Contents

Introduction 9

I Secularization and the Aesthetics of Belief 15

II A Promise of Happiness? 55

III Goya, Modernity, Aesthetic Critique 89

IV The Limits of Representation 137

V Conflicts of the Faculties: Goya and Kant 187

VI Extremities 229

VII Freedom and the Face of Darkness 269

VIII Beauty and Sympathy 301

Acknowledgments 329

Notes 331

Index 357

Image Credits 368
Introduction

My subject in this book is the relationship between the enormous, extraordinary, and sometimes baffling body of Francisco de Goya’s work and the interconnected issues of modernity, Enlightenment, and critique. This is admittedly a very large topic, but my hope in considering it is that it might help shed some light both on some of the difficulties that Goya’s work presents and on the paradoxes of Spanish modernity while establishing that Goya was dedicated throughout his career to the making of art in the service of critique. As for the apparent inconsistencies within Goya’s work and its relationship to Enlightened modernity, consider, for example, the fact that *Los desastres de la guerra* (*Disasters of War*) seem to presage the truth-telling function of modern photojournalism, while Spain is often cast as retrograde and reactionary when it comes to a model of modernity that hinges on Enlightenment values. Goya’s so-called “Black Paintings” are often thought to represent fearless journeys into regions of the psyche that were charted only much later, by figures such as Ludwig Kirchner and Edvard Munch. The influence of the Black Paintings on the history of modern art is a subject often commented upon by art historians. And yet Goya’s portraits of aristocrats are elegantly sedate and mostly conformist, while his colorful and light-filled tapestry “cartoons” seem to portray the leisure activities of a society too happy to be troubled by even the most disturbing domestic and international events.
I take exception to the standard view that relies predominantly on Goya’s darkest images to establish his relevance for modernity, and I suggest instead that his work invites us to consider the critical role of art with respect to the modern social and historical worlds, worlds of which it is nonetheless a part. For one thing, the standard views are not altogether coherent, either about Goya or about modernity in art more generally: with respect to Goya, they locate the truth function of art sometimes in a figural literalism (for example, of the Disasters of War) and sometimes in fantastical realism (for example, of the Black Paintings), and then with respect to modern art more generally, they simply flatten the curve of these contradictions by telling a story of the eclipse of figuration by abstraction. Yet these very contradictions are among some of the difficulties that the corpus of Goya’s work seems to embrace, rather than resolve. They hardly do justice to Goya’s oeuvre as a whole, where the inconsistencies are manifest. Indeed, we do well to reckon with the gulf that seems to divide the Disasters of War and the Black Paintings, on the one hand, from Goya’s scenes of bourgeois life or from the well-mannered portraits of aristocrats, military men, and intellectuals, on the other. What I want to suggest here is that these apparent contradictions themselves offer us the gateway into a vision of the critical function of art within the framework of a modernity that many tend to associate with the dominant Enlightenment values of Germany, England, and France. Call it a vision of aesthetics as critique, one that both identifies itself with and distances itself from what we regard all too broadly and uniformly as “the Enlightenment.”

What is “critique”? To the work of criticism, critique adds a self-conscious dimension that incorporates reflection on history, on tradition, on the underlying accepted categories and conditions of knowledge and belief, as well as on the medium through which these are represented. The chapters that follow are meant to illuminate Goya’s adherence to this project — a project carried out, perhaps needless to say, within the nondiscursive field of visual art. This affords an alternative to the standard readings of Goya’s work, many
of which acknowledge the explicit social criticism evident in certain parts of it (for example, the Caprichos), but that have little to say about those parts of his work that are not explicitly engaged in the work of social criticism. Indeed, the field of social relations is but one of many with which Goya’s project of critique is engaged. In order to convey the diversity of those engagements and to capture Goya’s relentless pursuit of the project of critique, the chapters that follow focus on a number of the different fields with which Goya’s work is critically engaged: religion and its antitheses (in secularism, on the one hand, and superstition, on the other); society (taking into account the valuation of happiness as associated with the nascent bourgeoisie, as well as the self-deception that social relations can enable); the individual (taking into account the role of portraiture as the form of art in which the dignity of the subject was made canonical, beginning in the Renaissance); history (including the representation of large-scale forces, such as revolution); and the psyche (interpreting questions of desire in the Black Paintings and the depictions of violence and the drive toward death in the bullfight images).

Much of this involves an account of Goya’s critical relationship to conventions that had become well established in the visual arts for rendering a truthful likeness of the world. I argue that Goya came relatively early in his career to reflect on the means by which any view of the world, including any view of art as creating a faithful image of the world, is constructed and sustained—“invented,” rather than “natural”—and invented in ways that are often concealed by the very conventions that enable it. That recognition, I argue in Chapter 2, was underpinned by a process of secularization that was nonetheless incomplete. It was a process that enabled the creation of images of the world by the use of rational visual perspectives as a means of organizing space (the convention known as “artificial perspective”), but it did not root out all the possible irrational causes of fear, anxiety, and violence that continued to haunt the world. It was also, as Goya makes plain, a wholly artificial process with no inherent claims to truth, albeit one that was made to appear as if it were wholly natural.
There is no doubt that this questioning of the established conventions of secular art — its reliance on the artifice of perspective and certain other elements of scenic composition — is a crucial element in Goya’s relationship to modern art. But there is at least one important difference, at least between Goya’s work and what is often regarded as the achievement of “high” modern (that is, modernist) art, which is to say, the art that begins roughly with Manet and continues through Cézanne and the avant-gardes all the way to abstract expressionism. This is the gradual, but systematic elimination of figuration, leading to a kind of art that eventually was not “about” anything in the world at all, other than itself and its component elements — for example, color, shape, flatness. Goya’s work may sometimes appear to be “subjectless.” There are images whose subject matter would be hard to name, and there are others where Goya’s involvement in the medium of art (paint, in particular) seems to overwhelm whatever subject the work may be “about.” And yet Goya rarely ceases to engage a particular subject of some kind. His relationship to whatever art may be “about,” its subject, matters for the execution of the work of critique. But it may be misleading to say that Goya’s works are simply “about” the subjects they depict. In the case of Goya, that “aboutness” is hardly a passive relationship; the truth is that his works inevitably have an active, critical relationship to the things they might seem simply to be “about.”

