'There are no rules in painting'

The break in tradition

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Painting in the Age of Enlightenment:
Goya and his Contemporaries
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Reviewed by David Walsh

An exhibit currently at the Spanish Institute in New York, Painting in the Age of Enlightenment: Goya and his Contemporaries, contains some fascinating pictures. In addition to a number of works by the great Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828), there are paintings by the Italian late Baroque master Giambattista Tiepolo (1696-1770), the portraitist Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-79) and a number of other lesser known figures.

By the 1700s Spain, which had benefitted so greatly from the exploration and plundering of the New World, had long since entered a period of decline - convincingly signalled by the destruction of the Great Armada in 1588 by the British fleet. Holland, grown rich, had broken free of Spanish control. England subsequently assumed economic dominance over Europe. Spain's "inglorious and slow decay" (in Marx's words) was well under way.

"The old and new ruling classes - the landed nobility and the Catholic clergy with their monarchy, the bourgeois classes with their intelligentsia - stubbornly attempted to preserve the old pretensions, but, alas, without the old resources.... While not permitting the formation of a new bourgeois society, the economic stagnation also corroded the old ruling classes. The proud noblemen often cloaked their haughtiness in rags. The church plundered the peasantry, but from time to time it was plundered by the monarchy, who, as Marx said, had more in common with Asiatic despotism than with European absolutism" (Leon Trotsky, The Revolution in Spain, 1931).

Nonetheless during the eighteenth century the Spanish monarchy could still put on an extraordinary show. On his deathbed in 1700, Charles II, the last Spanish Habsburg ruler, named Bourbon Philip of Anjou - the grandson of France's Louis XIV - as his successor, thus triggering the War of the Spanish Succession.

It was not until 1713 that Philip secured his crown, at the cost of renouncing any future claim to the French throne. From 1715 a number of French painters, travelling in Philip's train, became influential in Spain, including Michel-Ange Houasse (1680-1730), whose genre paintings influenced Goya; Jean Ranc (1674-1735); and Louis-Michel Van Loo (1707-71). Works by the three are included in the first section of the current exhibit. Houasse's Children Playing Leap Frog (1725) is a likable and unusual work.

The Spanish court provided a good deal of employment for European artists throughout the century. In 1734 the royal palace burned down and the adornment of the new one took up much of the next three decades. Italy's foremost decorative painters, Tiepolo and the Neapolitan Corrado Giaquinto (1703-65), as well as the Bohemian portrait painter Mengs, were summoned to Spain under Ferdinand VI (king from 1746, the year of Goya's birth). The Royal Academy of Fine Arts, provisionally established in 1749, helped to foster the emergence of a Spanish school of painting.

Giaquinto's Allegory of Peace and Justice (1754), on display, is an accomplished piece of Roman Rococo. An article in the exhibition catalogue notes: "As the white dove above Justice suggests, Ferdinand's reign along with his just and peaceful kingdom were all instituted, sanctioned and guided by the hand of divinity."

The Enlightenment

Changes were taking place, however, at the base of society. Humanity's view of the world and of itself was also changing. The thinkers of the Enlightenment were submitting a whole host of ideological assumptions to criticism. Rousseau's Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men, which suggested that the existing state of society had something other than divine sanction, appeared in 1755.

What artists, still in large measure dependent on court and church patronage, made of these changes is sometimes difficult to measure. It would be wrong to assume that the artists of the late Baroque period were any less concerned with the elementary problems of life and truth than the artists of the nineteenth century, for whom the old patronage system no longer operated.

Tiepelo is considered to have been perhaps the last of the great Venetian painters and one of the most inspired artists of the late Baroque and Rococo periods. He is renowned for his grace, his delight in the pleasures of the senses and his light touch. During his lifetime Tiepolo's fame reached its peak after the invitation from the Spanish king. The exhibition presents a number of his works, the most impressive of which is the large St. Joseph with the Christ Child (1767-69).

The work depicts St. Joseph, as an old but still physically powerful man, holding the baby in his arms. The saint's walking staff, which is flowering, rests against his shoulder. Angels hover in the background. In the lower right-hand corner we see in the distance a city and the dome of a cathedral.

It is not difficult to read the painting, despite its iconography, in purely secular terms. We are clearly approaching a point at which it is no longer possible for any serious artist to depict the human realm merely as the debased, alienated image of a celestial sphere.

