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Goya’s Prints Capture Human Frailties, Hopes, Fears

Stephen West · Friday, May 3rd, 2024

Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) first made his name as a court painter to the Spanish king in the late 18th century, producing lavish portraits of the aristocracy. Yet he was also a prolific printmaker, publishing four series of etchings and aquatints on subjects ranging from war to bullfights to the inner demons that haunted his imagination.

The Norton Simon Museum has just opened an impressive exhibition, *I Saw It: Francisco de Goya, Printmaker* that features every print in all four of the artist’s series, a total of more than 200 images. It also includes plenty of scholarly comments on wall labels that offer history and context to help understand the works.

The first series, *Los Caprichos (The Caprices),* was published in 1799 and includes 80 aquatint etchings that satirize the foibles and compromises of Spanish life at the time. Aristocrats are depicted as donkeys in fancy clothes. Pretty young women are given in marriage to ugly but rich old men, thus saving the bride’s parents and older relatives from the poorhouse. Pretention and greed are prime targets.

Francisco de Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters,* 1799, etching, burnished aquatint, drypoint, and burin on laid paper; Norton Simon Art Foundation.

One of the most famous and fascinating images of the series, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (above and detail in top image), depicts a man — presumably Goya himself — asleep at

his desk. He’s surrounded in his dreams by a sinister flock of owls, bats, and other creatures, while his cat sitting nearby on the floor is clearly alarmed. It’s an astonishing work of the imagination.

The small images in the series — each only about 8½ by 6 inches — are in effect shaded line drawings, with the etching providing the lines and the aquatint adding the shading. (A few are tinted with watercolors by hand.) Produced in an edition of 300, Los Caprichos was designed to make money. Yet Goya pulled the series off the market after only three days, presumably because his visual wit proved too sharp for the public at the time. (He later gave away copies of *Los Caprichos* to friends and the Royal Academy of Arts.)

Francisco de Goya, *The Disasters of War: I Saw It*, 1814-20, etching, burnished aquatint, lavis, drypoint, and burin on laid paper; Norton Simon Art Foundation.

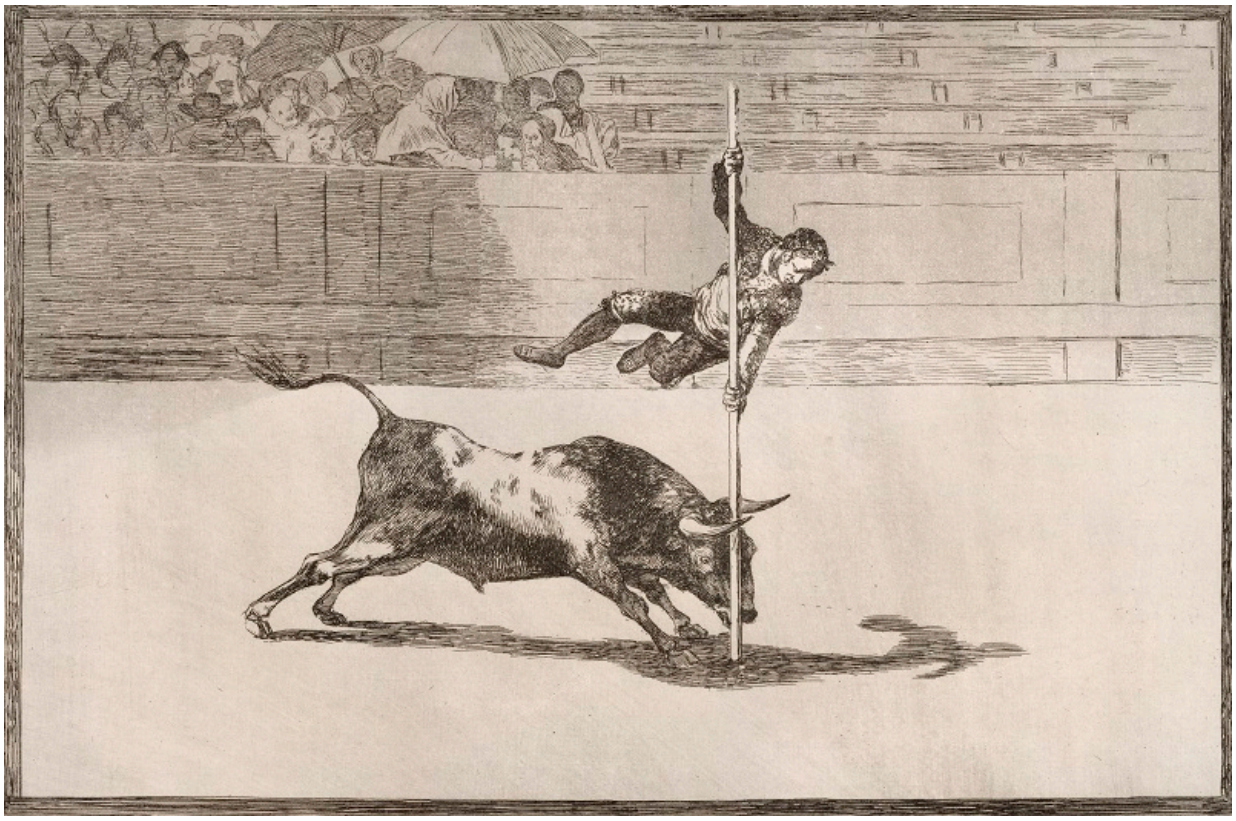
Goya’s style in his second series, *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War)* of 1810-15, is serious and realistic rather than cynical and satirical. When Napoleon’s army invaded Spain in 1808, civilians as well as soldiers tried to resist, and Goya followed developments closely in Spanish newspapers. One image depicts a young woman, standing on the bodies of dead soldiers, firing a huge cannon toward an unseen enemy.

