 12 b/w). \$39.95 U.S. / £30.00 (hb). ISBN 9780691181646.

Review by Andrei Pop, University of Chicago.

At a key moment halfway through George Cukor's 1950 film *Born Yesterday*, the idealistic young reporter played by William Holden recites a soliloquy on Napoleon's tomb penned in 1877 by American orator and agnostic Robert G. Ingersoll: "I said I would rather have been a French peasant and worn wooden shoes....I would rather have been that man and gone down to the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust than to have been that imperial impersonation of force and murder, known as 'Napoleon the Great'".[1] Art historians have not been quite as hard on Napoleon, but he has given them enough trouble. For he mobilized the arts, above all portraits of his person, in ways consistent with imperial precedent but outstripping in ambition any ruler of his era. In concert with this personal propaganda, he seized for the Musée Napoleon many of Rome's antiquities, a practice reversed after his fall but emulated by colonial powers ever since. Napoleon's legacy in the arts was mixed in more ways than one: his instrumentalization of French academic art deprived it of whatever intellectual and aesthetic legitimacy it retained at the end of the French Revolution. If the Empire remains a force in fashion and furniture, its identity in painting and sculpture is less distinct: historians have focused on art administration, or single artists, from Jacques-Louis David and his pupils to Jean-Dominique Ingres and Théodore Géricault, who navigated the choppy waters.[2] It is as if the towering figure of Napoleon cannot be perceived directly in the art he so forcefully claimed as his own.

Fortunately, Thomas Crow, who has contributed as much as anyone to our understanding of French art around 1800, has delivered and published a set of Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art which tackles the Napoleon myth head on while recognizing the difficulty of grasping its object: as the subtitle of his ironically titled *Restoration* makes clear, the book addresses that eight-year span, from the disastrous Russian campaign of 1812 to the reshuffling of the restored Bourbon administration in 1820, when Napoleon's star was in decline, for all the brilliance of his brief return to power. David's brassy equestrian portrait of *Napoleon crossing the Alps*, which adorns the cover and makes a brief appearance in the book, does not fall in this period, but the text is bookended by two masterpieces: David's 1812 *Portrait of the Emperor in his Study at the Tuileries* and Géricault's 1819 *Raft of the Medusa*, whose progress from subtly confident but anxious *déshabillé* to anguished foundering of the ship of state captures the arc of

the era in question, at least in Paris. Not that the doom was all-pervading: in Rome certainly, and to some extent in London and Madrid, this was an epoch of carnivalesque celebration. It is a joy to read Crow on the cosmopolitan art scene of the Eternal City, reawakening after a decade of continental war and the requisitioning of ancient art: from the warmly sympathetic portraits of Pope Pius VII and his right hand, Cardinal Ercole Consalvi, as custodians of antiquity by the often slick English society painter Thomas Lawrence to the vibrant street views of Rome, from butcher shop to Carnival procession, by Géricault's academic contemporary Antoine Jean-Baptiste Thomas. This forgotten French draftsman who fell in love with Rome, foregoing classical nudes for contemporary bullfights and gossiping women and returning to Paris with a deep well of picturesque Roman souvenirs to sell as prints, is the unofficial hero of Crow's narrative, teeming with characters familiar and obscure.

The obscure are often brought to center stage. For instance, Crow deftly compares Thomas's and Géricault's studies of the riderless Barbary horse race during the Roman carnival. Crow tellingly commends Thomas's renderings for revealing "the goads along the flanks of the horses that spurred them to run, supplemented by barbs in their festively ornamented headgear" (p. 90). The dark thread underlying this contrast, we are told, is bleaker even than this pain inflicted on animals: it is "the responsibility for any artist aspiring toward greatness to confront the catastrophic levels of violence and endemic cruelty visited on Europe by the onset of total warfare. No profundity would be possible without that recognition" (p. 91). This passage, closing a fairly cheerful chapter on postwar peripatetic artists, passionately echoes not only the politically engaged social art history that Crow has played a part in establishing—it also aims to jolt readers living through years of political extremism and uncertainty. In a recent interview, Crow recalls delivering the lectures in the autumn days of the Obama administration, and he compares the reversals of the Restoration with events like Brexit and Trump's election.[3]

