

# Goya: Order and Disorder: A comprehensive view of the work of the Spanish genius

Clare Hurley  
12 January 2015

“Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto” (“I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me.”) – Terence

The sentiment of the second century BCE Roman playwright Terence could equally describe the work of Spanish painter and printmaker Francisco Lucientes de Goya (1746–1828). The most comprehensive exhibit of the artist’s work in 25 years, including 170 paintings, prints and drawings, is on view at the Museum of Fine Art (MFA) in Boston till January 19, 2015.

Organized by themes rather than chronologically, the exhibit underscores the range of Goya’s artistic output over his long and prodigious life, a range so diverse that at times it hardly seems like the work of a single person.

On the one hand, Goya was royal painter to the Spanish court, beginning under Carlos III in 1774 and serving four monarchs until his self-imposed exile under Ferdinand VII in 1824. As such, Goya painted portraits of the Spanish royal family and aristocracy, designed tapestries depicting everyday pastimes of their subjects, and also produced Church altarpieces and numerous other commissions.

However, most influential in Goya’s work for subsequent generations—and for which he received virtually no recognition during his lifetime—are his unparalleled depictions of revolution and war. Living as the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that followed swept absolute monarchs—including Spain’s Carlos IV, a Bourbon cousin of Louis XVI—from their thrones, Goya’s work bears witness to these events. Or, as he entitled one of his prints: “*Yo lo vi!*” (“I saw this.”)

Feudal Spain in the late 18th century was uniquely unprepared for a bourgeois revolution, with little commercial or industrial development and subsequently a negligible native bourgeoisie. Much reduced from its Golden Age in the 15th-16th centuries, Spain’s economic decline during the period of European capitalism’s great expansion had by the end of the 1700s left Spain a backwater of impoverished provinces ruled by a weak absolute monarch bolstered by a fanatical Catholic Church, for whom the methods of the Inquisition were not necessarily things of the past.

The tiny light of the Spanish *illustrados* (artists and intellectuals associated with the Enlightenment) was quickly extinguished as Spain was ravaged by Napoleon’s invasion and the Peninsular War, which ended with the reinstitution of an even weaker, but for that very reason more threatened and more intolerant Bourbon monarch, Ferdinand VII, in 1814.

*Disasters of War* (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*), a series of 82 prints created between 1810 and 1820, and his monumental paintings *The Second of May, 1808* and *The Third of May, 1808* (both painted in only a two-month period in 1814), depict Spanish popular resistance to the French occupation in horrific detail. A touchstone for subsequent generations of artists who have addressed the topic in their work, Goya’s images of the occasional heroism but more often desperation and atrocity of war are unrivalled.

Neither *The Second* nor *The Third of May, 1808* paintings, which are in the Prado in Madrid, were included in the MFA exhibit. But a wall array of first edition prints from the *Disasters of War* series was displayed, including *I Saw It* (No. 44) of a woman clambering over a mound of corpses to fire a cannon; *One Can’t Look* (No. 26), of a group of civilian men, women and children about to be shot; *Why?* (No. 32), of a man being strangled by a group of French soldiers who have tied him by the neck to a tree; and *The Consequences* (No. 74), of a corpse being devoured by birds of prey. Despite their small format (most of the prints are 5 x 8 inches), this work is shocking, more so than many larger “anti-war” works of art, in part because of its almost dispassionate objectivity, aptly summed up by the titles.

Who was Goya, to have produced such a body of remarkable images?

Born near the provincial capital of Zaragoza in the Aragon region of Spain in 1746, Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes’ father was a craftsman who earned his living as a gilder, while his mother belonged to one of the multitudinous, usually impoverished families of minor Spanish nobility (hence the *de Goya*). In his late teens, the future painter studied in Madrid under Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779), the painter to the Spanish court, but he clashed with the master’s formal Academic approach, which emphasized copying the art of the past instead of the direct observation of life that was favored by the up-and-coming generation of Romantics. After being rejected twice by the Royal Academy of Fine Art, in 1763 and 1766, Goya travelled to Italy to study the masters of the Italian Renaissance on his own.

On his return to Spain, the ambitious young artist studied under Francisco Bayeu, whose sister he married in 1773, and whose membership in the Royal Academy led to Goya receiving royal commissions for tapestries to decorate the Escorial palace in Madrid. Goya submitted 42 full-size drawings (or “cartoons” as they were called, because they were on *cartonne*, i.e., paper) over

a five-year period, which depicted scenes of everyday Spanish life.

But Goya's scenes of rural taverns and local weddings often took a satirical or grisly turn—the pompous groom is far older than the village beauty who is to become his bride, the stage coach is held up by bandits and the noble occupants plead for their lives. Even a scene of young ladies tossing a straw mannequin up and down in a blanket to amuse themselves suggests more ominous interpretations. Indeed, the precariousness of social status remains a constant theme throughout Goya's work.

