Francisco Goya
1746-1828

After he became deaf,
Spain’s top painter became a great artist.
Brush with Light

ON AN AFTERNOON in May, in 1808, people gathered along the sidewalk of a cafe near the center of Madrid, the largest city in the terrified country of Spain. In shock and horror, they tried to talk about what had happened the day before. Soldiers, sent to Spain by the dreaded Napoleon of France, had massacred everyone in their path. Men, women, and children had died—slaughtered by the French soldiers.

Suddenly a man broke from the crowd. The talking stopped as everyone turned to watch him. Everyone knew the man, of course. He was Francisco Goya, deaf and eccentric, and the most famous artist in Spain.

When he reached the street, Goya pulled his handkerchief from his coat pocket and dipped it in the mud. Suddenly the handkerchief became a paint brush, the mud became paint, and the walls of the cafe became an enormous canvas. In bold strokes, Goya painted the massacre—soldiers firing and men, women and children falling dead. Again and again he returned to the street to dip his handkerchief in the mud. And again and again he returned to the wall, where he drew lifesize people, and the act of agony and murder.

When he finished, the crowd was silent. All of the people stood in awe of his drawing. Goya, tired, but still filled with fevered energy, went to his studio and transformed his mud sketch into a painting. It was called Le Tres de Mayo or The Third of May, the date on which the massacre happened. It would become one of the most famous paintings in the world.

Young Rebel

It was not the first time Goya had used mud on walls to draw pictures. Goya was born outside the town of Zaragoza, the art capital of Aragon, a province of Spain. When he was a small boy, he often used mud and walls for paint and canvas. One day, a priest came by and saw one of his drawings. Some say it was a drawing of a pig; some say it was a drawing of a blind man.

“Come with me,” the priest told the young boy. “And I will find you an art teacher.”

The teacher was Don Jose Lugen, a kindly old man, who refused to take money for his work. But Goya’s art lessons did not last long. He got into trouble with the law and ran away to Madrid.
Francisco Goya

Goya had a lot of energy, a hot temper, and a desire for many women. In Madrid, he got into trouble with the law again. Again he ran away. This time he fled through the countryside of southern Spain. Some people say that he paid for his trip by fighting bulls. He got on a boat and made his way to Rome. In Rome, Goya took a few art lessons, but mostly he played his guitar, chased after women, and challenged other young men to sword fights. He climbed the dome of the famous church, St. Peter, and carved his initials in its top.

Finally he returned to Spain. At age 25, he got a job drawing for the Royal Tapestry Works. He married Josefa Bayeu, whom he called “La Pepa.”

Goya drew pictures of the court and famous people. Unlike some artists, he drew people who were not famous, too.

He met the king of Spain and asked to paint for the Royal Court. But twice the king refused to hire him. No one doubted his painting talent, but the Catholic Church, very powerful in Spain, remembered Goya’s troubles as a young man. Further, Goya sometimes still got into trouble. He was rough with people; he did not try to make friends.

Some people were critical of Goya’s art, as well. It was too much like real life, said some art critics. The critics preferred an older romantic style of painting that originated in Italy.

Playing Tricks

Goya, always full of tricks, thought of a plan to get back at his critics. First he asked a friend for help. Then he painted some pictures, copying the old Italian art style. Finally he asked the friend to hang the pictures in his home and invite one of the most famous critics to come look at them. “Pretend you discovered the pictures in Italy,” Goya told his friend. “And ask the critic to write an article about them.”

The plan worked as Goya had hoped. The critic loved the phony pictures. He wrote a long newspaper story praising the “old Italian paintings.” Then Goya and his friend together published another newspaper story, explaining that the pictures were fakes painted by Goya himself. The critic was humiliated and Goya was triumphant.

Triumphant Artist

Goya was admitted to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1786. It was about this time that he began to lose his hearing. People began to call him “semi-deaf.”

Goya tried to ignore his hearing loss and enjoyed his life at the court. He continued to play tricks on people. When a noble lady asked him for help so she would not have to go on a trip with her husband, Goya was happy to paint a lifelike bruise on her ankle. When her husband saw it, he thought it was a real bruise and very kindly let his wife stay home.

When Goya was about 46 years old, he reached the height of his fame. He was frequently in the king’s court, and his friends were the royal courtiers. One of his most famous friends was the Duchess of Alba.
A Deaf Man

Goya and the Duchess were travelling to one of her homes when a wheel broke on their carriage and Goya decided that he would repair the wheel himself. While the Duchess watched, Goya built a fire, and used the heat to reseal the break. Then the wheel was put back on the carriage and they were off.

