Francisco Goya

Biography

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes was an innovative Spanish painter and etcher, and one of the triumvirate—including El Greco and Diego Velázquez—of great Spanish masters. He was born in the small Aragonese town of Fuendetodos (near Saragossa) on March 30, 1746. His father was a painter and a gilder of altarpieces, and his mother was descended from a family of minor Aragonese nobility. Facts of Goya’s childhood are scarce. He attended school in Saragossa at the Escuelas Pías. Goya’s formal artistic education commenced when, at the age of 14, he was apprenticed to a local master, José Luzán. Goya spent four years in the studio of this competent, but little-known, painter. In 1763 the young artist went to Madrid where he hoped to win a prize at the Academy of San Fernando (the official center for the fine arts in Spain, founded in 1752). Although he did not win the desired award, he furthered his acquaintance with Francisco Bayeu, an artist also from Aragón, who would later influence Goya’s career (Bayeu also became Goya’s brother-in-law when Goya married his sister, Josefa, in 1773).

Returning to Spain in 1772, Goya would become Aragon’s most famous painter as a result of several fresco projects. He worked in the Cathedral of our Lady of El Pilar in Zaragosa, in a chapel in the palace of the Count of Sobradiel, and completed a series of large frescos for the charterhouse of Aula Dei, near Zaragosa.

By 1774, Goya had one of the best artistic jobs in Spain, with steady work, good pay, and a direct connection to the royal court in Madrid. He was hired by his brother-in-law, Francisco Bayeu, to produce tapestries for the royal palaces. Goya’s job was to create paintings (called cartoons) which the weavers could copy in silk and wool. His tapestry cartoons were highly praised for their candid views of every day Spanish life, and he painted more than 60 in 16 years.

During this time Goya created etchings of some of the works by Velázquez found in the king’s art collection. As he copied Velázquez’s works, he was influenced by the way Velázquez composed his pictures, and by his way of capturing the emotions and personality of his subjects. Goya began to attract a steady clientele with his talent as a draftsman, printmaker and painter.

Goya’s career steadily advanced during this time. By 1780 he was accepted to the Academy of Art in Madrid, and he began to find new patrons in Madrid’s high society. He painted an official portrait of the king’s first minister and was soon one of the most sought-after portraitists in Madrid. When Charles IV ascended the throne in 1789, Goya was appointed Court Painter and commissioned to paint the official portrait of the new King and Queen.

In the winter of 1792, while on a visit to southern Spain, Goya contracted a serious disease that left him totally deaf and marked a turning point in his career. A mood of pessimism entered Goya’s work. Between 1797 and 1799 he drew and etched the first of his great print series “Los Caprichos” (“The Caprices”). With their satirical humor, these prints mocked the social mores and superstitions of the time; yet they did nothing to dampen his reputation at court. By 1799, Goya was appointed First Court Painter.

In 1771 Goya went to Italy and stayed for about a year. His activity there is relatively obscure; he spent some months in Rome and won a prize for a composition he entered into the Parma Academy competition.

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In 1800 Goya received a commission to paint a life-size portrait of the royal family, and his audacious painting, in which the royal family is shown as a group of strikingly homely individuals, was surprisingly well received.

By 1807, Spain was at war. Napoleon marched into Spain pretending to be allied with the Spanish against the British, but his intent was to take control. Goya observed firsthand the battles between French soldiers and Spanish citizens during the bloody years of the Napoleonic occupation. In 1814 he painted the horrors of warfare in “Second of May, 1808” and “Third of May, 1808.” These paintings depicted horrifying and dramatically brutal massacres of groups of unarmed Spanish street fighters by French soldiers. In 1810 he created another series of etchings called “Disasters of War,” which further illustrated his views on the horrors and brutality of war.

The Black Paintings, scenes of witchcraft and other bizarre activities, are among the most outstanding works of the artist’s late years. Painted about 1820, these paintings are now in the Prado, Madrid. These works were originally painted in fresco on the walls of Goya’s country house; they have now been transferred to canvas. They attest to his progressively darkening mood, probably aggravated by an oppressive political situation in Spain that forced him to leave for France in 1824, settling in Bordeaux. There he took up the then new art of lithography, producing a series of bullfight scenes considered among the finest lithographs ever made. He only returned to Madrid for a brief visit in 1826, then died in self-imposed exile in Bordeaux two years later, on April 16, 1828.

Goya left no immediate followers of consequence, and his reputation was waning at the time of his death. However, French scholars and artists rediscovered his paintings and etchings, particularly “Los Caprichos,” by the mid-1800s, furthering his reputation. Goya became known as the “first of the moderns,” influencing 19th and 20th century artists, from Delacroix and Manet to Picasso.

Bibliography:

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