



### **Francisco Goya: The Disasters of War (1810-1820)**

When Francisco Goya created "The Disasters of War" between 1810 and 1820, he was documenting something that had never been shown before—not the glory of battle, not heroic generals on horseback, but the actual horror of war as experienced by ordinary people. This series of 82 etchings stands as one of the most powerful anti-war statements ever created, and perhaps the most remarkable aspect is that Goya never intended them to be seen in his lifetime.

The prints chronicle the Peninsular War, the brutal conflict that erupted when Napoleon's forces invaded Spain in 1808. Goya was in his sixties, too old to fight but close enough to Madrid to witness the occupation, the resistance, the reprisals, and the descent into barbarism on all sides. What he saw—or heard about from survivors—stripped away any romantic notions about warfare. These weren't distant battles observed from a hilltop; this was war in the streets, in the villages, in people's homes.

What makes "The Disasters of War" so devastating is Goya's unflinching honesty. He shows French soldiers executing Spanish civilians, Spanish guerrillas mutilating French soldiers, bodies piled in ditches, women raped, children starving. The captions are terse, bitter, sometimes sardonic: "One cannot look," "This is worse," "Why?" The title itself— "Los Desastres de la Guerra"—uses the word "disasters" rather than "battles" or "campaigns," stripping warfare of any noble pretense.

The technical achievement is extraordinary. Goya used etching and aquatint to create images of almost photographic immediacy. The compositions are stark, often placing the violence in the center of the frame with nowhere for the viewer's eye to escape. There's no heroic distance, no comforting mythology—just human beings destroying each other with methodical cruelty. In Plate 39, "Grande hazaña! Con muertos!" (A heroic feat! With dead men!), bodies hang from a tree like grotesque fruit, the caption dripping with savage irony.

But Goya didn't stop with scenes of combat atrocities. The final third of the series, created after Ferdinand VII's restoration in 1814, turns its fury on the political aftermath—the return of the Inquisition, the persecution of liberals, the betrayal of those who had fought for Spain's freedom. These "Caprichos enfáticos" (Emphatic caprices) are more allegorical, showing monstrous figures representing tyranny and superstition crushing human reason and liberty.

The prints were never published during Goya's lifetime. He was too smart, had survived too much, to make that mistake. The political climate was too dangerous, the images too inflammatory. When he died in 1808 in Bordeaux, self-exiled from Spain, the copper plates and a set of proofs remained with his son. They weren't published until 1863, 35 years after his death, when Spain had changed enough to bear witness to what Goya had seen.

"The Disasters of War" occupies a unique place in art history. These prints predicted the unflinching documentary photography of the 20th century, from the Spanish Civil War to Vietnam to every conflict since. You can see their influence everywhere—in Picasso's "Guernica," in the work of war photographers like Robert Capa, in any artist who has tried to show war as it actually is rather than how we pretend it to be.

There's something almost unbearably honest about an artist choosing to create this knowing he would never see it published, never receive recognition for it, never know if anyone would care. It speaks to what Goya had become by then—not just Spain's greatest painter, but its conscience, creating an indictment that would outlive him by centuries.

This is Goya bearing witness in the dark, armed with copper plates and mordant acid, proving that sometimes art's highest purpose is simply to remember what others would prefer to forget, to say "this happened" when the world wants to look away.

