

GoyasWarCSUArtMuseum2015TextTVs

Goya's War: Los Desastres de la Guerra

by Tim Van Schmidt

It was as quiet as a church at the Colorado State University Art Museum as a companion and I arrived to see the new exhibit featuring Spanish painter Francisco Goya y Lucientes's etching series, "Los Desastres de la Guerra." But there was nothing sacred or quiet about what was depicted in the art.

Killing. Torture. Famine. Rape. Depravity. Greed. Disgust. Sorrow. Horror.

All of these things were in full supply in these pieces of art created in the early 1800s, when Spanish rulers abdicated and left their country torn apart by the French. During a six-year period, the people of Spain, and specifically the people of Goya's hometown of Madrid, were drowned in blood and misery, if the artworks tell an accurate story of the time.

Goya did not publish these images at the time, or even during the rest of his life. It is easy to see why because while the work aims at expressing the hardships of these years of Spanish disaster, it is shocking and revolting. While the artist obviously labored over the images and succeeded in communicating a sorrowful meaningfulness with each one, they were not meant to be placed on the marketplace. There was a deeper, much more personal reason these were made- perhaps to purge the fear and loathing actually living in such an environment would create.

These images come from a different time than our own, when such images were rare. In fact, pictures of any kind were relatively rare, but especially ones such these- scavengers pulling the clothes off of dead bodies; men being chopped in half; women defending themselves against brutal rapists; corpses decorated with signs explaining why they were executed; well-dressed citizens standing next to those dying of starvation.

In our world, we are used to horrible images. We even seek them out as entertainment. And they are everywhere- in magazines and newspapers, on the Internet and our TV screens. Because of this, perhaps some modern viewers might not be bothered by Goya's art. But Goya was not trying to create entertainment and his expression of the horror that men inflict on other men was not meant to be titillating. That these pieces were shelved, unpublished until some 35 years after the artist's death, helps explain their dark power.

I did not exit the museum glad I had been able to experience great art. These images are disturbing and even damage the soul. They do not elicit excited chatter or bring forth glowing inspiration. Instead, they creep around in the dark corners of the human heart where the horrible things human beings are capable of breathe heavily, stinking. I imagine that if Goya heard this he would sadly nod, knowing that his work had succeeded.

This isn't to say that the exhibit is not worth seeing. But after viewing this collection do not expect to go out into the bright Colorado sunshine to continue your day as usual. These images deepen the shadows and call out with a weak voice that all that is human is not well- and it is still not well some two centuries later.