‘If Walls could talk!’ – What we can learn from the first modern artist about the value of isolation to our ability to express ourselves.

Scroll down for relevant artworks.

A good while ago, in sun-soaked fields on the edge of Madrid, a crumbling old house that hadn’t been touched in half a century had itself a visitor. This house had belonged to Francisco Goya, who had been the most famous and important artist in Spain, and so this visitor’s discovery probably shocked him more than anyone had been shocked so far in the 19th century because as it turned out, the ghost of Francisco Goya was still there.

If you’re under the impression that I mean there was a wobbling man fluttering around you’ll probably find the rest of this article very confusing because the shock came not in the form of any supernatural thing but as paintings on the walls. Completely miserable paintings - wretched scenes of death and violence and ghoulish old men and women – they are very mysterious works of art as well because they’d been given no titles (the ones they have now are from art historians,) no explanation, and absolutely no one had heard anything about them, or had had any idea that they were even there. These fourteen lonely paintings had just sat there for fifty years facing the opposite wall. Because Goya was so important though they were cut from the walls and by 1878 they found themselves to be in the Prado museum in Madrid, (where they now most likely have very interesting walls, full of art, to busy themselves with,) and then they ended up being called ‘The Black Paintings’- and this doesn’t make them sound like a whole lot of fun, but I promise you that they are very.

Now you know a little about the paintings, I’ll tell you about the painter. So I said he was the most famous and important artist in Spain, but this wasn’t really the case when he made up the Black Paintings around 1819-23, towards the end of his life, because by this time Goya was already forgotten, having long since been alienated by the Spanish Royal court. While he was painting these Black Paintings he was living alone. Like a bear in a cave. (The cave being bluntly but not incorrectly called ‘the Deaf Man’s house,’ bought by Goya in February of 1819, which was 201 years and one month before we all hurried off home.) He hadn’t been having a very jolly time either, having lived through two illnesses which nearly killed him; then the Napoleonic wars which were miserable and bloody, and the reign of terror that followed which left him angered and embittered; then Historians speculate that by this time he’d suffered a loss of confidence, physical decline; and he had witnessed famine, poverty and cruelty; he was aged, deaf, and fearful of insanity. (And I think maybe we know the feeling…)

So he wasn’t in the best of spirits, but we mustn’t get ahead of ourselves; in order to understand the bear in the cave, we must first understand the official Court painter for Charles IV. Goya was a bit like Cinderella because despite his modest upbringing in the provinces of Aragon he spent the bulk of his life mingling around with Spain’s high society. His background, though, left him with a scornful distaste for the subjects of his portraits; Goya was absolutely unrivalled, he was brilliant, unpredictable, weird and wild but you must know this: he was famous for being brutally honest and savagely unforgiving in his portraiture. Charles IV and his family enjoyed flaunting their wealth and not letting the suffering of the Spanish people rain on their parade, and this left Goya rife with opportunity to criticise them. Many historians consider his portraits of Charles IV to be coyly satirical; for example, in one called ‘Charles IV and his family,’ he’s put the Queen in the centre, and the King off to the side, which is assumed to reflect the popular view of the time which was that this King was just a weakling, but the Queen was the one with the power, (off having affairs and illegitimate children as well – and they also appear in the painting.) You also see here his wickedly

unforgiving nature because frankly, they all look 'rather unsightly'. If he was a photographer, I'm sure they'd all have run up to look at the photograph and then when they saw it demand that he take another. (Unless they looked even worse in real life, which would have been truly unfortunate for them.)

But Goya wasn't finished. He made and sold eighty prints, called Los Caprichos. They made up a biting critique of contemporary Spanish society, using witches, demons and goblins as metaphors for ignorance, violence, and blind superstition, and then so as not to get in trouble for it Goya tried to conceal their overt political commentary with ambiguous titles. (This didn't work – he was reported to the Spanish inquisition.) Then, in response to the thoroughly horrific civil war he made a series of etchings, which were called the Disasters of War, which detailed such disasters: mutilated corpses hung from trees, cut off arms and legs - then on the third of May 1808 it got even worse because hundreds of brave Spanish freedom fighters were rounded up and massacred by the French. Their blood is said to have run down the streets of Spain. Goya was profoundly affected by this, and his famous painting, called the Third of May 1808, displays a proud soldier. His figure is very bright on the canvas, arms outstretched like Jesus Christ on the cross, about to be shot by faceless soldiers. This painting was kept hidden away for forty years by the Spanish government, most likely because the fury of it burned through the canvas and scalded their eyes and hands. So I'm sure after all this that it then comes as no surprise to you that after the fall of Napoleon in 1814, once Ferdinand VII had kicked and pinched his way onto the throne and had gone about commencing his reign as an absolute monarch, he found troublemaking Francisco Goya to be nothing but trouble. Ferdinand said to him, 'Goya, not only do you deserve death, but the Gallows! If I forgive you, it's because I admire you,' and Goya left enraged.