Tiepolo has designed his picture so that the lower part of St. Joseph's body, enveloped in a yellow robe, is obliterated. The old man, whose muscular left arm, cradling the child, is almost as thick as his head, is literally "half a man." The infant's entire naked body is revealed. But the child does not have, as paintings of an earlier period might have given him, adult or adult-like features. He has a rather blank, babyish face. While the (divine) light comes from on high and illuminates the child, all eyes in the painting - the infant's, the angels' - are on St. Joseph. Is he

gazing down at the child, or are his eyes closed in reverie, memory?

What we see are two "incomplete" creatures: an old man contemplating an infant, or perhaps contemplating the problem of youth and age. What youth could accomplish, he might be thinking, coupled with knowledge. The painting's emotional currents are deepened by two biographical facts. St. Joseph with the Christ Child, completed only a year before the painter's death, was replaced shortly afterward to make room for the efforts of far less accomplished, although more "up-to-date," Neoclassical painters. Furthermore, Tiepolo had an extremely close relationship with his own sons, who accompanied him everywhere as his assistants and in whom he placed great hopes. Neither made a lasting mark as an artist.

Goya

If Tiepolo is the last great Baroque artist, Goya is generally ranked as the first great nineteenth-century, or modern, painter. Born in the 1740s, like Jefferson, Marat, Mirabeau and Herder, Goethe, David, Volta, Lavoisier and Cartwright, Goya grew to maturity in the period leading up to the American and French revolutions. Of course he lived in Spain, the least enlightened country in Europe. The Spanish Inquisition was still in operation; its last public execution of a heretic took place in 1783.

The painter's family had modest means. His father was a master gilder and his mother owned a small piece of land. In 1760, having spent his childhood in a village, Goya and his family moved to Zaragoza and for four years he attended a school run by a religious foundation. He then began taking art lessons from JosÃ© LuzÃ¡n, an academic painter who had once been painter to the court in Madrid.

Goya there met Francisco Bayeu (1734-95), whose sister he later married. In 1763 Bayeu - represented at the New York exhibit by a number of works - was named assistant to Mengs, then the favourite of the king, Charles III. Bayeu was admitted that year to the renowned Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. Goya failed to gain admission in 1763 and again in 1766.

Five years later Goya was in Rome, where judges of a painting competition criticised him for the "jarring tones" of his canvas. The work, Hannibal the Conqueror Viewing Italy for the First Time from the Alps, long thought lost, was only rediscovered in 1993 and is on display in the current show.

That same year he received his first artistic commission in Spain. His first royal commissions, in 1775, were cartoons for a series of tapestries to hang in one of the royal palaces. The exhibition contains two works, Children Picking Fruit (1778) and Children with a Cart (1778), executed for the tapestry factory.

The period of the late 1770s and 1780s seems to have been particularly fruitful, artistically and intellectually, for Goya. He came into contact with advanced, liberal-minded thinkers in Madrid, who offered criticism of the monarchy and the existing order. He encountered the works of VelÃ¡zquez, the great Spanish painter; Goya later described his three masters as "VelÃ¡zquez, Rembrandt and Nature." His Portrait of the Condesa-Duquesa de Benavente (1785), part of the exhibit, helped to establish him as the best portraitist of the day. The study of the countess, a cultivated patron of musicians, poets, artists and actors, is a dazzling and sympathetic harmony of blue, pink and grey.

The French Revolution of 1789 had a powerful effect, as one might expect, on Spanish society. Within a short time, Louis XVI secretly sent a desperate appeal to his first cousin, the newly-crowned Charles IV, to allow him to take refuge in Spain.

Under Charles and his wife MariÃ¡ Luisa a period of reaction began. The Inquisition was mobilised to block the spread of subversive ideas. As a result of the fall from grace of a number of his friends, and perhaps suspicions about his own loyalties, Goya's career was disrupted. His precise reaction to the revolution is unknown, but during the winter of 1792-93, the painter was suddenly stricken with a combination of nervous and physical troubles, leaving him virtually deaf, which proved a turning point in his life.

It is known that during his long recuperation he read a good deal about the French Revolution and the philosophy, including works by Rousseau, which had helped prepare its outbreak and eventual course. He apparently drew from his reading the notion that imagination divorced from reason produces monsters, but that coupled with reason "it is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders."

Artists were becoming critical of the conventional wisdom that dominated their field. Goya was one of the first to ask out loud, 'Why must we work in a manner which is only sanctioned by tradition?' Immediately prior to his illness and breakdown, in a report to the Academy of San Fernando on the study of art, he had written, "There are no rules in painting, as I shall demonstrate with facts." The painter excoriated the practice of forcing the student to follow the style or method of particular painters. "What scandal it is," he wrote, "to hear nature despised in favour of Greek statues by those who know neither one nor the other...."

