

I saw it: The Invented Reality of  
Goya's *Disasters of War*



Curated by students in the  
Exhibition Seminar, Department of Art  
Under the direction of Associate Professor Susan Strauber

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1108 Park Street  
Grinnell, Iowa 50112-1690  
641.269.4660  
641.269.4626 fax  
[www.grinnell.edu/falconergallery](http://www.grinnell.edu/falconergallery)  
[Gallery@grinnell.edu](mailto:Gallery@grinnell.edu)

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Cover image: #15 *Y no hai remedio (There's no help for it)*, etching,  
drypoint, 145 x 165 mm

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Falconer Gallery  
Bucksbaum Center for the Arts  
Grinnell College

## **Exhibition seminar participants Spring 2004:**

Annaliese Beaman '05	Alfredo Rivera '06
Nicole Bungert '06	Katherine Rochester '06
Audrey Coffield '05	Katherine Skarzynski '04
Megan Drechsel '04	Kimberly Theodore '04
Nathaniel Jones '06	Madeline VanHaaften-Schick '04
Tala Orngard '05	Roxanne Young '05

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# Preface

In 1985, Grinnell College received a sixth edition of Francisco de Goya's *Disasters of War*, printed in 1930, through a generous donation by Helena Percas de Ponseti, Professor Emerita of Spanish and her husband, Dr. Ignacio V. Ponseti. These prints are the subject of this year's art exhibition seminar, in which students are offered a unique opportunity to curate an exhibition in the Faulconer Gallery and write an accompanying exhibition catalogue. Over the course of the spring semester, we have come a long way in our understanding of Goya's *Disasters of War*. We began by simply looking. After familiarizing ourselves with the works, we were able to begin a process of intensive research and discussion on Goya and his times, with particular attention to the *Disasters of War* prints.

The idea of witnessing was one that recurred in both the readings and our class discussions. This concept is rich in meaning and implication, and, as such, we decided on it as a theme to frame our exhibition. Bringing the exhibition to fruition was a lengthy, rigorous process that demanded the cooperation, focus, and dedication of everyone involved. Now, our efforts having finally taken shape, we present you our catalogue.

—Annaliese Beaman & Roxanne Young

# Introduction

What does it mean to witness? Does it mean seeing? Offering testimony? Participating? All of these questions inform Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes's *Disasters of War* print series, which offers a vision of the visceral realities of the Peninsular War (1808-14) between France and Spain. Formally titled *Fatales consecuencias de la sangrienta Guerra en España con Buonaparte. Y otros caprichos enfáticos* (*Fatal consequences of the bloody war in Spain with Bonaparte. And other emphatic caprices*), the print series reveals Goya's "waxing awareness of the tenuous distinction between patriotic fervor and mindless brutality, between heroism and fanaticism," and thus serves as a commentary on the political climate of Spain during and after the Peninsular War (Tomlinson, *Graphic* 34).

Despite titles of prints like *I saw it* through which the artist seems to claim his role as viewer and documenter, it remains unclear whether Goya actually witnessed the events he depicts or used his artistic skills to invent them. The degree to which Goya's invented realities document specific incidents that actually happened, or not, is immaterial, for there is no doubt that events like those Goya depicts occurred; what matters, rather, is how Goya forces the viewer into the position of witness.

As a series of eighty prints, the *Disasters of War* compel the viewer to repeatedly confront the unbearable, to become a sustained witness to the unthinkable, and, in some small measure, to experience the war itself. The prints thus remain relevant today. As viewers of the prints, we are often placed in the position of onlookers and become, implicitly, members of the crowd or spectators, and so the *Disasters of War* continues to resonate (Wolf 43). What makes Goya's imagery so alternately disturbing and poignant, then, is his understanding of "the complex psychological and sociological implications of being in the position of witness," and thus his ability to integrate the viewer into the action, whether or not the viewer was physically present to witness the events depicted (Wolf 37).

In order to appreciate the impact of these prints, it is important to situate them historically, both within the context of Goya's life and within the political climate of early nineteenth-century Spain. In "Goya: *Disasters* in Context," Tala Orngard investigates Goya's career as an artist, with a focus on the historical and political context of the *Disasters of War*. Her essay recognizes the print series as a continuation of previous themes in Goya's art and contextualizes it conceptually among his other works, in particular the late "Black Paintings" and one other series of prints, *Los Caprichos*.

In their essay, "The Medium for the Message: Printmaking and the *Disasters of War*," Roxanne Young and Annaliese Beaman present a detailed description of Goya's

printmaking process. They show why understanding Goya's formal media is important to viewing the *Disasters of War*. Goya was an innovator in the use of aquatint and, more generally, a stylistic innovator in printmaking.

Katherine Rochester, in "Moral Action/Guilty Conscience: The role of the witness in Goya's *Disasters of War*," establishes how the word "witness" connotes both a human context and a moral aspect, something beyond just "seeing." She contextualizes what witnessing meant for Goya and examines the ways in which witnessing is thematized within the series. Not only did Goya invent new ways of viewing war, he also offered trenchant political commentary by subverting religious icons, as Nathaniel Jones maintains in his essay "Secularizing the Holy: Christian Iconography in Goya's *Disasters of War*," analyzing Goya's use of religious iconography.

Just as religious imagery is a component of the print series, so is the depiction of famine. In her essay, "The Forgotten Prints: Images of Famine," Nicole Bungert scrutinizes a portion of the print series that is less well known, less reproduced, and less discussed.

Alfredo Rivera's essay on the emphatic *caprichos*, "*Que locura!*: The Fantastical and the Absurd in the *Caprichos Enfáticos*," is a close examination of the most strange and difficult section of the *Disasters*, the last sixteen prints. This essay relates the emphatic *caprichos* to the *Disasters* series as a whole and explores the notion that the entire series can be seen as "caprice" (fantasy and invention).

Kimberly Theodore assesses modern images of atrocity in photojournalism in her essay, "*Disasters Revisited: Modern Images of Atrocity and Photojournalism*" and addresses the questions "Why are modern viewers inclined to compare the *Disasters of War* to war photography?" and "What does it mean to view in a media-saturated environment?" Far from claiming that Goya's work functions as literal, factual documentary, Theodore agrees with Susan Sontag's assertion that "Goya's images are a synthesis. They claim: things *like* this happened. In contrast, a single photograph or filmstrip claims to represent exactly what was before the camera's lens" (Sontag 47).

Finally, Madeline VanHaften-Schick considers the meaning of "truth" by locating the series in a current theoretical framework in her essay, "Reviving the Reality of Goya's *Disasters of War*." Her essay suggests that the events Goya depicted in the *Disasters of War* are "real," although the scenes themselves may have been a product of Goya's imagination.

—Audrey Coffield & Megan Drechsel