



Plate 32 Why?

FRANCISCO GOYA

The Disasters of War

A first edition set of 80 etchings with aquatint,
from the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

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The Disasters of War

In 1810, more than 10 years after he published his satirical **Caprichos**, Goya returned to etching with renewed anger and purpose, this time in response to a national disaster that was consuming his country.

For almost two years the Spanish population had been fighting a bloody war of independence against Napoleon Bonaparte's troops, after the French had elbowed aside the Spanish monarchy and installed a Bonaparte dynasty with a new constitution.

Goya may have witnessed the riot of Madrid on 2 May 1808 that triggered off the war. On that day citizens loyal to the Spanish monarchy fought pitched battles with Murat's troops. The day after the insurrection, mass executions were ordered by the French, in reprisal. As word spread of the bloody events of the 'Dos de Mayo' province after province rose up against the French. Towns like Saragossa fortified themselves against the invaders and were reinforced by peasants from the surrounding countryside, armed with whatever weapons they could improvise.

In July 1808, Napoleon installed his brother, Joseph Bonaparte, on the Spanish throne. The Spanish population was almost wholly supportive of Ferdinand, the legitimate heir to the Spanish crown. Napoleon thought the ill-trained Spanish troops would fall within six months. Instead, because of the strength of the popular resistance, the war dragged on for almost six years, ending in 1813 with the defeat of the French.

The war was catastrophic in terms of human suffering and waste. In 1810 Goya began a series of etchings of extraordinary realism and power that expressed his horror and despair at the carnage suffered by many provinces of Spain. Like his first major series of etchings Goya called the new series 'Caprices' (**Caprichos de Goya**). However the connotations of levity in the description are inappropriate to the many grisly subjects.

On the manuscript title-page of one of two proof sets of the prints, Goya inscribed in ink "Fatal consequences of the bloody war in Spain with Bonaparte. And other allegorical **Caprichos**, in 85 prints". The series was not published during his lifetime. When it was published, in 1863, by the Academy of San Fernando, the number of plates was reduced to 80 and the series was retitled **Disasters of War**, the name it is known by today.

Few of the **Disasters** describe events from the war that can be identified with any certainty. One of the exceptions is plate 7, 'What courage!', which depicts the heroine of the first siege of Saragossa, Augustina Aragon, in her moment of

bravery. When all the artillery men manning one of the batteries had fallen, she rushed forward over the slain and fired off a massive 26-pounder, inspiring the Spanish defenders to fresh exertions.

Apart from this one plate, Goya ignores the heroics and large-scale confrontations of the war, focussing instead on the anonymous incidents that occurred in many parts of Spain. Torture of prisoners, hanging, execution by firing squad, mutilation of corpses, rape of Spanish women, murder of children and the heaps of the dead are subjects Goya compulsively returns to, again and again. No fewer than nine of the prints depict executions, not all of them by the French.

Although Goya's sympathy lay with the Spanish cause, the **Disasters** depict atrocities on both sides. The real subject of the series is not so much the incidents of the war *per se*, as human nature and the abysmal depths to which it can sink. Like the **Caprichos** before them, the **Disasters** are universal statements — in this case, of man's inhumanity to man. Aside from such clues as style of dress and weaponry that date them, many of the plates could equally well describe some of the atrocities committed in the conflicts of Vietnam, Cambodia, Angola, El Salvador, Argentina, Uganda, Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, in recent decades.

Throughout the **Disasters**, Goya takes a close-up view of the events he depicts, with special attention given to the gestures and expressions of the participants in the drama. As a result the viewer is drawn directly into the realm of the action. Backgrounds are deliberately either misty, murky or cursorily described so as not to detract from the figures.

The blind panic of villagers fleeing at the advance of enemy troops, the desperation of women with children defending themselves against marauding soldiers, the terror of prisoners about to be executed by firing squad, the anguish of survivors of a massacre, even the stench of rotting corpses, are dramatically communicated by expressive faces and gestures. Especially remarkable is the sense of dead weight Goya imparts to corpses being dragged or carried away for burial. Plate 30, 'Ravages of war' portrays the moment of an explosion in a munitions store. The extraordinary realism of figures falling through the air suggests a knowledge of objects in motion that was in fact only gained later in the 19th century with the invention of the camera.

Like the **Caprichos**, the **Disasters** bear etched captions; but whereas in the **Caprichos** they were sometimes deliberately ambiguous, in the **Disasters** they eloquently and unequivocally express Goya's incomprehension and despair at the cruelty of human beings to each other. 'That always happens'; 'They do not want to'; 'This is bad'; 'One shouldn't look' and 'Everything's going wrong' are such pathetic understatements that they express the horror Goya felt realistically.

The **Disasters** is an encyclopedia of human suffering, although not all of the plates are devoted to the events of the Spanish War of Independence. Sixteen of them

deal with the terrible Famine of Madrid (1811-12) in which some 20,000 Spaniards perished.

In 1814, when the French had been defeated and Goya was preparing to publish the *Disasters* (which at that stage numbered 56 plates) Ferdinand VII repealed the 1812 Constitution of Cadiz, imposed censorship and restored the Inquisition. Many Spaniards who in the aftermath of the war had looked forward to freedom and political stability found their hopes dashed by a reactionary, absolutist king who seemed determined to uphold the status quo of persecution and oppression. Amongst the decrees of 1814, Ferdinand specifically forbade reference to the war and the word 'constitution' — as if these had never existed. In the light of these developments Goya prudently decided against publishing the *Disasters*.

In 1820, when the political climate was more favourable, Goya enlarged the series with an additional group of plates called the *caprichos emphaticos* (emphatic caprices) that comment on the restrictive years since 1814. In style and content the *caprichos emphaticos* hark back to the more fantastic of the *Caprichos* of 1799. The demons and monsters that haunted the earlier series return with a vengeance, along with bats, owls, asses, wolves and other creatures that symbolise the stupidity and cruelty of the political and religious reaction after the war.

In plate 75, 'The Charlatan's show', a monstrous parrot in clerical robes, preaches to a congregation of imbeciles. In plate 77, 'May the cord break', the church is symbolised as a cleric precariously balanced on a tight-rope. A preliminary drawing for this plate identifies the figure as the Pope himself.

Spaniards who bravely defended their country against the French, only to be exploited in the aftermath of war by the powers-that-be are represented in plate 72, 'The consequences', as corpses being sucked dry by monstrous vampires. In plate 79, 'Truth has died', the demise of truth is personified as the corpse of a voluptuous, narrow-waisted woman (Goya's ideal of beauty), over whose body the 'Church' intones last rites, while 'Justice' covers her face with her hand.

But Goya's pessimism is nowhere so intense as in plate 69 which depicts a corpse (perhaps representing the Constitution of 1812) raising itself on its elbow and turning its back on 'Justice' whose symbolic scales can just be made out in a dark obscurity of aquatint. With a bony finger the corpse points to a sheet of paper where it has inscribed the word Nada (nothing). When the *Disasters* were first published in 1863, the inscription was changed from 'Nothing. That is what it says', to 'Nothing. Time will tell', which is considerably less emphatic. Nineteenth-century academicians apparently found Goya's title too nihilistic.

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