

## LA MAGIA DEL AMBIENTE

“La Magia del Ambiente”, an expression often used by Goya, describes an element which contributes vitally to the power of his work, and which seems to provide a kind of bridge between intentions and realizations. It is something which has to be with the painting from the beginning if it is to give it its character at the end. And it is something which requires a complete openness or respect from the artist if it is to help him. Different artists talk about it in different ways. Delacroix for instance refers to it in his journal as being something indigenous in his rapid oil sketches, watercolours and drawings and felt that the spontaneity and life of these was replaced by the resonance of more worked and finished paintings. In the best paintings of both artists there is a prevailing ambiance which influences the way one perceives everything present. From the painter’s side each element would in turn fall under the spell of this “Magia” whether one refers to the consistency of light, or the psychological effect of a figures presence, and the way different elements work together. Every consideration can be tackled without conscious concern for its rightness and with great confidence. In other words everything a painter needs will come naturally to that painting if the artist will allow the doors to remain open. And Goya leaves some very wide doors open, Compassion for and observation of his subject, with his imagination to adapt materials and forms, realize his intensely real vision.

The challenging scale of the paintings in La Ermita de San Antonio de La Florida (1798) in the context of Goya’s work meant that he had to adapt existing Fresco/Tempera methods into being his equivalent of ink drawing and oil painting, in order that this “Atmosphere” should be a natural quality of the murals; felt in all parts of the work. His technical innovations can be really appreciated from the temporary scaffolding, and it is still possible to see the drips of very wet and thin paint from the preliminary stages. These are invisible from beneath due to a projecting architectural moulding, but from above give a sense of being in Goya’s studio which it was for 2 or 4 months. With the platform in place again it is possible to imagine more clearly the working conditions and the same autumn light in which he had worked. In the same way I feel it would be a revelation to be able to see the so-called “Black Paintings” still on the walls of Goya’s house, ‘ La Quinta del Sordo” with the atmosphere they must have there.

One would have originally entered the Ermita by a small, south facing door and seen that Goya had painted all the surfaces above the level of the Corinthian columns. And these surfaces are divided up by a white cornice at the base of the dome. The framing effect of these white elements allows the individual areas of painting to be seen very distinctly.

From the door looking up, one would see the side of the dome with the main characters of the miracle Goya was to depict. The miracle here is that a young priest brought back to life a murdered man, to prove the innocence of the priest’s father who was on trial for the crime. Around these figures gather an excited crowd, amongst which is a figure

thought to be the true murderer as he is seen to turn away in haste. It is atypical for miracles to be performed in self-interest, and Goya's treatment of this theme comes from his understanding of how people would react. Apart from the halo on the priest, Goya avoids the supernatural and saintly melodrama. But he emphasizes that it is a miracle instead by showing that it is performed by a simple priest who is not seen as a servant of God so much as a man responsible to himself and his own belief. It is a miracle seen within ordinary reality, and like Goya's visions within reality, has all the more credibility and power. Furthermore it is understood by Goya rather than illustrated by him.

Opposite the priest is the figure known as "El Extatico" and like the priest he is also raised above the general level of the crowd. Between these two figures going around the painted wooden parapet, the figures are hung in gentle arcs which echo the soft landscape behind. I like the simplicity and frankness with which he shows the scene. It is a cross section of "Madrileño" society composed of characters one still might find here. All the figures, even the more obscure ones, are seen as individuals. They are distinct from each other and Goya contrasts rich with poor, grotesque with beautiful, to stress that a crowd is always a group of people, each with their own "self". He pours his knowledge of humanity into their faces without censorship. "Wonder" is at the forefront, but "indifference" is also there. Writers on the subject (Hans Rothe for example) have been tempted to suggest names for them to distinguish one from the other: Celestina, Beatifico, El Mendigo Desdentado, or Una Bella Huri, and they have done so because the figures' individuality is so inviting. "Celestina" is one of Rothe's suggestions and I think it likely although there is no evidence that Goya labeled her himself. In Spanish literature she is known as a mysterious go-between for illicit lovers and appears nine times in Goya's "Los Caprichos" (1799), the year after the work in the Ermita. Perhaps as her name suggests, she is a celestial intermediary standing without surprise by the now vacant shroud.

