Francisco Goya (1746-1828)

"Fantasy is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders"

Maria Esposito
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An exceptional collection of prints and paintings by Francisco Jose de Goya y Lucientes opened last month at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The internationally-acclaimed exhibition, "Goya: Another Look", which runs until July 11, has been assembled by the Palais des Beaux-Arts in France from private and public collections. Included in the exhibition are *Los Caprichos*, a collection of 80 prints produced in the late 1700s, and an extensive assortment of other etchings and lithographs by Goya.

Los Caprichos, and more than 120 other prints, were exhibited last year under the title "Reason and Folly: The Prints of Francisco Goya" at the National Gallery of Victoria in Australia. This was the largest exhibition of Goya's prints ever shown in Australia and also included *Disasters of War*, *La Tauromaquia*, *Los Disparates*, *Bulls of Bordeaux* and some of Goya's early work—his interpretations of Diego Velázquez's paintings. I would urge readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* in the United States to make every effort to visit the Philadelphia Museum of Art and view the work of this remarkable artist.

Regarded by many as the father of modern art, Goya is without doubt one of most influential artists of the last two centuries and arguably the finest printmaker in art history.

As the French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote in 1857, “Goya is always a great artist, frequently he is a terrifying one. To the gaiety and joviality of Spanish satire... he adds a more modern attitude, one that has been much sought after in the modern world; a love of the intangible, a feeling for violent contrasts and the terrifying phenomena of nature and strange human physiognomies which in certain circumstances become animalistic.”

Born 1746 in Fuendetodos, the son of an artisan, Goya served his apprenticeship in Saragossa and later worked for a court painter in Madrid. After returning from a year in Italy he married and settled in Madrid where he was employed as a designer for the Royal Tapestry factory. His artistic status grew and in 1780 he was elected to the Academy of San Fernando. Five years later, he became assistant director of painting and in 1795 succeeded Francisco Bayeu, whose sister he had married, as director of the Academy.

In 1792 Goya was struck down by a mysterious illness that left him temporarily paralysed and permanently deaf. Despite these difficulties Goya, who had been appointed court painter three years earlier, was made the “First Court Painter” to Charles IV in 1799.

Goya's illness marked a turning point in his life. What emerged was an introspective and critical artist who explored the social and psychological themes with a depth and intensity not seen before, and rarely matched today. His prints challenged the existing political institutions, social norms and conventional values.

Goya's life spanned one of the most turbulent periods of European history—the 1789 French revolution; the military conquest and reorganisation of Europe by Napoleon Bonaparte; and the occupation of Spain and ensuing civil war from 1808 to 1814. The revolution, having overturned the feudal regime of Louis XVI, raised high the hopes of revolutionary elements and liberal reformers that a new era of social progress would dawn in Spain. These hopes were not realised.

Napoleon's military occupation of Spain failed and the Spanish monarchy was restored. Goya was retained as court painter under Joseph Bonaparte, during the French occupation. When Ferdinand VII was restored to the Spanish throne, Goya although regarded as a traitor by some Spanish ruling elements, was pardoned by the Military Commission and kept on as court painter.

Goya's first important series of prints were *Los Caprichos*, published in 1799. Many of the original ideas for these were elaborated in drawings called *Sueños* (Dreams). The etchings reveal Goya's passionate opposition to the backward social relations and religious beliefs then dominating Spanish society. It is a world inhabited by witches, goblins, strange animals, drunken priests, idlers, criminals and corrupt officials. No social stratum is spared Goya's incisive wit as he explores the consequences of greed, ignorance, superstition and miseducation.

These were "follies and mistakes” not confined to Spain, Goya wrote in press announcements advertising the prints, but “common in every civil society". A series of “vulgar prejudices and lies authorised by custom, ignorance or self-interest."

French Enlightenment philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, declared in 1762, “Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains." *Los Caprichos* is a passionate declaration that the chains of social backwardness, religious intimidation, hypocrisy and the immorality of feudal society had to be broken if humanity was to advance.

Few copies of the *Los Caprichos* were sold and Goya withdrew the prints after two days. In 1803 he presented the remaining 240 unsold first edition sets and the copperplates of the series to the Royal Printworks in exchange for a pension for his son. Some years later, in 1825, in a letter to a friend Goya revealed that he feared prosecution by the Inquisition.

Probably the most famous print in this series is *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The sleep of reason produces monsters), which explores the relationship between the conscious and unconscious, the conflict between rational thought and feudal superstition, and the role of fantasy and dreaming in the creative process. As Goya's caption reads: "Fantasy deserted by reason produces impossible monsters: united with it, fantasy is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders".

The artist, slouched over his desk, arms around his head, is in a deep sleep. Around him bats and owls fly across a foreboding night sky, or more precisely, seem to appear out of the darkness flying towards the sleeper. Two cats, one lying on the floor behind the chair stares at the sleeper and the other, while in a sleeping position behind the artist, gazes on with gleaming eyes. An owl is prodding the artist with a crayon holder.

The irrational seems to dominate the sleeping figure. The creatures of the night—the forces of evil—seem to rule. The unconscious dominates the conscious with no certainty that reason or rational thought can overcome the nightmares that surround him.

Goya seems to be grappling with an ever present contradiction: the conflict between the victorious French Revolution of 1789 and the spread of rationalism and Enlightenment thinking, and the social and political reality of Spain—one of the more backward societies in western Europe. This etching symbolises, in the negative, the ideal of the enlightened men who believed that everything—religion, society and its political institutions should be subjected to rational criticism—be placed before the judgment of Reason and measured accordingly.

