

Goya's Deafness in Art History

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Coffee Shop Notes

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For the Deaf Way in 1989, a tour of works by six deaf artists was put together through the cooperation of participating museums in Washington, DC. Visitors were invited to enlighten themselves with the knowledge that artists such as botanical illustrator Regina Olson Hughes and the legendary Spanish artist Francisco Goya, both of whom led highly productive careers, were deaf. In the opening comments of the brochure for this tour, Professor of Art History and Museum Studies Deborah M. Sonnenstrahl noted that while deafness is acknowledged in the study of art history, few art historians bother to examine its impact.

A cursory look over of texts and other writings on Goya, for example, will clarify what Sonnenstrahl meant. In the brochure commentary, it is noted that while Goya lost his hearing at approximately age 47, he recovered and went on to produce the works for which he is now best known, including the Black Paintings. He died shortly after his 82nd birthday. Readers would find no mention of his deafness in the Dorling Kindersley (DK) book *ART BOOK: GOYA*, which is intended to give newcomers to Goya's work a thorough introduction of his major creative periods. Published in 1999, this is one of these generic books on individual artists found at any major book retailer.

This neglect of Goya's deafness is remedied and, surprisingly, refuted in a more recent text, John J. Ciofalo's book, *SELF-PORTRAITS OF FRANCISCO GOYA*, which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2001. In this book, Ciofalo quotes from personal letters, correspondence, as well as a range of other sources, in the examination of Goya's self-portraiture. According to Ciofalo, although Goya despaired over the loss of his hearing, this "proved to be a superb platform from which to project the formidability of artistic genius, to command respect for an individual's original talent and to criticize culture, this latter position previously occupied in Spain only by its writers."

Another memorable passage from Ciofalo reads: "To be deaf in nineteenth-century Europe was considered a pathology related to the mind. This perception was the cause of great despair to both Goya and his contemporary, Beethoven. Yet, for Goya, this pathology, compounded by his imaginative bravura with the brush, became a hallmark of his mystique." Ciofalo goes on to describe and quote the reactions of a Swedish diplomat who was fascinated by this mystique and had visited the studio of Goya. Ciofalo also mentions Goya's close friend, the art historian Ce•n Berm™dez, who wrote of Goya's using his fingers to spread paint and of his work not being "particularly outstanding until he lost his hearing."

Ciofalo does not execute a comprehensive analysis of the effects deafness may or may not have had on Goya, but he was indeed thorough as far as the examination of self-portraiture goes, in covering a range of other historical considerations. What is laudable about his book is Ciofalo's respect to the honest reactions of Goya's contemporaries to the artist's deafness—something for which generic art histories cannot be counted on.

Is society in general so eager to bury disability or other differences, once genius has been recognized and mythologized? Beethoven, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Mary Cassatt, a painter who was ostracized for being a woman, are only a few among famous personalities who suffered

from limitations of one sort or the other, and the public now beholds them as shining examples of their work and contributions to society, while a few labor to get their flaws included in the larger picture.

Is this part of the myth of the hero who cannot be imperfect or else it must be guarded with secrecy, like Achilles—or is this part of what seems to be the modern drive to believe that genius cannot be affected by disability, that it stems from a source completely separate from the central facts of the person's life?

Either way, it's quite ludicrous, and an extremely fragmented approach to understanding talent. So, on one hand, it's tiresome to see people say how the deaf are so visual they're all natural artists, which couldn't be further from the truth, while on the other hand, deafness shouldn't be denied as a factor.

Dizzying, isn't it?

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