The Peninsular War pitted Spain (and her ally, England) against Napoleonic forces that by 1810 had occupied almost the entire country, as the emperor’s brother Joseph Bonaparte occupied the Spanish throne. The artist Francisco Goya y Lucientes, sixty-two years old at the outbreak of the war, remained in Madrid from 1809 onward. Discussions of his activity during this period focus almost exclusively on the etchings to become known as Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War) and on the paintings of the Second and Third of May 1808 created in 1814.

Goya’s creativity during these years was in fact far more wide-ranging, including satires and still-lifes as well as portraits of the French occupiers and the future Duke of Wellington. An examination of these works, set against the background of wartime Madrid, broadens our understanding of Goya’s war, and of the context for his iconic etchings and scenes of The Second and Third of May 1808.

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