



Art and Revolution

About: Goya

In pursuit of ugliness

Revolution is Janus-faced. David (see *Reformed Perspective* of March 1983) shows us the official face with its display of classical features. Goya reveals the other side, a face that is contorted in a pained grimace, expressing despair. Goya is David's antipode. In his early years he became known as a libertine, a free thinker. In 1763 he was refused a bursary for a study trip to Rome on account of his skeptical attitude. But, being an adventurer, he earned the necessary funds as a bullfighter, so that he could be found in Rome at the same time that David sojourned there. Shortly after his return from this eventful trip, Goya had already found his way into the highest Spanish circles, to obtain the appointment as *Pintor del Rey*, painter in royal service. In 1789, the year of the Revolution, he even became the *Pintor de Cámara*, painter in residence to the court. In revolutionary times this is a dangerous position, since lawful governments are then often replaced by others that are even more lawful. Nobody quite understood how Goya managed to do it, but after every upheaval he seems to have maintained his position. In retrospect, it appeared that he worked for all the parties, painting portraits of Spanish royalty; the French King, Joseph Bonaparte (brother of Napoleon); an English upstart, the Earl of Wellington; and then again Spain's newest King, Ferdinand VII.

This is characteristic of Goya. No one ever knew where he stood. He never took sides, was never really loyal. That is reflected also in his work. It is often difficult to read a point of view in it. There are always conflicting elements. He has painted startlingly beautiful portraits, but also the most ugly monstrosities. He created the loveliest dreamlike landscapes, but also drew marshes of deep despair that would give a person lasting nightmares. No, Goya was not the man who went to Rome to pledge his soul to the ancient classics. Goya was in search of man — man in his innermost essence.

Goya does remind us of another painter who never stopped exploring the deepest recesses of the soul: Rembrandt. To him Goya felt strongly attracted. He never made a secret of his feelings about the miller's son from Leiden. He admired him as a painter. He idolized him as an etcher. Yes, those two had much in common. But yet ... Rembrandt was more than a painter, more than an etcher. Above all, he was a believer of the gospel. This will not have escaped the attention of Goya, who was a "practicing Roman Catholic." But for Rembrandt-the-confessor Goya had little interest. There was no hint of shared convictions in that respect. Goya was a representative of the spirit of enlightenment. He desired to be an independent, free man, without bias or bigotry. Uninhibited, he wanted to plunge into life and let his passions run their free course, while yet, as an observer, keeping distance. He stated himself that that was what he set out to do: make observations.

Such an utterance reminds us for a moment of David, who painstakingly studied archeological findings, in order to be as factual as possible in his representation of the personalities of the Great Republic. But neither David nor Goya treat the facts in a neutral manner. David idealizes his objects and exalts them. Goya pushes them down, driven by his bizarre love of ugliness.

There was a society in Madrid whose members called themselves "lovers of the ugly." Critic Jean Adhemar said:

"These educated and knowledgeable men and charming ladies were possessed with the idea of ugliness and convinced of its importance."

He also explained that many members of that circle have posed for Goya and that Goya's prints were carefully studied by them and commented on.

This well-organized preference for ugliness illustrates how deeply opposite Goya's aims are to David's. Even in the representation of an assassinated demagogue, David still introduces beauty and a solemn nobility. Goya is capable of turning the funeral of Sardine into a carnival. His macabre fantasy pulls down everything, while he surrounds this degradation with an appearance of enlightenment-inspired justification.

Los Caprichos

In the year that David painted *The death of Marat* Goya began with a series of etchings later called *Caprichos*, freaky fancies. It became a torrent of eighty captioned prints, which Goya populated with the most lugubrious products of his imagination. It is a procession of monstrous humans and human-like monsters, swarms of witches, dwarves, fools, sots, jesters, mockers, monkeys, donkeys, demons, and all manner of evil beings, the brood of dark places. They are all very inventive when it comes to pestering and tantalizing each other, and they stage numerous jokes of the most repulsive nature.

The one printed on these pages is comparatively tame. But it has something that may help us understand Goya's other works. This is the only one in the series that has an inscription forming part of the actual composition, which would indicate that he considered this editorial comment of great importance. There is speculation that initially he intended it as a title page. In any event, the artist does ask our special attention for this particular print.

What does it exhibit? We see the image of a thinker at his desk. The front of the desk forms a frame around the pronouncement: "El sueno de la razon produce monstruos," the dream of reason brings forth monsters. For such an enlightened spirit this is a revealing motto. After all, what is said here is no less than that there is a connection between reason and ... monsters! It is worth our while to explore this relationship a little further.

