Daniela Bleichmar


Bleichmar begins her recently published Visible Empire with the statement that this is “a book about twelve thousand images” (3). These images, depicting plants from all over the Spanish Empire, were produced through the collaboration of artists and naturalists involved in a series of natural history expeditions sponsored by the Spanish Crown in the eighteenth-century age of Enlightenment. According to Bleichmar, they attest to the importance of visual culture and “visuality” in the Crown’s pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the natural resources in its far-flung colonies, and serve to distinguish the Spanish Empire from its European imperial contemporaries. Though French, British, and Dutch colonial administrators sought to collect, depict, and catalogue natural flora within their imperial domains as well, Bleichmar contends that the Spanish pursued a line of investigation that particularly emphasized and sought out the visual, and that visuality characterized “a Hispanic way of knowing the empire” (9). Despite the striking beauty and quantity of botanical illustrations in this “impressive visual archive”—one that Bleichmar implies is much larger than other imperial collections—the images have been for the most part ignored in the secondary literature. Historians of science, on the one hand, have paid little attention to illustration, while historians of art, on the other, have not considered the content, the artists, or the materials used in producing the illustrations important enough to merit detailed investigation—and thus this visual archive has fallen through the disciplinary cracks. This is a lacuna that Bleichmar aims to fill in this well-written, beautifully produced volume replete with dozens of full-color illustrations on large, glossy pages.

The five chapters of the book go about explaining the origins and production of the images through Crown sponsorship of scientific expeditions in the eighteenth century as well as the establishment of a Natural History museum in Madrid and botanical gardens in Spain and throughout the empire. In this way, Bleichmar considers not only the images but also the “texts and objects” involved in the expeditions’ natural history investigations as well as those pursued by colonial administrators. Chapter 1 details Crown sponsorship of the investigations and the people and networks involved in them, whose aim was to make the empire visible in a kind of “botanical reconquista” reminiscent of sixteenth-century efforts. Chapter 4 discusses the Crown’s pursuit of economic botany through investigations into local colonial commodities—
pepper, cinnamon, tea, and cinchona (quinine)—that, because they did not involve the use of images in any significant way (beyond taxonomic identification), demonstrate “the limits of the visual” (13). Chapter 5 discusses the “global white space” of the botanical illustrations, meaning the “overwhelmingly blank pages” that characterized the drawings, as indicative of “a process of visual erasure that transforms [local plants] into decontextualized products that can circulate globally” (151). These white spaces are contrasted with the highly contextualized “local color” represented by the numerous and very colorful depictions of local flora and fauna found in colonial painting—most notably the well-known casta paintings of colonial Mexico.

Chapters 2 and 3 deal with the 12,000 illustrations referred to in Bleichmar’s introduction. Chapter 2 sets up the theoretical grounds for her argument as to the illustrations’ significance. Although most of them were never published—which thus leads to questions about reception and audience, as the author rightly points out—Bleichmar argues that they are nevertheless highly significant in terms of their epistemological purpose. The images represent, for Bleichmar, a “visual epistemology,” or “a way of knowing based on visuality, encompassing both observation and representation” (8). It was an epistemology particularly important to natural history because it was “a dominantly visual discipline, with a methodology based on acts of expert viewing . . . [and] specialized ways of seeing through multimedia training that involved plants, texts, and images” (8). Thus this chapter and the next examine the way that European naturalists worked in the field to produce images of the plants they observed by comparing the plants to those depicted in botanical texts and working with artists “in carefully orchestrated duets” (80) to record them as images on paper. These images would then serve to preserve fragile specimens that could be transported to a metropolitan audience: thus they were “visual avatars replacing perishable or untransportable objects that would otherwise remain unseen and unknown” (154); they created “a kind of botanical alchemy” in which “pictorial representation transformed unique and fragile objects into multiple and sturdy illustrations” (63); they constituted a “domesticated paper nature that was always and perfectly available for virtual exploration” (9). Connecting Spain and its colonies in a “visual loop” (10) that crossed both the Atlantic and Pacific, the images had “rich social lives,” serving as sites of knowledge production, as gifts, and as ontological symbols of the plants themselves (76). The naturalists responsible for representing these plants were trained to observe and record them in specific ways, employing “comparative acts of multimedia seeing” (12) to place them within a Linnean framework.

Chapter 3 goes on to study the images produced in the Spanish natural history expeditions—who drew them (though the individual artists were often