

Out of Hours Exhibition

WICKED RENDERINGS

Francisco Goya: The Witches and Old Women Album

*The Courtauld Gallery, London,
25 February 2015–25 May 2015*

In his later life, Goya began a series of bound volumes of drawings and sketches, the individual images named and often numbered, the albums themselves left untitled, and all dismantled after Goya's death. In this extraordinary exhibition, inspired by a drawing in the Courtauld's own collection, brilliant analysis has enabled one of the books to be reconstructed. The 22 drawings are now presented in the order in

Francisco Goya (1746–1828). Regozijo (Mirth). 'Witches and Old Women' Album (D), page 4. c. 1819–1823. Brush, black and grey ink with traces of red chalk and scraping. 237 x 148 mm. New York, The Hispanic Society of America, A 3308.



which they filled the album, gathered from sources all over the world. The title of this show, *The Witches and Old Women Album* is a little crude and not that accurate, but in no way detracts from the brilliance of the hugely subtle use of line and wash that is Goya's medium. The 22 images, and the additional pieces that help to give the album its context, are sometimes compassionate and affecting, but also mercilessly satirical and often cruel. Above all, they indicate in Goya a most unappealing attitude to old women, whose foibles are treated far more unkindly than the decrepitude of old men.

The comparison that struck me was, weirdly, with Sir W S Gilbert. His libretti all contain a female character, sung by a contralto, whose delusions as to her own desirability and desperation for marriage are the source of much unkind humour. Compare Goya's drawings, *What folly still to be thinking of marriage, or Showing off? Remember your age* [from the *Black Border Album*]. And yet beside these one must set the simply wonderful and final drawing from the Album — *Just can't go on at the age of 98*, where the compassion for an ancient, bowed figure on two sticks, sex indeterminate, is almost heartbreaking, your pity aroused further by the placing of the figure at the bottom of an empty page, accompanied only by his



Francisco Goya (1746–1828). No puede ya con los 98 años (Just can't go on at the age of 98). 'Witches and Old Women' Album (D), page 23 c. 1819–1823. Brush, black and grey ink. 233 x 144 mm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, 84.GA.646.

shadow. It is one of those masterpieces that gives you goosebumps.

Frank Minns,
Retired Naval Officer.
E-mail: frank@c21gardens.com

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp15X685873