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Santa Fe's Goya exhibit: Here today, gone tomorrow

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BY ANNE Z. COOKE
McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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SANTA FE, N.M. - You have to ask yourself: Why is the current exhibit at the New Mexico Art Museum, in multicultural Santa Fe, attracting not just artists and scholars, but fans of the cartoonist's art (admirers of Gary Trudeau, Mike Luckovich and Rob Rogers)? Because Santa Fe is the only place in American where "Renaissance to Goya: Prints and Drawings from Spain," is on display. Ending a global tour that visited Madrid and Sydney, the show's last venue is in Santa Fe, where it remains through March 9.

And why, you might wonder, did I find a collection of black-and-brown scribbles compelling enough to make a hastily planned trip to Santa Fe to see them before they return to the archives in London's British Museum? Because the La Fonda Hotel on the Plaza, a museum down to its bones (and my heart's own home-away-from-home), was advertising a killer rate for two in a double room, plus a scrumptious breakfast and tickets to the exhibit.

But I would have gone anyway. First, the "Renaissance to Goya" exhibit is small enough to see all 132 pen-and-ink and chalk drawings and sketches in a morning and still have time to study them in detail. Some are quick and rough; others are "cartoons" (from "carte," meaning paper), designs drawn for tapestry weavers. Instead of cruising by, as one tends to do in a huge museum, I took my time, giving each one the same attention I pay to the political cartoons on the Los Angeles Times' opinion pages. Not surprisingly I came away with some clues as to how successful artists plan and complete their master works, those enormous oil paintings that cover entire walls.

When you compare two or three of Francisco Goya's preliminary sketches for a painting, you can almost see the way he thought. Playing with different layouts, he would try one angle and then another until he found the most effective way to record what he'd seen and felt. It's what you or I do - more or less - when we take a photograph, zooming in and crossing the street to avoid the ugly truck or telephone pole. Poets do it when they edit first drafts of poems. A look at the first draft of the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson, reveals lined-out words and substitute phrasing suggested by John Adams and Benjamin Franklin.

Equally intriguing - but in a different way - is the story of the collection itself, much of it assembled by Tomas Harris (also known as Thomas Harris), a British painter and draftsman, and - astonishingly - a MI5 double-agent for Britain during World War II. If it had been me, poking through second-hand book and print stores near the British Museum, I'd never have thought to search through the dusty stacks of tattered prints and etchings. But Harris, who knew what to look for, would have recognized them immediately. Ever on the hunt, he eventually built the largest collection of its kind. And the MI5 connection gives the story a certain zing. I like to imagine that his underground secret-agent life gave him special access to shady characters and hidden works of art. You think? After he died (in a car accident after the war) his collection went to the British Museum, where it lives in the archives.

Though half a dozen artists are represented here, the majority of works are by one of my favorites, painter and print-maker Goya (1746-1828). Living during one of Spain's most tumultuous eras, he witnessed - and recorded - brutal scenes of war, military sieges, random killings, drought and political repression. The prints he made in the last decades of his life, some printed in popular publications, wouldn't look amiss in tomorrow's newspaper. Roughly drawn with dark, harsh, quick strokes, they decry the horrors of modern war: denuded landscapes, mutilated corpses and starving peasants. Signaling the end of a long era of classical European art, they foreshadow both Impressionism and Expressionism.

IF YOU GO:

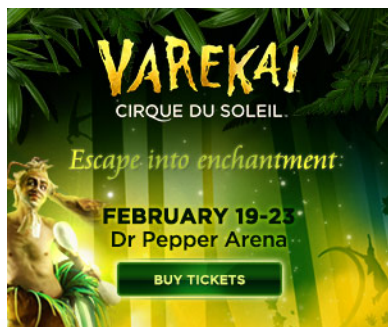
The "Renaissance To Goya" exhibit remains at the New Mexico Art Museum in Santa Fe through March 9. The museum is open every day except Monday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; entrance fees are \$9 for out-of-state residents and \$6 for New Mexico residents.

For lodging and dining information, go to www.santafe.org. Or stay where I do, at the historic La Fonda hotel, on the Plaza. Completely renovated from the plumbing to the plaster, the much-loved, art-decorated ground floor and lobby appear unchanged, and the guest rooms look as they did when architect Mary Coulter designed them in the late 1920s. Paintings, murals, sculpture, Pueblo pottery and Spanish colonial influences make sleeping and eating here an experience. The New Mexico Art Museum is a five-minute walk away. La Fonda's "Renaissance to Goya" hotel package starts at \$139 per night and includes breakfast for two in La Plazuela, La Fonda's the enclosed courtyard restaurant.



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