

Francisco de Goya and the Mirror's Reflection

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Bio:

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Abstract:

This analysis argues that Spanish painter, Francisco de Goya (1746-1828), uses mirrors to symbolize harmonization of subject with its true self throughout his work. To argue this thesis, the analysis strategy employs a semiotic approach by first using the etching *Hasta La Muerte* (1794-1799), of the *Los Caprichos* series to define the mirror as a bridge between a perceived state of being and reality and then considers Goya's modern interpretation of the classic female nude through his drawing *Nude Woman Holding a Mirror* (1796-1797). The following section addresses the artist's intentional reference to art history and an implied mirror in his painting *Family of Carlos IV* (1800-1801). The analysis explores the circular similarities between the series *Allegories of Commerce, Agriculture and Industry* (1802-1804), and traditional mirror form to determine how Goya intends to represent Spanish society.

Introduction

In the *Los Caprichos* series (1796-1797), a collection of 80 plates created by Goya and published as a complete album in 1799, the artist creates a visual interpretation of the Spanish society in which he lived. As it is well known, these plates depict controversial illustrations that Goya defines as, “the innumerable foibles and follies to be found in any civilized society, and from the common prejudices and deceitful practices which custom, ignorance, or self-interest have made usual and which, at the same time, stimulate the artist’s imagination” (Hughes 429). Consequently, the series sells poorly, despite the obvious mocking of noble and clerical lifestyles; the public reacts to the plates quite favorably. In late October 1799, the Spanish crown subsequently promotes Goya to court painter. Goya’s whimsicality and mischievous prints are what bring his characters to life and give them an underlying depth not typically seen in artwork from this period. For this reason, the *Los Caprichos* series is regarded as an innovative approach to subject representation (Licht 93).

First Use of Mirror in *Hasta La Muerta*

Goya’s intention to offend suggests an underlying objective of the series. In fact, the whole series is a kind of truthful mirror held up to Spanish society. This is most clearly demonstrated in pl. 55: *Hasta La Muerte* (1794-1799) (Figure 1), of the *Los Caprichos* series. The viewer witnesses an old woman contentedly gazing in the mirror at her own reflection, as she primps with meticulous attention to detail. In the meantime, her spectators laugh and whisper about the absurdity of this self-interest. Goya intended the woman’s audience to communicate in the background, but what is he suggesting about her? Despite the ridiculing laughs of her spectators the old woman seems quite satisfied with her appearance. At first glance, this etching seems to deal solely with the idea of female vanity. Goya’s careful choice in the title, “Hasta la

muerte” (Until death), implies the old woman illustrated in the etching, will likely be obsessed with her outward appearance until the day she dies. It can be assumed that Goya insinuates an alternative explanation for this etching. Goya represents a bridge between an ideal state of being and reality by using the mirror. Within this ideal state, the old woman, as she sees herself reflected, is no longer an aging beauty but a young beautiful girl untouched by the ravages of time. The mirror reveals in beautiful form the true nature of its subject. This true nature can only imply the old woman is beautiful inside, despite her contrary outward appearance.

Goya's use of the mirror is explained in Anna Maria Coderch and Victor I. Stoichita's *Goya: The Last Carnival*, as the harmonization of the subject with its ideal true self. The authors draw upon the period's use of physiognomy to make their case. Physiognomy is the judging of one's temperament through perceived physical characteristics. These characteristics are usually in facial expressions and their similarity to define physical traits, in order to identify certain personalities in human beings. Through the Enlightenment's determination to escape ignorance in pursuit of reason, physiognomy perceives these actualities as divinely acquired knowledge. In effect, this guarantees the visualization of true self (Hartley 1-3). Due to the success of *Lavater's Essays on Physiognomy* in Spain, Goya most certainly was affected by the study of this subject. As physiognomy suggests, this implies that Goya intended to create a relationship between physical being and state of mind (Coderch 62). Having witnessed the onset of the Enlightenment, Goya essentially attempts to understand the true relationship of man and inner-self (Coderch 60).