Reason and monsters

Goya rejects the straightforward aspect of the Revolution, the side we encounter in the daylight. He looks for the back alley, the hidden face that lights up in the dark of the night. He who wishes to witness revelations must "observe by night." Does revolution not mean "turning over?" Since, therefore, the world is turned upside down, it follows that the night reveals the truth with greater clarity. That is also what the print shows. We are not treated to a daydream there, but a nightly vision is shown with fearful sharpness. We see the thinker abandoning himself to a slumber, or rather a dream. But his spirit is active.

In contrast with David's reasonable world, Goya reaches for the world of unreason. He searches for contact with hidden territories by turning reason around so that it works contrary to the natural



Francisco Goya, 1793. Etching from the series
Los Suenos (Los Caprichos) No. 43
Prentenkabinet Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

order. What used to go together, reason and fantasy, he breaks asunder. The marriage is broken up, but the marriage partners do not separate. Instead of complementing each other in harmony, they now attack and distort. Reason becomes the engine to set in motion some very unreliable matters. Instead of thinking in a flow of pointed, systematic arguments, the thinker gives himself up to the most uncontrollable activity of the human mind: the dream.

That is why this picture is not out of place in the series *Caprichos*. Their name initially was *Suenos* (dreams). That would even be more becoming. See how the thinker abandons himself to his own depth from where he conjures up all manner of hidden powers. There they come, the creatures of the night. A cat-like predator moves in silently and occupies the place at his feet with its sinister presence. Another cat-like being stares with hypnotizing eyes from across his hips. The heavy silence is broken by the flapping sound of bat wings. Owls call out: "Oohoo!" Behind this lonely figure they loom up, these nocturnal powers. They swarm all around him; they move in on him to bewitch him. They are symbolical figures, those beings of the night. They represent human passions, untamed desires, lust, dread, aggression. Such symbolic language can be followed throughout the nineteenth century, and time and again we can point at Goya's direct influence.

Fire and water

This print of Goya's may well be regarded as his declaration of principle. David attempted to take his starting point in Socrates, the human mind. Goya does it from his alternative mode, which equally calls upon the power of the human mind. Although they are not the virtues of goodness and unselfishness, they are powers that originate from inside man. While David divorces the mind from the heart and the senses, Goya sets the one up against the other. In David reason loses the living bond with the warmth of the blood. The man of reason ends up in the cold. His teeth start to chatter. Lest he freezes to death, he needs fire — and quickly!

Where to get it? There are two directions. He can restore the broken harmony by placing both reason and the heart under the supremacy of faith. Then the bond with heart and senses would be rediscovered and man would again live as a complete human before the Lord. He would have life "in God." But Goya rejects that road. Stubbornly he chooses the other direction, the fatal one. Over against the deifying of reason, he searches for a solution in the divinization of feelings, the senses, the passions, the imagination. All those powers within man which cannot be "reasoned out" he exalts over against reason. It is in effect a hardening of the heart. It is a perseverance in conceit. It is a continuing on a road of sin that does not lead to a destination of ideas, but to the abyss of destruction.

Sin is destruction. Sin is catastrophic. That becomes more apparent now that these two opposing powers have been unleashed within the one man. Now he begins to fall apart. These two drives strive with each other to obtain the position of supremacy. Two principles: reason and unreason. The world of thought on the one side, and the world of the senses, passions, and feelings on the other. The natural bond is broken up; the unity is lost. The individual is divided. The fear of freezing to death drives him into the fire.

Passions are set aflame. High roar the flames of unbridled desire. The fire that was supposed to give warmth breaks out of the hearth. The bonds that held together are cut. The fire has no resting place; it falls on the floor and sets the house on fire. And then the street. And then the city. And then ... It is a monstrous situation, completely out of control, unless ... Yes, unless reason prevails again to put out the fire with its icy jets of water. Then we are all back in the cold and things can start all over again.

"The dream of reason brings forth monsters." That revelation is the last thing we would have expected from an "enlightened" society. At first glance one would think that reason and monsters exclude each other, but upon closer examination the horrible truth becomes apparent. It is exactly that world of reason which summons the monsters into existence! Precisely that ice-cold thinking kindles the fire! This is most revealing. We perceive more clearly that that well-balanced world of David was too stifling, too artificial. It is a world which is too organized to be human. David's art is a

lifeless art, degrading to propaganda for a cause. In Goya the opposite trend prevails: a life without beauty, or rather a life of witchcraft, under the spell of magic.

The terrors of war

The contrast with David is also evident from Goya's reaction to war. When French armies under Napoleon's command invaded Spain, a bloody battle ensued. This became the theme of a series of etchings. Even the title of this second series, *The Horrors of War*, takes issue with David's triumphant assuredness. There is no evidence here of the euphoria of victory, even though Goya is bent on victory just as well. But his approach is different.