There is a parallel relationship between Goya’s works and the routes of explanation that have conventionally been invoked in order to explain it. The differences between various segments of Goya’s work are sometimes explained by appeal to a number of external factors, all of them in fact quite common in the accounts that are given of the works of many artists. His career as a professional artist in relationship to various official recognitions and commissions is one such factor; his personal history, including his amorous entanglements and his illnesses, is another; national politics is yet another; the state of Spanish society is another; international politics, war, and large-scale historical movements are further factors. All these factors and
more have an undeniable bearing on Goya’s work. My argument here, however, is that they do not fully explain the work and that to say so is to think centripetally, to move conceptually in interpretation away from the work itself. Rather, I argue that while Goya’s work is manifestly involved with all the things that might seem to explain it, the work is engaged in an active, critical response to the very things that might be thought of as explaining it. In doing so, it unsettles the conventions on which art criticism and history tend to rely.

Still, one may wonder about the conditions that made such a project possible. How and why was it that Goya was in a position to undertake such a project of critique? Recognizing that there can be no complete answer to this question, I would nonetheless hazard a response that has some basis in the facts and that is borne out in relation to a number of the images to which I refer in the chapters to follow. This has to do with Spain’s position in relation to the rest of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Goya saw the attractiveness of the “enlightened” cultures of France, England, and Germany, just as he saw the severe limitations of traditional Spanish society and of the Spanish past. But at the same time, he could see — and forcefully showed in the executions in *The Third of May, 1808*, for example — that the Enlightenment could bring its own forms of barbarism. The ethical ideals of Kant and Hegel epitomize the attractions of enlightened thinking and serve as foils to Goya’s work at various points in the chapters that follow. Goya’s position was one of distance both from the superstitions and backwardness of the Spanish past and from the promises offered by Enlightenment culture. It seems quite plausible that the project of critique that runs throughout his work was informed by the need to maintain a distance from both these alternatives.
Index

Unless otherwise noted, all works of art are by Francisco de Goya.

“Aboutness,” 12, 120–23.
Abstraction, 10, 24, 89, 96, 97.
Addison, Joseph, 331–32 n.2.
Adoration of the Name of God by the Angels (1772), 37, 39; Tomlinson on, 37, 333 n.19.
Adorno, Theodor W.: Aesthetic Theory, 98; Dialectic of Enlightenment, 110, 126, 277–78, 292, 293, 353 n.44; on freedom, 293.
Aesthetics: as critique, 10; Enlightenment principles, 60; of Kant, 213, 243, 331; neoclassical, 307–309; picturesque, 307; of the sublime, 213, 232–33, 243, 261.
Agility and Audacity of Juanito Apiñani in the Ring at Madrid (Tauromaquia, no. 20, 1816), 121, 123, 355 n.22.
Alba, Duquesa de, 393, 336 n.31.
Albañil borracho, El (The Drunken Mason, 1786), 338 nn.44–45.
Albañil herido, El (The Injured Mason, 1786–87), 338 nn.44–45.
Alberti, Leon Battista: De puctura, 66; historia, 67; orientation toward nature, 67–68; painter as god, 340 n.3; theory of artificial perspective, 18, 27, 50, 66–67, 68, 138, 154.
Alciati, Andrea, 157.
Alfonso V, King, of Aragón, 32, 42–44.
Allegory of the Adoption of the Constitution of 1812, 271.
Alpers, Svetlana, 30.
Altamira, Count, portrait of, 57.
Altarpieces, 46, 47–44, 191, 327.
Anamorphosis: in ceiling frescoes of San Antonio, 47, 51, 282; defined, 46; in Goya’s Italian sketches, 47, 48–49.
Another Madness of His in the Same Ring (Tauromaquia, no. 19, 1816), 122.
Anthony of Padua. See Miracle of St. Anthony; San Antonio de la Florida church.
Aquatint, 46, 85, 88, 150–51. See also Etchings.
Aragón Canal, 44, 314.
Aristotle, 345 n.27.
Art as critique, 68, 107, 301–304. See also Critique.
Art criticism, 13.
Artificial perspective: Alberti’s theory of, 27, 50, 66–67, 68, 154; conventions built on measure, 253; exaggeration of, 206–207, 284; Kubovy on, 18; and the limits of representation, 198–99, 140, 144, 177; and “naturalness,” 18, 67–68; radical foreshortening, 206–207; and secular art, 11–12; and use of color, 149–50. See also Alberti, Leon Battista; Perspective.
Asmoea (1820–23), 294, 296–99, 297, 303
Asmodeus, 297.
Atropos, or the Fates (1820–23), 276, 294–96, 295
Attack on a Coach (1793), 76.
Aula Del paintings, 32, 35–36; Betrothal of the Virgin (1774), 35, 36, 47.
Autonomous art and decorative art, 36.
INDEX

BANDERILLAS IN THE COUNTRYSIDE (1793), 118, 119.

