Francisco Goya: Los Caprichos (1799)

When Francisco Goya published "Los Caprichos" in February 1799, he was taking one of the most audacious artistic risks of his career. This collection of 80 aquatint etchings represented something unprecedented in Spanish art—a savage, unflinching critique of the society that sustained him. Here was the First Court Painter to King Charles IV, at the height of his powers and prestige, creating images that mocked the clergy, exposed the corruption of the aristocracy, and laid bare the superstitions and hypocrisies of Spanish life.

But this wasn't recklessness. It was the work of a man who had survived a devastating illness in 1792-93 that left him profoundly deaf, fundamentally altering his relationship with the world around him. Cut off from casual conversation, from the social chatter that smooths over uncomfortable truths, Goya developed a more penetrating vision. The silence forced him inward, and what emerged was darker, more uncompromising than anything he had created before.

What makes "Los Caprichos" particularly remarkable is Goya's technical mastery combined with psychological depth. He employed the relatively new medium of aquatint—which allowed for subtle gradations of tone and shadow—to create images that hover between dream and nightmare. The prints are populated by witches, demons, donkeys dressed as scholars, and grotesque human figures whose moral deformities are rendered as physical ones.

The most famous image from the series, Plate 43, shows the artist himself slumped over his desk, surrounded by flying bats and owls. The caption reads: "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos"—The sleep of reason produces monsters. This has become one of the defining images of the Enlightenment's anxieties, suggesting that when rationality sleeps, superstition and ignorance take flight. But Goya's meaning was characteristically ambiguous—the Spanish word "sueño" means both sleep and dream, suggesting that reason's dreams might also produce monsters.

The prints went on sale in Madrid on February 6, 1799, advertised in the Diario de Madrid. The public reaction was immediate and unsettling. Within two weeks, Goya withdrew the entire edition from sale—only 27 sets had been purchased. Whether he feared the

Inquisition, which still wielded considerable power, or simply recognized that Spanish society wasn't ready for his vision, remains uncertain. In 1803, he donated the copper plates to the Royal Printing Office, perhaps as protection against persecution.

"Los Caprichos" sits at a crucial turning point in Goya's artistic journey and in Western art more broadly. These prints bridge the decorative optimism of his early tapestry cartoons and the apocalyptic horror of "The Disasters of War" that would follow. You can see in these images the birth of modern art's willingness to confront the ugliest aspects of human nature, the conviction that art's purpose isn't merely to please but to reveal.

There's something profoundly courageous about an artist at the peak of his career choosing to create this: a mirror held up to Spanish society that showed not flattering portraits but grotesque caricatures. It speaks to what Goya had become—not just a court painter executing commissions, but a witness to his times, documenting folly, cruelty, and superstition with the bitter clarity of someone who could no longer hear the comforting lies people told themselves.

This is Goya stepping into his full power as an artist, armed with copper plates and corrosive acid, proving that images can be weapons as well as ornaments, and that sometimes the artist's duty is not to comfort but to disturb.