

**Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions & Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, 286 pp., 100 colour illustrations, \$55, ISBN: 9780226058535**

**Sebastián Ferrero**

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## Book Reviews

### Comptes-rendus de livres

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Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions & Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, 286 pp., 100 colour illustrations, \$55, ISBN: 9780226058535.



When they ascended the Spanish throne in 1700, the Bourbons significantly stimulated scientific inquiry by promoting and sponsoring botanical, geographic, and mineralogical expeditions to their overseas territories. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the number of expeditions greatly increased, in particular under the

reigns of Charles III and Charles IV. Through the mapping of these territories and the systematic classification of non-European specimens, the Spanish monarchy reformulated essential information about its territories based on scientific knowledge. The aim was to capitalize on the imperial economy, notably by marketing new commodities and transplanting botanical specimens from the overseas colonies to the metropolis.

Studies of scientific expeditions in the Hispanic Enlightenment have generally focused on political and economic aspects. Less explored, however—though not completely ignored, if we consider the works of Carmen Sotos Serrano, Antonio de Pedro Robles, or Marta Penhos, just to name a few<sup>1</sup>—is the copious visual production of these scientific enterprises. In *Visible Empire*, Daniela Bleichmar considers this specific aspect, studying the relationship between visual productions generated by botanical expeditions and the political, economic, artistic, social, and geopolitical issues underlying them. “Why did Hispanic naturalists and imperial administrators care so much about images—what work did visual materials do for them? What to make of these images, hybrids of art and science, and in some cases of European and American styles?” (p. 7). These are some of the questions the author attempts to answer throughout this magnificent, richly documented, and lavishly illustrated work.

Bleichmar’s book is comprised of five chapters and illustrated with a hundred colour images taken from European botanical treatises and Spanish scientific expeditions. Throughout these chapters, the author discusses how visibility and utility join together in Hispanic empire thinking; how images are used as a tool to train the gaze of naturalists; and how botanical images are involved in the commercial development of the Spanish empire. Bleichmar also examines the formal elements of the expe-

ditions’ botanical illustrations, such as different modes of composition, drawing, use of colour, and other aesthetic choices, in order to show what these images either reveal or fail to display.

The fruitful result of many years of research, *Visible Empire* collects and condenses many of Daniela Bleichmar’s previous publications.<sup>2</sup> The author revisits and revises much of her previous work through the lens of visual epistemology, providing multiple and original perspectives that address the question of the different acts of visualization involved in Spanish botanical expeditions and arguing that botanical images constituted the main stage of a very complex and multifaceted empirical process.

Bleichmar focuses her work on botanical expeditions conducted under the reigns of Charles III and Charles IV, during the last third of the eighteenth century and first decades of the nineteenth. In particular, she emphasizes the Royal Botanical Expeditions of Hipólito Ruiz and José Pavón to Chile and Peru (1777–88); of Celestino Mutis to the New Kingdom of Granada (1787–1803); of Martín Sessé and José Mariano Mocino to New Spain; and the scientific expedition led by Alejandro Malaspina through the vast territory of the Americas, Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand (1789–94). These expeditions together resulted in a total of twelve thousand images by more than seventy different artists.

In these expeditions, the use of images was essential to the work of naturalists, allowing them to compare and classify natural specimens and thereby transmit knowledge in the name of scientific progress. In many cases, images were, according to Bleichmar, the primary and most valuable tool of scientific expeditions, even more powerful than textual descriptions. Natural history illustrations were a way to “make visible” to the European public the natural reality of faraway territories.

The author argues that although visibility was, generally speaking, the most important tool for eighteenth-century natural history, “the connections between exploration, visibility and utility were particularly strong in the Hispanic world” (p. 33). As Bleichmar remarks, the copious visual production generated by naturalist/artist duets is one of the major differences between eighteenth-century Spanish expeditions and British or French ones, which were less illustrated. The first chapter, “A Botanical Reconquista,” retraces, among other things, the historical background linking the visual productions of these expeditions to the first attempts at classifying nature in the Americas in the early colonial period. From its early discoveries, the Spanish crown understood the importance of using images to promote the control and knowledge of its imperial possessions.

In chapters three and five, arguably the book’s most significant ones, Bleichmar constructs a finely honed analysis of the

formal elements that characterized botanical images. She shows it is possible to establish a common pattern of representation specific to natural history, a “strict grammar of eighteenth-century botanical illustrations” (p. 103). Featuring fragmented representations of botanical specimens, a special attention to flowers and fruits of reproduction, and a marked trend towards the volumetric rendering of objects, these rigid conventions standardized scientific visual language.