This quality of a nameable crowd might be simply an illustrative device if it were not supported by Goya's powerful ability to create an atmospheric presence to which all the figures contribute in a natural way. He also uses the actual building to affect this atmosphere. This is done by a very sophisticated and at the same time playful use of light and space, united with the painting in the dome by the wooden railing which is a device to blend the illusionistic space with the real architectural space.

Before there was any decoration, he would have seen the bare walls of the new building lit by small windows at the sides and by a cupola with windows at the top of the dome. The dome would appear light at the top and darker towards its base. The other windows would light the aisle but create shadows in amongst the niches and other architectural forms where Goya also had to paint. It appears as though he worked in harmony with the light and architecture and not against it. In the dome he has kept the upper part very pale and the darker parts are towards the bottom. In decoration of the rest of the surfaces, the natural shadows are cast where Goya has created illusionary ones. This conserves light and gives all his figures a sense of belonging to where he has placed them. The angels and cupids are painted as if supporting a huge awning which works as an illusionistic ceiling on the true ceiling of the Ermita. Again he is in

harmony with the setting. He is not creating the illusion that there is not a ceiling where there is one, or that there is light where there is not. This is a very beautiful balance.

Neither is he using contrasting direction in the composition, except within small areas. He avoids sweeping arabesques and weightlessness. The shroud from the resurrected man does not flutter in the breeze, but hangs very still in the form of a crescent. Its minimal restraint offers no clue that Tiepolo had been so influential in Spanish church paintings only a few years before. Tiepolo had painted the ceilings in the new Royal Palace during the 1760's with many other commissions in Spain at that time. Until his death in Madrid in 1770 and for years after, he was by far the strongest influence. The Neo- Classical interior of San Antonio de la Florida is quite simple and suits the restraint in Goya's paintings.

He also breaks with tradition by putting "secular" above "divine". He uses angels, but they are his own kind. They are more like women dressed as angels; beautiful but not ethereal. Like ostriches, they have wings but they do not fly. Some cupids do fly and support a heavily embroidered cloth which they draw back as if reveal the great source of light in the dome. But the angels stand in the play of light and dark on ledges and in corners, and their gazes and gestures take ones attention to the miracle above. The idea of the canopy gives Goya a way to tie together the twelve areas he was to paint, without using sky effects which would reduce the effect of the sky in the dome. At the same time it allows him to use subtle spatial contradictions and soft complexities in the drapery, within the hard but simple architectural frames. Unfortunately there are no studies extant of these twelve areas: 4 lunettes, 4 vaults and 4 spandrels but perhaps Goya did prepare something as there preliminary marks in the plaster itself.

There are some studies for his first thoughts of how to treat the dome, and these reveal a gradual refinement of the final form. Given the fact that the finished work is regarded as a vital turning point, the germination of these ideas is very significant, The most interesting and the least refined is in private collection in Spain and I have only seen it in books ( 27 x 38 cm). It's a seed for the work in the church, miniature and compressed but containing all the elements within its cells. A visual note that Goya possibly made after reading the text. It is a solid visualization of the atmosphere that Goya was to hold on to while painting later on. On the right one can see the body being disinterred which only appears here and in the text. On the other hand the priest on the study and the finished work are remarkably similar. The resurrected man is shown still on the shroud and Goya separates them later, as he has with the angels who are separated with the scene entirely in final form. In this studies crudeness is also its potency and it's from this that his whole concept grew. With this Goya creates a bridgehead into something new and by being so loyal to the mood in the small work, successfully cultivates the same ambience in the finished work.

Until 1961, when a large scale study was discovered (55 x 266 cm) in Paris ( now in the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburg), theories about his planning were much more speculative. It is a thorough development o the small study, and done to scale with all the figures around the parapet.

It is clear from this that he had the image very much mapped out, except for the final consideration of foreshortening, or for example, the exact scale of the parapet and spacing of vertical railings (71 in the study, 81 in the mural). The extent to which he used this planning can be illustrated if one looks carefully at any one figure. The lefthand side of "Celestina" is an example and typifies the kind of changes Goya felt were necessary when the work was underway. In the study we can see the head standing quite upright and the left hand of the cloak meets the shroud on the bannister. In the finished work the overall shape of this figure is more compressed in a vertical plane for reasons of foreshortening, and the shroud now appears to be to the right. Closer inspection shows the lines actually in the plaster which corresponds to the drawing in the study. These lines can be observed throughout the figures in the dome, and the example of "Celestina" is typical. Goya also had to change the perspective of the hand rail from that in the study, thickening one's view of the underneath so that it appears correct from below. For the same reasons the figures have become generally more squat, and their gestures less exaggerated.