Now you know about the painter - onto the Black Paintings, and what was meant by them. We can't be sure, of course, what was really meant, if anything at all, because of the symbolically charged imagery, and distorted, exaggerated forms which contrast starkly the artistic conventions of the time. So anything goes, and this openness to personal interpretation is why Goya is sometimes referred to as the last Old Master and the first modern artist; before the 19th century when modern art came along, painting was a trade which you learned in an apprenticeship, (although Goya was largely self-taught), and not yet seen as an emotional outlet. The apprentice would simply be taught a set of conventions and an iconography with which he could incorporate symbolism into his paintings. Because of this, you could learn to understand hidden messages or meanings in art like you could learn a language - but if this is the case then the Black Paintings can only be described as gibberish! But despite this I think you can still confidently read into them heavy criticism of what was going on in Spain, and the first of the paintings of this critical nature that I want to write about is called 'The Dog.' The dog is drowning up to its neck in mud, doomed, but you can see that this dog is still looking faithfully, hopefully up at the sky, desperate to be rescued. This perhaps indicates a turn away from religion for Goya, because Spain was very Catholic and still is; perhaps he is suggesting that humanity's destiny isn't looked over by a God, or no benevolent one. Another, called 'Peasants fighting with cudgels,' reminds me a bit of what the front page of the Economist sometimes looks like. (I should know, because I don't get past it.) It shows us two peasants stuck in mud, beating each other with sticks, the problem being because they're stuck there, there's only one way for either one to survive: to kill the other.

My favourite one, and it's my favourite because I think it's the best one, is called Saturn devouring his son. It is almost certainly based on Roman mythology: the Titan, Saturn, was told by a prophet that one of his sons (it turned out to be Zeus) would grow up and overthrow him, and he was so put off by this that he ate them. (When I wrote this I said to my mum, 'are you sure I shouldn't say: his

children would live to be his downfall?' She said no, lots of parents think that.) Of all of Goya's work, I think this one is the most expressive, has the loosest brushwork, and it creates an unhinged impression similar to the work of Francis Bacon. (Francis Bacon was a 20th century painter famous for the violence and brutality of his paintings.) Then comparing Goya's depiction to one of the same story from two hundred years earlier by an artist called Peter Paul Rubens (this one is also in the Prado museum) there are several interesting differences. Rubens' 'son' is a plump little baby with soft fleshy skin. When you look at his angelic face, and how pink and vulnerable he is, the tearing of his flesh feels as sharp a sting as if it were ours bitten off, whereas Goya's 'son' is already a fully formed person, and already a corpse; his head is completely gone; we feel nothing for him; our sympathies lie instead with Saturn, who is crouched shamefully in the dark (unlike Rubens' Saturn, an evil-looking man with a face full of cold, cruel hatred) and here's the most interesting thing: Goya's Saturn's eyes show us fear. He's afraid. So what's he afraid of? His son, who he knows will ruin him? Or is he fearful of himself and his own monstrosity?

This last painting is something of a contradiction, an enigma. It's in a shade of millennial pink, with the phrase 'Live, laugh –' just kidding.

So I said these paintings are something of a mystery– they are, and there is a fair bit of disagreement about what Goya intended by them. Although many historians would most likely agree that these works are about Spain 'not doing very well', the peasants fighting with cudgels symbolic of Spain's civil war and Saturn being Spain miserably destroying itself, there is also this idea that the paintings reveal Goya in a state of crazed fury and devastation, that they are the innards of his brain splattered onto the walls of his house as evidence of some terrible explosion. Whether this is truly the case, however, is a point of contention. Manuela Mena, who is the Goya specialist at the Prado Museum, who 'knows him as well as anyone now living' doesn't agree with this interpretation: "all you hear about these pictures is how he was crazy, melancholic, pessimistic when he made them. But he was actually an optimist with a great sense of humour, very rational and very clear in his mind, right to the end of his life." So this isn't Goya flying off the rails; instead it's more of his relentless criticism of the Spanish monarchy, something as you know he did a lot of in a way that was often shocking. There's the idea that he deliberately made the Black Paintings so cryptic to attempt to soften the blow, so he wouldn't land himself in trouble. He'd tried to do this with Los Caprichos too. And, to be fair, I did just choose the most dramatic paintings to write about; the rest of them aren't nearly so morbid, some even seemingly quite comic, or humorous, mockeries of the state of affairs in Spain. For example, there's one of some skeletal men eating soup, one of them maybe the Grim Reaper; one of the Three Fates; one of a congregation of witches meeting with the devil, (and his use of supernatural characters before in Los Caprichos had been satirical); and there is even one of his young lover. I think it would be a bit rude to say that that one in particular was absolutely horrific. But then when you ponder Goya's work in its entirety, it raises the question of why they aren't just called the Slightly Grim and Depressing Paintings; the Black Paintings have a reputation for their feverish intensity, and their ability to haunt everyone who sees them. So what's it about them that does it?

