

Goya and His Women

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AN EXHIBITION AT WASHINGTON'S NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART TAKES A FRESH LOOK AT ONE OF SPAIN'S MOST CELEBRATED ARTISTS AND THE WOMEN HE PAINTED.

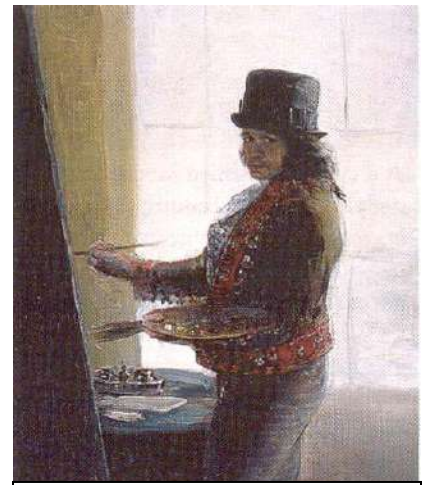
For two centuries, the powerful, beautiful, and mysterious paintings and prints of Francisco Goya have delighted admirers and confounded detractors. The 19th-century French poet Charles Baudelaire, who was most familiar with Goya's darker works, depicted them in *Les Fleurs du Mal* as "nightmare, full of things unknown, of ...witches' sabbaths, of old women looking into mirrors and naked girls stretching their stockings tight to tempt demons." More recently, 20th-century French novelist Andre Malraux proclaimed that "modern art begins" with the great Spanish artist.

One aspect of Goya in particular—his portraits of women and his relations with them—has inflamed imaginations for generations. An early biographer, French critic Laurent Mathéron, claimed that Goya's wife, Josefa, had to suffer the humiliation of a husband who had "scandalous adventures ...with the most illustrious women." In his 1951 novel *This Is the Hour*, German-born writer Lion Feuchtwanger portrayed a tempestuous love affair between Goya and the Duchess of Alba, a powerful aristocrat whose family owned vast tracts of land in Andalusia in southern Spain. The novel culminates with the duchess posing nude for Goya's shocking (at the time) painting, the *Naked Maja*. The artist's infatuation with the duchess also plays a key role in *Goya in Bordeaux*, the 2000 film by Spanish director Carlos Saura.

There is little evidence for Goya's infidelities, and most modern scholars discount them as conjecture. Yet the stories are circulating again as the result of a lavish exhibition, "Goya: Images of Women," that opened at the Prado Museum in Madrid last fall and is now on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C....

Goya lived at the time of the French Revolution—a period during which the role of women, at least in urban and upper-class society, began to change. After the revolution, many upper-class women emerged from the seclusion of their homes. They took to gathering in squares and promenades and sometimes joined organizations that cared for the sick and poor. Influential women such as the Duchess of Alba hosted salons where men and women could meet to discuss literature and to gossip.

While Goya tried to portray some of the more liberated women of his time, he was more ironic commentator than feminist, and his attitude toward women is both ambivalent and complex. As Francisco Calvo Serraller, the Prado's



Goya (his hat fitted with candlesticks in a c. 1794 self-portrait.



The most renowned of Goya's "gentlemen's paintings," the *Naked Maja* (detail) was secreted for many years in its owner's private study.

The work, which elicited a subpoena from the tribunal of the Inquisition in 1815, is now regarded as a masterpiece of the female nude.

curator of the show, puts it, "Woman is goddess and witch for Goya, sinner and saint, lover and procurer, worker and aristocrat, mysterious and enigmatic, tender and maternal, greedy and, when necessary, as tough as a man."

In his many self-portraits, Goya appears as a tall, full-faced, vigorous but anxious-looking man. What set him apart from the typical bourgeois of his era, however, was his genius—that and his intense ambition and incredible will. Fiercely independent, he was an indefatigable innovator, always seeking new ways of depicting the world around him and the demons within. It was this incessant search for newness that led Malraux and others to see him as a forerunner of modern art.

Born March 30, 1746, in his mother's native village of Fuendetodos in the hardscrabble farmland 35 miles south of Saragossa, the capital of the Spanish province of Aragon, Goya spent his childhood in Saragossa, where his father was a master gilder. Since gilders worked closely with the painters and sculptors who decorated the local churches, Goya grew up with artists all around him. According to one story, a friar came upon the youngster drawing a pig on a wall and urged his father to provide the boy with art lessons. In any case, Goya was apprenticed at the age of 14 to a painter regarded as the best teacher in the city. Another apprentice, Francisco Bayeu, would soon become a court painter in Madrid—one of a small group of prestigious, official artists in the employ of the royal family.

