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book review of

Goya: The Witches and Old Women Album edited by Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Stephanie Buck

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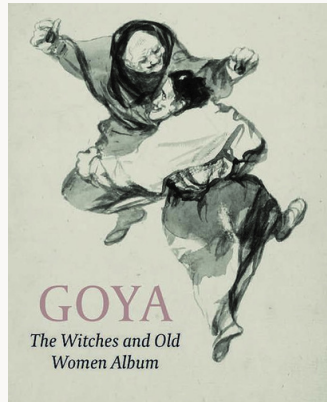
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Juliet Wilson-Bareau and Stephanie Buck, eds.,

Goya: The Witches and Old Women Album.

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The lavishly illustrated catalogue, *Goya: The Witches and Old Women Album*, accompanied an exhibition with the same title held in the Courtauld Gallery in February–May 2015. Exhibitions in the Courtauld Gallery typically focus on a number of works never previously assembled together with some related works. At least one work is customarily owned by the Courtauld collection. This exhibition reunited for the first time the surviving drawings of one of Francisco Goya’s eight private albums, which, after the artist’s death, were taken apart, reassembled in completely different volumes and later placed in other collections. Twenty-two drawings (one is from the Courtauld collection) were gathered from about a dozen public and private collections.

Of the more than 1800 works by Goya (1746–1828), approximately half are drawings, roughly a third of which are preparatory drawings for tapestry cartoons, frescoes, and prints; the other two thirds are individual drawings once contained in eight bound notebooks or “albums” that Goya made from around 1794, soon after his convalescence from a severe illness that left him deaf, until his death in 1828. In 1958, Eleanor Sayre lettered the albums from A to H to designate their chronological order (since then, they have been re-ordered). Dated to circa 1819–23, Album D or the “Witches and Old Women” album originally comprised twenty-three drawings (one is now lost) titled and numbered by Goya. The drawings display one to four figures on a blank sheet with almost no spatial details. The figures, mostly of old women, float in or fall from the air, walk with a cane, sit at a table or lie asleep on the ground, fight with or tempt one another, and play tambourines or castanets. By means of these activities, and in a tone wavering between mockery and the lugubrious, the album displays emotions of joy, mirth, fear, despondence, forlornness, and anger. The fantastic and diabolical elements so prominent in Goya’s oeuvre permeate these drawings as well. Imagination, fantasy, and dreams are expressed in such titles as *Nightmare*, *Dream of Flogging* and—articulating the irrational thoughts of the old crone depicted—*What Folly, Still to be Thinking of Marriage*. The old women in the album, such as the one talking to her cat or those floating in the air, may represent witches, but in the absence of the witchcraft

paraphernalia like broomsticks or wax figurines, only three crones can be definitely identified as witches: the one who is apparently about to consume a child in *Wicked Woman*, the one who carries dead infants dangling from a stick in *Dream of a Good Witch*, and a third who is unambiguously entitled *Mother Celestina*, the old procuress and witch from Fadrique Alemán de Basilea's famous comedy published in 1499 who became the archetypal Spanish bawd.

The collaboration between curators and art historians has proved to be rewarding here. Edited by the celebrated Goya specialist Juliet Wilson-Bareau and the curator of drawings at the Courtauld Gallery Stephanie Buck, the exhibition catalogue opens with three essays that reassess and contextualize the place of the Album D drawings in Goya's biography, oeuvre, and cultural milieu. A fourth essay provides a reconstruction of the album's sequence and an in-depth technical analysis conveniently summarized in a table describing the media, the inscriptions, and the condition of each drawing. The series of essays ends with a comprehensive record of the provenance of each drawing, where it was exhibited, and the relevant literature. The catalogue raisonné consists of the album's twenty-two drawings reproduced in their actual size (to which the size of the book conforms) plus twenty-seven related graphic works by Goya.

The first essay by Wilson-Bareau, "Dreams and Visions: Of Witches and Old Women," introduces the albums, and in particular Album D, relating the circumstances of their creation, chronology, technical, and stylistic characterization, meaning and fate after Goya's death. The seeds of Album D are traced to as early as the 1790s, when Goya depicted the subject of witchcraft in diverse media—drawings in Album B (ca. 1795), cabinet paintings for the Duke and Duchess of Osuna (1798) and, most famously, etchings in the *Caprichos* series (1799). For Goya, the imaginary realm of witchcraft served as "a way of conveying through caricature a critique that could not be openly expressed in a society controlled by the Church and the ever vigilant officers of the Inquisition" (16). As for the meaning of the drawings, Wilson-Bareau argues that they remain for the most part incomprehensible due to numerous obstacles to interpretation: the absence of detailed settings, the inexplicable gestures, the enigmatic captions, the lack of a rigorously systematic development among the drawings, the abrupt interruption of briefly coherent sequences, the inability to know if the order of numbering corresponds to the order in which the drawings were produced, and the changes of conception shown by marks of obliteration in the figures and captions. The essay concludes with a meticulous account of the albums' hectic and obscure afterlife in the decades following Goya's death, from the time they were dismantled and reassembled into three tomes after 1828 by Goya's son, Javier, to the 1860s when they were made into three completely different volumes by the artist Federico de Madrazo.

