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Comments

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Book Review: *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin*

Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin, by Daniela Bleichmar. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017, 240 pp., 153 color illus. \$50 (cloth), ISBN 9780300224023. Reviewed by Amy Buono.

Of the nearly eighty Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA exhibitions, only a handful have dealt in any historic depth with the Americas. That lack of historic grounding has been one of the key fault lines separating these few but significant shows from the larger PST: LA/LA project sponsored by the Getty Foundation. How does one bridge the chasm between the contemporary art world and the ancient Americas except by contending with the very nature of colonization and colonialism? *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin*, co-curated by Daniela Bleichmar and Catherine Hess at the Huntington Library, stood out as a close and careful examination of the art and science of nature in colonial Latin America, chronologically spanning the period from Columbus's voyages to the Americas in 1492 to Charles Darwin's travels to the region centuries later. Bleichmar's accompanying catalogue provides a much more fulsome account of the "intertwined worlds of what we now call art and science, and the connections between Latin America and other regions of the world, principally Europe" (xiii). Large-scale histories of colonial Latin America often favor either discussions of European sources on the one hand, or indigenous-authored sources on the other. Bleichmar provides a useful integration of manuscripts and printed sources, thus revealing the interlocked intellectual cultures that bound the Americas with Europe in the sixteenth century.

One of the book's great virtues is its succinct and comprehensive historical and visual overview of the role of nature in European colonization of the Americas from the late fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The first chapter, "Reinventing the Book of Nature," examines early modern visual print culture (woodcuts, engravings, maps) in the wake of a media revolution in Europe that allowed for the proliferation and rapid dissemination of images and narratives about the Americas across Europe. This material is staged against the backdrop of Johannes Gutenberg's movable-type press of the 1450s and Christopher

Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean in 1492. For example, the author discusses the stunning *Vallard Atlas* (from the Huntington Library's collections) in terms of anachronism, as its artists incorporated new technologies while maintaining old artistic practices. Likewise, she considers the ways in which new printing technologies allowed books like Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theater of the World, 1570), containing printed maps of the entire world in a single binding, to function as both cartographic commodities and performances, employing William Shakespeare's metaphor of the world as stage. One of the highlights of this first chapter is Bleichmar's discussion of the printing process—the important roles of scholars, engravers, and printing workshops—in the creation of many of the earliest images of New World nature. Perhaps the most important section of this chapter is Bleichmar's discussion of Native American authors, specifically the Codex de la Cruz-Badiano from 1552 and the Florentine Codex from 1577, two extraordinarily important Renaissance manuscripts created in Mexico in the sixteenth century, both authored by Nahua artists and scribes working under the patronage of European missionaries. These works demonstrate the rich world of indigenous Central Mexican knowledge systems, such as their healing practices and pharmacopeia, including women's preparations for childbirth in the Aztec sphere. This chapter ends with a discussion of the *Relaciones Geográficas* (geographical accounts), maps produced by Indigenous artists at the behest of the Spanish Crown in 1577. As with the Florentine Codex, these works have been very well studied by specialists of the indigenous Americas, but Bleichmar's circumscribed discussion of Nahua themes of nature, medicine, and healing homes in on key details of their visual brilliance, confirming how they are simultaneously self-contained and deeply cosmopolitan.

The second chapter, "The Value of Nature," examines the global circulation of Latin America's "nature," a topic

more thoroughly researched by historians of science than by specialists of colonial Latin American art, for whom this book will serve as a key resource. The author examines minerals, plants, and animals as commodities from Latin America in order to reveal their economic and intellectual impact upon early modern Europe. Bleichmar's discussions of chocolate, tobacco, and cochineal, for example, demonstrate how American flora and fauna become part of a transatlantic economic framework, valued for their utility while still embodying cross-cultural (and transcultural) value systems. How these debates played out in the visual sphere through woodcuts, engravings, paintings, and in books of *materia medica* are the meat of this chapter. Flora and fauna, raw and processed, were integral to highly divergent cultural worlds, metaphorical realms, and cosmological, spiritual, and moral discourses. Aspects of the value systems that informed them were transmitted piecemeal by scribes, laborers, naturalists, scientists, and missionaries, who sometimes censored and corrupted the knowledge associated with them and in the process altered them for new markets, new contexts. There are splendid images in this chapter—engravings of subjects smoking tobacco and imbibing chocolate and coffee, watercolors detailing the marvelous interiors of cacao pods, and pigment and ink drawings of the painstaking process of harvesting cochineal from nopal cacti. Nature in the Americas, as Bleichmar suggests, was imbued with social, cultural, and moral implications, associated as it was not only with indigenous ritual contexts, but also with the servitude, slavery, scientific study, and commodification—all engines of the colonial machine.

The place of New World nature in early European museums is the subject of Bleichmar's third chapter, "Collecting: From Wonder to Order," which explores the "ways in which collecting and collections contributed to the exploration, representation and investigation of Latin American nature" (94). Bleichmar discusses several key early modern European collections of Latin American nature, which included specimens, images, and texts, including commissioned works such as the 146 exquisite paintings of plants and animals produced by Jacopo Ligozzi for Francesco I de' Medici and Cassiano dal Pozzo's "paper museum" (*museo cartaceo*) in seventeenth-century Rome, which contained between seven and ten thousand images of Latin America's nature. Bleichmar also provides a substantial discussion of Dutch Brazil in this chapter, thereby integrating the colonization of Brazil, via the Dutch and Portuguese in

particular, into discussions of the colonization of Spanish America. The second part of the chapter addresses how particular voyages shaped the development of natural history collections. Bleichmar introduces the Swedish physician and botanist Carl Linnaeus and his systems of classification and naming, thus showing how visual and textual systems, as in his *Systema naturae* (*The System of Nature*, 1735), were informing artists and naturalists and thus producing a "visual epistemology . . . a way of knowing based on observation and representation" (123). The reliance, in fact, on visual materials for botanical science bound together artists and scientists in mutual training. Bleichmar's discussion moves into the eighteenth century and the visual realm of expeditions that are not often showcased in exhibitions, namely the Royal Botanical Expedition to the Kingdom of New Granada (1783–1816). The paintings that emerged from the project are not only stunning artistic productions, but reveal how artists and scientists would work together to build scientific knowledge around a single specimen.

The fourth and concluding chapter contends with the scientist-explorers Alexander von Humboldt and Charles Darwin as exemplary traveler-artists, traversing Latin America with notebooks and sketchbooks, and compares them with local artists from across the continent. Von Humboldt and Darwin at the close of her book, together with Christopher Columbus at the beginning, serve Bleichmar as bookends—renowned figures whose voyages and writings shaped the work of the naturalists, artists, and scientists who represented Latin America. By concluding with these nineteenth-century figures, Bleichmar engages with scientific and natural historical imagery within the context of growing nationalist agendas.

Herein lies the dilemma of Bleichmar's volume, especially within the context of the PST: LA/LA exhibitions that were its point of origin. What does it mean, in this day and age, to frame the natural history of Latin America through the figures of European explorers and scientists? Would granting a greater role to local artists help decolonize the history of Latin America's nature? This minor critique aside, Bleichmar's book stands as an important volume for the field of Latin American art and colonial studies writ large, bringing together five hundred years of images of nature and making clear the scientific and social networks with which they were intertwined.

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