

The Secret of the Black Paintings

By ARTHUR LUBOW, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 27, 2003



Venerated as the first modern artist, Francisco Goya produced nothing more abrasively modern than the series of 14 images known as the Black Paintings, which a half-century after his death were cut from the walls of his country house on the outskirts of Madrid. Even today, when you come upon them in the sanitized confines of the Prado Museum, these nightmarish visions can unmoor you. An ancient crone grins ghoulishly over a bowl of food; a demonic figure whispers in the ear of a stooped old man; a midnight coven surrounds a goat-headed sorcerer; a dog raises its head forlornly; and, most famous of all, a raggedy-bearded man with bulging eyes devours a human form that is already reduced to red meat. Of this last iconic image -- called "Saturn," after the Titan who ate his children -- the art historian Fred Licht has written that it is as "essential to our understanding of the human condition in modern times" as Michelangelo's Sistine

Chapel ceiling is to our grasp of the 16th century.

So it made perfect sense that Scala Publishers, which specializes in art books and museum catalogs, would commission a book on Goya's Black Paintings. To write it, the editor, Antony White, signed up Juan Jose Junquera, a professor of art history at Complutense University in Madrid who is best known for his studies of 18th-century Spanish furnishings. A burly, gray-haired man, Junquera, 60, has made a career of tunneling through the labyrinthine Spanish archives. During the eight years that he researched his doctoral thesis, on the art of the court of Goya's royal patron, Charles IV, he spent five hours every weekday morning in the archives. "It is amusing," he says. "You can touch everyday life. Their way of eating, their way of dressing, their way of thinking -- their whole life is before your eyes." Having taken on the subject of Goya's Black Paintings, Junquera proceeded to scrutinize the documentary record. Before long, he realized that he had a problem.

The Black Paintings decorated the walls of the Quinta del Sordo, or "House of the Deaf Man," which Goya purchased in February 1819. (Although Goya was deafened by a near-fatal malady that struck in 1792, the house already bore this name when he bought it.) On Sept. 17, 1823, not long before the collapse of a short-lived liberal regime and the return of the reactionary King Ferdinand VII, Goya signed over the farmhouse, which was built in the late 18th century, to his only grandchild, Mariano. The next year, perhaps for political reasons (the word "perhaps" is attached to almost every detail of Goya's biography), the elderly artist left for France, where he resided until his death in 1828 in Bordeaux. The Black Paintings were neither commissioned nor sold, and during Goya's lifetime, no visitor reported seeing them. As a result, it is impossible to date them precisely. They are usually thought to have been created between 1820 and 1823. For a historian with Junquera's propensities, such vagueness is highly unsatisfactory. Indeed, it is an incitement to plunge back into the archives.



A self-portrait by the artist, top, and a portrait of Junquera, the skeptic.

Goya's purchase contract for the Quinta was not discovered until 1946, but since then it has been closely examined. So has the deed of transfer that Goya made to Mariano in 1823. When Junquera analyzed these documents and a description of the property at the time of Mariano's marriage in 1830, he reached a startling conclusion. In his reading, the bill of sale to Goya describes a residence of two low dwellings, only one-story high; the later account of Goya's renovations, which was made for Mariano's marriage settlement two years after the painter's death, does not mention the addition of another story. The Black Paintings were found on the Quinta's upper and ground floors. If the second story of the house was added after Goya's death, the researcher was forced to deduce that Goya did not paint the Black Paintings.

"I started to read what has been written about the Black Paintings," Junquera recalls in his small living room, crammed with books, bibelots and antique furniture, in the affluent Salamanca district of Madrid. "I found that it was something impossible." There are just two published sightings of the paintings by contemporaries of Goya. The first is the so-called Brugada inventory, compiled by Goya's friend Antonio de Brugada, a liberal Spanish painter who for political reasons fled Spain for Bordeaux in 1823. In the inventory, which was putatively written in the 1820's but not published until 1928, Brugada listed and recognizably described 15 paintings -- one more than are now known -- in the downstairs dining room and the salon above it. The second contemporary record of the Black Paintings is a magazine article published in 1838 by Valentin Carderera, an artist and collector, who recounted that in Goya's country retreat "there is hardly a wall that is not full of caricatures and works of fantasy, including the walls of the staircase."

The Brugada inventory and the Carderera account -- that's it. Except for two cursory appraisals by art specialists retained in the 1850's when the house was placed on the market, there is not one further word in the literature about the Black Paintings until the French art scholar Charles Yriarte described them, with accompanying engraved reproductions, in a book about Goya that he published in Paris in 1867. The public did not get to see them until the Baron d'Erlanger purchased the house and retained a painter and restorer, Salvador Martinez Cubells, to remove them from the walls. The Black Paintings were exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1878 and then donated to the Prado.