The use of a mirror allowed Goya to draw the object as allegory of man. Moreover, the mirror acts as a relationship between one's self and reality (Werness 171). For centuries, reflections have been used to signify the physical being of one's soul, which is invisible except in the mirror. The ancient Egyptians strongly believed the mirror contained of the soul and were

known to bury engraved eyes on mirrors in tombs of the deceased as a refuge from darkness (Werness 4). Therefore, the soul resides within this tangible object and is a reflection of past, present and future. A number of cultures believe that mirrors are sacred objects, if broken all of one's self is lost forever. In this series, the mirror acts as a bridge between an ideal state of being and reality, suggesting a parallel universe independent of its subject (Werness 3). The mirror's reflection is thus a distortion of actuality in the physical sense but a true manifestation of the subject's own ideal feelings of self.

The feeling of self calls to mind Jacques Lacan's *Mirror Stage*, in which the formation of the "I" as self-identification is witnessed through the recognition of one's physical reflection in a mirror. Essentially, what is observed during this initial identification will be crucial to later identifications of the self (Gallop 119). As has been suggested, the mirror is a significant form of identification for all human beings in their attempt to create meaning behind their own reflection. Lacan's mirror stage is the "turning point" when a subject recognizes the existence of an ideal self (Gallop 121). This bridge created by the mirror as a gateway from reality to an ideal state of being assists Goya in mocking Spanish society in the *Los Caprichos* series but more specifically in *Hasta La Muerte*. In Goya's etching the old woman defines herself with the reflection she sees in the mirror. Although the subject sees her physical likeness, Goya uses the mirror to symbolize the harmonization of the old woman with her true self; this "true self" is her soul reflecting inner beauty. Despite the spectators ridicule, Goya's etching suggests she sees beyond outward appearance and into her soul. Consequently, through this ideal recognition of one's self the subject is thought, by the viewer, to be delusional.

Nude Woman Holding a Mirror

Having established Goya's understanding and use of the mirror in the *Los Caprichos* series, one can now test these ideas in other works containing mirrors. Goya offers a modern interpretation of the classic female nude in his drawing, *Nude Woman Holding a Mirror* (1796-1797) (Figure 2). As the central figure in the composition, the nude woman sits in a draped bedroom, leaning back and turned away from the viewer. Seemingly captivated, she holds the mirror to her face, actively studying the reflection. Historically, the classic female nude is characterized as a passive subject seeking the gaze of her male viewer. Throughout history, she has been regarded as a "shameless" woman whose body is a commodity. Traditionally, with the addition of a mirror to the composition the artist introduces a duality between the female nude and her viewer. Through this dynamic, the viewer and the female nude are mutually engaged in the act of looking (Prater 21). Goya's explicit reference to the Spanish art tradition is noticeably apparent in his illustration of the female nude. His drawing clearly alludes to Diego Velázquez', *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, (1647-1651) (Figure 3). In Velázquez' composition, Venus reclines with her back to the viewer as her obscured reflection looks outward through the mirror held by Cupid. Velázquez' use of the mirror placed at the middle of the composition focuses all attention on the passive reflection of the reclining female nude (Prater 28). According to inventory of Velázquez' belongings, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* was discovered in the artist's library (Prater 73). This sixteenth century emblem book acted as a reference point for artists to base illustrations of certain intangible concepts or feelings. In *Iconologia*, the mirror operates as an aid for self-knowledge. The subject uses the mirror to examine his own physical characteristics and belongings (Ripa 17, 63). Moreover, the mirror in Velázquez' painting is instrumental in reminding the viewer of his own reflection. This task is accomplished by linking the subject's gaze with that of the viewer. The mirror therefore creates a duality in the act of

viewing. The female nude contemplates her own physical being, while the viewer deliberates the same subject. This interactivity in Velázquez' painting causes the viewer to be an active participant in the work (Prater 98).

It can be assumed that Goya's composition implies the same themes as Velázquez' painting. By presenting his subject in what seems to be a bedroom chamber, Velázquez indicates to the viewer the obvious intimacy of this painting. In Goya's composition, the artist situates his subject within similar surroundings. This creates a noticeable gesture to the Spanish art tradition and in particular to Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus*. While both artists place their subject in an intimate space, the pair also creates a sense of mystery and control over their viewer (Werness 9). Contrasting visual tradition, the female's backside only is offered for viewer consumption. This refusal to reveal her entire body gives the female nude absolute control; she has decided what is to be seen and further does so by her conscious gaze upon her viewer in the reflected mirror.