There are a number of prints that give us some insight into Goya's stand. Two things are remarkable: first, the emphasis Goya places on observation, and secondly, his zeal to find the truth. Observation and truth are related in Goya's world. To ignore this fact gives rise to the



Francisco Goya, Prentenkabinet Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

maltreatment of the dead — how much worse then is their vivid depiction! And Goya does not know how to stop. One can count seventy, eighty, or more pictures of horrors. Critics say that it was like the purging of an obsession, of an *idée fixe* that haunted him. That is quite different from the impression of an uninvolved reporter.

This characterization has an element of truth. In fact, the casual captions mentioned here are exceptions. Most of them are as biting as the acids Goya used in making his etchings. Some of them express complete despair. No. 15 is called: *There is no cure*. No. 69 shows a skeleton pushing up a tombstone. The stone carries one word: *Nada* (nothing). The title of the print: *It says: nothing*. That is more than journalistic reporting. It is desperate involvement.

But the question must be asked: What is Goya after in all this? He is, just like David, posing as an eyewitness. But why? For what cause? Of an earlier series of etchings Goya had declared to have given "witness to the truth." It is clear enough that his intent with the series *Horrors of War* was similar. This is confirmed by the title of the print which concludes the series: 82: *This is the truth*. The meaning of this truth is explained in the earlier prints: 79: *Truth is dead*; 80: *But will there be a resurrection?*; 81: *Devouring monster*.

impression that this is the work of a mere reporter. The captions under some of the prints (they are numbered) would strengthen that impression: 30: *War damage*; 44: *This is what I saw*; 45: *And this*; 47: *Thus it happened*.

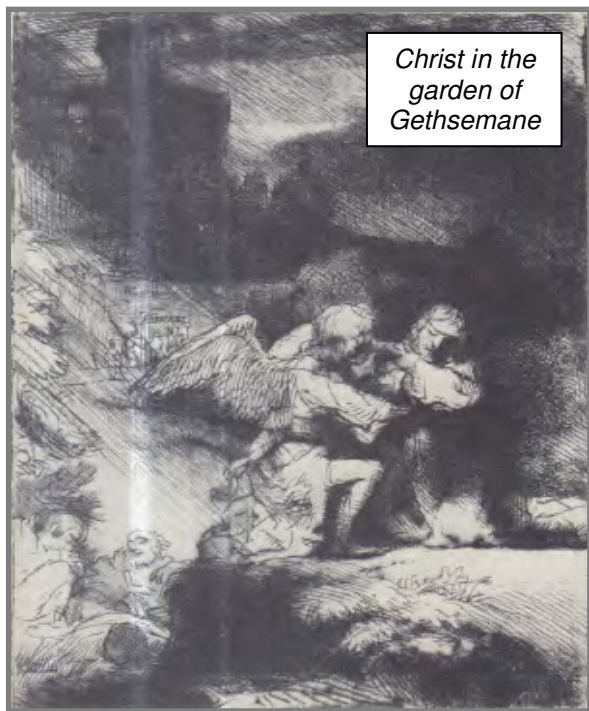
Such inscriptions do not seem to comment on the most horrible war conditions or on the very realistic representation of all those atrocities. We cannot show the prints, themes is already repulsive = hangings, murder with an axe, maiming of the dying,

What do these pictures represent? Print 79 personifies Truth as a woman who lies dead on the ground, surrounded by a host of people. From this crowd a mitered figure comes forward who lifts his hand and makes with his fingers the gesture of an oath. Two men are using a spade to dig a hole. Their hoods betray them as the executioner and his helper. Truth is dead and is given a Christian burial. In Print 80 the executioner is kneeling down beside Lady Truth and cudgels the half-buried woman with all his might. Around the scene is a circle of dreadful figures. A grimacing monster sticks out his tongue. On his shoulders he carries an open book. No. 81 shows a man-eating monster. When we consider the titles in their interconnections, then this message can be derived from them: The revealed truth, the written truth, is dead and must be buried, and the church which proclaims the truth is in reality a devouring monster.

The final print shows a very old man. He is holding a spade in his hand, and he has his arm around the shoulder of a radiant new Lady Truth. He, with his spade, seems the symbol of man with one foot in the grave. She, with her youthful appearance and her pointed finger, seems to symbolize the future. But it is as if she is saying: You seek the truth? Know, then, that there is no cure. You search for surety? Know, then, that outside the realm of this horrible reality there is "Nothing" (*It says: nothing*). The world consists of that which is before our eyes, that which we experience outside and inside ourselves. Nothing more, nothing less. Only the facts, only what we observe, has meaning. Beyond that there is *Nada*, nothing.

