

## BOOK REVIEW

# Pioneer of modernism

Though it underplays the political context, a new book on the great Francisco Goya is a rewarding introduction to the influential Spanish painter, says CHRISTINE LINDEY

**Francisco Goya, 1746-1828**  
by Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen  
(Taschen, £6.99)

**A** WELL constructed page-turner, attractively designed and copiously illustrated, this book cleverly interweaves biography, patronage and socio-political contexts into discussions of specific works by Francisco Goya,

The Spanish artist's output was varied, complex and contradictory. An observer of social classes, mores, values and pretensions, he was also a satirist, psychologist and progressive humanist.

He raged at the injustices, hypocrisies and repressions of church and crown yet he depended on commissions from these institutions.

Goya (1746-1828) lived through tumultuous times in his native Spain, then one of Europe's most reactionary countries. The largely rural, illiterate and poverty-stricken population was ruled by an absolutist monarchy and repressive church, both of which fanned the flames of ignorance, superstition and fear of authority.

Goya was of the "illustrado" (the enlightened), the small minority who welcomed the ideas of the Enlightenment. Born to a craftsman, his work shows a lifelong empathy with the "pueblos" (common people).

During his era, artists in Spain were still mostly dependent on church or court patronage. Goya achieved profes-

sional success by obtaining his first commissions from relatively progressive court members when aged 30.

His outstanding portraiture landed him the deputy directorship of the Spanish Academy in 1785 and by 1799 he became Principal Painter to the king. Nevertheless he had to be wary of the Inquisition and of losing his livelihood, especially after the monarchy declared war on revolutionary France in 1793 and the "illustrados" were persecuted.

That year illness temporarily paralysed Goya's hands and left him deaf. From then onwards he took the unusual step of pursuing his own preoccupations alongside his commissions. He published his noncommissioned *Caprichos*, a series of 80 etchings satirising the hypocrisies and stupidities of the nobility and clergy and exposing the irrationalities of the human psyche.

Aimed at a wide public they were almost immediately withdrawn from sale, probably due to clerical disapproval.

The brutalities of the Napoleonic invasion of 1808-13 led to conflicted loyalties and a widespread patriotic defence of the nation. But the restoration of the absolutist monarchy in 1813 brought repressions and persecutions.

Goya negotiated an uneasy relationship with the new king and persuaded him to commission two history paintings, purportedly to celebrate patriotic resistance to the Napoleonic invasion.

One such is *The Executions Of The Third Of May, 1808* (1814) which remains possibly the greatest celebration of popular resistance and condem-

nation of military power.

On seeing the paintings' populist stance, Ferdinand VII banished them to the palace basements, from which they only emerged long after Goya's death.

In 1824, having seen many "illustrados" persecuted or escaping Spain, Goya exiled himself in France, where he died four years later.

By navigating a fine line between official acceptance and disapproval Goya managed to retain establishment patronage. The book's authors, Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen, interpret this as opportunist careerism but it can also be understood as an astute way of ensuring material and professional survival, so enabling Goya to develop his revolutionary ideas in form and content.

An example is Goya's responses to the Napoleonic war, the Madrid famine of 1811-12 and the repressions of the restored monarchy in 1813 which led to the bleak and emotive *Disasters Of War* (1810-1820), a series of 82 non-commissioned aquatint etchings considered far too subversive to be published.

Finally appearing in 1863, they still resonate two centuries after being made — the power of their emotional truth transgresses the specific circumstances which triggered their creation.

Unlike previous portrayals of war

which stressed heroic national victories, Goya expressed grief and horror at the cruelties, famine, impoverishment and indignities of war. Naked, truncated people hang from trees, human corpses are piled callously like abattoir carcasses and fights, rape and murder are commonplace.

They appeal directly to our emotions due to the use of strong tonal contrast, unexpected viewpoints, expressive line and dynamic compositions.

Formal innovations underline the modernity of Goya's subject matter. Concentrating on essentials, the very lack of specificity in descriptions of locations, dress or surface textures give his prints and paintings their timeless relevance.

Goya was fundamentally a realist in his unflinching observations of the complexities of human character and behaviour and in his engagement with topical events. He was a realist too in encompassing the full range of human consciousness by encompassing the sometimes irrational life of the imagination as well as rational observations of life.

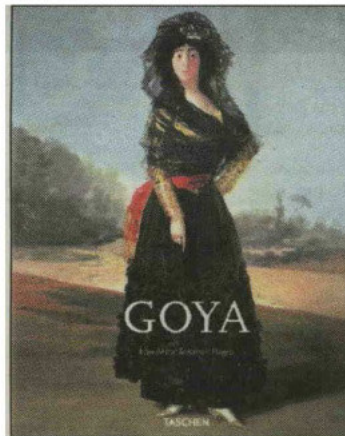
Even his court portraits refuse to idealise the physical ungainliness and intellectual shallowness of their sitters. Born into near-medieval mid-18th century Spain Goya embraced new ideas to create a revolutionary art which anticipated modernism.

Intended for mass publication this book could not be contentious. Its interpretations of Goya's works emphasise details of his private life and speculations about his psychological states and underplays their political context.

Yet it takes a progressive attitude on social matters and there is an interesting chapter on women's status and frequent condemnations of clerical oppression.

Recommended as an accessible introduction to this great painter.

■ *Disasters Of War etchings are on show at the Wellcome Institute, Euston Road, London NW1 until February 24. Free. Details: [www.wellcomecollection.org](http://www.wellcomecollection.org).*



**REAL GOYA:**  
(Clockwise from top) Plate from Disasters Of War, with the inscription: 'A heroic feat! With dead men!', Self-portrait In The Workshop, (fragment), The Second Of May 1808 and The Duchess of Alba