



Francisco Goya: La Tauromaquia (1816)

When Francisco Goya created "La Tauromaquia" in 1816, he was returning to something quintessentially Spanish after years of documenting humanity's worst impulses. This series of 33 etchings explores the history and spectacle of bullfighting, but calling it simply a celebration of the corrida would miss what Goya was actually doing. These prints are as complex and ambiguous as everything else he created in his later years—simultaneously honoring a tradition and questioning the violence at its heart.

The timing is significant. By 1816, Goya was seventy years old, profoundly deaf, and had just lived through the nightmare of the Peninsular War. "The Disasters of War" was hidden away in his studio, too dangerous to publish. Ferdinand VII had returned to the throne and restored the repressive old order. In this climate, "La Tauromaquia" might seem like a retreat to safer subject matter—a patriotic celebration of Spain's national spectacle. But Goya was incapable of simple celebration.

What makes "La Tauromaquia" fascinating is its dual nature. The series begins with quasi-historical scenes—Moorish origins of the bullfight, medieval noblemen on horseback confronting bulls. These early plates have an almost documentary quality, as if Goya is establishing bullfighting's ancient pedigree. But as the series progresses, it becomes increasingly focused on the modern corrida and its most famous practitioners: Pedro Romero, Pepe Hillo, Martincho, and others who had elevated bullfighting to an art form.

The technical execution is masterful. Goya used aquatint and etching to capture the drama and movement of the ring—the explosive power of the bull, the grace and terror of the matador's movements, the terrible instant when things go wrong. Unlike his war prints, where horror dominates, these images contain genuine beauty. The compositions are dynamic, almost cinematic, with bulls and fighters captured mid-action, their bodies forming elegant or violent arcs across the picture plane.

But beneath the spectacle, there's something darker. Goya shows not just triumph but disaster—matadors gored and tossed into the air, picadors crushed beneath fallen horses, the bull as both magnificent animal and instrument of death. Plate 21, "Desgracias acaecidas en el tendido de la plaza de Madrid" (Misfortunes that occurred in the stands of the Madrid ring), shows a bull charging into the crowd, bodies flying in panic. This isn't romanticization; it's recognition of the blood price the spectacle demands.

The series was published in 1816, but it was a commercial failure. Only a handful of copies sold. Perhaps the Spanish public, exhausted by years of actual violence and death, had no appetite for artistic representations of ritualized killing. Or perhaps Goya's ambivalence showed through too clearly—his prints were too honest about the danger, too willing to show the bull as victim as well as threat, too aware that courage and cruelty often occupied the same space.

"La Tauromaquia" sits at an interesting intersection in Goya's career. It's bracketed by his two darkest works—"The Disasters of War" before it and the "Black Paintings" that would come later. In some ways, it's a respite, a return to a subject he'd drawn and painted throughout his career. But you can't unsee what Goya had seen by 1816, and that knowledge seeps into even these most Spanish of images.

There's something revealing about an artist choosing to explore this tradition at this moment—seeking perhaps some connection to a Spain that existed before the war, before the disillusionment. The bullfight represented order, ritual, ancient tradition, a space where death was meaningful rather than random. But Goya, ever honest, couldn't show the pageantry without showing the gore, couldn't celebrate the tradition without acknowledging its cost.

This is Goya engaging with his nation's defining spectacle, armed with the same technical mastery he'd used to document atrocity, proving that even in returning to traditional subject matter, an artist who has seen too much can never quite return to innocence.

