

GOYA



MASTERS OF ART

GOYA

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Frontispiece: Francisco José Goya, *Self-Portrait in the Studio*, 1794/95 (pages 60/61)

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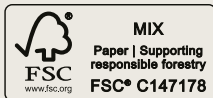
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INTRODUCTION

Francisco José Goya, from provincial origins to First Court Painter, has become one of the best-known Spanish artists of all time. He straddles the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and is difficult to categorise. Adventurous Academic? Cynical Romantic? Closet Humanist? Dramatic Realist? Funny, engaging and morose. Goya was born at a time when the Industrial Revolution was about to usher changes in the lives of people in the rest of Europe while Spain faced political and social upheaval and was not to modernise for many years. The painter was both old-school and innovative at the same time. Whether we are looking at old crones, flying witches, bullfighters in the ring, angels or demons, we are transported to other worlds by this extraordinary Aragonese artist who spent most of his working life at the court of Spain in Madrid, kowtowing to the aristocrats, bowing to the monarchy and scraping to the Intelligentsia.

To what can we attribute his meteoric rise? A father who was a gilder and had the ear of the artistic milieu of Zaragoza? A capacity to spot an opportunity? An ability to capture the turmoil of the time or perhaps more accurately a simply marvellous brushstroke? Goya lathers his canvases with sweeping, thickly laid strokes of paint, with a confidence in his own brilliance, capturing a crooked smile or a leering grin, an arrogant gaze or a sensual stare. Men and women, with all their fascinating foibles are rendered with a determination to seek the truth. Goya saw war and was able to convey the true horror not just of those who died at gunpoint, but those who were strung up, stripped bare to die with no dignity or were bludgeoned to death. He saw war, as he saw a bullfight—as a mortal, relentless and bloody combat. Yet his softer renditions of naked beauty and pale fragility point to a man whose sensitivity meant he understood suffering.

It is not known exactly how he went deaf, but it is known that he lived in a silent world for nearly three decades during which he and his wife lost countless children while he managed life at court. Capricious, spoilt and often ineffective kings and queens came and went, along with their advisers. One often wonders how Goya stayed under the radar of a terrorising Inquisition which would be abolished soon after his death. Through his letters, mostly to and from his oldest friend Martín

Zapater, we know he loved chocolate, snuff, 'roscones' (round doughnuts) shooting, fishing and music before he went deaf, but we do not know how he felt about his wife or whether he loved the beautiful Duchess of Alba and despised the royals he worked for.

So much of Goya's life is shrouded in mystery and contradictions. Did he absorb the thoughts of the enlightened aristocracy, or enjoy a caper with street musicians, or did he share a prayer with men and women on a pilgrimage? Did he side with those who read Voltaire, if they could get their hands on the books, or with those whose endeavours led them to more religious pursuits? Ultimately, there is the extraordinary number of paintings, drawings, etchings, prints and frescoes to pour over and we must make our own decisions.

Goya looked to Velázquez for inspiration and he himself inspired later artists. When Edouard Manet went to the Prado in 1865, he marvelled at Goya and darkened his own brushstroke. He copied shamelessly and reinvented Goya's energy in his own *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867/68) or *Olympia* (1863). Are those Frances Bacon's distorted faces lurking in the so-called *Black Paintings* that Seamus Heaney loved and Joan Miró admired so much? Many were inspired by Goya. The Spanish composer Enrique Granados wrote the *Goyescas* in 1911, an evocative suite for piano, then a later opera. Novels, poems, countless films and even video games have been based on Goya's works. Goya seems to live on through Picasso's adherence to black and white in *Guernica* and to his rendition of the horrors of a later civil war. When Dinos and Jake Chapman bought and subsequently defaced one of Goya's series of *The Disasters of War* we cannot help but wonder whether he might just have approved.

Illness and political turbulence did not dampen the artist's spirits and he lived to the ripe old age of eighty-two and died in Bordeaux. His works can be seen in galleries and museums all over the world. Goya helped to spread the myth of a Black Spain which was held back by an overwhelming Church, a cruel Inquisition, despotic monarchs and selfish politicians, and yet his vibrant greens, velvet reds and lemon yellows adorn our gallery walls and bring us joy.



LIFE

