GOYA'S CREATIVENESS

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New York is fortunate in the quantity and above all the quality of Goya’s work that can be seen in the Hispanic Society, the Frick Collection, and the Metropolitan Museum. This Museum alone has over half a dozen of his paintings, over fifty bister and India ink drawings, and most of his prints in fine and early impressions. Out of this wealth of work he emerges as one of the giants who shaped modern art.

Among all the characteristics that make Goya extraordinary, nothing is more peculiar than his way of reverting to traditional formulas and repeating his own inventions during the very years when he was discovering a direction for the art of the next century.

His swinging between tradition and discovery may partly be due to his early training—or, rather, lack of training. Unlike almost every other great artist, Goya did not grow up in the thick of intense artistic activity, nor does he seem to have had more than a sketchy and peripatetic instruction in his craft. While he learned a great deal from paintings, he learned little from painters. Indeed, he seems even to have disliked their company, to judge by the few portraits that he made of painters, in contrast to the many that he made of architects, actors, and bullfighters. As a result of his isolation, Goya acquired no settled procedure in painting but primed his canvases now lighter, now darker; from paint to color, now troweled it on with a knife.

In drawing, after he outgrew his amateurish beginnings in India ink, he found a clear path through the example of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, who died in Madrid when Goya was twenty-four. The great fresco-painter’s handling of bister wash must have shown Goya how to get a similar breadth and translucence, not only with inks, but also with red chalk. The Venetian’s prints showed Goya how to etch in areas of tone made up of straggling horizontals—a manner to which Goya always remained faithful even when he added aquatint to make his etchings still more like wash drawings.

By way of parenthesis, it is curious to observe that Goya’s position toward painting and etching was the opposite of Rembrandt’s. Rembrandt was thoroughly trained in painting by growing up in the midst of a consistent and sound practice, which he gradually developed into his intensely personal late style. In etching, which he took up as simple drawing on copper, he experimented with daring variety until he perfected almost every known technical device.

Goya’s scanty training might have prevented even so extraordinary a man from growing into one of the world’s great artists if he had not become stone deaf shortly before he was fifty. The ensuing year of prostration, during which his convivial and conversational nature had to accept the solitude of soundlessness, apparently led him to reconsider his whole career. When he felt strong enough to venture into the world again, he sent to the Academy, “for the criticism of the profession,” some small paintings that show “a fantasy and invention for which there is no play in commissioned works.” This was the beginning of those masterpieces of the imagination that made Goya a force in history.

The shutting of his ears sharpened his eyes to an almost unheard of alertness. He claimed that a good painter should be able to observe a man falling off a roof so distinctly that he could go home and draw him correctly, and he made good his word by etching bulls in cavortings that seemed untrue until photography proved him right. During his last thirty years of deafness the sign language that he taught to his intimates forced him to scrutinize hands until he was able to draw them from memory as expressively as any artist who ever lived.

The eye that could stop a bullfighter vaulting on a pole was just as prompt and complete
in evoking visions out of the invisible. As a deaf man who could “hear” strangers only through letters, he could never be without ink and a pad. This constantly invited his graphic stream of consciousness to flow onto paper in drawing that became as natural as writing. Years of practice enabled so much of his visions to survive in sketches that one flash of action sufficed to compose a whole picture. Thus a drawing like the Museum’s Three Men Digging needed only the shifting of a leg or two and the substitution of a hammer for a mattock to become the Frick Collection’s magnificent painting of The Forge. It is curious that while Goya’s manner of drawing resembles Tiepolo’s, their purposes could not have been more different. Tiepolo drew to feel his way, bit by bit, toward commissioned paintings; Goya, on the contrary, seems to have
The Forge, by Goya. Reproduced through the courtesy of the Frick Collection, New York
left no studies of parts of pictures like hands or drapery: he drew as a man with live ears might talk, to unburden his mind. Once a picture had flashed through his imagination onto the paper, he not only found nothing to correct but seems to have been unable to change, so that he repeated the Majas on the Balcony in canvases that hardly differ. Thus it is that the artist whose inventions have power to haunt us still, sometimes repeated compositions with less change than most itinerant hacks.

The similarity of many of Goya's portraits probably has another cause. To invent a fresh scheme for each of the hundreds of portraits that provided the main income of his maturity would have wasted effort to no purpose, since most sitters want a likeness, not a composition. So Goya painted Spanish sovereigns in the attitudes and with the attributes that Velazquez had used for their ancestors. For most of his other portraits he took over the half- or three-quarter-length schemes that Raphael Mengs had made fashionable in Madrid when Goya was there in his twenties, and the eyes of all his sitters, like those of Mengs, look out of the canvas with the same insistent beadiness.

Could it be that the portraits also served another purpose of frequent return to a home base of tradition? It is certain that when Goya, as a prodigy of seventy-nine, was inventing nothing less than the modern lithograph, he wrote that he was painting miniatures on ivory "with more of the brushwork of Velazquez than of Mengs." It is not thinkable that he, like some men who never went to college, overvalued the benefits of formal schooling, but his lack of training may well have made him feel that he must hold ever faster to something of the past as he journeyed farther and farther into regions that he was the first to explore.
Majas on a Balcony, by Goya. This painting came to the Museum as a bequest from Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer in 1929. A detail is reproduced in color on the cover.