



Los Caprichos

Taft Museum's Goya exhibit shows the artist's darkly satirical side as social commentator

MATT MORRIS // DEC 12, 2010

Francisco Goya produced his famous series of etchings, 1799's *Los Caprichos*, at a time when narrow-minded religious extremists and other authoritarians were striving to control politics on the one hand while on the other the rise of the Enlightenment represented society's attempt to shift to reasonable thinking.

Sound familiar?

Populated as the etchings are by monstrous metaphors for social injustice and the dangers of unchecked superstition, there is a clear timeliness to the Taft Museum presenting a first edition of *Los Caprichos* now through Jan. 30. The traveling show was organized by Landau Traveling Exhibitions of Los Angeles in association with Denenberg Fine Arts of West Hollywood.

Goya's Spain was a place of economic depression, religious persecution and a widening gap between the Church's authoritarianism and the creative class's embrace

of the Age of Reason. Though the worst of the Spanish Inquisition had passed, its effects were still evident through heavy censorship, baseless accusations and unfair trials. Out of such oppressive circumstances, Goya — a painter for the Royal Court — emerged with darkly funny critiques of some of the very institutions from which he earned his living.

By today's standards, Goya was like a hybrid of Jon Stewart and Perez Hilton, rarely shying away from scathing political satire and snarky remarks about the habits and fashions of his day's aristocracy. And like *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Wizard of Oz* after him, Goya translates many of these topics into dark fantasies where prostitutes, unfit rulers and lessons in morality are represented by a menagerie of anthropomorphized beasts and mythical monsters.

Ostensibly, the most well-known print in the exhibition is "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," where a scholar has fallen asleep at his desk as owls, bats and a cat-like creature descend upon him. Besides being one of the most animated compositions, displayed against a twilight gray aquatint background, this work is the lynchpin to Goya's driving message: Art is the result of a union of Reason and imagination and without logical thinking, fantasy is an abused tool to breed paranoia and fear in the lives of citizens.

I saw other visitors to the exhibition flinching away from some of Goya's more horrific images. Striking, considering they were produced more than 200 years ago. "There Is Plenty to Suck" features a pair of witchy, drug-dealing whorehouse madams, accompanied by a basket of dead babies. The Taft's didactic panel suggests Goya was commenting on the number of abortions that prostitutes had to undergo to continue in their profession. Whatever the purpose, the image is highly grotesque; one senses how much more pleasurable these were to produce for the artist than his many commissioned paintings.

He has particular flair in images of winged creatures in flight. Flutters of feathers and arching wingspans activate the small images and fill them with the wind that sweeps the harpies, gargoyles and birds skyward.

Several of these flight scenes feature the 13th Duchess of Alba, reputed to be a friend and possible lover of Goya's. Theirs might have been a complicated relationship, because he seems as enamored by her beauty and fashion as he is critical of her

vanity and the attention she garnered. “All Will Fall” shows her as a heavily decorated harpy attracting male bird counterparts that are snatched from the air by a gang of crones, only to be de-feathered, tortured and humiliated.

She flies through “They Have Flown” with a black veil flowing between her hands, wearing a headpiece crafted from a butterfly. Her crones join her here as a huddled cloud of elderly female faces beneath her feet. Both alluring and frightening, I wonder if Helena Bonham Carter’s character in the *Harry Potter* movies might be based on Goya’s depictions of the Duchess.

Aside from the storytelling in these works, Goya’s virtuosity as a printmaker can’t be overemphasized. His “Bon Voyage” is the most painterly of the set. A conglomerate of winged, tortured souls make their way through a nighttime of gloomy aquatints, which might again be a retelling of the social night of the Spanish Inquisition.

“Can Anyone Untie Us?” is a perfectly relevant question today. In it, the two figures bound together at waist and ankle, swooped down upon by a giant impassive bird, could be interpreted as a critique of the marriage laws of Goya’s day, but it might also represent a country in political identity crisis, where wildly differing positions are caught together in a dysfunctional government.

Goya’s outlook did not improve later in life. Serious illness, permanent deafness and exile under Napoleonic rule heaped personal tragedy on top of Goya’s already dire outlook. The nightmarish visions in *Los Caprichos* might only be outdone in his oeuvre by the late “Black Paintings,” as they are called. Funereal, gory and bleak, all of Goya’s cynicism culminated in these works, which now are at the Prado.

The Taft exhibits these etchings in a thoughtfully designed series of galleries that have been painted with graphite black and a brooding range of burgundy. It is an exquisite exhibition of works that are beautiful, haunting, humorous and very appropriate for today.

LOS CAPRICHOS continues through Jan. 30 at the Taft Museum of Art downtown.

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13012885/los-caprichos-review>