

69 *The very skillful Student of Falces, wrapped in his cape, tricks the bull with the play of his body*

Tauromaquia, plate 14

1816

Etching, aquatint, drypoint

Sheet 12 × 17½ in. (30.5 × 44.5 cm); plate 9⅞ × 13¾ in. (24.5 × 35 cm)

Inscribed at left: Goya. Numbered upper right: 14

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1921 (21.19.14)

Provenance: see cat. 66

References: Harris 1964, no. 217.III.1; Matilla and Medrano 2001, no. 14, pp. 63–65

In this print, Goya shows the legendary matador known as the “Student of Falces” (Bernardo Alcalde, born 1709) performing one of the death-defying feats that made him famous. In his treatise on bullfighting, Nicolás Fernández de Moratín described the matador as “diestrísimo” (very skillful); Goya’s use of the same adjective in the caption suggests that the text was a source for the print.¹ Contemporary authorities on bullfighting detailed tricks like the one Goya depicted here. In 1802, Josef de la Tixera wrote that the Student of Falces was astonishingly light and “dexterous beyond measure, especially in tricking the bulls . . . which he used to do as he spun in circles and without taking off his cloak.”² Another writer observed how, before conducting that move, the Student of Falces would draw a circle on the sand and manage to keep the bull inside it while pivoting until the animal tumbled.³ In old age, he regretted the reckless behavior of his younger days, according to Vargas Ponce’s *Disertación*, as techniques like using his own cloak as a cape brought him dangerously close to the bull’s horns.⁴

Goya illustrated the intensity of such a maneuver by setting both figures in an austere context, lightly indicating the outlines of the barrier and the onlookers. The focus of the image is the man and the bull, which Goya treated as a single compositional block moving in unison, the surface of their bodies animated by contrasting dark and light tones. Whereas the black appears saturated to the point of lightening, owing to overbiting in areas of the cloak and on the back of the animal, the highlights reveal the tonal ground of thin aquatint and the blank paper left in reserve.⁵

The prominent diagonal shadow created by the man and the bull and the areas of emptiness endow this work with an almost abstract quality. In addition to the central placement of the figures, a number of other details convey the impression of circular movement, including the swirling cape wrapping around the man’s leg, reworked in several stages to improve its legibility, and the lines indicating movement that radiate from the matador’s torso. Perhaps to lead the eye around the sheet and emphasize dynamic rotation, Goya placed his signature in an unusual position, vertically and at almost the left edge of the plate, superimposed over a mass of horizontal strokes that articulate the shade. FJRC

1. N. Fernández de Moratín 1777, n.p. See also López Izquierdo 1978, pp. 26–27. 2. “imponderablemente diestro, con singularidad en hacer recortes, ó quartéos á los toros, sin desembozarse de la capa”; Josef de la Tixera, *Las Fiestas de Toros* (Madrid, 1894), p. 23. 3. Lafuente Ferrari 1946, p. 195. 4. Vargas Ponce 1961, p. 222. 5. Garrido Sánchez 1989, p. 167.

