

23. The Works of Francisco Goya

FRANCISCO GOYA Y LUCIENTES was born in 1746 in the village of Fuendetodos and grew up in the city of Zaragoza, the provincial capital of Aragón. He was the fourth child of José Goya, a gilder, and Doña Gracia Lucientes, a member of the *hidalguía* or lower nobility. During his 82 years he became one of the world's most productive artists, creating 700 paintings, 900 drawings, 300 prints, two great mural cycles and several lesser murals. Robert Hughes describes him as, "in a real sense, the last Old Master; and in an equally real sense, the first of the Moderns" (*Goya*, Vintage, 2004, p24).

Hughes also says that he was "one of the most radical artists that ever lived". Court painter, social observer, satirist, war reporter, he was, he says, "the first painter to take on the extraordinary burden of being a real witness to all layers of society". He compares him to Dickens in literature, but equally applicable is the Shakespeare parallel. All three shared a panoramic, humanist, yet critical vision. They also believed in reason and culture yet used the imagination to convey their message. They despised power and status and subjected them to intense criticism. They wanted a more tolerant and liberal society. And they hated all cruelty and hardness of heart.

For 40 years from 1786, Goya was court painter and then First Court Painter to three consecutive Bourbon kings: Carlos III, his son Carlos IV, and his son Fernando VII. Carlos III is often credited with bringing the Enlightenment to Spain, but his son was rather dim and dominated by his wife Maria Luisa who had the real power. This is reflected in Goya's portrait of *The Family of Carlos IV* (below), painted in 1800, in which Luisa occupies the centre. Théophile Gautier described the figures as looking like 'the corner baker and his wife after they won the lottery'. Goya is surely being satirical, though Hughes argues that if it had any detectable barbs, Goya's career would have been finished there and then. But maybe Carlos missed the subtlety.



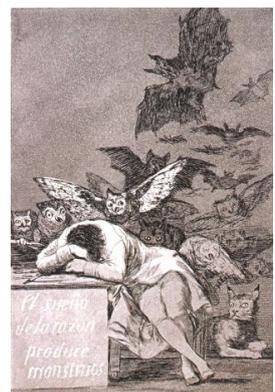
The fact that he depended on commissions from royalty and the nobility did not mean that Goya was a traditional painter. On the contrary, he broke free from established modes and addressed the most pressing problems of the day, including the vices of the Spanish clergy, the barbaric repression of the Inquisition, the prevalence of superstition, the excesses of violence and war, and the exploitation of women.

This social commentary is explicit in a series of 80 aquatint etchings that Goya entitled *Los Caprichos* (a caprice is a whim or fancy) and which were produced in 1797 and 1798. Yet these prints were anything but whimsical. As he himself explained, their subject matter was selected from "the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilised society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual". Robert Hughes sees them as a merciless commentary on social, political and religious hypocrisy. In particular, the clergy did not escape Goya's lash. "They were as bad as any modern Catholic priests. They praised chastity but groped boys; they praised moderation but gorged and swilled like pigs; they pretended to have access to divine wisdom but imposed the basest superstitions on the faithful to keep them obedient; they preached rubbish from the pulpit and brutally supported the Inquisition". (*Goya*, p193).

The tenor is given by *Capricho 52, ¡Lo que puede un sastre!* ('What a Tailor can do!'). A young woman falls on her knees, hands clasped in prayer. Behind her are others, equally awestruck. The object of their devotions looms over them, a giant, arms menacingly raised, swathed in the clerical cloth of a friar's habit. His hands are branches that sprout trees; he is a bogeyman.



As a man of the *ilustración* (the Spanish name for the Enlightenment), Goya was enraged by the irrationality of Spanish life, a theme encapsulated in the most famous *Capricho*, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*: 'the sleep of reason brings forth monsters'. The 'monsters' are bats and owls flying around the sleeper in his dream. Bats are creatures of the night and therefore ignorance; and the owls at that time were



symbols of mindless stupidity, not as we might suppose today of wisdom. These dark forces are watched at lower right by a staring lynx, an emblem of perceptive wisdom which, it was believed, could see through the thickest darkness and tell truth from error.