Although both compositions echo one another, there are many differences that set Goya's interpretation of the female nude apart from Velázquez' *Rokeby Venus*. If the classic female nude was generally a passive subject in the visual tradition, Goya's depiction was decidedly a game of manipulating the reflection to not reveal its subject. As stated above, the centering of the mirror in both compositions is significant. In Goya's drawing, however, the mirror's significance is redirected by instead placing it in the hands of the female nude. Generally, Venus is depicted in the company of Cupid, but without his addition she is consequently a mortal human being. By recalling the *Rokeby Venus*' subject matter, Goya raises his female nude to the rank of the goddess (Prater 100). Despite this reference, Goya's female nude continues to set herself apart from visual tradition. Unlike the *Rokeby Venus*, her body does not recline into a calm and relaxed

position that extends across the picture plane. Her upright position is contemplative. Through use of the mirror, Goya rejects classic forms of the female nude by, in essence, showing her true reflection as an active participant in the viewing process.

Implied Mirror in *Family of Carlos IV*

The influence of Velázquez' mirror in Goya's work was not restricted to his drawing of the female nude. Goya's painting, *Family of Carlos IV* (1800-1801) (Figure 4) is said to be a direct reference to Velázquez' *Las Meninas* (1656) (Figure 5) (Olszewski 178). *Las Meninas* features twelve figures in a room, flanked by the painter at his canvas and a mirror in the background. The mirror's reflection seems to capture two observers, perhaps the king and queen, who are not pictured in the foreground. Throughout the centuries, *Las Meninas* has been regarded as an objective observation of the artist's surroundings (Brown 48). Within the painting, there has been an interruption in the room, perhaps the viewer, that draws all attention of the painting's subjects towards this intrusion (Brown 78). Once again, Velázquez illustrates the mirror as the focal point of the painting. His self-portrait within the composition paints the two figures reflected in the mirror (Prater 76). In turn, these reflections create a duality within the painting that link the subject's gaze with that of the viewer.

Goya makes an intentional reference to *Las Meninas* in his portrait of Charles IV and his family. Having made an etched reproduction a few years earlier, he knew the painting well. In his composition, Goya exploits the unconventional spontaneity seen in Velázquez' *Las Meninas*. Similar to the older painting, the royal court in Goya's portrait stands as if carrying out an "informal" visit to the artist's studio. The family appears to have stopped to look at themselves in an unseen mirror. Goya directly references Velázquez' composition by illustrating his self-portrait in the process of painting on a canvas the viewer cannot see. As a result of this self-

referential illustration, he suggests the presence of an implied mirror. The painting the viewer sees is in fact this mirrored reflection (Licht 69). In these references to Spanish tradition, it is obvious that Goya desired his composition to be thought of as a masterpiece itself.

Despite Goya's reference to Velázquez' *Las Meninas*, the meaning he creates within his painting is dissimilar to that of his predecessor. The informal stance of Goya's figures highlights the fact that the family is on stage for everyone's viewing, just as they are in everyday life (Tomlinson 60). In his depiction of the royal family's physical characteristics, Goya carries over the satirical humor he used in the *Los Caprichos series* to portray the "follies" of Spanish society. Goya's lack of idealization in his composition attempts to show the court's accessibility to their subjects (Olszewski 176). Consequently, this realism was considered to be an intentional insult against the royal family (Olszewski 172). Although, due to the objective nature of mirrors, all responsibility of the painting's "realism" is placed on the implied mirror within the painting. Moreover, Goya, through no fault of his own, was simply painting what the mirror revealed to him (Licht 78). As a result, this lack of idealized physical characteristics reflects the court's true self as an approachable ruling family, undoubtedly accessible to their subjects.