However, this prescience seems to have been lost on Carlos III. By 1786, after painting several commissioned portraits of the Spanish aristocracy, including one of the Count of Floridablanca (1783), and of the family of the crown prince Infante Don Luis, which are included at the MFA exhibit, Goya was appointed to a full-time salaried position as court painter in 1789.

His remarkably unflattering portraits of his royal patrons—one of Carlos IV and his family was said to look more like a butcher's family who had won the lottery—are less likely satirical than due to the technical challenges of creating large scale, multi-figure portraits of sitters who most likely didn't pose in person or as a group. In any case, Goya's paintings pleased the court. Other portraits of friends and acquaintances, like that of liberal statesman and fellow *ilustrado*, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos (1798), are masterful evocations of 18th century ideals of learned and graceful rationality.

Better known are his portraits of the Duchess of Alba, one dressed in white (1795) and the other in black (1797). The proud, seductive woman in traditional Spanish black lace mantilla and crimson sash looks boldly at the viewer while pointing imperiously at the ground. There, between her gold and satin clad feet, the painter has written "Solo Goya" in the sand, declaring his own superiority as much as hers.

Goya's output of aristocratic portraits—which number more than 50 in the years between 1800-08 alone, (although he may have had the help of workshop assistants)—along with commissions for altarpieces and a continued demand for tapestry designs, were all the more remarkable for having been achieved after a mysterious ailment in 1793 left the painter completely deaf.

Although he continued as court painter, the isolation of deafness that left Goya "with voices in the head" increasingly expressed itself in the nightmarish images he produced in numerous sketches, sometimes subsequently reproduced as prints. Lunatics fighting or locked away in thick-walled madhouses, survivors of a shipwreck at sea, as well as more humorous depictions of people tottering on skates or an old man swinging, speak to a sense of disequilibrium, whether physical, mental or social.

*Los Caprichos*, a suite of 80 allegorical etchings published by the artist in 1799, abound in all manner of witches, goblins, and other weird creatures engaged in bizarre diabolical behaviors. Goya undoubtedly shared the skepticism of the *ilustrados*, but he was no atheist. Some of these images, like *Witches Sabbath*, may have been produced to indulge the vogue for ghoulish subjects among his noble patrons. However, Goya's demons are disturbingly real, at least as embodiments of the darker side of the human psyche.

Vanity, lust, ignorance, duplicity, self-aggrandizement,

hypocrisy—Goya satirizes our all-too-human faults and weaknesses in the *Caprichos*. Although in Goya's view, even the well-intentioned are vulnerable, he reserved particular scorn for the clergy and the petty nobility.

The painter was profoundly shaped by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism. There is something reminiscent of Beethoven (the painter was about a quarter-century older than the composer, but they died only one year apart) in Goya's somewhat anguished response to the revolutionary period in which he lived and worked. In what seems like an expression of uncertainty in the face of immense revolutionary upheavals, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* suggests that nightmares threaten to engulf Enlightenment ideals of reason and rationality.

While Goya remained the pre-eminent Spanish court painter of his day, after the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1814 he increasingly distanced himself from the court. In 1819, at the age of 73, he retired with his much younger housekeeper Leocadia Weiss and her daughter to a country house overlooking Madrid, where he covered the walls with the so-called *Black Paintings*.

Painted on interior walls for no one to see, these intense, brooding and horrific images turned his earlier pastoral scenes of Spanish life into their nightmarish opposite. Humanity surges forward in an unending procession of hollow-eyed ghouls, no doubt like the refugees from a war-zone Goya either witnessed or imagined. And instead of enlightened figures of reason, giants preside over this social order. One, Saturn-like, devours his children, while another turns to look up from his ruminations as though startled by the faint light of the moon.

Rather than signifying the end of his days in bleak isolation, however, the *Black Paintings* may have served as a catharsis for Goya. One of his late drawings, an old man walking with sticks, is called *I'm Still Learning* (1824-28). And indeed Goya still was. In 1820, like many of the Spanish *ilustrados*, he moved across the Pyrenees to France to escape the restoration of autocratic absolutism under Ferdinand VII.

Granted a permit to visit Paris on account of his health, Goya spent his time there mastering the newly developed printmaking technique of lithography. Settling back in Bordeaux, at the age of 80, he produced a series of large lithographs, *The Bulls of Bordeaux*, that are unprecedented in their dynamic compositions, conveying all the deadly excitement of the *corrida*. Goya's exceptional insight into all aspects of human existence, from the lowly and mundane to the heights of pomp and circumstance, the innocence of childhood to the frailties of old age, from wicked perversity to the tenderness of friendship, from the depredations of war to the valor of resistance: one feels—"Yo lo vi"—that he has seen it all, and that nothing human is alien to him, or to his art.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**