By comparing images produced by these scientific expeditions with illustrated natural treatises, Bleichmar observes a difference between the “visual grammar” of Mutis’s images produced during his expedition to the New Kingdom of Granada and other European natural history illustrations. According to Bleichmar, this expedition had as its main purpose the production of a visual record. It included a considerable number of artists, as many as sixty, all carefully selected and meticulously trained to develop the “naturalist gaze.” Several of them were not educated in an academic environment but in colonial painters’ workshops, and were thus otherwise mostly confined to the production of religious paintings.

The images produced during this expedition did not evolve separately from European conventions of eighteenth-century botanical illustrations, but they do have some distinctive characteristics. Based on a study of Mutis’s *Archivo epistolar* and other documents, Bleichmar demonstrates that he was seeking a new visual style that was particularly suited to the transmission of botanical knowledge. She lists three characteristics that identify Mutis’s botanical illustrations: the use of symmetry, the lack of volume in favour of flat representations, and the high opacity of colours (due to the use of tempera instead of watercolour, as was usual in botanical illustrations). The author argues convincingly that Mutis sought to create a revolutionary new style. It is somewhat unclear, however, why Bleichmar describes this as an “American style.” Would it not be preferable, as Pedro Antonio de Robles has proposed, to simply speak of “Mutis’s style?”<sup>3</sup> Bleichmar dismisses the possibility that Mutis’s visual work was influenced by local artistic traditions, stating that “flatness and symmetry were conscious choices, guided not by artistic traditions or shortcomings but by botanical considerations and a search for change” (p. 113). In applying the label of “American style,” perhaps Bleichmar wishes to account for the wider context of geographical creation within which Mutis’s search for a new style emerged, as well as the esteem that Mutis displayed for the American-born artists assigned to the expedition, claiming they were much better suited to the expedition’s naturalist objectives than were European artists. Moreover, her argument might have been enriched by a consideration of works produced during the pastoral visits of Jaime Martínez Compañón, bishop of Trujillo (later, the bishop of Santa Fe de Bogotá), specifically the more than 1,400 watercolours of flora and fauna, cartog-

raphies, and “ethnographies” produced by unknown artists (probably Indigenous painters). As is widely accepted, Mutis became friendly with the bishop in 1791. In fact, the style of many of these images—particularly the watercolours depicting flora in the third to fifth volumes of *Trujillo del Perú*—is strikingly similar to the “American style,” suggesting possible influences between Mutis’s and Martínez Compañón’s works.

In the fifth and final chapter of *Visual Empire*, Bleichmar explores two different approaches to visualizing the natural world of the Spanish colonies. The first derives from conventions of European natural history, characterized by selecting and decontextualizing specimens from their original environment, both spatially and socially. While botanical images make visible new specimens to European eyes, context becomes invisible. Bleichmar contrasts this “invisibility” in traditional botanical artwork with a second approach, which can be found in a series of depictions in which American fruits, plants, and animals are interconnected with space (wild or domesticated) and types of human colonial society. Bleichmar focuses on three examples: Vicente Alban’s *Cuadros de Mestizaje*, painted in Quito in 1783, the Mexican series of *Pintura de Castas*, and *El Quadro de Historia Natural, Civil y Geográfico del Reyno del Perú*. In the first two examples, the paintings represent American natural products (usually fruits and vegetables) surrounded by local landscapes, private or public urban spaces, and their inhabitants. In these paintings, imagery plays a major role in the affirmation of local elites’ (creoles and enlightened clergy) self-consciousness and makes visible the social and spatial context within which American natural species evolve.

The third example reveals perhaps the most complex treatment of this visible and invisible dialectic. Bleichmar provides an in-depth discussion of this painting, unique among its kind. It was commissioned in Madrid in 1799 by José Ignacio Lequanda, Bishop Martínez Compañón’s nephew, and produced by the almost unknown painter Luis Thiebaut. The *Quadro* was conceived as an encyclopedia of Peruvian natural history. Using texts and images, the canvas describes and depicts natural history categories such as cartography, mineralogy, botany, zoology, and ethnology. Thiebaut’s painting presents compartments depicting different species of plants, animals, and types of humans. As such, it can be studied as a scientific categorization of the natural history of Peru, as Bleichmar did in a previous essay published in 2011.<sup>4</sup> Even the human types appear as classifiable objects and not as social referents. While the images represented in the *Quadro* epitomize much of the grammar of natural history illustrations, it is unusual to see natural specimens and human types represented together in the same visual space. The density of the subject matter creates the impression of an idea of global territoriality, supporting Bleichmar’s arguments on the interconnectedness of natural history images and the American

environment and her claim that the *Quadro* is a singular and unique vision of the Peruvian microcosm.