In the second essay, "Goya's Prints among his Drawings," Mark McDonald chronologically outlines the thematic and stylistic intersections between Goya's prints and drawings—both the preparatory studies for prints and the individual drawings in the albums—throughout his career. The similarities include subject matter, effects of light and shade, added captions, mutual motifs and compositions, and the difficulty of deciphering their meaning. To underline Goya's dynamic creative process, McDonald points to the differences between a few prints and their analogous drawings, but he makes no attempt to explain the possible motives for these differences. If, for example, "[t]he drawings record private thoughts,

whereas the prints were very much Goya's public statement" (32), how does this factor shed light on the differences between two of the works that he compares—*Devout Profession* from the *Caprichos* and its early version (but not preparatory study), *Witches, Go Fly*, in Album B? Another unsubstantiated statement concerns Goya's first experiments with lithography in 1819. McDonald recognizes a thematic and technical parallelism between the lithographs and the Album D drawings, which were created around the same time, but fails to supply specific examples (these, however, are provided by Wilson-Bareau). The fact that the essay recapitulates information and ideas previously published suggests that McDonald had in mind the general reader, who will no doubt benefit from this authoritative overview.

The impenetrability of meaning asserted by Wilson-Bareau and McDonald is impressively surmounted by Reva Wolf in the third essay, "Folly, Magic and Music in Goya's Album D." Wolf does not endow the drawings with a clear-cut narrative or allegory, but weaves a multifaceted web of cultural associations, visual and textual analogies, and metaphors that promote an open-ended reading. Beyond discussing the place of Album D in Goya's oeuvre, her analysis situates it within a broad cultural spectrum. This approach is immediately apparent when the reader flips the pages of the book and realizes that only in her essay are there images other than Goya's. Consider, for example, the drawing *Locura (Madness)* of a man with a fool's cap gesturing towards the viewer while positioned frontally behind a rail. As Wolf convincingly shows, this figure is a composite of a preacher and a fool drawn from at least three sources: the eponymous character of a pretentious preacher in Padre Isla's mid-eighteenth-century satirical novel *Historia del famoso predicador Fray Gerundio de Campazas*; an illustration in the eighteenth-century French edition of Desiderius Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* of a preacher standing in a railed pulpit (his fool's cap was modified by Goya to evoke a bishop's miter); and the gesticulating personification *Loquacità* in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*. The fact that Goya drew on *In Praise of Folly* and *Fray Gerundio*, books banned by the Inquisition but printed for a short time when the Inquisition was abolished, suggests that the drawing was intended as criticism of the Inquisition.

For Wolf, ambiguity is a key concept in Album D. This is demonstrated by the multivalent layers of signification, including metaphors and double entendres, in the opening sequence of four drawings that feature airborne men and women. These drawings allude to witchcraft through their parallelism to the record of a seventeenth-century Inquisition trial in Logroño, published with annotations by Goya's friend, the playwright Leandro Moratín in 1811. This account reports witches dancing on the Sabbath to the sounds of tambourines and castanets and flying in the air while playing musical instruments—a description that bears a striking resemblance to the opening four drawings. On another level of meaning, Goya's airborne musicians invokes the metaphorical connection of the Spanish word *aire* with music, a connection reverberating, for instance, in the *bolero*, a type of dance invented in the 1780s whose name derived from *volar*, "to fly," spelled *bolar* at the time. The allusion of these drawings to the musical *aire* may also have a biographical dimension. Deprived of hearing, Goya depicted musicians in the air as a witty solution of translating "an aural phenomenon into a visual encounter, as if to make concrete what he could experience only in his mind" (49). Given that *tímpano*, or eardrum, was described in an eighteenth-century Spanish dictionary as containing a membrane "stretched and taut like that of a tambour," the torn membrane of the tambourine played by the airborne woman in *Suben alegres (They Ascend Joyfully)* perhaps signifies deafness. Lastly, the sexual innuendo that has been detected in *Suben alegres*—the torn membrane was interpreted as a sign of sexual penetration—is

reinforced by Wolf, who points out that *suben* (ascend) is a euphemistic word for sexual intercourse. Pervaded with ambiguity, the airborne figures mirror the uncertainty and the unknown in early nineteenth-century Spain but, as Wolf proposes, they also echo the emotional state of viewers confronted with Album D: they remain “in the air” with regard to the exact meaning of the drawings.

In the catalogue entries, Edward Payne introduces each drawing with a vivid and precise description. But, here too, the drawings are juxtaposed only with Goya’s works, so perhaps giving the non-scholarly reader the impression that Goya merely recycled earlier works to create these drawings and that Album D primarily evokes the aged artist’s idiosyncratic personality and mental state (he made this album in his seventies). Payne does include some cultural and social insights of previous scholars on other works by Goya, but, however relevant they are, they leave the reader wondering what distinguishes Album D from his previous works. Although any reading of these enigmatic drawings must be conjectural, a more daring path of interpretation that transcends a safe comparison with Goya’s other works would be in keeping with the very essence of these drawings, which spark an open discussion and involve the viewer in an experimental game of interpretation.

Apart from the inadequate place given to the interpretive possibilities of the drawings, this catalogue is a valuable contribution to Goya scholarship that sheds light on the artist’s creative process and provides a model for further investigation of the other albums. Indeed, one can only hope that this landmark project will encourage galleries and museums to reunite the dispersed drawings of Goya’s other albums so that his drawings will command greater attention, at least equal to that given to his prints.

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