Bank of San Carlos, 145, 315.

Baroque illusionism, 17, 21, 26.

Barthes, Roland, studium, 64.

Basilica of the Virgen del Pilar (Zaragoza), 32, 37; Adoration of the Name of God by the Angels (1772), 37, 39, 333 n.19; Mary, Queen of Martyrs (1786–81), 37–39, 38.

Bataille, Georges, 107, 126.

Baxandall, Michael, 30.

Bayeu, Francisco, 15, 39.

Bayeu, Ramón, 30, 39, 65.


Beckett, Samuel, 237; Waiting for Godot, 244.

Beethoven, Ludwig van, 269–70, 348 n.2.

Beholder, presence of the, 31–32, 35, 332 n.15.

Bell, David A., 262–63.

Bentham, Jeremy, 311.

Bermúdez, Juan Agustín Ceán, 231, 335 n.20.

Bernardino of Siena, 32, 34, 42–44.

Betancourt, Agustín de, 320.

Betrothal of the Virgin (1774), 35, 47; detail, 36.


Black Paintings (1809–24): affinities with expressionist art, 9, 288; Asmodea, 294, 296–99, 297, 303; Atropos, or the Fates, 276, 294–96, 295; beauty and dignity in, 303–304; and Bulls of Bordeaux, 123–24; contradiction in, 298–99; creation and placement at Quinta del Sordo, 269, 274, 282–83; darkness of, 35–36, 152, 193, 269–70, 271, 275–76; Duel with Cudgels, 81, 82, 283–86, 289, 296; engagement with myth, 276–77, 290–91, 294–96; and Enlightenment culture, 188, 279–81; Goya’s state of mind, 269–70, 274, 276–77, 331 n.28; imagination and reality in, 10, 232; interpretation and critical commentary, 274–79, 284, 298, 349 nn.8,12, 351 nn.28,30; Leocadia, 271, 272, 303–304, 320; number of, 348 n.1; Pilgrimage to San Isidro, 267, 268–209, 271, 283, 286–87, 293; political interpretation, 274–75, 284, 291, 298; as projections, 288–90; as reflection on freedom, 286–88, 284, 287, 293–96; relationship to earlier works, 81, 124, 282–83; renunciation of decorative function of art, 282, 351 n.28; self-reflection in, 282, 303; Semisunken Dog, 100–102, 101, 237, 258, 280; size and scale, 287–89, 291; titles of, 294, 351 n.32; Two Old Ones Eating Soup, 285, 285. See also Saturn Devouring His Son.

Blind Man’s Buff (1788), 68, 69, 81, 284, 285.

Bonaparte, Joseph, 216.

Bonaparte, Napoleon, 105, 291, 315.

Borbón, Infante Don Luis de, family portrait, 114.


Bort, Julián Sánchez, 314.

Boy Riding a Ram (1786–87), 81, 83, 337 n.43.

Boys Picking Fruit (1786–87), 84, 85.

Bozal, Valeriano, 17, 65, 332 n.2, 335 n.16, 349 n.8, 352 n.36.

Bravo de Rivero, Tadeo, 216.

Brugada, Antonio de, 348 n.1.

"Brujas disfrazadas en fiestas comunes” (1796–97), 325, 326.

Brunelleschi, Filippo, 340 n.3.

Bryson, Norman, 68, 286, 335 n.19; Vision and Painting, 18, 335 n.19.

Buck-Morss, Susan, 351 n.33; “profane illumination,” 283.

Bullfight, Suerte de Varas (1824), 116, 117.

Bullfight images, 11, 74, 79, 90, 116–26, 355 n.22. See also Bulls of Bordeaux; Tauromaquia series.

Bulls of Bordeaux (1824–25), 119; connection with Black Paintings, 123–24; no. 11, Andalusian Dance, 124; no. 12, Modern Duel, 124; no. 14, “El famouso American, Mariano Ceballos,” 124; no. 16, “Diversión de España,” 124, 125; no. 18, Bullfight, 124.


Burial of the Sardine (1812–19), 223, 224.

Burke, Edmund, 213, 259, 347 n.22; Dehesa’s translation, 312, 323; Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 258, 312, 347 n.18.

Butler, Judith, 346 n.7.

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INDEX

CABARRÚS, FRANCISCO, 35–16.
Cadalso, José, Noches lúgubres, 276.
Cádiz constitution of 1812, 214.
Calasso, Roberto, 25; Tiepolo Pink, 26–27.
Callot, Jacques, Les misères et les malheurs de cabarrús, francisco, 315–16.
Cano y Olmedilla, Juan de la Cruz, 77.
Caprichos, 138.
Carracci, Annibale: Dead Christ, 70–51, 51;
Goya on, 50–51.
Castel Sant’Angelo, 298.
Castro y Velasco, Antonio Palomino, 328.
Cervantes, Miguel de, 350 n.20.
Cerdá y Rico, Francisco, 263.
Cervantes, Miguel de, 328 n.20.
Charles III, King, 314, 328; and his family, 304, 305, 320.
Charles IV, King, 57, 314, 328; and his family, 304, 305, 320.
Charterhouse of the Carthusian Monks (Aula Dei), 32, 35–36; 305, 306.
Christ Crucified (1780), 40, 41, 333 n.23.
Churriguera, José Benito de, 23.
Ciofalo, John J., 328.
Civil society, 70, 75, 199, 212, 315.
Clausewitz, Carl von, On War, 50.
Clavijo y Fajardo, 332 n.2.
Connell, Evan, 298.

