CHAPTER 2

On the Art of Surviving the Revolution:
Jean-Baptiste Pierre Lebrun

How can one maintain a self-gratifying absorption with art in the face of epochal and life-changing social and political upheavals? Furthermore, how can one justify the egotistic pursuit of owning art when such ownership is based on birth and class privileges that are about to be called dramatically and violently into question? These and similar concerns must have weighed heavily on Jean-Baptiste Pierre Lebrun’s mind when he put the finishing touches on the *Galerie des peintres flamands, hollandais et allemands*, his monumental three-volume dictionary and price guide dealing principally with Dutch and Flemish paintings of the seventeenth century.\(^1\) Although Lebrun had researched and prepared the content of the tomes for years prior to their publication, it so happened that the appearance of the first two installments, in 1792, coincided with the onset of the radical phase of the French Revolution. The third part of the set, an addendum of previously overlooked Golden Age artists, was added only in 1796. Between the issue of the first and the last volume, Robespierre’s Terror regime had raged, sending scores of Lebrun’s well-heeled aristocratic clients to the guillotine or across France’s border into the safety of exile.

The leading French dealer in Netherlandish pictures in the 1780s and 1790s – a position he arduously defended against his main competitor, Paillet – Lebrun stood out as a flamboyant and extrovert representative of the trade.\(^2\)

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1. According to Lebrun, *Galerie des peintres flamands, hollandais et allemands*, 3:n. p. (“Avis”), note 1, the author had begun research on the volumes in 1774.
His attire was always selected with utmost care. During the summer, when at home, he wore frock coats of white bazin fabric, along with vests also made of white bazin cloth – with large lapels or in combination with shawls – breeches of Nanking silk imported from India, white silk stockings, and shoes with golden buckles. During the other seasons, he dressed with the greatest of luxury. He powdered his hair and carried a little cane, which he handled gracefully and with great agility, to the amazement and delight of his niece when she was still a child.³

Lebrun seems to have been a dandy avant la lettre. As Marie-Christine Natta so fittingly observed, the cane is the dandy’s elegant “scepter of mundane majesty; it establishes a space around his body that prohibits any outsider from getting too close.”⁴ However, although he could claim common descent with Charles Le Brun, the seventeenth-century academic painter and art theorist whose seminal contributions defined the artistic program of the Palace of Versailles, Lebrun’s own family background was modest and rooted in the artisan and shop-keeper milieu of the rue de l’arbre sec in the quarter adjacent to

³ Papiers Tripier-Lefranc-Lebrun, INHA, Documents autographes, Carton 51, fol. 27854: “Il était toujours très recherché dans sa toilette. Il portait habituellement chez lui pendant l’été des redingotes de bazin en blanc à côté de gilets aussi de bazin en blanc, soit à châle soit à grand revers; des culottes de Nankin, des Indes; des bas-de-soie blanche et des souliers à boucles d’or. Dans les autres saisons, il se mettait avec le plus grand luxe. Il portait de la poudre sur ses cheveux et avait une petite queue, bien remuante et bien tenue, qui faisait toujours l’étonnement et le charme de sa nièce, tout enfant.” Part of the extensive but scattered notes that the art historian Justin Tripier Le Franc had assembled in the nineteenth century to write a biography of Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, the description of Jean-Baptiste Pierre Lebrun’s appearance was based on the childhood memories of the author’s wife, Eugénie, who was Vigée-Lebrun’s niece. The project to publish the biography was left unfinished at the time of Tripier Le Franc’s death in 1883.