

Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), *The Third of May 1808, 1814*



Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

Key facts:

Artist: Goya

Date: 1814

Medium: oil on canvas

Dimensions: 268 x 347 cm

Location: Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain (P000749)

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: On 2nd May 1808 Napoleon's lieutenant-general, Murat, marched on Madrid with a contingent of special mercenary forces, the mamelukes of North Africa. Because the leaders had fled and things were left in disarray there was no-one to give orders to the Spanish army. The people rose up against the invaders. Goya was living in the Puerta del Sol at that time, close to where the uprising took place, so he may well have witnessed it. In his painting of the events of 2nd May Goya celebrates the bravery of his fellow citizens, but focuses on the violence.



Francisco de Goya, *2nd May 1808 (The Fight against the Mamelukes)*, 1814, oil on canvas, 268.5 x 347.5 cm. Collection Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain (P000748). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

From the Royal Palace General Murat, Napoleon's brother-in-law, ordered the detention and execution of suspected participants in the uprising. The shootings went on all night long. This is the event depicted in *3rd May 1808*.

Composition: Goya shows the firing squad taking aim with their rifles. Seen from the back, they resemble a machine, a uniform row of faceless executioners in a diagonal line with their guns a strong horizontal drawing attention to the focal point of the man in the white shirt. On the ground in front of them is a pile of blood-stained bodies.

Each of the victims, clearly individualised, stumbles up the slope, facing an untimely death, alone. Their heads are bowed; some cover their faces; one shows intense fear in his eyes. Some appear bewildered, but there is also active defiance. Of the two men facing the bayonets, one is a praying monk – a victim, not a confessor – while the main focus is on a kneeling man in a white shirt and yellow breeches.

Light: The scene is lit up by an unusual cube-shaped lamp which casts strong shadows. The whites of the main figure's eyes contrast with his dark skin. Highlighted, he defiantly throws his arms in the air, a gesture reminiscent of a crucifixion, and his open palms bear the *stigmata*, the wounds of Christ. Goya commemorates the brave but futile 'glorious insurrection' as a martyrdom, not victory. It is night time and the sky is dark. This is a new kind of war art. Rather than celebrating military glory and victory over the enemy, it shows the heroism and sacrifice of the defeated.

Goya could have witnessed the executions on Príncipe Pío hill, visible from his home, and he owned a telescope. Details, such as the lamp, suggest the scene remained vivid in his mind when painting it six years later.

Colour: Goya used white lead paint to illuminate the lamp and the white shirt and yellow trousers of the central figure. The other earth colours are dark: browns, greys and ochres. The congealed blood is dark red.

Space and depth: The main figures occupy the foreground. Behind their silhouettes on the left rises a hill and beyond that in the distance to the right is what looks like an ecclesiastical building. A foreshortened dead man with arms outstretched on the ground whose pose mirrors the kneeling figure, is diagonal to the picture plane. There is recession in the line of people coming up the hill paralleled by the diagonal row of soldiers which recede. There is a large flat area of heavy blackness above the scene.

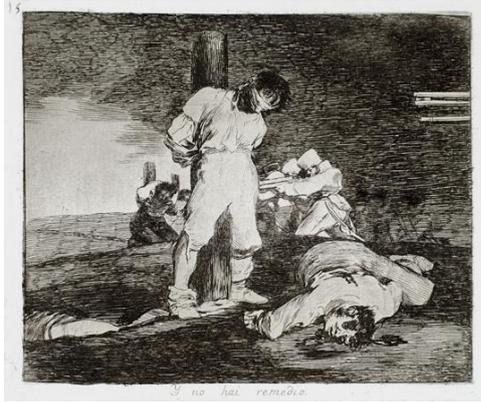
2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The artist: Goya was First Court Painter to Charles IV of Spain. He continued to work as court artist under Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte, who was made King of Spain. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo there was a short regency followed by the return of the new Spanish king Ferdinand VII.

In December 1807, with the help of Napoleon, Prince Ferdinand of Spain conspired against his parents, Charles IV and Maria Luisa, but the plot was discovered and Ferdinand was pardoned in exchange for betraying his collaborators.

Soon after, France began preparing the invasion of Spain. When the Spanish Court realised what was going on they fled to the Palace of Aranjuez, 30 miles from Madrid. On 17th March 1808 Ferdinand's supporters staged a popular uprising against the Prime Minister Manuel Godoy, the King's favourite, who had allied himself with Napoleon. He had given the French army free passage through Spain to conquer Portugal, which was an ally of England. Charles IV decided to abdicate in favour of his son, but Ferdinand did not remain king for long. In April Napoleon called him to Bayonne, on the French-Spanish border, where his family and Godoy were under arrest. He was forced to return the crown to his father, who passed it to Napoleon.

The war against Napoleon was the first *guerilla* war, in which the people had to defend themselves against the invaders. Scenes representing some truly horrific events were represented in graphic detail by Goya in a series of etchings called *Los desastres de la Guerra* - The Disasters of War.



Print number 15 from Goya's *Los desastres de la Guerra*

Francisco de Goya, Plate 15 from "The Disasters of War" (*Los Desastres de la Guerra*): 'And there is no help' (*Y no hai remedio*), 1810, etching, 14 x 16.7 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (32.62.17)

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, Goya petitioned the Spanish regent, Cardinal Luis de Borbon asking: "...to perpetuate, with a paintbrush, the most notable and heroic actions or scenes of our glorious uprising against the tyrant of Europe".

Goya chose to represent the first two days of what, in the UK, is called The Peninsular War, because it refers to Wellington's campaign against Napoleon in Spain. However, in Spain the war is known as The War of Independence.

3. MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Goya was a painter in oil on canvas. He used the paint quite loosely and his technique for painting textiles was virtuosic. He used large amounts of lead white in his work and this may have led to the illness that caused him to lose his hearing. He is known for his numerous drawings in various media and his engraved–etched series of prints in black and white.

4. WAYS THE PAINTING HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

In the past the painting has been seen as an example of patriotism and of the heroism and sacrifice of the Spanish people. More recently it has been viewed as a symbol of universal suffering in the face of military oppression. It has inspired many artists and continues to do so.

The 3rd May 1808 inspired Manet, who used it as a basis for the composition of his large oil painting *The Execution of Maximilian* in 1867. Pablo Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* was completed on 18th January 1951; it criticises United States intervention in the Korean War.



Left Edouard Manet, *The Execution of Maximilian*, circa. 1867-8, oil on canvas, 193 × 284 cm. Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery, London (NG3294)

Right Pablo Picasso, *Massacre in Korea*, Valauri, 18th January 1951, oil on canvas, 110 x 210 cm. Collection Musée Picasso, Paris (MP203). Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

Wendy Bird, *This is Goya*, London, 2015

Fred Licht, *Goya and the Modern Temper in Art*, New York, 1978

Sarah Symmons, *Goya*, London, 1998

Hugh Thomas, *Goya: The Third of May 1808*, London, 1972

Gwyn Williams, *Goya and the Impossible Revolution*, New York, 1976

Prado Museum, Madrid, *Goya en Tiempos de Guerra* (Goya in Times of War) exhibition catalogue, 15th April to 13th July 2008.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/later-europe-and-americas/enlightenment-revolution/a/goya-disasters-of-war>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/becoming-modern/romanticism/romanticism-in-spain/a/goya-third-of-may-1808>

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