Sombre forebodings

We may well assume that this series was born from obsessions. Besides, it is almost certain that Goya eventually became a prisoner of his own ideas. But that does not take away the fact that we find here a purpose, a conscious and systematic attempt to shape a vision. This series of eight-two prints has an inner bond that ties them together. They represent one total view of the truth. That is



Christ in the garden of Gethsemane

Rembrandt, etching with dry needle, 1657.

not only apparent from the last picture, where this is formulated in clear terms. There is another very special etching in this series. It is the first one. Its title is *Sombre forebodings of things to come*.

At a glance we are aware that this has a symbolic character; even a child will notice that. We see a man in utter loneliness, completely cut off from the human environment. His features are wasted and hollow. He has fallen on his knees in the dirt. Feverish eyes stare into the darkness which surrounds him like a mantle. The etching needle has hurriedly scratched up the black background to indicate what terrors possess this cast-out man. He is full of sombre forebodings and knows what horrors are at hand. But he does not fend them off. His hands on both sides indicate resignation. When you let this picture penetrate your mind, you become strangely aware that you must have seen this before. That is no mistake. Sedlmayr says: "*It is undoubtedly a secularized image of Christ in Gethsemane; only the comforting angel is absent.*"

In this first print we find, so to speak, the third meaning aspect of this series. The first was the aspect of observation. That involved the meaning of truth. Now that we look back, it is apparent that all along this truth had been focused on suffering, more specifically on the kind of suffering that Christ has lived through. And that means: a suffering that brings deliverance. This assertion fits in the frame of Goya's own ideals and among the avant garde of his days. If one does indeed believe that beyond the horizon of human experience there is nothing, then there is no cure to be expected from outside. And certainly not from above. There is nothing left than to take the suffering upon oneself. That is how Goya desires

to descend into hell and redeem himself. Without assistants. Without a comforting angel. The angel is absent!

At bottom Goya pictures himself as a man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief, to the same extent that David presented the dead Marat as a man of sorrows. It is most striking that these two extremes touch each other here at these crossroads of haughty identification with the crucified Christ. David's conceit is self-assured and confident of triumph. Goya's pride is full of despair. But both have in common the proud refusal of any help, the stubborn rejection of a salvation that does not come from here below.

Goya's dove?

We may not neglect to mention that there are those who have an entirely different view on Goya's prints about the war. They believe that Goya's intent was the opposite, that he wished to protest against the inhuman aspects of war. His prints are then regarded as a deterrent, and Goya is introduced as a peacemaker. But that is farfetched. The very fact that Goya never published these etchings during his lifetime would belie that. Also, the prints are often sinister and far too unclear to be moralizing pictures. This is quite obvious when we compare them with British caricatures of that time; for example, of Hogarth.

And then there is another, very important point. Goya put his inner self into his drawings, creating images of what lived inside him. Notwithstanding Goya's claims of being an observer, there is a strong impression that these pictures have started from within. The observer has turned his attention to the world inside himself. He sees the horrors he lived through. They are his very own experiences. Sedlmayr points out that many of the initial sketches for those etchings had been drawn in red. And Haftmann, the great proponent of this originator of modern art, says that Goya, seen through the eyes of his time, was...

"A relentless destroyer, one who would ruin the styles, a disturber of the peace, one who knew the archimedean point that supported the whole fragile spiritual building of the Renaissance."

No, there is very little to support the opinion that it was Goya's aim to teach us to flee from those horrors, which he so consistently hankered after...

Let us conclude by taking a look at Rembrandt's etching *Christ in the garden of Gethsemane*. On a small rock table Christ is supported by an angel. Front, left, close to the rock formation, three disciples are sleeping. One lies on his stomach, his head on his arms, towards us. The environment indicates grass and other vegetation. In the background there is a wall with a gate (at the edge of the angel's wing), where a crowd of people linger. The dark shapes above the wall can be read as a mountain slope, trees, or a fortress. Dark cloud formations cover the nocturnal sky, but not altogether. Through an opening we get a glimpse of a lighter part of the sky, where the moon is shining. The image conveys that great suffering is taking place here, in which heaven and earth are involved. But the disciples, who are so close by, are out of it: they sleep. What deep sorrow! But there is hope. The angel, as a messenger from heaven, indicates that much. It is also indicated by the rhythm in the composition which opens up to above.

Those are exactly the accents that are absent in Goya's etching. There every historical relationship, every bond with the earth, has been removed. As a result, Goya's print receives a general and universal application of human despair, whereas Rembrandt's picture has a specific, historically-dated message of divine salvation.

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