

Los Caprichos



Goya's Mastery in Prints: Los Caprichos

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Acknowledgements

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All images created by the artist, **Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes** (1746-1828)

Cover Detail & Title Panel: *Nadie se conoce* (*Nobody Knows Himself*), Plate No. 6 from *Los Caprichos*, 1797-98, etching and burnished aquatint, Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas, Algor H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.06.06. Photograph by Michael Bodycomb.

Interior, from Left to Right:

Fig. 1 *El sueño de la razon produce monstruos* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*), Plate No. 43 from *Los Caprichos*, 1797-98, etching and burnished aquatint, Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas, Algor H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.06.43. Photograph by Michael Bodycomb.

Fig. 2 *Los chincillas* (*The Chinchillas*), Plate No. 50 from *Los Caprichos*, 1797-98, etching and burnished aquatint, Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas, Algor H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.06.50. Photograph by Michael Bodycomb.

Fig. 3 *Hasta la muerte* (*Til Death*), Plate No. 55 from *Los Caprichos*, 1797-98, etching and burnished aquatint, Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas, Algor H. Meadows Collection, MM.67.06.55. Photograph by Michael Bodycomb.

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The University of Arizona Museum of Art presents *Goya's Mastery in Prints*, a celebration of the graphic techniques and visionary achievements of Spanish master Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes (1746-1828). These exhibitions present in succession the artist's four most significant print suites — in first-edition imprints — on loan from the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.

This extraordinary cycle of exhibitions concludes with *Los Caprichos* (*The Caprices*), the artist's most influential undertaking in printmaking — 80 aquatint etchings that satirize human folly and critique elements of 18th century Spanish society. Goya worked on the etchings from 1797-1798 and published them in 1799, at the age of 53.

The term “capricho” translates as whim, fantasy, or invention. It relates to the Italian tradition of the artist’s “capriccio,” a composition that combines the imaginary with the real, particularly in the realm of architectural fantasy. The Italian term was also interpreted by the 17th century theorist Filippo Baldinucci as “one’s own thought and invention” — the product of an unfettered imagination. In calling his series “caprices,” Goya aligned himself with this tradition, but unleashed a decidedly new vision: his intention was not simply to create images for pictorial pleasure, but to craft wildly inventive scenes in order to make statements (sometimes comedic, sometimes grim) with potent moral force about societal ills.

In an announcement advertising *Los Caprichos* in the *Diario de Madrid*, Goya describes his purpose:

“The author [Goya], convinced that the censure of human errors and vices can be as much the subject of painting as it is of oratory and poetry, has chosen for his work themes from the multitude of follies and wrong-doings which are common to all societies, of prejudices and lies countenanced by custom, ignorance or self-interest, which he has considered appropriate to submit to ridicule, in order to exercise his fantasy.”

Goya goes on to state that the etchings do not “ridicule the particular defects of any one person,” and that with his art, he alters reality to produce a work of true invention, rather than simply copying images directly from nature.



FIG. 1

The prints in *Los Caprichos* exhibit the influence of Enlightenment ideals on Goya — in particular, the notion that reason should govern human thought, social behavior, and political institutions. This is perhaps best illustrated by one of the best-known prints in the series, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*) (Fig. 1). Without reason and rationality, the etching seems to suggest, the human mind is capable of generating all manner of evils. Originally intended as the suite’s frontispiece, an inscription on the preparatory drawing for the etching reads “The Author dreaming. His only intention is to banish harmful common beliefs and to perpetuate with this work of caprices the sound testimony of Truth.”



FIG. 2

Individual scenes in the series comment on a range of subjects, including the dangers of ignorance (Fig. 2), the irrationality of superstition, the frivolity of courtship customs, and the absurdity of innumerable human vanities

(Fig. 3). They criticize various professions and institutions (including the state, the church, and the aristocracy) and denounce certain injustices and abuses of power. Although numbered by the artist, the plates do not follow an obvious thematic or narrative order.

Much of the influence of *Los Caprichos*, and of the later suites, in addition to their innovative design and concept, rests in the Goya’s exceptional use of aquatint. As a printing technique, aquatint had just begun to be used by artists early in the 18th century. By the end of the century, Goya had exploited the medium’s full potential to produce dazzling results.

Los Caprichos established Goya as the most important printmaker in the western tradition since Rembrandt. Although a commercial failure during the artist’s lifetime, the suite’s combination of social satire and political critique, with inventive imagery and innovative graphic techniques, has influenced countless artists of subsequent generations.

Susannah Maurer
Assistant Curator, The University of Arizona Museum of Art
& Archive of Visual Arts, February 2008



FIG. 3

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes

Born on March 30, 1746 in the Spanish village of Fuendetodos, Francisco de Goya would prove to be one of the most innovative and provocative artists of all time.

Although he came of artistic age surprisingly late in life, Goya produced a revolutionary and unforgettable oeuvre.

The young Goya sought education through studio apprenticeships and travel, yet it was not until 1773 that he was formally engaged as an artist. By painting tapestry cartoons for the Royal Tapestry Workshop in Madrid, he garnered the attention of the Spanish royal court. In the years following, Goya found increasing favor among noble society and received many distinguished portrait commissions.

In 1777 and 1778, Goya executed his first etchings, copies of paintings by the highly regarded 17th-century Spanish court painter, Diego Velázquez (1599-1660).

Scholars posit Goya’s deafness, the result of illness in 1792, as a turning point in his subject and style. In 1794, he wrote: “In order to occupy my imagination which was troubled by the consideration of my ills... I dedicated myself to painting a set of cabinet pictures in which I have succeeded in making observations for which the commissioned works, in which fantasy and invention had no place, never gave the opportunity.”

By 1797, Goya was at work on a suite of satirical etchings, known as *Los Caprichos* (which were published in 1799). In that same year, Goya was appointed First Court Painter and with the enhanced social access of the position produced his greatest aristocratic portraits— those marked by a distinctive and often unflattering realism.

In 1808, amidst the war against Napoléon in Spain, Goya’s world of court patronage dissolved; the artist found himself increasingly isolated and gripped by psychological crisis. After the death of his wife, in 1812, the artist produced some of his most politically charged work, including the print suite *Los Desastres de la Guerra*.

Through his last years, Goya was astonishingly prolific— producing portraits, religious paintings and genre scenes, the series known as the Black Paintings, and various drawings and print suites, including *La Tauromaquia* and *Los Disparates*. Threatened by escalating political, social and artistic repression under the regime of Ferdinand VII, Goya chose self-exile in 1824. He settled in Bordeaux where he died, on April 16, 1828, at age 82.