For Goya, the picture plane is a mirror surface, reflecting its subject truthfully. The picture plane and mirror are equally related objects available to satisfy the viewer's gaze. Moreover, both interchangeably take on each other's attributes to reflect the surrounding world (Prater 59). If we accept that Goya viewed the picture plane as a mirror, it stands to reason that a painting might be a mirror even when the painting's subject makes no clear reference to mirrors.

It is clear that Goya has, without a doubt, made use of mirror reflection while painting his subjects throughout his career. In this action, the painted image derived from the artist's mirror creates a duality and in effect becomes imitation imitated (Prater 86). That is, the mirror's

imitation/reflection is imitated again on the canvas. In this way, the artist denies his subjective role, emulating the objective or truthful reflection in the mirror. Due to its synonymous relationship with truth, objectivity is recognized as being more powerful than the artist's naturally subjective hand. According to Leonardo da Vinci, who was famously fixated on all aspects of the object, the mirror was a teacher of artists and the highest possible visual perfection (Prater 65). In *The Practice of Painting*, a text with which Goya was familiar as an academy-trained artist, Leonardo explains the didactic nature of the mirror as a reference point when drawing or painting. Taking Leonardo's teachings a bit further, Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) (Figure 6) is a composition painted directly on a wooden tondo, cut and then painted to look like a mirror. His self-portrait points to the importance of mirrors for artists and shows that the mirror image holds more truth than reality itself (Werness 97). In the theory of *disegno interno*, the artist's depiction of an object is regarded as a divinely inspired visual truth. Furthermore, the distortion caused by the convex surface in Parmigianino's composition highlights this relationship between the circular mirror, the artist's exaggerated hand, and the light of god providing him with objective drawing skill ("Disegno").

Allegories of Commerce, Agriculture and Industry

To test this hypothesis, let us turn to Goya's *Allegories of Commerce, Agriculture and Industry* (1802-1804) (Figure 7). These paintings lack mirrors but physically share the circular format of mirrors that appear in contemporary domestic scenes. The similar shape of Parmigianino's painting and Goya's allegories further solidify their interpretation as mirror views of the reality of early nineteenth-century Spanish society. The three tondos each feature a painting of the allegories mentioned in the title, *Commerce, Agriculture and Industry*. The first painting, *Commerce*, portrays a man seated at a table writing, as a second figure across from him

hunches over the table with his back towards the viewer. In direct reference to Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, below the table lie two full sacks and a stork standing in the foreground of the picture plane. The two symbolize *Action* and *Commerce*, and their mutual need for one another in order to be successful. A second visual reference to *Iconologia*, *Agriculture* features a peasant woman in an outdoor scene, perhaps from southern Spain (Tomlinson 99-101). As Ripa suggests, the woman is dressed in a green gown that signifies hope. Furthermore, a man stands by her side holding a basket filled with fruit and flowers, seemingly offering it to the woman. The third tondo, *Industry*, depicts spinners working in the foreground of an architectural setting, usually symbolically associated in Goya's work with institutional confinement (Tomlinson 100).

With documentary evidence of Spain being a country ridden with turmoil during this time, Goya's intentions for these paintings were to show Spain's true or potential industriousness in the face of economic crises in the late eighteenth-century (Tomlinson 98). This series of paintings are visions of a prosperous and industrious nation. As first court painter during the enlightenment, Goya uses the reflection of superior "Commerce, Agriculture and Industry" in order to align Spanish gaze with the truth that this philosophy promised to create.

Conclusion

It is clear that Goya used mirrors to reflect the concept of harmonization of the subject with its true self. In this, the artist creates a well-rounded understanding of mirrors all symbolizing this harmonization between the material, implied aspects, and formal aspects, by using mirrors in his paintings. By use of these unconventional techniques, Francisco de Goya produced striking compositions that stand the test of time in visual tradition.