The lens of aesthetic insight wrested from "violence and endemic cruelty" (p. 91) allows Crow to weave into his narrative not only Jean-Antoine Gros's phantasmagoric drawing of *Napoleon at the Burning of Moscow* and Géricault's *Medusa* but also Goya's *The Third of May 1808* and its pendant *The Second of May 1808*, depicting the Spanish riot against French Mameluke troops that provoked the bloody retribution of the next day. Nor does Crow say the expected about these classics of *art engagé*: in the case of Goya, he is less interested in the stark division between perpetrators and sufferers in the *Third of May* than in the melee of suffering human and animal bodies of the *Second*. And, in concluding with the *Medusa*, Crow dispenses with the minute reconstruction of the whole in light of every stage of preparatory work, opening out to the depths of the representation of race, community, or painting itself, to which art historians have accustomed us.[4] Instead, Crow tersely argues that the oft-noted homogenization of the raft's crew allows Géricault to identify with them, not as a Frenchman or white European but as a former soldier—a bittersweet, quasi-Napoleonic echo in his art—and to raise them to the level of the heroic bodies he saw and copied in Rome. The muscular back of the Belvedere Torso is compared to that of the gesturing black sailor, particularly in a humble single-figure study in the Musée de Montauban, where "pigment seems transmuted into sculpture" (p. 187). Once again decreeing that the first shall be last, Crow argues that, if the African is positioned as savior (his gesture is seen by the rescue ship) in the Louvre canvas, "the bare, unadorned silhouette of Géricault's small study enlarges that triumph, making of it a victory over the invidious distinctions of rank that disfigure their bearers: the Restoration unrestored" (p. 187).

The rousing tone of these final words of the book hardly represents the variety of voices, and motives, that fill its pages: we encounter the Scottish nobleman and fan of Napoleon who commissioned David's Tuileries portrait, the youthful Ingres and his quixotic struggle to outdo the Germanic Nazarenes in reactionary Catholic sentimentalism, and Antonio Canova's tireless efforts to return Napoleon's looted antiquities to Papal Rome. Not everything is treated with equal depth: if Crow is right that Géricault and Thomas were particularly fascinated with Roman street life and rituals, he might well have traced this development in the drawings of earlier Prix de Rome winners, in particular the generation after 1800, among whom perhaps only Ingres made a permanent reputation.[5] The brief endnotes give one the pleasure of being able to do without them, rather than being a sea to dive into, as they are in some of Crow's other books.

That said, a reader swept along by the post-Napoleonic panoply might miss some subtle acts of looking, such as the new chapter devoted to the elderly David and his Belgian disciple François-Joseph Navez, who, according to Crow, was crucial to David's late rethinking of his compositional principles. Here, so quietly that one might almost miss it, Crow revises and rounds out decades' worth of close looking and argument addressed to history painting. His *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* showed how the tense, fragmentary arrangements of bodies in David's revolutionary-era paintings broke with the balanced pyramidal compositions of academic routine, and its sequel, *Emulation*, backtracked to correlate this painting with the tragedy of Pierre Corneille as well as tracing its mutation in the work of succeeding generations of David's students.[6] In *Restoration*, these literary and painterly strands are rejoined at the end of David's life, where, in concert with Navez (Crow is nothing if not generous), we find the exiled master making strangely frontal, claustrophobic history painting under the sign of "displacement and loss", responding to "changes in the actual climate of Europe, strange weather beyond the capacity of contemporary [*sic*] science to comprehend, as if the earth itself shared the distress of humanity under the Restoration" (p. 151).

Crow is alluding here to the trio of mysterious ideal landscapes painted by Géricault in 1818, and traditionally associated with the times of day, *Morning*, *Noon*, and *Evening*, located in the Neue Pinakothek in Munich, in the Petit Palais in Paris, and in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, respectively. He suggests, tantalizingly, that they bear witness to the severe consequences of the eruption of the volcano Tambora in Indonesia in April 1815, an event which climate historians now consider the cause of catastrophic crop failures and famines in Europe and on the Atlantic coast of North America in 1816, the so-called year without a summer. Crow correlates this catastrophe cautiously with English travelers' reports on the Continent in 1817 and the lowering clouds, deserted vistas, and distressed humans of Géricault's canvases (to say nothing of the drooping palm tree of *Morning*). Crow is no simple-minded positivist, nor is there any work for such a personage, since, as Crow emphasizes, no one in Europe at the time connected the bad weather with Mount Tambora. Accordingly, the world these paintings create is a vague one, "the stilled, morbid aftermath of a deluge where scattered survivors cling to life" (p. 176). But as Crow is painfully aware, climate history is contemporary history, that is to say our history, and a few pages later he struggles to put into words Géricault's struggle "to reconcile the traumatized, post-Tambora condition of rural Europe with the generalizing demands of major art" (p. 178). As Crow's discussion of animal cruelty in connection with the Roman horse races showed us, the question to what extent art registers suffering is factual as well as aesthetic, and squinting at the bathers splashing one another in *Evening* until they look like "one group possibly warding the other away from the

