Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes
(“GOY-ya”)
1746-1828
Spanish Painter & Graphic Artist

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes was born on March 30, 1746, in the northern Spanish town of Fuendetodos. He lived most of his adult life in Madrid, where he painted for the Spanish royal court and he died in exile in Bordeaux, France, at the age of 82. He is best known for his paintings of portraits and genre scenes, for menacing and melancholy images that he painted during his later years, and especially for his superb graphic works, including numerous satirical drawings and etchings that reflected both his sense of skepticism about human nature and his abhorrence of tyranny and violence.

Historians view Goya as an important artistic link between the 18th and 19th Centuries, in a time when art transitioned from a decorative era (mainly serving to please or instruct) into a diverse modern era (where each artist created his own artistic vision). Goya cannot be assigned to any specific artistic category; his work was unique. However, his ability to expose and depict the foibles and evils of human nature as well as his original technique of painting with slashing brushstrokes greatly influenced many 19th and 20th century artists. Goya is now considered to be an important forerunner of the modern art movement.

Vocabulary

Etching—A type of print in which a copper plate is engraved using a corrosive acid instead of metal tools. First, the artist coats the plate with a wax. Next, he scratches through the wax with his design to expose the metal below. Finally, the exposed metal is given an acid wash to cut the design permanently into the plate. The plate is then inked and printed on paper using a printing press.

Genre—A term used to identify paintings or artworks that represent scenes from everyday life.

Satire—Art used to expose human or institutional failings and/or vices.

Cartoon—A full sized drawing or painting made specifically for transferring its image to a tapestry or fresco.

Art Elements

Shape—An area that is contained within an implied line, or is seen and identified because of color or value changes. Shapes have two dimensions and are either geometric or organic. Design in painting is basically the planned arrangement of shapes in a work of art. Shapes are either positive or negative: the subject in a realistic work is the positive shape while the background is the negative shape. Goya emphasized shapes in his works by their placement, size, and/or value contrast.

Value—Refers to the qualities of light and dark. Value contrasts help us to see shapes, such as those in Goya's black and white prints, by showing how light both illuminates and casts shadows upon them. Value changes help us see and understand the shape of an object. While an entire object might be the same color, its shape is visually defined by varying highlighted and shadowed values. The values of light and dark that describe a form or shape can also create a point of interest, or focal area (emphasis).

Art Principles

Contrast—Contrast refers to differences in values, colors, textures, shapes and other elements so that when placed next to each other, the differences can be discerned and emphasized. Contrasts of value, shape, and texture are all emphasized in Goya’s works.

Emphasis—Artists create dominant points of focus and interest in their works by the use of emphasis. Goya created emphasis on the most important subject or focal point of his works by the use of placement, color dominance, value contrast, or shape contrast.
Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes was an innovative Spanish painter and etcher. He is considered to be one of Spain’s “triumvirate of masters” that also includes El Greco and Diego Velázquez. Goya was born on March 30, 1746, in the Aragon town of Fuendetodos, near Zaragoza. His father was a painter and a gilder of altarpieces; his mother was descended from a family of minor Aragonese nobility.

Facts of Goya’s childhood are scarce. He attended the Escuelas Pias, a school in Saragossa; his formal artistic education commenced at age 14 when he was apprenticed with José Luzán, a competent local, but little-known, painter. Goya spent four years in Luzán’s studio. In 1763, he left for Madrid where he hoped to win a prize at the Academy of San Fernando (the official center for the fine arts in Spain that was founded in 1752). Although he did not win his desired award, Goya did become acquainted with Francisco Bayeu, another Aragonese artist, who would later influence Goya’s career (Bayeu also became Goya’s brother-in-law when Goya married his sister, Josefa, in 1773).

In 1771 Goya spent about a year in Italy. His activities there are relatively obscure, but it is known that he spent several months in Rome and in Parma where he submitted a work that won a prize in the Parma Academy’s annual competition. Goya returned to Spain in 1772 and furthered his career by painting several fresco projects: he worked in the Cathedral of our Lady of El Pilar in Zaragoza, in the chapel of the palace of the Count of Sobradiel, and he completed a series of large frescos for the charterhouse of Aula Dei, also near Zaragoza.

By 1774, Goya achieved one of the best artistic jobs in Spain that included steady work, good pay, and a direct connection to the royal court in Madrid. He was hired by his new brother-in-law, Francisco Bayeu, to produce painted imagery for the many tapestries that were woven to decorate the walls of the various royal palaces. Goya’s job was to create paintings (called cartoons) that the weavers would then copy and weave in silk and wool. During the next 16 years, Goya painted more than 60 of these tapestry cartoons and all were highly praised for their candid and charming views of every day Spanish life.

