

The Third of May, 1808: The Execution of the Defenders of Madrid – Goya

1814, Oil on canvas, 266 x 345 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid



In this painting by Goya (1746 – 1828) he is very much fulfilling his role as the defender of the Spanish people in their fight against oppression. This painting and another entitled “The Second of May 1808: The Charge of the Mamelukes” painted at the same time show Goya representing one of the ‘*most notable and heroic actions...of our glorious insurrection against the tyrant of Europe*’. It is a dramatic execution scene showing the savage punishment dealt out by the Napoleonic forces in reply to the uprising of the people of Madrid on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May. It is reputed that Goya actually witnessed these executions on the hill of Principe Pio from the window of his own home and, deeply angered by what had occurred, went to the site straight away and made sketches of the corpses by the light of a lantern.

This monumental painting by the Spanish Old Master is an example of the realistic bold technique used by him throughout his career. It is because of his original approach to painting he is often referred to as the ‘father of Modern Art’. Even though Goya mainly uses big, bold brush strokes it does not detract from the attention to detail, especially seen in the horrified faces of those facing execution, their expressions expertly dealt with in a way only an experienced portrait painter such as Goya could. He was the son of a master guild, Goya was first appointed painter to the King in 1786 and was raised to rank of

Court painter in 1789, finally he was appointed as First Court Painter in 1799 where he remained during the succeeding reigns until he resigned in 1826, two years before his death in 1828. Goya first represented this scene in a series of several etchings entitled “Los Desastres de la Guerra” (The Disasters of War) and in some smaller paintings before this final immense work in oil.

The style in which the figures are handled in “The 3<sup>rd</sup> of May” is similar to that of some of his first commissions as court painter as the faces have an almost cartoon element. Goya had a skill of capturing wider moral meaning in the faces of people, this often made his earlier ‘traditional’ portraits of the monarchy slightly unconventional. The city of Madrid is only suggested behind the hill with the buildings outlined in a loose and vague manner. After Goya became ill and lost his hearing completely his style evolved to be bolder and freer and often darker and more sinister and sometimes even caricature-esque. As shown in this work and in others, he often painted haunting satires depicting the flaws of humanity. In Goya’s “2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of May” paintings he painted war and its consequences with an amount of realism never before witnessed and with this paintings ability to depict the horror of the events Goya became one of the pioneers of the expressionist movement. It is because of this and his other revolutionary works that he earned the title of the first modernist, however this is somewhat limiting as Goya was a painter of great mystery and suspense.

The tragic importance of the events depicted in the painting are highlighted because they are set against a dark, barren hill beneath a heavy night sky. A huge lantern on the ground, in-between the executioners and their victims, provides the only light source. This lantern casts an eerie light across the faces of the heroic victims, highlighting their tortured expressions. It also accentuates the vivid brightness of the white shirt worn by a kneeling figure with arms outstretched in courageous defeat. This figures posture is mirrored with haunting consequence by the position of the corpse, sprawled across the ground, in front of him. The figure in the white shirt is very much the focal point of the painting as it is the only point at which the colour tones are drastically varied, throughout the rest of the painting the colours are muted and similar in their dark and gloomy nature. This figure has a kind of effervescent glow that almost has angelic, religious connotations. There is a sense of the inevitability of death with the group facing the executioners arranged in positions that give a sense of them cascading downwards towards the ever growing heap of corpses in the left of the painting. The crowd of cowering bodies with their fearful postures and expressions is contrasted to the harsh, impersonal, uniformed and military line of soldiers facing them. These dramatic qualities help depict the horrific atmosphere of the scene.

Goya had a talent of finding universally relevant and timeless meanings in specific events, in this work Goya is showing the consequence of war and the atrocities that occur during times of war. This painting is both subjective – in recording an event of historical importance, and objective – in showing Goya’s own strong personal feelings with its empathy for the anonymous victims and its celebration of their heroism. As this work shows the extreme patriotism of a number of Spanish people the painting itself communicates a sense of patriotism and respect for the Spanish people repressed by the

French during the War of Independence. It is a symbol of the defence of liberty by the Spanish people and so a work of immense importance both at the time it was painted and in present circumstances.

This painting and its counterpart “The 2<sup>nd</sup> of May” were painted in 1814 after the re-establishment of the Spanish throne, to ‘*celebrate the heroism of the people of Madrid*’. At the time Goya was under investigation with regards to his behaviour during the French Occupation, namely on account of his controversial ‘*Mayas*’ (fashionable young women.) However Goya offered to paint the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> of May paintings and so was retained as first painter to the new court. These paintings are therefore commissions of the Regency Council governing Spain.

After Goya’s completion of the two paintings they were put on the Arch of Triumph that was built in honour of King Ferdinand VII’s return to Madrid. This painting was, and still is, looked upon as Spain’s greatest symbol of independence. Currently it is on display in the same hall as its counterpart in the Museo del Prado in Madrid and serves as one of the most powerful and harrowing anti-war statements made by an artist.