

## The Atrocities of War by Mary Connell



The painting *The Third of May*, by Francisco de Goya, was done in 1814 to commemorate the events of that took place during the Napoleonic Wars in Madrid, Spain on May 2 and 3, 1808. The painting sets the scene of a man about to be killed by a firing squad. The bodies of those who have already been killed are scattered around him, and those that wait to be killed stand in line behind him. The ground is covered in blood from those who have already been executed. The sky in the background is black, with the outline of a convent on the horizon. Through my religious upbringing, as well as my background in art history, I am able to recognize the symbolism and tools that Goya used to make his statement that war of any kind produces no good.

During the Napoleonic Wars, which took place in the early part of the nineteenth century, Spain was invaded in 1807. Napoleon forced King Ferdinand to abdicate the throne, which he gave to his brother Joseph Bonaparte. Many Spanish citizens welcomed the presence of the French in Spain because of the liberal reforms that they made, including a new liberal constitution. But with the rumor that the last member of the royal family was going to be removed from Madrid, the citizens of Madrid gathered in public squares on the night of May 2. At nine o'clock on the morning of the third, an uprising began. The citizens were armed with whatever they could find: scissors, knives, spoons, and a few firearms. The mob temporarily prevented the cart with the remaining members of the royal family from leaving. By mid-afternoon the revolt was crushed (Tone 48).

The French would not let the revolt go unpunished. They instead made an example of it, so that the Spanish would not attempt anything like that again. As a result of the revolt, eighty peasants were gathered together and executed during the pre-dawn hours of May third. Despite the overwhelming defeat of the revolt, the Spanish people were not daunted. In the countryside, during the next six years, the first guerilla warfare was waged. Eventually Napoleon and his troops were forced from Spain, but with them left their liberal reforms (Tone 49). Goya had been pleased with the liberal reforms and other changes that Napoleon had instituted in Spain, but was completely disgusted with what had happened during the war. He felt that nothing lasting had been accomplished, while many had suffered and died as a result of the war.

Goya made a series of etchings and paintings depicting the atrocities of both sides involved with the war. The most famous of these paintings are the two depicting the scenes from the second and third of May. The work focuses on the victims of the situation, which in this case are the Spanish citizens being executed. The work is not meant to be beautiful, but is instead supposed to be horrible in order to shock the viewer. Goya's purpose within the painting is less to blame the French, but instead to point out to people the "faceless and mechanical forces of war itself, blindly killing a representative of humanity" (Stokstad). He used the incident as an example of how horrible war is and what can happen when violence is instituted. By demonstrating to people how war is always wrong and produces evils of all kinds, Goya was hoping to encourage people to never resort to such means again (Stokstad).

When I first looked at this painting, the image that jumped out at me immediately was the man with his arms stretched out. To me, he seemed to resemble Christ as he was sacrificing his life on the cross. The man in the painting seems to be doing the same thing. By stretching out his arms he seems to be accepting the fate that he has been dealt. He seems like he is almost welcoming death, knowing that he is dying bravely, sacrificing himself.

This aspect of the painting probably strikes me in this way, in part, because of the religious background that I have had. I was baptized in the Catholic Church as a baby, and have been very active in my faith since. My parents have always instilled in me beliefs in God and Jesus. I went to a Catholic high school, so I took plenty of religion classes that influenced my knowledge of the Bible. The image of the man looking like Jesus goes along well with the message that Goya is trying to send about war never being a good solution.

The art history class that I am taking this semester affects my understanding of Goya's painting as well. Before taking this class I had very little knowledge of how to decide what was going on in a painting or what certain things represented. Through this class I have learned terms to use when discussing art, as well as what artists in particular time periods were interested in depicting in their artwork. I have learned that the term tenebrism refers to the strong juxtaposition of light and dark. Goya employs this technique in *The Third of May*. By demonstrating the strong difference between the light and dark areas, he is able to emphasize the sense of good versus evil in the painting. I have also learned that history painting of the Romantic period had changed greatly from that of former time periods. Romantic history painting was more focused on the emotions of the scene, rather than on glorifying a particular well-known figure, like past history paintings. Goya's painting shows this tendency in the way it shows the drama and emotional turmoil of the unknown individual facing death.

The French troops who have their backs to the viewer seem to represent the evil and dark aspects of war. They are dressed in dark clothes that seem to be in good shape, versus the man about to be killed who is dressed in a tattered white shirt that seems to represent good, innocence, and purity. The central man's face is very prominent, clearly showing his emotions at the moment before he is going to die. The soldiers' faces are instead not shown, keeping them a general, unknown evil presence in the painting. Despite the fact that in this particular painting the French troops are depicted as being the evildoers, it seems to me that Goya's main objective was to simply show how war always produces evil. By keeping the troops anonymous, Goya is using a technique

that is better able to make his point that all aspects of any war are atrocious, rather than directly pointing a finger at the French.

The people waiting to be killed are not as prominent as the man facing death at the moment. Their emotions seem to be of fear and sadness. They are all grouped together crying, focused on themselves rather than exhibiting the bravery that the man about to be killed is. They are all covering their faces, which seems to represent their need to hide themselves from the fate which is awaiting them. They are not as willing to accept their death as the man about to be killed. The bloody corpses lying on the ground seem to further emphasize the horrible and brutal reality of what occurred that morning. The red blood spilled all over the ground is a contrast to the otherwise relatively colorless scene. It draws the viewer to look at it and to think about what it means and where it comes from.

Goya's painting has historical significance as well as a social message that he wanted to send to generations to come. It is this social message that, in my opinion, seems to be what is really captivating and moving about the painting. I am struck by the Christ-like image in the center of the painting, mostly because of how I can relate to what is being conveyed through the representation. The parts of the painting and their meanings affect me in a certain way because I am able to recognize them as certain tools used by the painter. It is very possible that if I had not been raised with a religious background or had not taken my art history class, my perspective towards the painting would be very different. I might look at the painting and simply see a man about to be killed. I might not see the sacrificial element of it. My understanding of art and the language of art would be lacking. Without the knowledge of these things I would probably see a more general picture, and I might have missed the aspects of Goya's masterpiece that make the painting so moving to me.

#### Works Cited

- Tone, John Lawrence. *The Fatal Knot: The Guerilla War in Navarre and the Defeat of Napoleon in Spain*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1994.
- Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. New York: Prentice Hall Inc. and Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1995.