

GOYA AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

INTERVIEW WITH JANIS TOMLINSON



Janis Tomlinson, has consistently shed new light on the life and work of Francisco Goya y Lucientes within its social and historical context – from her book *Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment* (Yale University Press, 1992) to her recent biography, *Goya: A Portrait of the Artist* (Princeton University Press, 2020); her awards include: the American Association of Publishers 2021 Prose Award (Biography and Autobiography), the Order of Isabel la Católica, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Woodrow Wilson International Fellowship.

jatomlinson28@gmail.com

The interview highlights two aspects related to the Enlightenment. First, how the Enlightenment takes on its special significance when interpreted not by a philosopher or politician, but by an artist, in this case Goya. And second, how strongly the view of the Enlightenment depends on its embedding in the specific political, economic, and social conditions of Goya's time, as well as on his private circumstances.

Fig. 1:
The Sleep of Reason
Produces Monsters

Weiterbildung: Janis, first of all, thank you very much for taking the time for this interview. Could you start our conversation by telling the readers what you are mainly working on at the moment?

Janis Tomlinson: Thank you, Arnim, for your kind invitation. Since my retirement in 2021, I have written articles and lectures on a range of topics including *Goya and Edvard Munch*, *Goya and Antonin Artaud's „Theater of Cruelty“* and *Goya and Boccherini*. I continue research on the history of collecting Goya in the United States, to be addressed in a symposium offered by the Goya Center of The Hispanic Society of America on October 24, 2025, for which I will offer the keynote address.

We want to talk about Goya and his relationship to the Enlightenment. How did you come to deal with Goya?

One of the first courses I took as an undergraduate was a course on Nineteenth-Century European Art. Tasked with choosing a topic for a research paper, I spent hours in the library stacks where I discovered many tomes dedicated to French artists, but very few on Goya. Most of these focused on his works, with little discussion of their themes or social and historical context. Fifteen years later, I published my first book, a thematic study of Goya's early designs for tapestries to be woven by the Royal Tapestry Factory in Madrid to decorate rooms in royal residences. By the time this book was published, I had already decided the subject of my next book, *Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment*, in which I traced the course of the Enlightenment in Spain over almost three decades as well as its impact on Goya's work and life.

Let us begin by qualifying the term “Enlightenment” – or in Spanish, *ilustración* – as it pertains to Spain, where ideas associated with the movement could develop only within the parameters of Catholicism and Monarchy. For example, the fall of the Bourbon Monarchy in France led to war with Spain, which wreaked havoc on the Spanish treasury throughout the 1790s. To compensate, the monarchy confiscated and auctioned mortmain property left unused and uncultivated in the hands of monasteries and other Catholic institutions. This challenge to selected Catholic institutions in no way undermined the power of Catholicism as Spain's sole official religion. In the same vein, Goya presents in *Los Caprichos* – a series of eighty etchings published in 1799 – images of lascivious and gluttonous monks, seen by reformers of the day as parasites inhibiting the fiscal health of the country, and not interpreted as a commentary on the Catholic church.



Am I right in thinking that our topic will mainly involve etchings from the *Caprichos* and *Disasters of War*?

The impact of the *ilustración* was wide-ranging, encompassing the writings of men such as Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos and Juan Antonio Meléndez and popularized in the Spanish press of the 1790s. These ideas are certainly reflected in *Los Caprichos*, and less directly in Goya's images of war. The *ilustración* created a division within Spanish society, pitting those open to new ideas against those, who claimed their role to protect the traditions and religion of Spain. Many of the reformers in fact welcomed Napoleon, but the populace at large considered Napoleon the Anti-Christ and despised the French and their new ideas. The *Disasters of War* – eighty etchings inspired by the Napoleonic invasion of Spain, etched from 1810 to about 1815, and published posthumously in 1863 – highlight the passionate efforts of commoners to defend the religion and values of their homeland.

Perhaps we should start by looking at the etching *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (figure 1) which could have a connection to the Enlightenment, at least in terms of the title, *Reason*. What do you think about it?