Citations. See under Caprichos; Disasters of War.
Caravaggio, Michelangelo Merisi da, Supper at Emmaus, 50.
Carderera, Valentín, 348 n.1.
Carracci, Annibale: Dead Christ, 50–51, 315.
Goya on, 50–51.

Cители, 70, 75, 199, 212, 315.
Cervantes, Miguel de, 328 n.20.
Charles III, King, 314, 328; and his family, 304, 305, 320.
Charterhouse of the Carthusian Monks (Aula Dei), 32, 35–36; Betrothol of the Virgin (1734), 35, 36, 47.
Christ Crucified (1780), 40, 41, 333 n.23.
Churriguera, José Benito de, 23.
Ciofalo, John J., 328.
City on a Rock (prev. attrib. Goya), 797.
Civil society, 70, 75, 199, 312, 315.
Clausewitz, Carl von, On War, 287.
Clavijo y Fajardo, El pensador, 332 n.2.
Colonialism and race, 77.
Colosus (attrib. Goya), 201, 203. See also “Gran coloro dorado.”
Connell, Evan, 298.

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Constitutional government, 271; constitution of 1812, 214; constitution of 1820, 271.
Courbet, Gustave, 52; Burial at Ornans, 32.
Covarrubias, Sebastián de, Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española, 33.

DANCE ON THE BANKS OF THE MANZANARES (1777), 60, 62, 70.
Dante Alighieri, Inferno, 298, 352–53 n.38.
Daring of Martincho in the Ring at Zaragoza, 298, 352–53 n.38.
Dante Alighieri, Infierno, 316.
Darting of Martincho in the Ring at Zaragoza, The (Tauromaquia), no. 18, 1816), 121, 123.
Darkness: in Caprichos, 31, 55, 172–85, 178; in Daring of Martincho in the Ring at Zaragoza, The (Tauromaquia), no. 28, ”No se puede saber por qué,” 248; no. 30, ”No se convienen,” 264; no. 31, ”Lo merecía,” 253, 257; no. 32, ”Y no hai remedio,” 128; no. 17, ”No se convienen,” 264; no. 24, ”Aún podrán servir,” 253, 257; no. 26, ”No se puede mirar,” 268–269, 209; no. 27, ”Caridad,” 253, 255; no. 28, ”Papelacho,” 244, 246, 248, 253; no. 29, ”Lo merecía,” 264, 265; no. 30, ”Estragos de la guerra,” 253, 254; no. 31, 263; no. 34, ”No se puede saber por qué,” 84, 248; no. 36, ”Tampoco,” 233, 234; no 37, 263; no. 39, ”Grande hazanita. Con muertos,” 244, 245, 263; no. 42, ”Todo va revuelto,” 248, 252; no. 43, ”Tambien esto,” 248; no. 44, ”Yo lo vi,” 126, 129; no. 63, ”Muertos recogidos,” 244, 247; no. 69, ”Nada. Ello dira,” 264, 267; no. 71, ”Contra el bien general,” 264, 266, 315; no. 74, ”¡Esto es lo peor!” 233, 238, 264.
”Disinhibition,” 140–44, 162.
Disparates, Los, 123, 140, 146, 193, 304; The Simplicent (1815–19), 84, 87.
Dogs and Hunting Equipment (1775), 56.
Dragging the Bull Away (El arrastre, 1793), 116.
Duel with Cudgels (ca. 1820–23), 81, 82, 283–86, 287, 296.
Dürer, Albrecht, Melancholia I and Saint Jerome, 102.

EDUCATION, 162–64, 173, 322, 336 n.31.
El Greco, 44.
Elkins, James, 341 n.23.

INDEX

Enlightenment: aesthetics, 60; “black box” notion, 151–53, 155, 173, 229; and the Black Paintings, 188, 279–81; and Caprichos, 131, 144, 173, 187, 211; complexities and contradictions, 188–89, 205; critique of religion, 190–91, 197, 220; “diacritical of” (Horkheimer and Adorno), 110, 277–78; ethics and morality, 207–11, 216, 217, 227, 240–41; failed promises, 236; and the French Revolution, 221, 237; and Goya’s critique, 10, 13, 110–14, 187, 213, 226, 237; and Hegel’s critique of, 112, 134, 311; and history, 203, 213–14; Kant’s thought, 139, 152–53, 197, 212–13, 220, 311; and myth, 277, 278; and reason, 152, 173, 187, 199, 213, 229; and representation, 200; and Spanish backwardness, 9, 13, 112, 162–69; thinkers, 200, 223, 336 n.31; values of good breeding and learning, 114.

Ensemble painting, 52, 67, 264.

Etchings: process of, 88, 282; after Velásquez, 42, 146–50, 333 n.22. See also Caprichos; Disasters of War; Tauromaquia series.

Ethics: and affect, 240; Aristotelian sense, 345 n.27; in art versus philosophy, 240–41; bourgeois, 221; in Goya’s works, 203, 205, 226, 227–28; issue of responsibility, 237–40; Kant on, 200, 205, 208, 210–12, 241; and morality, 207–11, 217–20, 241; photography and, 235; of postmodernism, 344 n.29; and representation, 200; of the spectator, 205, 233, 236, 240–41.

Fajardo, Saavedra, 351 n.30.

Famine of 1811–12, 100, 235, 236.

Feelings, 214, 215, 242. See also Sympathy.

Feijóo, Father Jerónimo, Teatro crítico universal, 357–77.


Ferrari, Enrique Lafuente, 120.

Fight at the New Inn (1777), 59, 59, 74–75, 316 n.27.

Figuration, 10, 17, 89–90, 97–98, 105, 107.