The break in tradition

The New York exhibit contains two of Goya's portraits from the mid-1790s, of Don FÃ©lix ColÃ³n de LarriÃ¡tegui (1794) and bullfighter Pedro Romero (1795-98). Goya has given ColÃ³n, a descendant of Columbus, a skull for a face. One can only read severity and intolerance in his mouth and jaw. A book is propped open on a table behind him, Vol. 5 of his writings on military justice! Romero, on the other hand, is treated with admiration and respect, perhaps as an equal, as a fellow artist.

(In general, Goya is famed for the unflattering character of his portraiture. His Charles IV and His Family is particularly devastating - the queen dowdy, the king doltish-looking, with a tiny head. French writer ThÃ©ophile Gautier (1811-72) described the figures in the group portrait as "the corner baker and his wife after they won the lottery." What can Goya's patrons have been thinking when they allowed such works to be exhibited?)

The two works in the current exhibit that most clearly indicate the break Goya made with long-established traditions are Yard with Madmen (1793-94) and the much later St. Isabel attending the Sick (1817). The first picture is a small painting, 17 1/4 by 12 7/8 inches. "It represents," Goya wrote, "a yard of lunatics, and two, naked, are fighting, while the caretaker beats them (it is a subject that I witnessed in Zaragoza)." There are 13 figures in all in the painting. Two of the "lunatics," in the foreground, stare out at the viewer; a third foreground figure watches the two men who are fighting. Besides the naked madmen and the caretaker beating them with a stick, there are four figures on the right who have turned away and face the wall.

In the left background there is an additional group of three figures, their faces obscured. The man in the middle has his arms raised, his palms outstretched. "What do you make of this?" he seems to be asking the viewer. Or perhaps he is saying, "This is Spain," or, "This is life." The picture is disturbing, even frightening. It foreshadows Goya's mature work in the hallucinatory Los Caprichos of 1799, his devastating depictions of the Napoleonic wars of 1808-1814 and his "black paintings" of 1820-23.

St. Isabel attending the Sick was painted as a grisaille (work in tones of grey) overdoor for the apartments of the queen. It was one of Goya's last

commissioned works - and no wonder. A kind of mock relief, painted to look as if the figures are raised above the general plane, the work resembles nothing so much as an x-ray, or a negative perhaps, of the scene it depicts. The sick woman, who appears dead in fact, has empty eye-sockets; one of the male figures appears to be grinning ghoulishly. Goya's piece has little in common with the accompanying overdoor by the Neoclassicist Vicente LÃ³pez PortÃ¢na.

In Goya's work we witness the breakdown of an entire world outlook and a manner of creating art with which it was bound up. Late Baroque art, even as Tiepolo practiced it, presupposed, in one art historian's words, "the existence of another world that is the correlative and heightened, transfigured image of the terrestrial sphere.... The hereafter is not dark and forbidding - it is filled with light, life form." On the other hand, "Goya's figures loom up, silhouetted against the void. The darkness in his works is that of despair; it is terrifying. No mysterious gleam of light appears as a solace, as it does in Rembrandt's painting" (Theodor Hetzer, Francisco Goya and the Crisis in Art around 1800, 1950).

In place of God's domain, once and for all, the world of men; in place of firm, universal principles, uncertainty, even despair; in place of beauty and classical form, the ugly, distorted and even repulsive. Goya's art represents a great gain in that it is more human, but one perhaps glimpses for the first time the cynicism that is also associated with much of modern art.

Controversy has surrounded the study of Goya's work. One school of "left" art historians places the painter safely and securely in the "democratic tradition," as a man of the oppressed masses and their artistic spokesman. Another, more fashionable camp pokes holes in such theories, pointing to Goya's ambitiousness, even his opportunism, his close relations with the Spanish court, and so forth.

Both arguments beg the question. Goya approached reality not as a politician, but as an artist, with an artist's intuition. His body of work speaks eloquently for him. It exudes a hatred of hypocrisy, corruption and repression in all forms. He remained true to his inner self in all his explorations - of the pleasures of childhood and everyday life; of social injustice, war and revolution; of the unconscious, including psychic torment and sexual nightmare.

It is perhaps in this sense that one can speak of Goya as the first or one of the first modern painters, that one finds in his work premonitions of the great objective and subjective issues that humanity would confront during the next two centuries. Painting in the Age of Enlightenment contributes to an understanding of those issues.