The sleeper is clearly Goya himself because he is offered a piece of artist's chalk by one of the owls. So here is a self-portrait of a man at fifty, beset by demons that haunt him but also serve to inspire him; a man of genius whose mind was capable of monstrous doubts and anxieties, exhausted by a mysterious illness that, like Beethoven, left him deaf; and who responded emotionally and artistically to his country's poverty, oppression and war. His work became even more radical, particularly in its portrayal of war.

Between 1810 and 1820 he created 82 prints as a visual protest against the violence of the 1808 Dos de Mayo (2nd May) Uprising, the subsequent Peninsular War of 1808-14 and the setbacks to the liberal cause following the restoration of the Bourbons in 1814. He called the prints *Fatales consecuencias de la sangrienta guerra en España con Buonaparte y otros caprichos enfáticos*, usually called in English *Disasters of War*. For thousands of years, war art had always been commissioned by the winner to celebrate their triumph. *Disasters* was commissioned by no one and Goya did not publish the prints, which did not see the light of day until 1863. In *Francisco Goya: A Life*, Evan Connell writes that they are a 'prodigious flowering of rage', and Robert Hughes describes them as 'the greatest anti-war manifesto in the history of art and 'a vast and laborious act of public contrition for the barbarity of its author's own species'.

To take an example, plate 69 (below) is entitled *Nada* ('Nothing'). A cadaver rotted down almost to a skeleton is half-disinterred. In front of a confused mass of watchers, including a dark figure with the unbalanced scales of Justice, there is displayed a sheet of paper, with its one message from beyond the grave. 'Nada', it says. Nothing. It has all been for nothing: the countless deaths, the misery, the rape, the pillage. And it extends beyond the grave: the corpse testifies that there is nothing there either: no Jesus, no mercy, no redemption, no heaven and, because it has already established itself on earth, no hell.



Goya also produced anti-war oil paintings during this period, the most famous being *The Second of May* and *The Third of May*, both of which were finished in 1814. The former, based on the attack by Napoleon's Mameluke mercenaries on Spanish rebels in Madrid's Puerta del Sol, shows a thick mass of grappling figures mirroring the chaos of real battle in a real place and is as far removed from the ideal reflected in Renaissance battle pieces as painting can be.



The Third of May (above), represents the reprisals on 80 Madrid citizens the next day. In the words of Robert Hughes, it has lived on for two centuries as 'the undiminished and unrivaled archetype of images of suffering and brutality in war'. On the Príncipe Pío hill outside Madrid, a worker in a blazing white shirt and yellow pants kneels before a firing squad, dramatically lit up by the square lantern the soldiers have placed on the ground. He throws his arms up in the posture of a crucified man, a frightened, angry pseudo-Christ, staring down his killers, while on the ground lie the bloodied corpses of those already executed. Other condemned figures around him, including a priest, are next in line to be shot. The firing squad on the right are engulfed in shadow and seen from behind.

They are the faceless and mechanical forces of war itself. Here, as Hughes says, the modern image of war as anonymous killing is born, and a long tradition of war as ennobled spectacle comes to an end. The prophetic nature of Goya's work cannot be overestimated. What millions discovered in the twentieth century was foreshadowed in the *Disasters* and *The Third of May*.

Yet *The Second of May* and *The Third of May* were never publicly exhibited in Goya's lifetime, probably because the king disliked their presentation of radical citizens as heroes. Goya's disillusionment with the Spanish monarchy led him to retreat to his country house near Madrid where he painted the walls with what have been called the *Black Paintings*, which are some of the most disturbing images in western art. They include the powerful and weird *Pilgrimage of San Isidro* and, perhaps the most horrible of the lot, *Saturn Devouring his Son* (below), which can be taken as an allegory of Spain under the restored absolutist monarchy destroying her own people.

Goya's disillusionment finally forced him into exile in Bordeaux, where he died in 1828. Baudelaire said that "he painted the black magic of our civilisation". And he achieved it, like Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Beethoven, by daring to be radical and different when he didn't need to. By transcending his role as a court painter, he changed western art for ever.

