RENAISSANCE MENAGERIES.
EXOTIC ANIMALS AND PETS AT THE HABSBURG COURTS IN IBERIA AND CENTRAL EUROPE

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All these beasts Arcimboldo has painted from life […].
Imagine his cleverness; there is something stupefying about it (Gregorio Comanini, *Il Figino, overo del fine della pittura* (Mantua: 1591) 44). ¹

Introduction

This essay represents the third in a series of studies undertaken by the authors on the artistic and cultural exchanges between the courts of Iberia (Madrid and Lisbon) and those of Central Europe (Vienna, Prague, Graz, Innsbruck and Munich) in the sixteenth century. The first, published in 2001,² constituted a systematic approach to a series of unpublished documents, letters, accounts and inventories dispersed in archives in Spain, France, Portugal, Belgium and Austria. The second essay appeared in an exhibition catalogue of a show held in the Palacio Real in Madrid in 2003, dedicated to the Oriental and exotic objects in Spanish royal collections from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

¹ This article is dedicated to Pedro Fuerte, Master of the Horse of the Imperial Ambassador in Spain, Hans Khevenhüller, and others like him, who traversed Europe many times with wild, exotic animals, large and small, in order to please emperors and kings. The authors are grateful for Paul Smith’s critical editing of this text and for his insightful comments.
centuries. Both studies made advances into the history of Habsburg collecting at the courts in Spain, Portugal, Austria and the Netherlands, presenting new insights on how collectors in the Renaissance acquired their objects, from where, and how these reached their final destinations. As the century progressed, the exotic component of these Habsburg collections took precedence, assuming the most important area of collecting. After 1550, Habsburg collectors concentrated on, and spent a great deal of time, energy and money, in the acquisition of luxury wares from distant points of the world.

Curiosity collections, or Kunstkammern, reflected the peculiarities and tastes of their princely owners. The discovery of direct sea routes to Africa, Asia, the Far East and the Americas in the sixteenth century opened up a global market and a traffic for goods, which afforded discriminating collectors a unique opportunity to buy, commission and collect an assortment of commodities (spices, medicinal drugs, plants, seeds, herbs), luxury goods, furniture, textiles, all forms of exotic wares, and above all, animals and birds, never seen in Europe before. Owning and collecting exotic and domestic pets became part of the tradition of Habsburg collecting in the Renaissance. Menageries of live specimens, some exotic pets reserved for amusement, entertainments and hunting, became extensions of the Kunstkammer outdoors. Menageries with European, New World and Asian animals mirrored in microcosmic fashion the collections of rarities indoors, displayed in magnificent gardens, themselves planted with exotic trees, shrubs and ornamental flowers. Novel fauna and flora reflected a ruler’s mastery and dominion over territorial space. By the late sixteenth century, princes cultivated a garden culture, some patrons more scientific and systematic than others, whereby animals and plants were assembled and planted to dazzle and amaze, as symbols of an owner’s power and prestige. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has recently observed, gardens and menageries

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6 Cañizares-Esguerra, “Iberian Science” 98.