Goya later studied in Rome and then won a commission to paint a fresco on the ceiling of a small chapel choir in Saragossa's Pilar cathedral. In 1773, at the age of 27, he felt sufficiently established to marry Bayeu's 26-year-old sister, Maria Josefa. The couple moved two years later to Madrid, where Goya—most likely recommended by Bayeu—started work as an artist preparing what were known as "cartoons" for the Royal Tapestry Factory.

Cartoons were full-size canvases painted by artists solely for weavers at the factory to replicate in tapestries to be hung on the walls of royal palaces. The work was lucrative for the artists. From 1778 to 1780, Goya earned a total of 82,000 *reals* for his cartoons—more than five times the annual salary of a court painter. But cartoon work was frustrating. Artists had to guard against making the figures or tonalities too detailed for weaving. Goya was forced to alter one cartoon after the factory director complained that his weavers had been upset by "too many ornamental hair nets, belts, braids, veils and other bagatelles." Another source of frustration was the cartoonist's lowly status. The tapestry—not the canvas painted by the artist—was regarded as the work of art. After the weavers finished a tapestry, workmen stashed the cartoons away. Four decades after Goya's death, government officials found 45 of his cartoons stored in the basement of the Royal Palace in Madrid.

But the medium's limitations did not prevent Goya from being original and different. Instead of the hunting or mythological motifs usually depicted on royal tapestries, he painted such everyday scenes as children at play, street fairs, weddings, market days and even drunken brawls, sometimes adding sexual innuendo—a glance, a gesture—to the picture. He especially liked to portray male *majos* and female *majas*, the brazen and flirtatious lower-class youths who wore flashy clothes rather than fashionable French finery.

In the cartoon *The Picnic*, for example, a maja selling oranges encounters five picnicking majos who appear to have consumed several bottles of wine. The heavy-lidded young lady casts a coquettish look at one of the men and points away from the scene in a gesture that hints she may have more to offer than oranges. Goya's tapestries pleased the young heirs to the throne, Prince Charles and his wife, Maria Luisa, who displayed them on the walls of the Pardo Palace, their home outside Madrid.

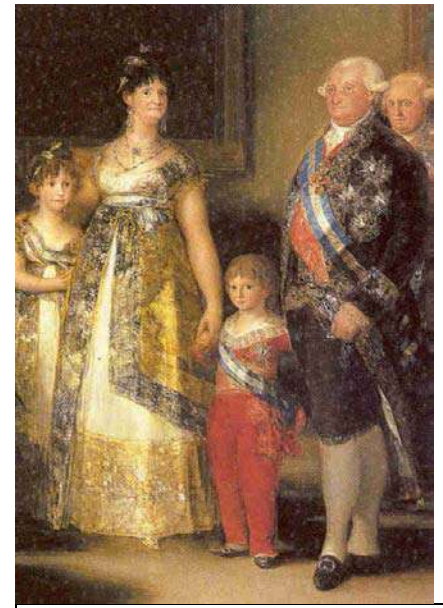


A design of "my own invention" Goya boasted of *The Picnic* (1776), his full-scale "cartoon" for a tapestry destined for the dining room of the Pardo Palace. Peopled with stock characters from the theater of the day, the work presents a tableau of country pleasures.

"I couldn't ask for more insofar as their liking my work goes," Goya wrote to Martin Zapater, a childhood friend, after showing some cartoons to King Charles III and the princely couple. Aristocrats and other members of the royal family soon commissioned Goya to do their portraits. And when the prince ascended to the throne at age 40 as King Charles IV in 1788, he appointed the 42-Year-old Goya a court painter.

While Goya's career advanced, his wife's health declined, mainly from a succession of pregnancies. Josefa bore six children and had several miscarriages. Their son Javier, born in 1784, would be the only child to survive to adulthood. "Let us hope this one will get a chance to grow," Goya wrote Zapater. Goya's letters reveal little about Josefa, and his only documented drawing of her depicts a woman, at age 58, fleshy, weary and domesticated.

Goya's appointment as a court painter enhanced an already swelling reputation. He had learned to infuse his portraits with a realism that somehow pleased his sitters, no matter how plain or tired he made them look. For example, in his 1784 painting *The Family of the Infante Don Luis*, a group portrait of the family of the king's brother, Don Luis looks vacant and old as he sits at a card table, while his younger wife, Maria Teresa, attended by her hairdresser, looks vital and in control. Female sway over the court was a recurring theme in Goya's work. In *The Family of Charles IV*, painted a few years later, there's no doubt that the self-confident if plain-featured Queen Maria Luisa rules the roost, while the passive King Charles IV stands forlornly nearby. Goya's harsh realism has led some to believe that he was openly mocking Spanish royalty. But Tomlinson, the American curator, says that Goya was much too ambitious to risk his career by satirizing his own patrons.