During this time Goya was also asked to create a set of etched copies of those works of Velázquez that were included in the king’s art collection. As Goya created his etchings of Velázquez’s works, he was greatly impressed by Velázquez’s masterful compositions as well as by the techniques he had used to capture the emotions and personality of his subjects. Goya learned from Velázquez and he soon began to attract his own steady commissions and clientele as he improved his own talents and skills as a draftsman, print-maker, and painter.

Goya’s career steadily advanced and by 1780, he was made a member of the Academy of Art in Madrid, an honor that helped him attract more new patrons from Madrid’s high society. He painted an official portrait of Count Floridablanca, King Charles III’s Prime Minister, and soon, Goya was one of the most sought-after artists in all of Madrid. When Charles IV ascended Spain’s throne in 1789, Goya was finally elevated to the prestigious position of Court Painter and one of his first commissions was to paint the official portraits of the new King Charles IV and his Queen, Maria Luisa.

Then, in the winter of 1792, Goya’s life and career reached a turning point. While on a visit to southern Spain, he fell victim to a mysterious disease that left him not only incapacitated for several months but also permanently deaf. A mood of pessimism soon began to enter Goya’s work and between 1797 and 1799, he drew, etched, and completed his first great print series entitled, “Los Caprichos” (“The Caprices”). This set of etchings...
was filled with satirical humor that mocked the social morals and the superstitions of the time. Fortunately for Goya, these etchings did not seem to harm his artistic reputation at court and by 1799, Goya had reached the pinnacle of his career with his appointment to the honored position of First Court Painter.

In 1800, Goya received one of his most important commissions: he painted a life-sized portrait of the entire royal family of Charles IV. Goya took much of his composition from Velazquez’s famous painting, Las Meniñas, but in his own audacious painting he actually depicted the royal group in a thoroughly blunt and unidealized manner. Despite its visual candor, however, Goya’s interesting, if strikingly homely, official portrait was well received by the royal family. In fact, they seemed to be quite pleased with Goya’s painting.

From 1808 - 1814, Spain was at war with France. At first, Napoleon marched into Spain under the pretext of offering aid to Spain against a British threat, but his ultimate goal was to take control of the country. Goya observed firsthand the battles between French soldiers and Spanish citizens during the bloody years of the Napoleonic occupation, also called the Peninsular War. By 1810, Goya had created another series of etchings entitled, “Los Desastres de la Guerra,” (The Disasters of War) that illustrated his views about the savage cruelty and brutality of the war. These prints, however, were not actually published until 1863, long after Goya’s death. Later, between 1819 and 1824, Goya created yet another set of prints entitled, “Disparates” (Proverbs), but they, too, were not published during his lifetime.

In 1814, Goya was commissioned to create two special paintings, “Second of May, 1808” and “Third of May, 1808” to commemorate the horrors of the recent war. The first painting depicted the initial, dramatic, and terrible battle between Spanish street fighters and French-led Mameluke (Turkish) warriors on May 2; the second showed France’s immediate, vengeful retaliation with the brutal execution of many captured Spanish fighters in front of a French firing squad on May 3.

The “Black Paintings” were several frescoes about witchcraft, monsters, and bizarre activities that Goya painted on the dining room walls of his farmhouse. These dark paintings are among the most outstanding, yet disturbing, works of Goya’s final years. They were evidently painted around 1820 as frescoes on the plastered walls of Goya’s country home, In 1878, however, the “Black Paintings” were carefully transferred onto canvas and then exhibited in the Paris Universelle Exposition before finally being donated to Madrid’s Prado Museum where they can be seen today. The “Black Paintings” are dark, frightening, and monstrous and some think that their creation might have been provoked, in part, by the oppressive political situation in Spain that eventually forced Goya to escape to Bordeaux, France in 1824, where he lived in exile.

Although Goya did return to Madrid for brief visits in 1826 and 1827, he died in self-imposed exile in Bordeaux, France, on April 16, 1828. He left no immediate followers of consequence, and his fame and reputation had ebbed by the time of his death. However, during the mid-1800s, French scholars and artists rediscovered Goya’s paintings and his etchings, particularly the set entitled, “Los Caprichos.” This discovery quickly revived Goya’s reputation and he became known as the “first of the moderns.” His works were to influence many important 19th and 20th century artists such as Delacroix, Manet, Degas, Picasso, and Dali.

Bibliography:
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