Flatness, 12, 42, 46, 50, 57, 333 n.24.


Flying Witches, 40.

Fragonard, Jean-Honoré, 55.


Francis Borgia, St., 44. See also St. Francis Borgia at the Deathbed of an Impenitent (1788).

Freedom, 280–81, 284, 287, 322.

French occupation, 105, 216–17, 236. See also Disasters of War; French Revolution; Napoleonic wars; Second of May, 1808; The Third of May, 1808.


Frescoes. See San Antonio frescoes; Miracle of Saint Anthony; Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista.

Freud, Sigmund, 193.

Fried, Michael, 32, 332 n.15.

Game of Horse and Rider, The (1791–93), 84, 86.

Garcini y Queralt, Ignacio, 355 n.21; portrait of, 317–20, 318.

Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos at his Desk (1798), 114, 115, 320.

Genealogy, 169.

Giaquinto, Corrado, 333 n.19.

Glenedenning, Nigel, 342 n.27.

Godoy, Manuel, 105.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, Werther, 320, 322.

Gombrich, Ernst, Art and Illusion, 68, 335 n.19.

Gontarski, Stan, 278.

Goya, Francisco de: career as artist, 15, 40, 145; commissions, 15, 19, 40, 57, 60, 145, 216; darkening view of the world, 15, 269–74, 351 n.28; deafness and illness, 269–70, 348 n.2, 349 n.3; early years, 15; exile in Bordeaux, 100, 271; on “invention” in art, 16, 46, 68, 331 n.1; as painter to the king and court painter, 30–31, 56–57, 216; political stance, 65, 124, 271; prestige and appointments, 145; project of critique, 10–11, 112, 116, 128–29, 135, 145, 226, 230, 296, 301–303; relationship to modern art, 9–10, 12, 52–53, 68, 277; sources of inspiration, 68–70. See also Goya, Francisco de, works.
INDEX

Goya, Francisco de, works: bullfight images, 11, 24, 79, 90, 116–26, 355 n.22; contradictions in, 10, 124, 197, 203, 298–99; ethical force of, 203–205, 226, 227–28; folk customs and festivals, 205–206, 344 n.24, 344 n.25; historical paintings, 102–107, 109–112, 236; images of violence, 126–28, 209–10, 232; Italian sketchbook, 15, 47, 48; light and dark in, 31, 42–44, 55, 84, 110, 114–16, 172–73, 185, 253, 339 n.5; negation in, 102, 107, 116, 126; relationship to external factors, 12–13, 124; religious painting, 17–23, 32–35, 42, 53; scenes of bourgeois life, 10; self-incorporation in, 44, 314; self-reflection in, 131, 282; standard views of, 10, 12; still lifes, 98–100, 99; subjectless, 12. See also Black Paintings; Caprichos; Disasters of War; Portraits; Self-portraits; San Antonio frescoes; Tapestry cartoons; Tauromaquia series; and titles of specific works.


Gran coloso (formerly attrib., 1808–12), 298.

“Gran coloso dormido” (1824–28), 202, 203, 227.


Guevara, Luis Vélez de, El diablo cojuelo, 297.

Hannibal Crossing the Alps (ca. 1770), 47, 48, 49.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 11, 213, 345 nn.29–30; “beautiful soul,” 320, 356 n.24; critique of Enlightenment, 112, 114, 311; on freedom, 281, 293, 349 n.12, 351 n.26; on utility, 311–12.


Hetzer, Theodor, 64.

Highwaymen Attacking a Coach (Asalto de la diligencia, 1786–87), 75.

History, 200, 203, 217–18, 301.

Hogarth, William, 114.

Horkheimer, Max, 230; Dialectic of Enlightenment, 126, 273, 293, 353 n.44.

Houasse, Miguel Ange, 332 n.2.


Human savagery, 75, 81, 126, 337 n.31. See also Disasters of War.
INDEX

Las Meninas (Goya after Velázquez, ca. 1778–85), 146, 147, 149. See also Velázquez, Diego: Las Meninas.


Leocadia, La (1819–23), 271, 272, 303–304, 320.

Licht, Fred: on the Black Paintings, 276, 350 n.20; on Disasters of War, 231–32; on religious art, 191; on the San Antonio frescoes, 21, 192; on the tapestry cartoons, 57–58.

Light, 31, 42–44, 55, 84, 114–16; of reason, 152, 173, 229; in Tiepolo’s works, 27–30; and truth, 110, 172, 226.

Lithography, 351 n.27.

Luzán, Ignacio de, Poética, 307–309.

Luzán, José, 15.

Madhouse, the, 304.

Madrid, 15; Allegory of the City of Madrid (1810), 214, 215, 216–17; bullfighting images of, 24, 121, 123, 355 n.27; celebration of, 206–207; famine year, 100, 173, 236; riots, 59, 105; San Antonio de la Florida church, 23; San Francisco el Grande church, 32, 34, 40, 42–44; Tiepolo’s Royal Palace frescoes, 27, 28–29, 30–31. See also Caprichos; Quinta del Sordo; San Antonio frescoes; Tapestry cartoons.


Majos and majas, 24, 51, 59.


Manet, Édouard: Absinthe Drinker (1859), 135, 320; Asparagus (1880), 98, 99, 107; The Bullfight (1864), 116–19; Dead Toreador (ca. 1864), 99–95, 91, 92, 96–97, 98; Execution of Emperor Maximilian (1868–69), 107–10, 108; The Fifer (1866), 94, 95; Incident in a Bullfight (ca. 1864), 90–93, 91, 92, 96, 97, 97, 116; and modernism, 95, 96–97, 107, 126; Philosopher, 115, 320, 322; portraits of lone individuals, 95; on Tiepolo, 31, 322 n.13.

