GOYA

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A selection from the Museum’s prints and drawings by Goya has been placed on exhibition in the print galleries and will remain until the autumn. It is probable that, with the single exception of Daumier, no other modern artist has made prints that are today of sufficient interest to justify the exhibition of so many for so long a time. The purpose of the exhibition is to provide an adequate idea of Goya’s prowess as an original graphic artist, and not to display the Museum’s possession of “great rarities.”

Goya’s prints provide a prime example of the way in which time has its revenges. A glance at the history of opinion about them should warn all pontificators that their judgments throw light not on works of art but on themselves. It makes art criticism a very hazardous business and one incompatible with modesty. The most dangerous thing that any one can do is to take out his bell, his book, and his candle and anathematize a work of art. The only criticism that has abiding interest is that which is itself a work of art. It is the rarest of all kinds of works of art. Otherwise criticism, and especially the criticism that makes bold to say why things are bad, survives only as nonsense. This is particularly true of art criticism in periods of transition, when standardized values are slipping and new ones are forcing themselves on the unwilling attention of people who have already laid their bets for eternity. As Dürer, in a moment of honesty, remarked, “What beauty is, I know not.” The only way for critics to make sure that their judgments of value will stay true is to see that the art they write about is destroyed.

ABOVE: The Death of the Alcade of Torrejon, etching by Goya. From the Bullfights
The Folly of Fear, etching by Goya. From the Disparates

You Can’t Look at This, etching by Goya. From the Disasters of War
without trace. This is what happened in ancient Greece and is the reason that no one questions the greatness of Apelles and Zeuxis, Phidias and Polycleitus. On the whole, however, it seems rather a drastic and costly method of insurance for one's critical opinions.

Goya was born in 1746 and died in 1828, which is to say that his working life was almost equally divided between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a world that thought Sir Joshua and Sir Thomas, Fragonard and Greuze the great painters of the present, and the Bolognese the great painters of the past, it was necessary to be a bullfighter if one wanted to do what Goya did. While Turner used etching and mezzotint to make highly polished imitations of tidy pen and wash landscapes, Goya used etching and aquatint roughly to show contemporary human beings in action under the stress of excitement and emotion. It was contrary to all the tenets of the Greek revivalists and thus was a very vulgar thing to do. Also he aggravated his offense by making his statements without picture-book gestures. Good artistic society in Paris and London regarded such lapses with horror. The only Englishman who liked Goya's work was the man who invented trench warfare and commanded at the breaches of Badajoz. Just as no one in northern Europe, with the exception of Wellington, liked Goya's work, so the only man in Europe who was not afraid of the duke was Goya, but, then, neither had he been afraid of the Queen Mother of Spain. He was so unafraid that he died a very old and lonely man who did not shrink from the visions that came to him in the night.

Few painters show bravery in their work. Goya did.

Bravery is not often accounted one of the artistic virtues; and yet if we look back it is one of the very few qualities that all the greatest of the great display in their work. When Galileo said “Eppur si muove,” he said it under his breath. When Mantegna and Michelangelo and Rembrandt said it, they said it out loud for all the world to know. Their every line was a challenge. What they had to say was said without circumspection, without smoothing out. In Goya's time Mantegna was a bad engraver, and the great work of Rembrandt's maturity was regretted by men of taste. Yet Goya took the same path. Neither in his subject matter nor in his technique did he show fear or compromise. Seeing straight, filled with powerful emotion, knowing what he had to say, he said it without thought of rhetoric or elocution—those two popular subjects that need to be studied only by the soft-headed and the woolly-minded. Whatever it may be in human relations, in poetry and picture making tact is either stupidity or cowardice. Great subjects cannot be handled greatly without bravery or with tact. The fact that great subject matter has been out of fashion for so long a time in picture making is a criticism of many things in modern life. The change that has taken place in Goya's esteem during the last fifty years may indicate that there is a return to older, less comfortable, but more abiding values. People who have fought know that one does not fight for draped models or odalisques, greengrocer shops, pond lilies, or the bar at the Folies Bergères.