Indeed, Bleichmar accounts for the political and economic aspects behind eighteenth-century expeditions, but she always discusses these matters in connection with visual epistemology. She warns on many occasions that visual production, as a privileged means of knowledge transmission, was pursued by the scientific enterprise necessarily in relation to the empire's goals. That is, she argues that botanical images were used by travelling naturalists both to ensure the progress of the expedition and to convince Spanish governors of the economic and political benefits of the scientific enterprise.

Nevertheless, in the fourth chapter of her book, Bleichmar ponders the limits of the botanical image to promote any real commercial success for new overseas commodities. She discusses two cases in particular. The first is Juan de Cuellar's (botanist for the Philippine expeditions of 1786–1801) study of Philippine cinnamon, which he proposed as a substitute for Ceylon cinnamon. The second is Mutis's enthusiastic work on the "Tea of Bogotá." In both cases, the naturalists' images of these specimens demonstrate their similarity to other commodities already consumed in the European market. Cuellar, for instance, claimed that a comparison between the images of Philippine cinnamon he sent to Europe and those of Ceylon cinnamon published in Linneaus's or other European natural taxonomies showed that these two plants were identical. Cuellar therefore also used images as scientific and unquestionable proof to support commercial ventures. Nevertheless, attempts to commercialize these products in the European market failed. According to Bleichmar, these examples demonstrate that although visual epistemology was highly successful in taxonomic terms and for the progress of knowledge, it often failed to achieve commercial results.

Overall, *Visible Empire* is a brilliant history of travelling images and their creative context, showing that visuality played an essential role in the process of knowing and making visible imperial possessions. Along with Daniela Bleichmar's

other works, *Visible Empire* is a fundamental and highly lucid contribution to the study of the scientific expeditions of the Hispanic Enlightenment.

SEBASTIÁN FERRERO, UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Carmen Sotos Serrano, *Los pintores de la expedición de Alejandro Malaspina* (Madrid, 1982); Antonio de Pedro Robles, *El diseño científico. Siglos XV–XIX* (Madrid, 1999); Marta Penhos, *Ver, conocer, dominar: imágenes de Sudamérica a fines del siglo XVIII* (Buenos Aires, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> See for example "Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections," in *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Pennsylvania, 2011), 15–30; "A Visible and Useful Empire: Visual Culture and Colonial Natural History in the Eighteenth-Century Spanish World," in *Science in the Spanish and Portuguese Empires (1500–1800)*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar, Paula DeVos, Kristin Huffine, and Kevin Sheehan (Stanford, 2009), 290–310; "Visible Empire: Scientific Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment," *Postcolonial Studies* 12, 9 (2009): 441–66; "El imperio visible: la mirada experta y la imagen en las expediciones científicas de la ilustración," *Cuadernos Dieciochistas* 9 (2008): 35–63; "Exploration in Print: Books and Botanical Travel from Spain to the Americas in the Late Eighteenth Century," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 70, 1 (2007): 129–51; "Painting as Exploration: Visualizing Nature in Eighteenth-Century Colonial Science," *Colonial Latin American Review* 15, 1 (June 2006): 81–104.
- <sup>3</sup> Antonio de Pedro Robles, "Las Expediciones científicas a América. A la luz de sus imágenes artístico-científicas," in *Ciencia, Vida y Espacio en Iberoamérica*, ed. José Luis Peset Reig (Madrid, 1989), 415.
- <sup>4</sup> Daniela Bleichmar, "Seeing Peruvian Nature, Up Close and from Afar," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (spring/autumn 2011): 82–95.

John Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2012, 328 pp., 197 duotones, \$45, ISBN: 978029273580; Alejandro Anreus, Robin Adèle Greely, and Leonard Folgarait, eds., *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 394 pp., illustrations, \$39.95, ISBN: 9780520271623; Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30–30!*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 376 pp., 48 colour and 122 b/w

illustrations, \$65, ISBN: 9780300184488; Ellen G. Landau, *Mexico and American Modernism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013, 224 pp., 39 colour and 71 b/w illustrations, \$50, ISBN: 9780300169133.

The visual culture of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its aftermath continues to be a rich source of material for scholars. Much of the literature devoted to this period has constructed the conflict and the decades that followed it as a momentous