

# Goya's bold portraits are the show of the decade

Review

## Goya

National Gallery

★★★★★

By Mark Hudson

**F**rancisco Goya was the greatest Spanish painter of the 18th and early 19th century, a man whose extraordinary works depicted everything from royalty – he was court painter – to major historical events, to the artist's personal nightmares. His technique influenced generations of artists, among them Manet and Picasso. Next week, the National Gallery unveils the exhibition of the year: a show devoted to Goya's portraiture, consisting of 70 paintings on loan from across the world. This is arguably the most exciting temporary display at the gallery since the one devoted to Goya's great Spanish predecessor Diego Velázquez in 2006. Here our critic gives an exclusive preview of the exhibition.

THE walls of the National Gallery's Sainsbury Wing can feel sparsely filled for old master exhibitions. Even last year's stupendous Rembrandt show was eked out with large numbers of prints and drawings.

Nobody, however, will be making such complaints about this exhibition. The basement galleries are packed, not only with fantastic paintings, but with the personalities that dominated Spain during the Napoleonic era: the powerful, the beautiful, the brilliant and the downright stupid.

Goya's portraits aren't at first sight one of the most radical aspects of a career for which he was hailed retrospectively as the first modern artist, encompassing the still-horrifying *Disasters of War* and the nightmarish Black Paintings. But he is nonetheless considered one of the greatest portrait painters of all time,

and this breathtaking exhibition gives a good idea why.

The first room is dominated by an early tour de force, *The Family of the Infante Don Luis De Bourbon*, in which the elderly prince plays solitaire, apparently oblivious to the surrounding crowd of courtiers, while his much younger wife looks out at us from the centre of the life-size spot-lit composition.

It isn't the most refined piece of painting ever executed but it positively crackles with human energy.

Some early aristocratic commissions have a slightly woolly, by-the-yard quality. *The Duke and Duchess of Osuna and Their Children* look like wide-eyed oversized puppets. Goya seems far more interested in two suave and sharp-eyed young men, the Duke of Alba and the Marquess of San Adrian, captured in swaggering, full-length portraits. Goya had an enviable and slightly scary ability to make people look highly intelligent, as he does with these two, and extremely stupid, as in his portrait of the big-jawed Ferdinand VII.

Another inspired pairing are the seated portraits of two politician-intellectuals, the world-weary Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos and Francisco de Saavedra, looking flinty-eyed into the middle distance, both painted with a free-flowing, almost impressionistic touch. As a supporter of liberal reform, Goya would have felt more relaxed

with these representatives of the Spanish Enlightenment than the members of Spain's feudal aristocracy, though one of the latter, the flamboyant Duchess of Alba, is popularly believed to have been his mistress. If the highly impressive full-length portrait included here is not



especially flattering it's impossible to know if that indicates familiarity or

simply a dispassionate concern for the visual facts.

Goya is often seen as an artist for the boys, with his war, gore and plentiful portraits of his intellectual cronies – some of the best of which are included here. But there are also two exquisitely sensitive portraits of young women, Therese-Louise de Sureda and Antonia Zarate, both radiating a melancholy sensuality that feels very Spanish.

The exhibition's parting salvo is the rarely seen *Self-Portrait with Doctor Arrieta*, on loan from Minneapolis, in which the artist, apparently delirious, has medicine administered by the slightly sinister medic as a group of dimly lit figures watch from the background.

This is the great revolutionary painter, the precursor of Expressionism, aged 74, by now stone-deaf and by repute half mad, but sharp enough to watch his own demise with the same unpitying, but all too-human gaze with which he observed the great events and personalities of his time.

This is genuinely one of the shows of the decade, revealing an artist whose unflinching portrayals of humanity still feel risky 200 years on.

*'Goya: The Portraits' is at the National Gallery from Wednesday until Jan 10 2016. Details: 020 7747 2885; nationalgallery.org.uk*



**Unflinching portrayals: Top, Joaquina Tellez-Giron, Marquise of Santa Cruz. Above, The Family of the Infante Don Luis De Bourbon, an early tour de force. Both in the National Gallery's show**

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