Queen Maria Luisa and King Charles IV (in a detail from Goya's 1800 portrait of the family) had been longtime patrons of the by then totally deaf painter.

Disaster struck in late 1792. On a trip to Andalusia, Goya fell ill, possibly from meningitis. Temporarily paralyzed, he was carried to a friend's home in Cadiz, where he slowly recuperated. For months, he would lose his balance when he stood up. He could hear a buzzing in his ears but nothing else. "I am on my feet," he wrote his friend Zapater, "but so bad that I don't know if my head is on my shoulders." When he returned to Madrid more than six months after taking sick, he was totally deaf and would remain so for the rest of his life. He was then 47 years old.

The affliction changed Goya's life. His work took on more weight, sometimes reflecting a sardonic view of the world. He searched continuously for new subject matter, new ways of applying his art. We do not know how he conversed—whether he read lips or whether friends and patrons used sign language or scribbled words on paper for him. But he kept up his many friendships and worked as hard as ever. In fact, it was not long after going deaf that he entered his ambiguous relationship with the Duchess of Alba.

The vivacious duchess had developed a reputation as an alluring, uninhibited socialite. "The Duchess of Alba possesses not a single hair that does not awaken desire," a French traveler wrote in 1796. "Nothing in the world is as beautiful as she." In 1795, when the duchess was 33, Goya was commissioned to paint formal portraits of her and her husband. One day, Goya wrote to a friend, before the posing had even begun, she burst into his studio demanding that he "paint" her face. After he added some color to her makeup, she rushed out, leaving the artist to ponder her brazenness. When the duchess's husband died a year later, Goya spent several weeks at her castle on the Andalusian coast. It is not clear whether he was invited to console or to paint her. In any case, he sketched her several times in his notebook, catching her in natural poses—arranging her hair, for example, and playing with her adopted child. In 1797, he painted a full-length



Goya's 1797 painting of the recently widowed Duchess of Alba, of whom he was likely enamored, she points to the words "Solo Goya," and wears two rings—one inscribed "Alba," the other "Goya."

portrait of her in mourning, wearing a black lace mantilla over a gold blouse. It is hard to look at this painting without concluding that the artist was in love with his subject. In it the duchess points downward at sand on which the words "*Solo Goya*," Spanish for "Only Goya," have been traced.

Adding fuel to speculation, Goya kept the painting for himself. Still, his biographer Jeannine Baticle maintains that it's unlikely that the artist's feelings were reciprocated. Tomlinson concurs. Although "we'll probably never know the exact nature of the relationship," she says, the difference in social status between the two makes a love affair improbable. Both Baticle and Tomlinson also reject the idea that the duchess would have posed for the Naked Maja.

Goya apparently painted this controversial nude in 1797-1800 for Manuel Godoy, Charles IV's powerful prime minister, who kept it in his study. (Goya also painted a clothed version, which the minister may have hung over the nude in order to conceal it.) The *Naked Maja*'s most likely model was Godoy's young mistress, Pepita Tudó. But she was not his only partner; Godoy owed his swift rise to power to his role as a favorite and presumed lover of Queen Maria Luisa. And at the behest of the royal family, he had married the future Countess of Chinchón, a cousin of the king and a woman whom Goya painted both as a child and as a fragile and saddened wife. Unlike classical nudes in most earlier European paintings, Goya's maja flaunted her sexuality. The painting was considered so shocking that officials of the Spanish Inquisition demanded an explanation when they discovered the work years later. Proceedings against the artist were probably dropped, however, since there is no record of his ever coming before the Inquisition.



As the new century neared, Goya, still esteemed as a portrait painter, began to find commissioned works too confining. Saying he wanted to allow "caprice and invention" full rein, he decided to rely more on his imagination. In 1799 he published a series of 80 etchings titled *Los Caprichos* (*The Caprices*), in which he examined society with a cold eye and bitter wit. The artist was convinced, according to a contemporary advertisement for the collection, "that it is as proper for painting to criticize human error and vice as for poetry and prose to do so." Though the series was not a big seller, its reputation spread, and it has astounded and excited admirers for almost two centuries.

In the series, most of the women are brides, prostitutes, majas, witches and gypsies. Many of the plates, accompanied by Goya's ironic titles and biting captions, deal—usually negatively—with relations between the sexes. In *What a Sacrifice!* a bowlegged, hump-backed man gloats before his demure betrothed while her troubled parents and a beaming priest stand in back. Although unattractive, "he is rich," reads the caption, "and, at the cost of the freedom of an unhappy girl, the security of a hungry family is acquired." In *Two of a Kind*, a young dandy arranges an assignation with a prostitute while two old hags, evidently procurers, converse in the background. "Wherever the men are depraved," Goya comments, "the women are the same." Other plates are more complex, even surreal, swirling with goblins and monsters.