Agreed. To begin, a clarification on the title is in order. The title, etched on the front of the desk supporting the dozing artist, reads *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*. A preliminary drawing for

it belonged to a group of drawings, many bearing the title “Sueño”, a word that can be translated either as “sleep” or “dream.” Context shows that Goya’s intended meaning was “dream” – as he picked up on the use of dream as a vehicle for social satire most famously illustrated by Francisco de Quevedo’s *Sueños y discursos* (1627). Unconfined by reason, the actions and creatures of the eighty etchings of *Los Caprichos* transport the viewer from the streets of Madrid, to witches flying in the night sky, to goblin-like monks carousing in a cell and other far-flung worlds of the imagination.

On the one hand, *Los Caprichos* can be seen as a massive criticism of the society of his time. At the same time, however, this society and its representatives were the ground on which he had to earn money as the First Court Painter. How did Goya navigate this ambivalent situation, both criticizing and recording his society in an affirmative manner?

Goya probably began work on the series in the mid-1790s, a period of rapid change as court, especially after 1796 when Spain attempted to develop a fruitful alliance with France. Changes took place throughout the decade and by 1797 – as Goya was finalizing the series – reformers were given positions at court (only to be exiled within a year or two). Discussions and satires of social issues in the newspapers of the day inspired *Los Caprichos*. Thus, their imagery co-existed with Goya’s extremely profitable career as a portraitist of

aristocrats such as the Duke and Duchess of Alba, and of intellectuals including Jovellanos and Meléndez. In 1798 the Duke and Duchess of Osuna commissioned a series of witchcraft scenes – thematically linked to images of *Los Caprichos* – and purchased four sets of those etchings. In years to come, the court became increasingly conservative, and perhaps because of this, in 1803 Goya gave to the state the etched plates of *Los Caprichos* as well as remaining unsold sets of the etchings – in exchange for an annuity for his son.

The etchings from the *Disasters of War* cycle offered an unrelentingly critical view. Could they be seen as a reflection of what is happening in most current wars, for example in Ukraine or Gaza or Sudan: war against women and children, as depicted in *The worst is to beg*?

Then as now, war is not fought willingly but imposed by world powers. In Goya’s imagery, there are neither heroes nor victors, only victims. The Spaniards defense of their homeland was also a defense of their faith; in the other side, Napoleon’s troops were worn out, unpaid, and far from home. Desperation led both sides to commit atrocities. If women, children, and men escaped their plundered villages to seek safety in towns, they still died in famine as illustrated in *Lo peor es pedir* (The worst is to beg, figure 2). The relevance of Goya’s images to the catastrophic wars of our time is, sadly, indisputable.



Fig. 2:
The worst is to beg

The etchings we've been discussing include several images of women. Did Goya adopt an enlightened view of women as equal to men? Or was he more in keeping with its time and conservative in character?

Goya's imagery of women does not adhere to any single philosophy. Many of his portraits of aristocratic women betray respect for their status, beauty, or intelligence. In *Los Caprichos*, flirtatious women (sometimes prostitutes) are the subjects of satire; yet the portrayal of the heroism of women in the *Disasters of War* (*Y son fieras*/They are wild beasts, figure 3) inspire awe of their bravery.

How would you characterize Goya's attitude towards the Enlightenment in a nutshell? And can we easily read Goya as referring to anti-enlightenment tendencies in our current situation, such as misinformation in the social media, isolated censorship measures even in democracies, fundamentalist political or religious ideologies, the influence of money on political processes?

My answer will be brief. Were Goya alive today, I doubt he could refrain from commenting on the current affairs that you have so well outlined.

Janis, thank you again for bringing a special approach to Enlightenment to this issue with your reflections on Goya.

Thank you, Arnim, for this opportunity.

The interview was conducted by Arnim Kaiser



Fig. 3:
They are wild beasts



Lo merecia. He deserved it



Tampoco. Not in this case either



*Tal para qual.
Two of a kind*



Estan calientes



*Que pico de Oro!
What a Golden Tongue!*