Source: The Times {Saturday Review}
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 26, September 2015
Page: 10,11
Area: 1752 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 392483 Daily
Ad data: page rate £16,645.00, scc rate £75.00
Phone: 020 7782 5000
Keyword: Goya

# Playful, energetic, empathetic — can it really be Goya?

**This remarkable exhibition explores the Spanish master via the everyday people he knew and loved, says Nancy Durrant**

Around a gallery within the Museo del Prado, Madrid, hang 14 paintings that in the 19th century adorned the walls of the Quinta del Sordo (Villa of the Deaf Man) on the outskirts of the city. The house, which no longer exists but was then surrounded by fields, belonged to Francisco de Goya, who had lost his hearing after a near-fatal illness in 1792. He painted the works directly onto the walls of his dining and living rooms between 1819-23, with no intention of public display. These "Black Paintings" are deeply disturbing — the most famous is *Saturn Devouring his Son*, and subjects range from a witches' sabbath to a desperate cudgel fight, as well as two hideous old men eating soup — and are limited to a dark, ominous palette. Standing among them is unsettling enough; God (and Goya) only knows what it was like having dinner with them on the walls.

These works loom unreasonably large — along with his prints series *Los Caprichos*, *The Disasters of War*, and private albums such as *The Witches and Old Women* — in our modern view of the painter as a gloomy, tormented satirist; a sort of Spanish Hogarth, forever churning out savage critiques of the troubled society he inhabited.

Visitors to *Goya: The Portraits* at the National Gallery, however, will meet a very different man. This is the first exhibition to concentrate on the artist's portraits — of kings and queens, artists and thinkers, dukes and despots, friends and family, ladies, liberals and little children — and spans his entire career in the form. It tells the story of a Goya most of us don't know: playful, experimental, energetic and empathetic — a man of the Enlightenment but one who managed to negotiate the tricky and dangerous politics of an age that took in the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the fall of the Holy Roman Empire and the brutal return of absolute monarchy to Spain.

The show, which has been nearly a decade in gestation, includes some spectacular loans. Ten works are coming from the Prado, and others from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (such as *The Countess of Altamira and her daughter, María Agustina*, which has never been lent internationally) and the







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Meadows Museum in Dallas (the last work Goya painted, of his only, much-loved and rather spoilt grandson Mariano), as well as from the Museo Goya in Zaragoza. There are a number of self-portraits, rarely lent, while the painting of Don Valentin Bellvís de Moncada y Pizarro from the Fondo Cultural Villar Mir in Madrid has never been seen in public before.

Another coup comes in the form of the superbly haughty 1797 portrait of Goya's friend and patron the Duchess of Alba, from the Hispanic Society of America in New York — a painting that has only once left its owners in the United States. And last month the gallery announced the last-minute inclusion of a pair of pendant portraits of King Charles IV in hunting dress and his Queen María Luisa from 1799. Loaned by the Patrimonio Nacional in Madrid, this is only the second time they have left Spain. No wonder no one has attempted an exhibition of Goya's portraits before.

Although portraits account for about a third of his painted output and more than 150 survive (about 70 are in this show), Goya came to portraiture quite late. Born in the village of Fuendetodos, near Zaragoza, in 1746, he studied alongside the painter Francisco Bayeu, marrying Bayeu's sister Josefa (Goya called her Pepa) when he was 27. The two painters had a friendly but tetchy rivalry. It was, however, another decade before Goya got his first portrait commission, in 1783, from the Count of Floridablanca; he had recently asked Goya and Bayeu to create altarpieces for the newly built church of San Francisco el Grande in Madrid (then an architectural symphony of neoclassical austerity, now an eye-popping rave anthem of gaudy colour due to excessive decoration added in the 19th century).

The portrait, though rather stiff, lays out Goya's intentions to do something different. Portraiture had developed during the Renaissance to be a tool of fame for the sitter. It required an idealised likeness, laden with signifiers of status and allegiance, emphasising power for men, beauty for women and wealth for both. The difference with Goya was threefold. First, a shift of emphasis from outward trappings to the inner character of the sitter; second, a verisimilitude and refusal to flatter that makes you wonder why certain people persisted in commissioning him (María Luisa for one, whose once-famous looks were visibly ruined by 22 pregnancies, though she considered herself a beauty to the end); third, an unconventional informality that served further to humanise his subjects.