Poring over the Brugada inventory, Junquera concluded that it was a late-19th-century concoction. "The words are impossible at this moment in Spanish," he says. In particular, he found one clear ringer: the term *vargueño*, used to describe a writing desk in Goya's possession. As co-author of a large tome on Spanish furniture, Junquera has strong opinions about the subject. "Do you want to know what Corominas says?" he asks. He pulls from his crowded bookshelves a copy of the Short Etymological Dictionary of the Castilian Language, by Joan Corominas. Needless to say, it supports his claim. "I asked people who are working in philological research at the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas," he says excitedly. "In the 1870's, *vargueño* began to be used. Before that, it was a *papelera* or *escritorio*."

And the Carderera description of the Quinta, which states specifically that there was a staircase? Doesn't the presence of a staircase strongly suggest the existence of a second floor? "This house was a very humble house," Junquera says. "The staircase was only a very rustic one that went to the attic." The staircase in the two-story Quinta, as it appeared in the 1850's, was created either by Goya's son Javier or by Mariano. "It is very well described in the inventory," Junquera says, referring to a later accounting of the house in 1854 at the time of Javier's death. "It is of the kind we call an imperial staircase, with two flights. Carderera speaks of paintings in the staircase, but the notary documents describe only a big sculpture, a head of Goya, on the landing. That is all. No paintings." The wall paintings that Carderera described are not the Black Paintings, he says. They depicted "very happy subjects -- paintings of local customs, of people Goya knew," and at some point they were destroyed. "It was a very simple house," he says. "A house only to go to have lunch, and afterward you go back

to the city." Furthermore, if it was decorated with arresting images, why did none of Goya's associates mention them? "Nobody spoke about that, not one of his friends," Junquera says. "No one who was his friend in Bordeaux, nobody." His judgment: "These are fake paintings."

But what was Junquera to do? He had been commissioned to write a book about Goya's Black Paintings. "If the upper floors do not exist in Goya's time, of course it is not by Goya," he says. Nonetheless, he wrote the book, "The Black Paintings of Goya," which will be published later this summer. In it, he scatters out the evidence but refrains from concluding that the paintings are not Goya's. As a result of this deliberate lack of focus, most readers will undoubtedly overlook the author's iconoclastic view. Indeed, even his editor, Antony White, failed to spot it in the manuscript until Junquera alerted him to it. "It wasn't enormously welcome as a discovery, but it was totally respected," White says dryly. And he responded to Junquera with a question of his own: "If he didn't, who did?"

Junquera was prepared for that reaction. Once he became convinced that the work could not be by Goya, he ran down the roster of likely suspects before finally arriving at the name of the one painter who had full access to the Quinta and knowledge of the master's oeuvre and technique. All the markers pointed in one direction: Goya's son Javier. "I think he did this for pleasure," Junquera says. But why were they then passed off as Goyas? Continuing down this trail of supposition to identify the person who stood to profit most from the subterfuge, Junquera zeroed in on the grandson -- Javier's only son, Mariano. A profligate who was chronically in need of funds, Mariano could fetch a higher price for the house if he passed off wall decorations, which he knew to be his father's, as originals by the great Goya.



Broadly speaking, art historians determine the attribution of a painting in two ways: historical documentation or physical examination. While any scholar will claim to employ both methods, that's a bit like professing to be completely ambidextrous. Through temperament, training or talent, each art historian tends to tilt toward the archive or the canvas. When Junquera, the consummate archivist, fingered Javier as the probable painter of the Black Paintings, he was following the lead of another, far more prominent, Goya specialist who had approached the shadowy Javier by the alternate route of connoisseurship. Examining other paintings supposedly by Goya, Juliet Wilson-Bareau, a London-based independent scholar who has been writing about the artist for more than 30 years, grew certain that many were not authentic. "One cast around for other people who could have painted them," she explains. "Initially, the only clues, if you like, for another person or painter substituting himself for Goya was Javier."

Javier was suspect because he had both access and motive. Yet his artistic credentials are at best sketchy. No known work exists, only a paper trail of documents -- and a very short trail at that. In 1803, Goya donated the copperplates of his "Los Caprichos" etchings to the king in return for an annual allowance to permit Javier to travel abroad to further his artistic education. Two years later, Javier listed "painter" as his profession on his marriage certificate. There is no further mention of Javier's artistic career until Yriarte, in his book published 13

years after Javier's death, noted that a painting had been removed from the walls of the Quinta; the painting, he said, was thought to be by Javier, not by Goya. That work has never been identified. In recent years, as more information has surfaced about Goya's associates, another possibility has occurred to art historians. Perhaps Javier, who was an avid businessman -- "If it was possible to sell his mother, he would have," Junquera remarks -- benefited from the trafficking of spurious Goyas without painting them.

Wilson-Bareau says that she has not studied the Black Paintings and is not prepared to comment on their authenticity. But in recent years, she has challenged the authorship of several prominent paintings attributed to Goya, including the "Majas on a Balcony," in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and "The Colossus" and "The Milkmaid of Bordeaux," both owned by the Prado. Her arguments -- based on composition, brushwork, underpainting (as seen in X-rays) as well as documents -- are convincing, and the Metropolitan has downgraded its attribution of the "Majas." While the Prado has not done likewise, its senior curator of 18th-century painting, Manuela Mena, seems to feel that Wilson-Bareau may be right. But Wilson-Bareau cautions that it is easier to disattribute than to reattribute. "I never really said Javier painted them," she says. "I said he might have."