Los Caprichos also sharply portrays Goya's main benefactors, the aristocracy and the ruling elite, as jackasses, symbols of stubborn ignorance and stupidity. In one print, *As far back as his grandfather*, an aristocratic jackass shows his family tree. He proudly indicates that he is from a long line of jackasses.

In another print, *Thou who canst not*, two peasants are bent in two carrying jackasses on their backs. The jackasses appear perfectly comfortable and one of them wears a spur. The message is obvious, but no less subversive: the ruling circles are maintained in every way by the peasantry and working masses. They not only bear down on them with economic oppression and exploitation but with ignorance and superstition, strengthened and ruthlessly imposed from generation to generation. While the closed eyes of the overworked peasants seem to indicate a blind acceptance of this social repression, the image is so morally powerful that it forces the viewer to recognise the necessity to end this state of affairs.

Goya often used goblins, witches and other strange and mysterious creatures of the dark to represent the Church. *Little goblins* is an example of this. Three goblins are in a cellar, one is on the ground in a monk's robe eating bread dipped in his wine, another, with a hood over his head holds a glass of wine tightly to his body. A third goblin with sharp pointed teeth in priest's garb gesticulates with an enormous claw-like hand. The caption accompanying the print explains: "The real goblins of this world are the priests and the monks who eat and drink at our expense."

In 1819 Goya began work on another series of prints, *Los Disparates* (Follies). These images are darker, more passionate and even more unsettling than the *Los Caprichos* series.

Arranged marriage is one of the themes considered in *Los Disparates*. Goya had previously examined this question in *Los Caprichos*. In Capricho 75, *Is there no one to untie us?*, a man and woman are bound together and tied to a leafless tree. They are attempting to disentangle themselves but are tightly bound and appear to be organically fused to the tree. Freedom appears impossible. A giant owl with outstretched wings has one talon on the woman's head, another on a branch. This symbol of the church dominates the image and the trapped couple.

In *Disorderly folly*, one of the *Los Disparates* prints, another entangled couple is moulded together, fused to form a two-headed creature. Their heads scream out in pain and despair. Their feet are deformed with innumerable toes. A strange crowd in semi-darkness, headed by a kneeling priest, gazes at the deformed couple. The priest prays for the maintenance of this unhealthy union. The only human face in this macabre group is a Moor who stares at the couple from the rear of the crowd.

Goya's artistic imagination and printmaking skills also provided the first modern, and horrifyingly real, images of the carnage produced by war. *Disasters of War*, a series of prints begun in 1810, depicts the atrocities—the unrelenting devastation of human life and spirit—produced by Napoleon's invasion of the Iberian peninsula in 1808.

In contrast to previous depictions of war, with heroic soldiers clothed in Roman or Greek uniforms, Goya graphically exposes the real barbarity of war with images of bombed out houses, destroyed villages, garroted Spaniards, famine, poverty and suffering. There are no grand battle scenes or gallant soldiers, only violence and savagery against soldiers and civilians, men and women, and old and young, alike.

In one etching, *Nor in this case*, a French soldier contemplates a Spaniard hanging by his own belt from a tree. The victim is highlighted by an invisible light source. In the gloomy semi-darkness one begins to notice that he is not the only one. Countless men hang from trees that disappear into the horizon.

Perhaps the most disturbing print is Goya's *Great feat! With dead men*! A tree, half-stump, half-dead, with a few emaciated leaves, is the prop on which hangs the bodies of mutilated, tortured and castrated men—an arm and a head and other body parts.

Napoleon's invasion and the regime of his appointee, Joseph Bonaparte, eventually failed and the Spanish monarchy was reestablished with Ferdinand VII returned to the throne. Ferdinand responded by brutally suppressing supporters of the French Revolution and Enlightenment ideals. Society in Spain took a step backward.

While Goya survived this political upheaval, the intensified censorship and oppression drove many of his friends into exile. Goya's public works gradually decreased and after 1815 he began to withdraw from public life. In 1819, after a second bout of illness he retired to his country house—Quinta del Sordo (House of the Deaf Man). In 1824 he obtained permission, on health grounds, to move to France. Except for brief periods, to obtain a pension and secure the well-being of his son, Goya did not return to live in Spain. He died four years later, on April 6, 1828.

While Goya produced some 300 prints in his lifetime this work, and his paintings, did not become well known outside Spain until years later. The

Disasters of War series was not published till 1863 and it was not until 1900, more than 70 years after his death, that an exhibition entirely comprising Goya's work was held.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of Goya: the complexity of his vision as a satirist and social chronicler, his determination to investigate the macabre, as well as the darker reaches of the human psyche. Nineteenth century French artists, Delacroix, Daumier, Manet and Degas were profoundly affected by Goya's work, as were Cezanne, Picasso, Munch, Dali and many others in this century. Nor is this influence confined to the visual arts but also extends to literature and other forms. Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky famously wrote:

I am Goya!...
I am the voice
Of war, the charred wood of town....
I am the throat
Of the woman whose hanged body, like a bell,
Clanged over the empty square...
I am Goya!

Two hundred years on, Goya's imagery still resonates with modern audiences precisely because humanity still confronts oppression, ignorance and military barbarism.

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