Marqués, Manuela B. Mena, 77, 354 n.6.

Martínez y Pérez, Sebastián, 221, 270; portrait of, 113, 114.

Mary, Queen of Martyrs (1780–81), 37–39, 38.

Material support, 37, 52, 338 n.44; canvas, 47, 46, 52.

Meadow of San Isidro (1788), 205–207, 221, 283, 286–87, 331 n.1; detail, 205.

Medicine, 325–27; El médico (1799), 325.

Mena, Luis de, Castas o escenas de mestizaje, 77.

Mengs, Antón Raphael, 15, 336 n.23.

Mercier, Louis-Sébastien, 110–12.


Miracle of St. Anthony (1798), 19–21; ana-morphosis, 46–47, 51, 282; architectural element of railing, 24, 25, 26, 31, 35; details, 22, 25; as ensemble painting, 51–52, 67; figures, 24, 44, 51–52; landscape and sky, 24–26, 36; perspective and composition, 31, 36–37, 51, 192; presaging of modernism, 52–53; presentation to painting’s beholder, 31–32; secular imagery, 23–26, 46, 192; and Tiepolo’s throne room ceiling, 30. See also San Antonio frescoes.

“Mirroring effect” (Ortega y Gasset), 65.

Modernism, 52–53, 95–96; and Goya’s work, 12, 52–53, 98–100, 226, 227; Greenberg on, 95, 333 n.24; Manet and, 95, 96–97, 98, 107; as move from figuration toward abstraction, 12, 89, 97–98, 107. See also Abstraction.

Modernity, 10, 138–39.

Monnet, Charles, 155.

Moral beauty, 314, 320–22.

Morality: and ethics, 207–211, 217–20, 244; and sympathy, 313, 328.

Moratín, Leandro Fernández de, 64, 221; Carta histórica sobre el origen y progresos de las fiestas de toros en España, 119–20; El sí de las niñas, 337 n.36.

Muller, Priscilla, 288, 290, 298; Goya’s ‘Black’ Paintings, 278–79, 350 n.20.

Munch, Edvard, 9.

Murat, Joachim, 105.

Murillo, Bartolomé Esteban, 49, 333 n.23.

Myth, 276–78, 290–93, 294–96.
INDEX

NAPOLEON, 105, 291, 315.
Napoleonic wars, 233, 262, 291. See also Disasters of War; Second of May, 1808, The (1814); Third of May, 1808, The (1814).
National painting (Spain), 331 n.1.
Negation, 98, 102, 109, 116, 126.
Nordström, Folke, 276.
oedipus, 294.
Optics, 46, 66, 288, 340 n.10. See also Perspective.
Ortega y Gasset, José, on the “mirroring effect,” 65.
Osuna, Duke and Duchess of, 42; portrait of, 57, 114.
pacheco, francisco, 40.
Palomino, Antonio, Museo pictórico, 44–46, 47, 66.
Parasol, The (1777), 55, 70, 70.
Pardo Palace, 56, 60, 334 n.4.
Pascal, Blaise, 191.
Paulson, Ronald, 274, 319 n.5.
Pelele, El (The Straw Manikin, 1791), 337 n.44, 337–38 n.45.
Pérez de Castro, Evaristo, 221.
Perspective: Albertian, 18, 27, 50, 66–67, 68, 118, 154; altered for curved surfaces, 46–47, 51; disruption of, by Manet, 95; eighteenth-century conventions, 16–17; oblique, in Last Supper, 47–50; in Palomino’s Museo pictórico, 46, 47; in religious paintings, 23, 31, 32, 37, 47–51; as secular, 31; as a window, 154, 341 n.23. See also Artificial perspective.
Phantasmagoria, 288–90.
Philip IV, King, 335 n.21.
Philippines Company, 335.
Philosophy, 199–200.
Photography, Sontag on, 235, 346 n.7.
Photojournalism, 126, 212–32, 233.
Picasso, Pablo: Guernica, 52, 268; Massacre in Korea (1951), 107, 109.
Picnic on the Banks of the Manzanares, 70, 73, 336 n.26.
Picturesque naturalism, 17, 18, 71, 397, 332 n.2.
Pliny the Elder, Historia naturalis, 67–68.
Plotinus, 322.
Politics, 12, 235–36, 274–75, 284, 291, 298, 301, 349 n.12.
Portraits: of aristocrats, 9, 10, 57, 114–16; for the Bank of San Carlos, 145; of Bartolomé Sureda y Miserol, 314, 317–23, 319; of Brigadier Ignacio Garcini y Queralt, 377–78, 378; The Count of Floridablanca (1783), 44–46, 45, 314; of the Duquesa de Alba, 303; family of Charles IV, 304, 305; family of Infante Don Luis de Borbón, 114; Ferdinand VII, 114, 216–17, 304, 306; Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos at his Desk (1798), 114, 115, 320; group, 114; of intellectuals, 10, 112–14, 221; King Joseph 1, 316; of the royal family, 146; Sebastián Martínez y Pérez (1792), 113, 114; ugliness in, 304. Postmodernism, 117, 345 n.29.
Potter Seller, The (1799), 71–73, 72.
Projection, 151, 288–90, 341 n.17.
QUEVEDO, FRANCISCO DE, Sueños, 155.
Quinta del Sordo, 55, 81, 188, 269, 270, 281, 286. See also Black Paintings; Witches’ Sabbath, The.
RAPE OF EUROPA, THE (1772), 336 n.22.
Reason: Enlightenment and, 152, 173, 187, 199, 213, 229; light of, 152, 173, 203, 229; limits of, 244–48. See also under Kant, Immanuel.
Religious painting: aesthetic conventions, 55; architectural elements, 35; Licht on, 191; neoclassical formalism in, 17, 18, 35; presence of the beholder, 31–31, 35; salvation, 192–93; visual effects required by the supernatural, 31–31, 40. See also Crucified Christ; Miracle of St. Anthony; San Antonio frescoes; Secular art.
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, 44, 68.
Renaissance pictorial tradition, 200, 229.
Representation: conventions of artificial per-
INDEX