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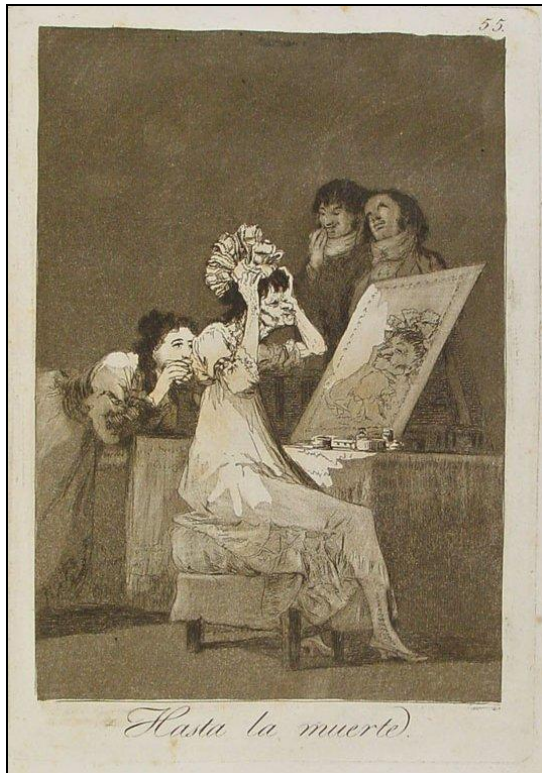


Figure 1. Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*, pl. 55: "Hasta la muerte", Etching, 1794-1799.

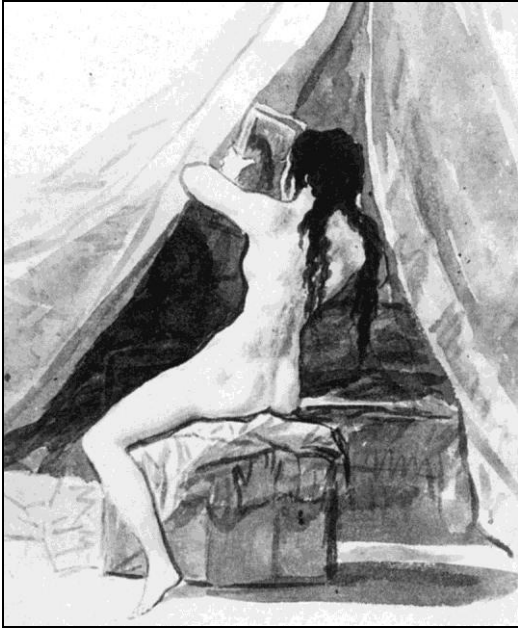


Figure 2. Francisco Goya, *Nude Woman Holding a Mirror*, Indian ink wash, 1796-1797.

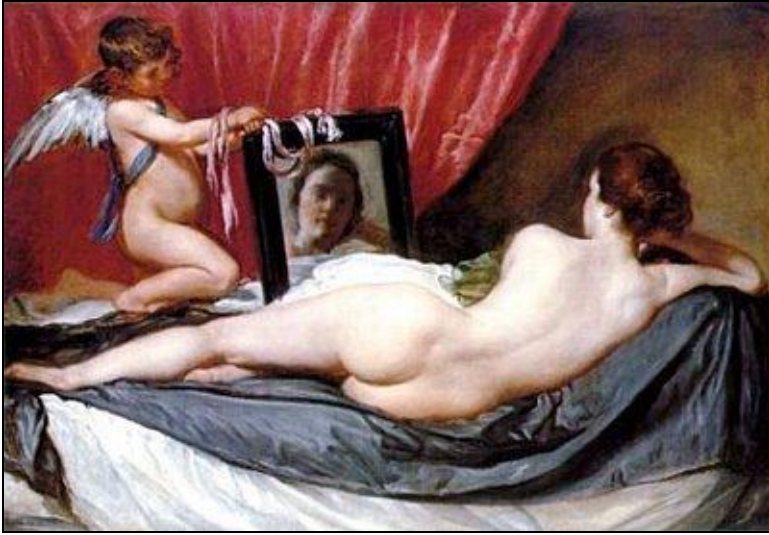


Figure 3. Diego Velazquez, *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, Oil on Canvas, 1647-1651.



Figure 4. Francisco Goya, *Family of Carlos IV*, Oil on canvas, 1800-1801.



Figure 5. Diego Velazquez, *Las Meninas*, Oil on canvas, 1656.



Figure 6. Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Oil on wood, 1524.



Figure 7. Francisco Goya, *Allegories of Commerce, Agriculture and Industry*; Painting, 1802-1804.