Los Caprichos apparently did not offend royalty, and the king promoted Goya to first court painter that same year. By then, Goya was the most celebrated portrait painter in Spain. The chasm between his formal portraits of women in the early 19th century and his biting sketches of them in *Los Caprichos* is immense. The portraits, while free of any fawning flattery, treat beauty with sensitivity, respect and psychological insight. The current exhibition offers a generous display of the portraits, including two of the finest—of Therese-Louise de Sureda (left), the delicate and aloof French wife of the chief of the royal porcelain works, and Sabasa Garcia, the pale and serene niece of the foreign minister. Neither woman wears any jewelry, and their beauty is enhanced by the lack of ornamentation.



A scene from Goya's *Los Caprichos* series offers a cynical view of marriage.

Goya sometimes dashed off a portrait without much care. A prospective client asked a mutual friend in 1805 to intercede with the painter to ensure he did not turn out "a hasty horror" but painted the portrait "the way Goya can do it when he really wants." Deafness made it difficult for the artist to communicate effectively with clients he did not know well. This may account for the disparity between his most psychologically insightful portraits and those that merely capture a likeness.

As Goya entered his 60s in 1806, he seemed to feel the need to take on bolder themes. He returned to etchings—but of a more realistic kind—during Spain's war against Napoleon. When mobs forced the abdication of King Charles in 1808, Napoleon took advantage of the chaos by sending in French troops and anointing his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, as Spain's new king. A bloody uprising against the French followed and kept on until British, Spanish and Portuguese troops, led by the Duke of Wellington, defeated the French in 1813.

Goya's series of etchings *Disasters of War*, created from 1810 to 1815, chronicled the terrible effects of war on civilians. Unusual for their time, the 80 plates make no attempt to glorify war or, for that matter, even to please the eye. Women play a prominent role in these scenes—as battlers, mothers, mourners, prostitutes and victims of violence. For reasons unknown, perhaps because they were too graphic, the plates were not published until 1863, almost a half century after their creation.

Josefa had died in June 1812 at the age of 65. And although the widowed Goya lived alone in his apartment, his son, Javier, a far less accomplished artist, resided nearby with his wife and child. Goya's output continued at an astonishing pace. Over the next few years, he produced the *Tauromaquia* (Bullfighting) series of etchings and the *Disparates* (Follies) series—a puzzling satire of human foibles—and painted such masterpieces as *The Colossus* and *Majas on a Balcony*.

In 1819, at the age of 72, Goya purchased a new home, the Quinta del sordo (Country House of the Deaf Man, after a previous owner who was also deaf). Leocadia Weiss, a 30-year-old unhappily married relative of Goya's daughter-in-law, moved into the house as well. Some gossips suspected that her youngest child, Rosario, was Goya's daughter, but Tomlinson says there is no evidence that this is so.



What Courage!, the most famous image from Goya's *Disasters of War* series, depicts Agustina of Aragon heroically manning a cannon during the siege of Saragossa in 1808.

Goya proceeded to paint the walls of his home with scenes of extraordinary invention, all dark in mood and tone. Heavy with symbolism, these "black paintings," as they are known, were painstakingly transferred to canvases after his death. They now hang in the Prado and are considered to be among his finest and most enigmatic works. Depicting such scenes as Saturn devouring his child, and Judith cutting off the head of Holofernes, these paintings are believed to reflect Goya's response to the puritanical regime of King Ferdinand VII, who, following the defeat of Napoleon, ruled as an absolute monarch. (Though Goya refused to take part in political activity, many of his reformist friends fled to Bordeaux in France.) In 1824, at age 78, Goya requested leave from his duties as court painter to recuperate from illness at mineral baths in France.

But instead of taking the waters, the artist joined the expatriate group in Bordeaux. He arrived "deaf, old, awkward and weak, and without knowing a word of French," Leandro Fernandez de Moratin, a fellow exile, wrote to a friend. Still, de Moratin added, Goya was "happy and desirous of seeing the world." Leocadia and Rosario soon joined him. He produced paintings, lithographs, drawings and miniature works on ivory. He died in Bordeaux on April 16, 1828, at age 82.

Some may lament the scholarship that discounts Goya's love affair with the Duchess of Alba and dispels his image as an antiroyalist liberal. But Tomlinson believes that we are left with something far more vital—the vastness, variety and complexity of the art itself: "There are very few artists who were as proficient in as many media, who were constantly experimenting with new themes and who were always driven to go beyond where they'd been before."

Stanley Meisler became a Goya fan while working as a newspaper correspondent in Spain in the 1970s.