Spective in, 138–39, 144–45, 146; Heidegger
on, 137–38; reliance on fram-
ing, 200; 229; and truth, 146, 162, 172, 229–30,
231; use of radical foreshortening, 206–207.
Ribera, Jusepe de: Crucifixion
Ricci, Sebastiano: Saint Anthony of Padua Heal-
ing a Young Man, 192; San Gaetano Comfort-
ing a Moribund Sinner, 192.
Robert, Étienne-Gaspard, 290, 351–52 n.35.
Rococo painting, 192, 333 n.19, 344 n.24.
Rosenberg, Jakob, 231.
Rothe, Hans, 23–24.
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 75, 336 n.31; invoca-
tion of humble people, 206, 344 n.24;
Philosophie, 155; sympathy, 221, 223.
Royal Academy of Fine Arts (San Fernando):
Goya’s address to, 16, 336 n.31; Goya’s
admission to, 40, 46, 50; Goya’s
director-
ship of, 145.
Royal Company of the Philippines, 315.
Royal Palace (Madrid), Tiepolo’s throne
Royal Tapestry Works (Santa Bárbara), 30,
55, 66, 67, 87–88, 334 n.1. See also Tapestry
 cartoons.
Rubens, Peter Paul, 68, 335 n.21.

SACRIFICE, 159, 292, 353 n.44.
St. Francis Borgia at the Deathbed of an Impe-
tent (1788), 191, 194, 373; preliminary
sketch, 191, 195.
Salvation, 192–93, 197, 217, 221.
San Antonio de la Florida church (Madrid):
construction of, 23; fresco ceiling, 19, 20,
30, 56, 66–67; as ordinary people’s place
of worship, 23. See also Miracle of St. Anthony;
San Antonio frescoes.
San Antonio frescoes, 19–23, 25, 27, 35–37, 40,
44, 47, 89, 192, 145, 282, 289, 332; com-
mission, 19; miracle scene, 19, 21–23. See also
Miracle of St. Anthony.
San Francisco el Grande church (Madrid):
altarpiece commission, 40, 42–44; Sermon
of Saint Bernardino of Siena (1781–83), 32, 34.
Santa Bárbara Royal Tapestry Factory, 30, 56,
66, 67, 87–88, 334 n.3. See also Tapestry
 cartoons.
Santiáñez, Nil, 263.
Saturnalia, 291–93.
Saturn Devouring His Son (1820–23), 271, 273,
274–75, 276, 283, 290–91, 335 n.21, 351 n.28;
and the myth of Saturn, 291–93, 336 n.22;
political interpretation, 275, 349 n.12.
Sebastián Martínez y Pérez (1792), 113, 114.
Second of May, 1808, The (1814), 102–107, 103,
124, 126, 261; detail, 106.
Second of May uprisings, 102, 105, 216.
Secular art, 17–18, 31; Alberti and, 67;
See-Saw, The (1780), 84.
Self-consciousness, 18, 114, 128, 134, 137, 203,
221, 226; and self-incorporation, 44.
Self-portraits, 44, 334; “Francisco Goya y Luci-
entes, Pintor” (1797–98), 131, 132, 134–35, 154,
189, 373, 376; Self Portrait at an Easel (1790–
95), 129–31, 130, 146, 226, 372; Self-Portrait
with Dr. Arrieta (1829), 323–25, 324, 327–28.
Self-reflection, 95–96, 102, 107, 111, 226, 282.
Semisunken Dog (ca. 1820–23), 100–101, 101, 227,
258, 280.
Seneca, Lucius Annaeus, 292.
Sermon of Saint Bernardino of Siena (1781–83),
32, 34.
Sessions of the Junta of the Royal Company of the
Philippines (ca. 1815), 315–17, 316.
Shaftesbury (Lord Ashley), 312–13, 323.
Siebers, Tobin, 344 n.18.
Sleep, 172–73.
Sloterdijk, Peter, 119.
Smith, Pamela H., 71.
Sobradiel, Count of, 39. See also Burial
of Christ.
Social criticism, 11, 16, 75, 77, 134, 145, 157,
162–69, 285.
Social relations, 11, 64, 81, 144, 162, 173, 291, 301.
Sontag, Susan: on photography, 235, 346 n.7;
Regarding the Pain of Others, 233–35.
Spanish Golden Age painters, 40–42.
Starobinski, Jean, 79.
Still Life of a Lamb’s Head and Flanks (1806–12),
98, 100, 102.
Still life painting, 98–100, 340 n.10.
Stiltwalkers, The (1797–92), 79, 80.
Studium (Barthes), 64.
Subjectivity, 119, 221, 334 n.29.
Sueños, no. 27, "Brujas disfrazadas en físicos comunes" (1796–97), 325, 326.
Superstition, 11, 40, 123, 153, 325; and Enlightenment thought, 13, 112, 152, 187, 191, 197, 199, 226, 221, 279; portrayed in Caprichos, 134, 144, 173, 221; and ugliness in the Black Paintings, 304.
Sureda y Miserol, Bartolomé, portrait of, 319, 320–23.
Swing, The (1779), 60, 61.