A scholar who relies primarily on a close examination of artworks bumps up against a serious obstacle in the Black Paintings. Everyone agrees that what we see today is at best a crude facsimile of what Goya painted. Nigel Glendinning, a professor emeritus at the University of London who has been writing about Goya for more than 40 years, did groundbreaking work on the probable arrangement of the paintings on the walls of the Quinta. Studying photographs by J. Laurent that are thought to date from the 1860's, he has also compared what we see now with what existed before Martinez Cubells, in the 1870's, hacked the pictures off the walls and attached them to canvas. "It is not surprising that the restoration included extensive changes and a lot of repainting," Glendinning says. X-ray examination reveals very different images under some of the Black Paintings, adding to the uncertainty. "There is all kind of scope in regard to the Black Paintings for rather reserved judgment," he remarks. "But I believe Junquera is the first person to say in print they are not by Goya."

Although he hasn't read the book, Glendinning responded vehemently to an article by Junquera in the April issue of *Descubrir el Arte*, a Madrid-based arts magazine. Junquera wrote the article to "move things along," because he was convinced that White, after meeting with Prado officials in March, had decided to delay or stop publication of his book. Both the publisher, Scala, and the Prado deny it. "There was no intention of not publishing the book," White says. Gabriele Finaldi, an associate director at the Prado, concurs: "It's absurd. I didn't even suggest changing a comma." In the magazine, Junquera abandoned all discretion and flatly announced that Goya could not have created the Black Paintings.

"I'm totally unconvinced by it, because I've read all the documents he is using," Glendinning says. "Inevitably, a lot of this is hypothetical, but his hypotheses don't in the least convince me. My view would be that the documents don't actually say whether the house had two stories or one." The philological evidence regarding the Brugada inventory also underwhelms him: "History of the language isn't an exact science. What people do is find the earliest reference they can. People don't go looking for these technical terms used for furniture." While Glendinning agrees that the grand staircase in the Quinta was added after Goya's death, he emphasizes that Carderera reports seeing wall paintings and that the earlier staircase presumably led to a second story. The missing testimony of Goya's friends? They were mostly old men who died at about the same time he did. Junquera insists that Glendinning fails to understand the rustic nature of the Quinta and thinks that "a country

house in Spain is like a manor house in Surrey." He says, dismissively, "Glendinning knows nothing about the decoration of the 18th century."

In this tempest, with documents flying back and forth as thick as confetti, the paintings themselves are easily obscured. Before leaving Madrid, I visit the Black Paintings one more time at the Prado. Certain crudenesses that I had previously overlooked -- the clawlike hands and blotchy landscape of "The Fates and Their Creation," for instance -- glare out at me now. Also obvious is the heavy blackness, so fashionable in the late 19th century. Surely it is the legacy of the restorer and has nothing to do with Goya. But the images, even Junquera admits, are "something very strange for the 19th century, a kind of painting that has never been seen before." Could they really be the work of Javier? As Glendinning notes, "There are no signed paintings by the son, and most of his life he described himself as a capitalist or landowner or farmer, not as a painter!"

Whenever the attribution of a famous work of art is questioned, its aura of authenticity flickers like a faulty light bulb. In a museum, we gaze reverently at the slightest doodle of an artist in the pantheon; we stride impatiently past the canvas of an unknown painter or, far worse, a work bearing the damning label "School of -----." In the case of the Black Paintings, this curatorial certification is compounded by a biographical mystique: the aged, deaf, misanthropic artist painted these unearthly images as his companions in a hermetic rural retreat. So, in addition to bearing a great-artist sticker, the Black Paintings come with a narrative of the most compelling sort. Like van Gogh's crow-haunted fields and Pollock's twisted skeins of paint, Goya's Black Paintings are popularly believed to be the outflow of a tormented great soul. A reattribution would strip away their pained sincerity along with their authenticity.

With a newly skeptical eye, I walk among the three galleries that hold the Black Paintings and find myself drawn less to the grotesque "Saturn" than to the disconsolate "Dog," which gazes like a character in a Beckett play toward a vast emptiness to the right. "The Dog," like several other Black Paintings, is a classic of modern art. "There is not a single contemporary painter in the world that does not pray in front of 'The Dog,'" Manuela Mena observes. As I stand before it, I think of a story she recounted. The painter Joan Miro, in the last year of his life, paid a final visit to the Prado, and Mena was assigned to escort him through the museum. When she asked him what he would like to see, he said, "I want to see 'The Dog' of Goya." He sat in front of it for half an hour. Then she asked if he wanted to look at anything else, and he had her take him to "Las Meninas" of Velazquez, which is perhaps the most revered painting in the world. "For him, 'The Dog' and 'Las Meninas' were of the same level intensity," Mena said. She looked at me challengingly. "We cannot send 'The Dog' to the museum basement because it was on the apparently nonexistent second floor of the Quinta."

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