

1984



Plate 1      The sleep of reason produces monsters

## FRANCISCO GOYA

### The 'Caprichos'

A first edition set of 72 etchings with aquatint,  
from the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Auckland City Art Gallery  
20 July — 19 August 1984

(The 'Caprichos' will be followed by an exhibition of Goya's  
Disasters of War series, 22 August — 19 September)

BIB 186051

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## The 'Caprichos'

The **Caprichos** is the first of Goya's four great print series which also comprise the **Disasters of War**, the **Tauromaquia** and the **Proverbios**.

Masterpieces of invention and etching technique, the 72 **Caprichos** plates are unrivalled in the history of graphic art for their philosophical depth and satirical power.

The theme of the **Caprichos** is the censure of human sin and folly. Under a proof of the title plate, 'The sleep of reason produces monsters', Goya inscribed in ink the series' *raison d'être*: "The author dreaming. His one intention is to banish harmful beliefs commonly held and with this work of **Caprichos** to perpetuate the solid testimony of truth."

The series is a catalogue of human vice and weakness and a savage indictment of Goya's fellow countrymen. But it is also a universal statement or "universal language" as Goya called it. The satire of the **Caprichos** remains valid so long as there is ignorance, superstition, stupidity, servility, discrimination, deceit, greed, lust and cruelty in the world. Human nature hasn't changed since Goya's time. The difference is that the society he lived in was conditioned by its history to the most intransigent forms of religion, class and custom.

Throughout the series the viewer is reminded of the dialectic of reason and unreason, truth and ignorance, by the skilful interplay of light and shade. Aquatint, a tonal etching technique then recently invented, is superbly exploited to create an imposing black setting to this theatre of the absurd and, by means of strong chiaroscuro modelling, give life and substance to its characters.

Across these dark plates parades a cross-section of Spanish society and a grotesque company of old hags, warlocks, witches, cadaverous ghouls, demons, goblins, monsters and wildeyed creatures of the night that give physical expression to the brutalising and sinister effects of evil and irrational thought.

The Church, the Inquisition and superstition are pilloried in about a quarter of the 72 plates. The unprepossessing conduct of monks and clerics, the abuse of spiritual power, the contrivance of false miracles, the corruption of rational thought, and the economic burden of the Church and monasteries on an impoverished populace, are targets of repeated broadsides. Another dozen plates are devoted to the hereditary aristocracy and the faulty upbringing and education of children. The remainder are primarily satires on sexual mores and the pitfalls of unbridled passion. These include parodies of prostitution, arranged marriages, sexual-social intrigue, blind love, sexual gluttony and rape.

When Goya first advertised the series in a Madrid newspaper he took pains to disclaim any intention "to mock the particular faults of one or another individual... each painting selects from the universal that which it deems most fitting to its ends (and) unites in a single fantastic person, circumstances and characters which nature presents distributed among many..." Hence the description 'Caprices',

although the word implies a levity that is inappropriate to their black mood. 'Fantasies' is perhaps a better translation, although 'grotesques' would be more descriptive.

In spite of Goya's published disclaimer, a number of public figures including Queen Maria-Luisa, her lover Manuel Godoy and even Goya's erstwhile lover, the Duchess of Alba, are clearly recognisable. Elsewhere Goya prudently uses the device of the fabulist and disguises the personalities he ridicules as dumb animals or supernatural creatures. In six of the plates humans are represented as asses and donkeys. Plate 42, 'Thou who canst not' (the first phrase of the Spanish proverb, 'Thou who canst not, lift me on thy shoulders') portrays two servile peasants ridden by donkeys (representing the idle aristocracy and Church) in a telling reversal of roles.

The world of the *Caprichos* is a topsy-turvy one of inverted values. When irrational thought and superstition displace reason, the sensible order of things is turned on its head, as in plate 26, where chairs sit on the heads of two scatterbrained women. In those plates that employ the imagery of witchcraft and sorcery, objects and beings seem to float about bereft of reason and physical laws.