steep bank” (p. 178) will not turn a Tambora-less painting into a post-Tambora one. Here Crow has given art historians a task worth doing, but hardly hinted at how it is to be done.

As this speculation about Géricault’s landscapes indicates, the book’s historical canvas is broad. Places are named in the chapter titles—Paris, Madrid, Brussels, Moscow, London, Waterloo—and if the action is not quite on a par with Tolstoy or Stendhal, the personalities are nearly as interesting. Beautiful glossy color reproductions accompany the enthusiastic, personable prose: the book retains the pleasing spirit of lectures by a master teacher, if not a Cicerone with subversive intent. For instance, in discussing the book, Crow has pointed out the irony of Canova, the restorer of the Laocoon and Apollo Belvedere to Rome, endorsing Lord Elgin’s taking of the Parthenon marbles. Although he does not mention this in *Restoration*, Crow certainly knows that Napoleon—and Lord Byron, among others—objected to Elgin’s high-handed appropriation, unswayed by any rhetoric of disinterested preservation.[7] He also probably realizes that Canova may have had his reasons for wishing to see Roman antiquities returned to the pope while approving a British purchase of Greek antiquities from the Ottoman Empire. But one should not forget that Crow, besides being a consummate historian of French painting, is also a historian of contemporary art and culture. The Parthenon marbles “remain in the British Museum, still the object of impassioned but unrequited pleas for their restoration to Athens.”[8] It is to the present and our complacency that Crow poses his most unsettling questions. At the same time, he hints at a restoration that has nothing to do with the forces of reaction—or, for that matter, Napoleon.

NOTES

[1] Robert G. Ingersoll, “The Liberty of Man, Woman, and Child,” in *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll, Dresden Edition* (New York: C.P. Farrell, 1900), v.1, 370-71.

[2] In Anglophone art history, Michael Marrinan, David O’Brien, Todd Porterfield, and Susan Siegfried have defined this spectrum. Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby’s *Extremities: Painting Empire in Post-Revolutionary France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) is not exactly Napoleonic art history, but puts it in a colonial context in its middle chapters.

[3] <http://blog.press.princeton.edu/2019/01/24/thomas-crow-on-restoration/>, accessed 17 June 2019.

[4] Grigsby, *Extremities*, chapter four (headed “Cannibalism / Senegal / Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*”), 165-235; Michael Fried, “Géricault’s Romanticism”, in *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 53-109; the model for such intensive readings remains Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa* (London: Phaidon, 1972). There are equally incisive brief treatments of the *Raft*: see esp. Linda Nochlin, “Géricault or the Absence of Women,” *October* 68 (1994): 45-59, reprinted in Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019), 58-79.

[5] A circle including Félix Boisselier, Merry-Joseph Blondel, Martin-Pierre Gautier, Joseph-Théodore Richomme crossed paths with Ingres in Napoleonic Rome, and he delighted in observing Roman women and ritual but also imagining scenes around Roman landmarks like the Bocca della Verità. Six albums of their drawings, collected by the architect Achille Leclère,

are in the Fogg Museum at Harvard. See Agnes Mongan, *David to Corot: French Drawings in the Fogg Art Museum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). For some discussion of their precursors in the work of David himself and his contemporaries, see Andrei Pop, *Antiquity, Theatre, and the Painting of Henry Fuseli* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 39-51.

[6] Thomas Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), esp. chapter seven; *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), revised as *David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), esp. part one. A clue to how Crow thought of the development of this tradition into the nineteenth century prior to *Restoration* can be found in his chapters “Patriotism and Virtue: David to the Young Ingres” and “Classicism in Crisis: Gros to Delacroix”, in Stephen Eisenman et al, *Nineteenth-Century Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, rev. ed. 2007), 18-80.

[7] A good telling of this tale of intrigue, and what followed, is William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[8] See the conclusion of the blog interview cited in note 3 above.

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ISSN 1553-9172