Tapestry cartoons, 15–16; anticipation of, 337 n.44; and the Black Paintings, 81, 282, 283–84, 291; and conventional visual principles, 64–65; creation of tapestries, 56, 65–66, 87–88; critical work, 58, 61–65, 76–79; darkness and tension in, 55, 66, 153; early, schematic works, 56; images of children, 81–83, 83; images of human aggression, 81, 124, 244; images of hunting, 81; as images of Spanish life, 9, 55, 58–61, 199, 334 n.2; influences, 64–65, 334 n.2; as invention, 331 n.1; modernity of, 65; as narratives, 35, 61, 70–71, 73–74; naturalism, 17, 18, 68–71, 107; normative view of world, 17, 58–59, 63; payment for, 56; placement of, 35, 56, 60, 334 n.4,9; rediscovery of, 56; royal patronage, 55, 56–57, 58; tree, 24–26; two periods of, 55, 64. See also Tapestry cartoons, by title.
Tapestry cartoons, by title: La acerolera (1788), 334 n.4; La Ball Game, 60; Blind Man’s Buff (1788), 68, 69, 81, 284, 285; Boy Riding a Ram (1786–89), 81, 83, 337 n.43; Boys Picking Fruit (1778), 84; Boys with Masts (1786–87), 84, 85; Dance on the Banks of the Manzanares (1777), 60, 62, 70; Dogs and Hunting Equipment (1775), 56; Fight at the New Inn (1777), 59, 59, 74–75, 336 n.27; Las floreadas a la Primavera, 334 n.9; The Game of Horse and Rider (1791–92), 84, 85; Hunt with Birdcall (1775), 56, 57; Jugadores de naipes (The Card Players, 1777–78), 336 n.29; El médico (1799), 325; The Paraiso (1777), 55, 70, 70; El Pelele, 337 n.44, 337–38 n.45; Picnic on the Banks of the Manzanares, 76, 73, 336 n.26; The Pottery Seller (1799), 71–73, 72; The Stiltwalkers (1797–92), 79, 80; The Swing (1779), 60, 61; Two Cats Fighting (1786), 81, 82; The Wedding (1791–92), 75–77, 76, 149, 337 n.34.

Taucroamaquia series (1816), 109–20; affinities with Caprichos and Disparates, 123; no. 14, “El diestrisimo estudiante de Falces,” 355 n.22; no. 18, The Daring of Martincho in the Ring at Zaragoza, 121, 123; no. 19, Another Madness of His in the Same Ring, 122; no. 20, The Agility and Audacity of Juanito Apiniani in the Ring at Madrid, 121, 123, 355 n.22; no. 21, “Desgracias acaecidas en el tendido de la plaza de Madrid,” 355 n.22; no. 38, The Death of Pepe Hilo, 123; Unpublished print ‘A’ (1814–15), 122, 123.
Taylor, Charles, 293, 349 n.12, 350 n.17.
Tiepolo, Domenico, 332 n.9.
Todorov, Tzvetan, 188.
Tomlinson, Janis: on Aula Dei paintings, 332 n.15; on bullfighting images, 110, 339 n.10; on frescoes for the Basilica of...
INDEX

the Virgen del Pilar (Zaragoza), 37, 39, 333 n.19; on invention in Goya, 333 n.1; on San Francisco el Grande altarpiece, 44, 333 n.26; on the tapestry cartoons, 79, 332 n.16, 334 nn.1–2, 4, 9, 337 n.34.

Torture, 236–37, 248, 304.

Truth, 31, 214–16, 229, 302, 304; and light, 110, 172, 216; and myth, 296; and role of art, 16, 230–31. See also Truth Rescued by Time, Witnessed by History.

Truth Rescued by Time, Witnessed by History (1812), 203, 204, 214–16, 217, 291; preliminary sketch, 217, 218.

Two Cats Fighting (1786), 81, 82.

Two Old Ones Eating Soup (1823), 285, 285.

uccello, paolo, 77.

Ugliness, 75, 77, 159, 162–64, 244, 304–307, 372.

Utility, 311–14.

Utopia, 296–97, 299; false, 302.

VARGAS ORIGEL, DR. ARTURO, 349 n.3.


Ventas del Espíritu Santo, 74.


Villabriga, Maria Teresa de, 114.

Vita activa and vita contemplativa, 320.

WAR: GOYA’S VISION OF, 231, 261–68; images of, 235, 268; response to, 301; total, 262–63; violence of, 235, 248–53. See also Disasters of War; Napoleonic wars.

Watteau, Antoine, 35.

Wedding, The (1791–92), 76; architectural elements in, 75; arranged marriage, 76–77, 337 n.34; composition and perspective, 75; as narrative of colonialism and race, 77; as social critique, 75.

Weiss, Leocadia, 271.

Whitebook, Joel, 292–93, 353 n.44.

Wilson-Bareau, Juliet, 120.

Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, 263–64.

Witches’ Sabbath, The (1797–98), 221, 221, 222, 290, 299.

Witchy Brew, The, 292.

Wittkower, Margot and Rudolf, Born under Saturn, 276.

Yard with Lunatics (ca. 1794), 193, 196, 197.

Young, Edward, Night Thoughts, 276.

ZAPATER, MARTÍN, letters to, 206, 270, 344 n.25.

Zaragoza: bullring, 121, 123; religious works, 32–40.

Zurbarán, Francisco de, 40.