

# Goya's Cycles

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## Sequences of images, like Goya's *Los Caprichos*, offer broader possibilities of expressing ideas and emotions than a singular composition

Francisco Goya (1746–1828), the ingenious Spanish painter and printmaker, outstripped the times he was shaped in by weaving together the ideology and means of artistic expression of three epochs: the Baroque, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism. Goya's work inspired several generations of artists belonging to different, sometimes opposing artistic movements in the 19th and 20th centuries – impressionists no less than symbolists, expressionists, and surrealists. One of the most intriguing aspects is in his numerous series and cycles, in both painting and graphic work, attesting that Goya found sequences

of images to offer greater possibilities of expressing ideas and emotions than a singular composition. The type of series called *capricci*, a set of variations on a single thematic motif, was particularly important in the origin of Goya's cyclical imagery.

### Goya's caprices

The concept of "caprice" arose in literature and the visual arts in Italy in the early 17th century, referring to artistic expressions characterized by full freedom of invention, by rich, unfettered imagination. Graphic *capricci* became the antithesis of conventionally constructed cycles of images based on the dramaturgical development of action, finishing with a moralizing conclusion. Goya adopted a formal trait that was typical of caprices – eschewing a storyline-based flow of narration in favor of variant treatment of recurring motifs.

This innovative formula of cyclical depiction manifested itself in fullest form in Goya's cycle of 80 etchings entitled *Los Caprichos* (1797–1799), his first work executed



National Museum in Kraków

Goya's print "A woman and a horse, let someone else master them - The Horse Abductor" is one of the works in the cycle *Los Proverbios* (Proverbs)



solely for the sake of artistic self-fulfillment. In it the artist imparted an original shape to ideas then being voiced by Spanish intellectuals, attempting to transplant the reformist ideology of the Enlightenment to the economically impoverished and politically destabilized Spanish monarchy of Charles IV. Goya's artistic genius enabled the force of *Los Caprichos* to overcome the barriers of history, to enter the realm of universal truths about human existence, to transform the cognitive objectivism characteristic of the Enlightenment age into a subjective artistic vision. The multi-layer symbolism of the cycle is an inherent part of its seemingly incoherent structure, consisting of three parts each of different poetics.

The first part is characterized by a realistic-caricature style of depiction, expressing critical observations of the social realities of Spain under Charles IV. The second part evidences a shift towards allegorical symbolism: animalistic representations of human shortcomings in a series of scenes featuring a donkey personifying moral self-degradation prefigure the poetics of phantasmagoria that seize control of the third part of the cycle. Here, inspection of reality is supplanted by dreamy visions replete with Satanist rituals. The prints in the final part of the cycle paraphrase and parody the motifs appearing in the first two parts. The play of associations between the particular links in the chain rouse the viewer's interpretative abilities. Semantic allegories and inversions and the antithetic juxtaposing of motifs broaden the range of associations. Because of the chosen means of expression the sequence of images does not lose coherence, it does not break apart into diverse thematic groups and individual episodes. By introducing a kind of meta-commentary into the third part of the work, the artist metaphorically conveys the essence of the evil fundamentally inherent in human existence. The grotesque tragi-farce depicted here reinforces the satirical force of the whole work. The structure of *Los Caprichos* is demarcated by the dichotomy of heightened awareness vs. dreamy sleep, intellect vs. instinct.

### The sleep of reason

The cycle opens with a self-portrait of Goya serving as a frontispiece; in the artist's cynical facial expression the viewer can sense the moralist observer's cool detachment from the absurdities of everyday reality. The artist appears again, this time sleeping, in the most famous print entitled "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" (*Capricho 43*), which opens the third part of the cycle. Adopting the convention of sleep enabled Goya to express views that were then subject to censorship. Imaginary imagery from this black-magic domain allowed the artist – under the guise of a typical Enlightenment-age condemnation of primitive superstitions – to denounce intellectual obscurantism and the mechanisms of power, both in late-18th-century Spain and among humanity at large. The cyclical form



"One unfond of you will speak ill of you even in jest - Loyalty"

which Goya introduced was of deeper epistemological significance, reflecting the artist's conviction about the impossibility of expressing the multiplicity and diversity of modern man's reflections within a single work of art exhibiting a coherent composition.

### Disasters of War

Goya employed a similar means of depiction in his cycle *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (1810 – ca. 1820) about the civil uprising for national liberation in Napoleon-conquered Spain. His repetition of motifs, depicted from a different angle in each case, conveys the fixated recurrence of appalling images in the mind of a survivor of the ordeal of war. Variant rendering of the scenes intensify the horror of the events, reinforcing the work's accusatory tone. Both sudden shifts of topic and the obsessive penetration of certain motifs serve to create an episodic vision of war; they reflect the chaos and randomness of events and express the impressions of one who has witnessed fighting and repression and is horrified at boundless suffering. Because of how the cycle is composed, one does not perceive it as a war chronicle but rather as a paraphrase of war, conveying the quintessence of human experience in the face of war crimes. Running in irregular sequences, the images of *Los Desastres de la Guerra* bear testimony to the cognitive limits of modern man – unable, on the basis of fragmentary experiences, to describe the surrounding reality in any complete and exhaustive way.

The formula of cyclical depiction developed by Goya was eagerly adopted by the symbolists in the late 19th century. The loose narrative structure was at the same time subjected to a hierarchical ordering harking back to the triptych or polyptych forms, an ordering that intensified the metaphorical connections between the particular elements in the cycle, reflecting the complex nature of a symbolist work of art. ■

#### Further reading:

- Francisco Goya y Lucientes. (2003). *Los Caprichos. Cycle of 18 Prints from the Collections of the Płock Scientific Society*. Catalog from an exhibition of the Lublin Museum. Lublin: Płock Scientific Society. [In Polish].  
Kossowska I. (1999). *Goya or Grotgter. Two Cycles Devoted to War*. [In:] *Art and Politics*. Ames-Lewis F., Paszkiewicz P. (Ed.). Warsaw.