In the print titled *I Saw It*, Goya shows civilians in retreat from the French invaders. A mother holds her baby on her shoulder while reaching down to her terrified son, who looks off to the right to the unseen soldiers. A man on the left grabs another man’s arm to pull him away from the scene. In the background are a jumble of civilians in a chaotic retreat. It’s a powerful image of the horrors of war, without ever showing the attackers.

The Peninsular War of 1808-14 also inspired Goya to create some of his most famous paintings. *The Third of May 1808 in Madrid*, commissioned by the provisional Spanish government after the end of the war, shows a relentless French firing squad executing a group of resistance fighters. One of the victims, a young man in a white shirt, stands with his arms raised in disbelief and surrender.

It’s an icon of antiwar campaigns, with the arms-raised gesture recalling the Crucifixion and reappearing in other paintings, from Manet to Picasso’s *Guernica.*

Goya never published *The Disasters of War* series during his lifetime, perhaps fearing a backlash from government and church authorities. It was first published by the Royal Academy in Madrid in 1865.



Francisco de Goya, *The Agility and Audacity of Juanito Apinani in [the Ring] at Madrid,* 1816, etching, burnished aquatint, lavis, drypoint, and burin on laid paper; Norton Simon Art Foundation. The artist’s third series of prints, designed to make money and not offend, celebrates Spain’s national pastime of bullfighting. There are certainly images of violence, but the series also emphasizes the spectacle and the skills of the bullfighters. In *Tauromaquia: The Agility and Audacity of Juanito Apinani in [the Ring] at Madrid* of 1816, the bullfighter cleverly escapes the charging bull by pole-vaulting over it!

Francisco de Goya, *A Way of Flying*, 1864, etching, burnished aquatint, lavis, drypoint, and burin, before engraved numbers, on wove paper; The Norton Simon Foundation.

Goya's final series of prints, *Los Disparates* from about 1815-23, returns to the fantasy world of *Los Caprichos.* These images of folly include people living in trees, a tightrope-walking horse, and a fantastical image of men flying with the aid of enormous bat wings, like the mythological Icarus. The series was never seen in Goya's lifetime; the Royal Academy finally published most of them in 1864, with four more appearing in the 1920s.

I Saw It: Francisco de Goya, Printmaker runs through August 5 at the Norton Simon Museum, 411 West Colorado Boulevard, Pasadena, California. A small companion show, *I Saw It: Modern Artists Respond to Goya* — featuring works by Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol, among others — is also on view at the museum.

Top image: Francisco de Goya, The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, *1799, etching, burnished aquatint, drypoint, and burin on laid paper; Norton Simon Art Foundation.*

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