With Floridablanca, Goya creates a credible narrative that cheekily puts the painter in the frame with his sitter. The count is shown in his study, poring over the plans for the Aragon Canal with an aide, at the moment of being interrupted by the artist, who has a sketch to show him. The painting depicts Floridablanca as a hard-working reformist (the building of the canal facilitated trade to Aragon, Goya's home province) and as a patron of the arts. Even without that background, it clearly shows a real man in his real, messy office, surprised but benevolent, even if Goya's representation is a bit wooden. This early stiffness didn't last long. Goya was a superlative observer of nature and proud of his originality. He relished the challenge of painting figures in new positions. It was also in his interest to develop the naturalism of his painting — his ambition was to become first court painter to the king, a position not held by a Spaniard since Velázquez in the court of Philip IV. According to his only surviving child, Javier, Goya once said that his only teachers were Velázquez, Rembrandt and Nature herself. He took Velázquez — who was being freshly acclaimed for his naturalism and realism — as his model.

Nowhere is that master's influence clearer than in another of Goya's early portraits, *The Family of the Infante Don Luis*. Luis, the king's younger brother, had been destined for the church, but his enormous appetite for fast women meant he gave up his position as Archbishop of Seville at the age of 26. After an incident involving the secretion of prostitutes at convenient spots in the woods while out hunting, he was ordered by the king to marry and to go into exile at Arenas de San Pedro, 80-odd miles from Madrid.

Goya's 1783-84 portrait of the 56-year-old infante's family evokes Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, in the way Goya again inserts himself into the picture, in which Luis's much younger wife, Maria Teresa, is having her hair done. It is a combination of

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ceremony and informality — a capturing of a (fictitious) moment; the closest servants mill around, Luis's young daughter is intrigued by the painter's daubings. And yet, it is entirely Goya's picture. Each figure is a real character operating within their mental ecosystem.

This psychological insight is what marks Goya out from his peers, according to Xavier Bray, the show's curator. He admits that Goya was not the first painter to accomplish it: "I think Velázquez, you could argue, is one for psychology; Holbein; Van Dyke less so, but Dürer and Rembrandt. I think Rembrandt is an equal to Goya." As an illustration, he compares Goya with Lucian Freud: "With Freud you don't get [that insight], there's so much about Freud in his portraits. You feel he's treating that person like a piece of meat. With Goya there's sympathy, empathy. I think he's a kind man. He does judge but he doesn't condemn in one go."

Two paintings in the exhibition clearly show this acuity (and in one case, judgment). Goya often stayed in touch with his sitters for many years and his portrait of the Marchioness of Santa Cruz, from 1805, is a case in point. He had painted her, a tiny, wide-eyed girl of four, with her siblings and her parents, the Duke and Duchess of Osuna, in 1788 in a beautiful, informal work that highlighted the couple's then-radical parenting (the duchess adhered to Enlightenment ideas of bringing up your children yourself) and the easy affection within the family. The later portrait shows the ravishingly lovely marchioness, a great patron of the arts, as one of the muses (her husband became the Prado's first director). Opulent though the image is — and frankly quite sexy — Goya's depiction of the marchioness's glorious figure through the clingy fabric of her dress suggests this was painted with her husband in mind. She is evidently very comfortable with the man before her; she has known him, after all, since she was a child. Goya retains something of that child in her face.

**How did Goya keep his court job? His Ferdinand looks like a thug in a bedspread**

Contrast this with Goya's 1814-15 portrait of the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII. Only a year before, Ferdinand had returned from his imprisonment under Napoleon and promptly overturned the constitution, arrested the liberals responsible for it and restored absolute monarchy. Though his return had been called for by the people of Spain, he turned out to be a brutal and repressive ruler — a decade later his tyranny would cause Goya to commit himself to exile in Bordeaux, where he eventually died aged 82.

Goya painted Ferdinand several times, and you do wonder how he kept his job as first court painter, a role to which he had finally ascended in 1799. His Ferdinand, in full royal regalia, swamped in gold and ermine, is a beetle-browed bruiser. His great ham fist clumsily grips the sceptre, making it look more like a stick to beat the people than a symbol of sovereignty, and his body is strangely twisted, his great chain of office badly off-centre. He looks like a thug in a bedspread. It seems perfectly clear what Goya thought of him. How Ferdinand didn't clap the painter in chains is beyond me.

Bray says he has a simple ambition for this show. "I want [visitors] to love Goya as a painter," he says, "and to get to know him in a completely different way — through the people that he knew, loved, and had an affection and respect for." This roll call of real, living, breathing people should tell that story eloquently.

***Goya: The Portraits* is at the National Gallery, London WC2 (0800 9126958), from Oct 7 to Jan 10**

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**Self Portrait, 1795-97. Below: Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuýigam 1788, on loan from the Met, New York**

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**The Duke and Duchess of Osuna and their children, 1788. Below: The duke and duchess's daughter, the Marchioness of Santa Cruz, 1805**

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**Goya's 1797 portrait of the Duchess of Alba, on loan from the Hispanic Society of New York. Right: Ferdinand VII, 1814, after the king's restoration to the throne**

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**Goya was a superlative observer of nature and took Diego Velázquez as his model**