I imagine that a very early stage the study was scaled up from 1:6.5 to 1:1, some kind of rough tracing to form a cartoon, and the principle lines applied from this to the wet plaster. This was essential to keep the figures proportioned around the circumference of the dome. Someone would have calculated the correct ratio to ensure that the two ends of this cartoon met fairly precisely when placed around the dome. The cartoon would have been used in stages as the plaster was not applied in one go, and apparently there are parts where the pigment has been applied in true fresco, to the wet plaster. Goya needed some indications permanently fixed on the wall as his first layers would have been as widely painted as possible. There are black (tierra negra) masses under the figures here, most dark at the bottom, and very thinly applied. On the list of materials bought by Goya for this commission is one and three quarters pounds of sponges and a quantity of buckets which were no doubt used from this stage on.

With the plastering completed, the work must have resembled one of his looser ink and wash drawings. Solid shapes corresponding to the general tones of the study. The landscape and sky were completed carefully to disguise the joins between the plastering of each "jornada" or day's work, but at this stage the work would have looked virtually monochromatic, perhaps using stains of light and dark ochre, and a dark brown called *sombra de Venecia*, to create some of the depths within the figures. Some of the passages in which he needed light, luminous tones, he left as bare plaster, as he would leave the paper in an ink drawing, to reflect light through the warmer tones of the glazes applied later. But unlike an ink drawing he also used of opaque pale colors to create light as well.

He was then able to work freely around the entire work in the dome, gradually introducing purer colours. He built the figures up over the dark under-painting finishing up with the strongest contrasts, and here the most impasto areas are found as around "una bella huri". The arrangement of figures around the railing flows in twists with the figures looking across the space. The purer colours are usually isolated from each other by neutral ones. This way he gives particular importance to certain characters, and the Vermillion, Indigo, Carmines and Yellows balance each other across the dome.

Being very close to the painted surface gives one the impression that Goya decided to work as quickly as possible, especially in the last stages; creating faces with the merest of marks, no more than a flick or smudge and always at speed. These appear as one might expect to see if one was looking at his ink drawings with a magnifying glass. Shapes without sense unless seen in situ and at a distance. Everything obvious is omitted, the mouth of “una bella huri”, for example. The directness of graffiti in Goya’s handwriting, without a care for existing convention, then, makes this one of his most remarkable large works.

It’s interesting to note that the “Black Paintings” were also painted directly on the wall within architectural confines. On that occasion he created the opportunity privately, and at a most introspective moment. There is something permanent about working directly on the plaster and perhaps he remembered his feelings while working in the church twenty years before. Although they are finished as oil paintings it’s most likely that they are started as tempera as he used in the Ermita.

The scene around the dome also relates to other dimensions of his life’s work. The crowds form the bullring in the “Tauromaquia” 1816, or “El Balcon” 1810, and it seems one finds faces found in other paintings form throughout his life. One could say that the “Bogey Man” is there, “The milkmaid of Bordeaux”, the nobility, the blind, the toothless and the wretched. Goya has given us a painting of faces and in each human reaction to an extraordinary event. A reaction which one feels is real, and it is this which above all gives life to the work. Facial expression is fleeting and Goya’s treatment of the work as a whole is done in this spirit. For this to be felt from beneath, he has had to work very freely and fast not to lose the momentum needed. He has perceived the degree to which, from beneath, our imagination can complete forms which from the scaffolding appear incredibly open. And of course they are not intended to be seen closely at all. Strong forms allowed to live by simplifying their pictorial elements. More refinement and detail might not be immediately noticed, but the cost in spontaneity would be felt, and for this reason it is an incredibly direct work, and especially interesting in terms of the development of Goya’s self expression. As André Malraux commented about it, “A painting which illustrates a feeling which had been shared by many of the greatest painters but which nobody had dared express: the superiority of direct statement over symbolic representation; the right of the painter to draw and paint, not in order to create an illusion, nor in order to describe a scene, but to express himself.

*The frescos in the Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida are undergoing major restoration and cleaning and will not be open until 1993. Fortunately I obtained permission to see Goya’s painting from the scaffolding and this has only been possible 2 or 3 times since Goya was there. I would like to thank Juan Ruiz for creating this rare opportunity.*

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