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New discoveries enlighten an exhibition of Goya's portraits

National Portrait Gallery, London
by Martin Bailey | 01 October 15



Francisco de Goya, *The Family of the Infante Don Luis de Borbón*
(1783-84) © Fondazione Magnani Rocca, Parma, Italy

More than 60 of Francisco Goya's 150 portraits will be assembled at the National Gallery in London this month, offering a fresh perspective on the Spanish Romantic master's work. "Goya's portraits are portals into the different aspects of his mind and creativity," says Xavier Bray, the chief curator at the Dulwich Picture Gallery and the show's organiser.

Among the discoveries is a portrait of the aristocratic military officer Valentín Bellvís de Moncada y Pizarro (around 1795), which has never been exhibited and was known only from a small black-and-white photograph. The painting remained hidden in the sitter's family until it was recently sold privately to the construction billionaire Juan-Miguel Villar Mir.

Other key loans include the newly conserved portrait of the government minister Francisco de Saavedra (1798) from the Courtauld Gallery. Naturally, the National Gallery will be including its own Goya portrait of the Duke of Wellington (1812-14). It was famously stolen in 1961 and recovered four years later in a left-luggage office.

Foreshadowing Manet

The final picture in the show will be a highly personal portrait (around 1827) by the 81-year-old Goya of his 20-year-old grandson Mariano, painted in exile in France. It was offered at Sotheby's in 2013 (estimated at \$6m to \$8m), but failed to sell and was subsequently bought by the Meadows Museum in Dallas. It is Goya's last documented painting and Bray describes the style as "proto-Manet".

The gallery will also be holding a separate display on the portrait of Dña Isabel de Porcel, whose attribution to Goya is now being questioned. A statement says that the technical examination has been inconclusive, but the painting's brushwork "lacks Goya's customary subtlety".

What Bray most enjoyed about organising the show was seeing Goya's development. "In his early work he puts too much into his portraits, adding a narrative," he says. "But that goes away and then he goes straight for the face. It must have been a nerve-wracking experience to sit for Goya—he would look through your pretences."

By coincidence, the show is the first exhibition to open under the National Gallery's new director, Gabriele Finaldi, a Spanish and Italian specialist who was until August the director of collections at the Prado. As we went to press, most of the National Gallery was closed because of a strike by warding staff, but a spokeswoman says that the Goya show "will be totally unaffected, even if the strike continues".

Credit Suisse is the sponsor.

Goya: the Portraits, National Gallery, London, 7 October-10 January 2016