I think it's this. (And this is the bit to pay the most attention to, if you've managed to get this far.) First, the mystery. We will never quite understand what they say; we could only know from Goya himself, who told not one soul about them. Finding such foreboding paintings left behind like a ghost sends our imagination off in a myriad of directions. Secondly, their being on the walls of his home, which there is something primitive about, I think, when you consider cave men who carefully pressed dust into the walls of their caves to form the shapes of cows, or the tendency of young children to grab their mother's lipstick and smudge it all over their parents' expensive wallpaper. The

walls, which form the house, put the paintings in the context of the very familiar and personal surrounding of a home environment, to the extent that when we peer into Goya's living room (or into the Prado museum) to see these paintings it's like peering into Goya' own soul. Then, finally, this: Goya painted the Black paintings in isolation exiled and forgotten, remember - he had no audience. This makes them very different from his previous work, and anything he could've come across in his lifetime, because before the 20th century painting was for looking at: in fancy houses, to impress guests, the backdrop of elaborate parties, or as frescoes in palaces or churches. Because of this, because we know the Black Paintings existed for no one other than Goya and the opposite wall, for whom there was no need for finery or for flattery, they become scenes of ruthless honesty. When you add to this what you know of Goya, the best painter in Spain, who spent his life getting human behaviour onto a canvas, and seeing the worst of it in the selfish rulers and in the horrors the Spanish citizens were sentenced to because of them – when you know all this, the Ghost of Francisco Goya becomes uncomfortably revealing, as though the skin of humanity has been peeled away for us to see its guts and bones.

What am I getting at then? What is it that we can learn from the first modern artist about human expression in isolation? It's this: that time in isolation gives us the unique opportunity to be entirely frank with ourselves. At home and like Goya in the middle of all kinds of commotion, we should remember not only the significance of art as a communicative tool, as Goya frequently used it, but also how its significance can be enhanced by the ability to be honest, and consequentially enables us to be truly expressive and personal. Up and down the country people are spending time creating art from home, and you too can join the unruly band of hermit painters; from elderly women dabbing birch trees onto bits of card to pupils in their virtual art lessons scribbling down mythical panthers and many-legged snakes. (I wonder what they use their legs for.) Art is the best emotional outlet we have, and we have no better time to make the most of it than now, when we have absolutely no obligation show anyone our sketchbooks because no one can get within two metres of them. So say, 'thank you, Francisco Goya,' and over the next six weeks, (although hopefully not completely in isolation,) do get on with your Hot Pink paintings, and we hopefully won't remember them as the most disturbing images in human history.

Charles IV and his Family

Disasters of War

Los Caprichos

3rd of May 1808

The Dog

Peasants fighting with cudgels

Saturn devouring his son (Goya)

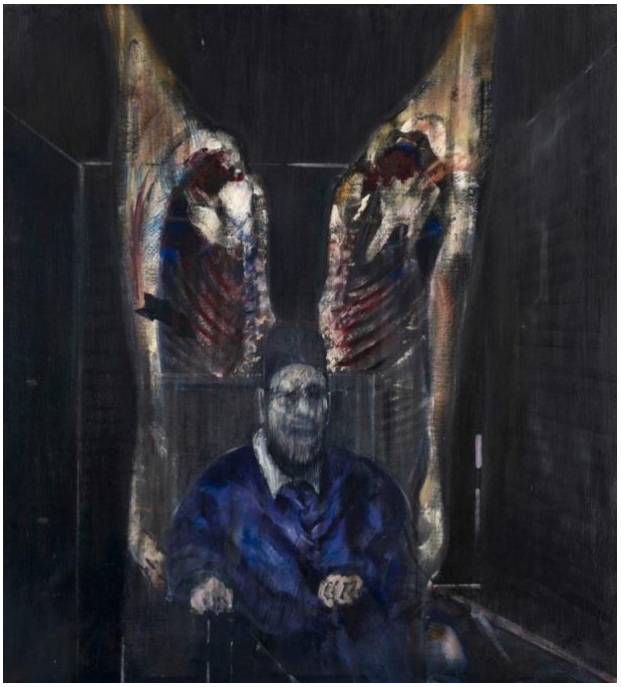
Saturn devouring his son (Rubens)

Two old men eating soup

Women laughing

Witches' Sabbath

Goya's lover



Francis Bacon (Figure with meat)