To understand the *Caprichos* it is important to know something about Goya's personal life and Spanish society in the closing years of the 18th century. Goya etched the *Caprichos* in the short space of a year and a half, between 1797 and 1798. They were published in 1799 when he was 53 and at the height of his career. He was Painter to the King, the highest position any Spanish artist could aspire to, and Honorary Director of the Academy of San Fernando, the leading fine arts academy in the country. He held a virtual monopoly on the royal tapestry factory and had already completed more than sixty cartoons for large tapestry designs, mainly on idyllic pastoral themes. He was in great demand as a painter of private and official portraits. So, what provoked this unheralded satire of his fellow citizens from all walks of life — from the monarchy to the whore in the street?

There can be little doubt that Goya's outlook on life was dramatically changed by two personal crises — a severe illness in 1792 which left him temporarily paralysed, blind and permanently deaf, and a love affair with the Duchess of Alba that concluded bitterly. These experiences were perhaps the catalysts for this cathartic outburst of satirical censure. But the real substance of Goya's unredeemed pessimism and cynical detachment must be found in the society that formed his attitudes.

Spain in the late 18th century was still feudal. A large peasant class supported the dead weight of an idle nobility and clergy who paid no taxes. The economy was mismanaged and there was widespread poverty and unemployment. The social consequence was a plague of prostitution and brigandry. The Spanish court was riddled with corruption and intrigue. Charles IV was an ill-informed, disinterested and ineffectual monarch. At the time Goya etched the *Caprichos*, Queen Maria-Luisa's lover, Godoy, whom she had appointed Prime Minister, held the real power. But in erecting a semi-dictatorial system and appointing his friends to all the important positions he alienated most sectors of the public. The Inquisition was still an active force, cruelly suppressing liberal dissent. The populace was suspicious of change and hidebound by outmoded traditions. The ideas of the

Enlightenment that were in force in Europe and America were dogged in Spain by superstition and obstinate ignorance.

In an effort to liberate Spain from its medieval past and encourage social reform, a progressive circle of Spanish intellectuals and writers waged a literary campaign to promote the ideas of the Enlightenment. But their efforts were denounced by a reactionary Church that regarded them as subversive, and viewed with suspicion by a xenophobic populace who saw the new ideas as an insidious imposition of French ways and a threat to national identity.

Although not an intellectual, Goya moved in intellectual circles and counted amongst his friends many literary personalities who by means of periodicals, manuscript journals, satirical plays, poems and fables, endeavoured to spread the new ideology to the Spanish people. The *Caprichos* were Goya's contribution to this campaign against the reactionary forces of Black Spain and the Inquisition.

In response to the threat of the Inquisition, the tense sardonic epithets that underscore the *Caprichos* frequently complicate rather than clarify the images, which themselves are veiled with ambiguities and hidden meanings. As a further precaution Goya put the *Caprichos* on sale in a perfume and liquor shop beneath his house, instead of the customary bookshop. Even so, two days later, he withdrew them after they were reported to the Inquisition.

Ironically, it was probably due to the intervention of Godoy, whom Goya satirised in several of the plates, that the *Caprichos* were saved from the Inquisition. Godoy, who in his role of Secretary of State was also Protector of the Academy of Fine Arts, apparently persuaded Goya to gift the plates and 240 printed sets of the *Caprichos* to the royal print collection, the Real Calcografia, thereby ensuring their immunity. It is unlikely the king ever got to see them, which is just as well since he would hardly have approved. Ironically, much of the paper that the *Caprichos* were printed on was unwittingly paid for by the king, who was duped into thinking that Goya needed it for working drawings for a royal fresco commission.

Andrew Bogle  
Curator of Foreign Art

Goya's draft advertisement for the *Caprichos* was for a series of 72 plates. He subsequently added another 8 subjects and changed the sequence of the plates. When first advertised in 1799 the series comprised 80 plates, the standard form by which the series is known. Adelaide's set of the *Caprichos* comprises 72 plates, as the title page describes, in the order Goya originally intended. As such it appears to be an extremely rare, complete pre-edition set conforming to the artist's original plan for the series.

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