A few days later, Goya caught a cold and blamed it on working on the wheel in the damp air. As usual, his ears seemed to fill up and he became deaf. At the Duchess’s house, Goya waited to hear again.

Time passed. He was still deaf. Finally, Goya returned to his own home in a black mood. He was tired of waiting for his hearing to return. In frustration, he picked up his guitar and strummed it, but heard nothing. He pursed his lips and whistled, still nothing. Finally he gritted his teeth, rubbing his top teeth against his bottom teeth to see if he could hear something inside his head. Again, silence.

Outside a storm raged and Goya stared at the flashes of lightning that streaked the sky. Finally he turned to his wife. “Is there really no thunder?” he asked her.

“There’s no thunder,” his wife said. But Goya, looking at her face, knew she had lied. He turned from her in frustration. Then he grabbed his charcoal. He drew a face. He called it Portrait of a Deaf Man. It was a picture of himself.

A Great Artist

With this realization, Goya’s art began to change. No longer was he satisfied painting cheerful court pictures. No longer did he paint only in bright colors. Deafness seemed to sharpen his eyesight, he told his friends. It helped him concentrate, too.

Goya continued to paint for the king, but his paintings were different now. His drawings were more creative. His portraits showed insight. People found parts of their characters, sometimes their very souls, reflected in Goya’s paintings.

For example, in the painting The Family of Charles IV, Goya drew a king and queen who look foolish. The queen is located in the center of the painting, instead of the king, because Goya believed that she was the most important person in the royal family. The queen’s face
Francisco Goya

Goya’s famous painting, The Third of May, shows the massacre of innocent people.

is not beautiful and her expression looks silly. The king, painted toward the edge of the canvas, looks even more silly because Goya painted King Charles IV as a foolish man who was trying to look intelligent.

Goya’s painting showed the suffering of his country. King Charles IV and his wife did not rule wisely and Spain’s power declined. Perhaps that is partly why Goya’s paintings became sad. During this time, he drew the devil eating his children and portrayed tormented people in the mental hospitals.

His personal life changed, too. He no longer cared about luxury. His wife worried because he slept on the floor or in a chair near the easel where he painted, instead of coming to bed.

When Goya came to court, the king and queen told him they were sorry that he was deaf. Of course they still wanted Goya to paint for them. In 1799, Goya became Chief Painter of the Chamber, the top position for the king’s painter. The day of his appointment, King Charles IV asked him to ride with him in his personal carriage, an unequalled triumph for a painter. Afterward the king bragged that he and Goya conversed in sign language.

Goya used signs with everyone. He and his wife made up home signs. The sign for the Duchess of Alba was a hand motion showing her wavy hair. Goya learned how to make the letters of the alphabet with his fingers. His finger alphabet was probably an ancestor of the same finger alphabet that is used by Spanish, French, and American deaf people today.
He taught the alphabet to Leocadia Zorrilla, a woman who became his friend. Perhaps he was surprised at the words that flew from Zorrilla's fingers. "Spain is a poor and evil country," she said. "Napoleon will conquer us—and he should." Goya burst out laughing. He wasn't used to women thinking about politics.

Zorrilla's prediction was right. Napoleon came, saw, conquered, and gave the Spanish crown to his younger brother, Joseph. Goya kept painting. Joseph Napoleon governed for five years and Goya painted for his court. Then the Spanish forced Napoleon out of their country and a republican government came to power. Goya painted for the republicans, too. Soon the royalists overthrew the republicans, and King Ferdinand VII, son of King Charles IV, ascended to the Spanish throne. King Ferdinand killed and imprisoned most republicans and the people who worked for them.

Goya, he pardoned. Goya was growing old as the king's chief painter. Finally he retired at age 74, moving to a country house outside of Madrid. "Huerto del sordo," everyone called it, "house of the deaf man." Still he kept painting.

At 77, Goya found himself in trouble again. Some people were mad that the king had pardoned Goya. They told the king that he should punish Goya for painting for Napoleon and the republicans. Other people told the king that he should punish Goya for painting a naked lady. Both actions were crimes and punishable by death.

Goya's friends pleaded with the king not to kill the old painter. But Goya was not taking any chances. He fled. His eyes were failing and he was weak, but he travelled alone, crossing the mountains at the Spanish border and moving into a town in southern France. His neighbors called him "the deaf old lion." He made his last drawings in France, a series of lithographs.

Goya was not one great artist, he was 20 great artists, a famous French art critic wrote. When he returned to Spain to die in 1828, the world of art was changed forever.