

Forum

Natural Designs: Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo and the Invention of New World Nature. By ELIZABETH GANSEN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023. 248 pages. LCCN 2023009889. \$55.00 hardback.

Natural Designs surveys the work of the first European to embark upon a natural history of the New World, the Spaniard Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo (1478–1557). Oviedo was the author of three works dedicated at least in part to the natural history of the New World. The slender *Sumario* (Toledo: 1526, USTC 336206¹) and the lengthier *Historia general* (Sevilla: 1535, USTC 336203) were widely circulated, translated, and read during the sixteenth century, while the monumental *Historia general y natural de las Indias* remained unpublished until the nineteenth century. Each text revises, recycles, and expands upon its predecessors in ways that allow contemporary scholars to explore how Oviedo's approach to natural history changed over the course of his lifetime. Elizabeth Gansen's contribution to the scholarly conversation about Oviedo stands out for the way it situates Oviedo in the intellectual and artistic developments of the European Renaissance and for its brilliant analysis of the illustrations that Oviedo created to accompany his written work.

A brief introduction outlines the book and surveys Oviedo's life and career, while the first two chapters embed the historian in late-fifteenth-century debates over natural history and pictorial representation. Oviedo's writing makes no bones about his admiration for Pliny the Elder. Gansen takes us beyond Pliny's well-known role as Oviedo's intellectual and literary model by examining the debates that his *Natural History* triggered among Renaissance natural historians. It turns out that Oviedo's insistence on the importance of firsthand experience to the practice of natural history was not, as is often assumed, a spontaneous reaction to the novelty of the New World, but a principle that had grown out of humanist reflections on Pliny that Oviedo took with him to the New World. Oviedo may very well have encountered debates about this issue while serving as a courtier in Spain and, especially, in Italy, where he learned about Renaissance agronomy and gardening. This helped him develop an approach to the natural world that emphasized both aesthetics and practicality. His experience as a courtier also brought Oviedo into contact with such giants of Renaissance art as Andrea Mantegna, Leonardo da Vinci, and Alonso Berruguete, which taught Oviedo to value artistic naturalism but also to appreciate the limitations of pictorial representation.

The next two chapters (3 and 4) turn to the *Sumario* and the *Historia general*, respectively, and help us understand how Oviedo's Renaissance background

¹ Universal Short Title Catalogue, <https://www.ustc.ac.uk>.

played out in these successive attempts to write the natural history of the New World. Written and published at the request of Charles V, the *Sumario* is easy to dismiss as an attempt to curry royal favor. Gansen, however, reads it against the background of the economic crisis that was plaguing the island of Hispaniola, where the demographic collapse of the indigenous population threatened the future of its principal industry, the extraction of precious metals. It is Oviedo the agronomist who stands out here, as he draws attention to the flora and fauna of the Caribbean as an unexploited resource that could provide the colonial project with a more sustainable and more lucrative basis to its economy. The chapter thus sheds a great deal of light on the purpose of natural history as Oviedo understood it. The next chapter, by contrast, shifts attention to the intellectual challenges Oviedo faced in grappling with his enormous subject and explores his methods. We learn how Oviedo handled different sources of information, like his own iterative experience of the world around him, singular encounters with natural phenomena (his own and others), and the wealth of indigenous lore without which the Spanish colonists could never have survived.

Chapter 5 turns to the illustrations Oviedo prepared to accompany his writing, including the four woodcuts that appear in the *Sumario*, the three in the *Historia natural*, and a series of drawings that appear in what is known as the Monserrat manuscript. These illustrations have captured the attention of many a scholar, but due in large measure to the disappointing simplicity of the woodcuts, have resisted compelling analysis. Why so many schematic images of individual leaves, for example? Gansen draws on methods developed by contemporary art historical scholarship to help us understand Oviedo's artistic choices better than anyone else has to date. It turns out that the very simplicity of the images can be understood as part of a deliberate strategy to highlight the aspects of a particular plant that were key to its correct identification. The argument is speculative but compelling, and I, for one, will never look at these woodcuts the same way again. The lovely drawings in the manuscript, meanwhile, raise interesting questions about the ways Oviedo imagined the relationship between image and text, and tell us a great deal about how his approach to botanical illustration developed over the years.

The next chapter (6) turns to a small number of images in the *Sumario* and the *Historia*, along with their accompanying text, to examine some of the political and epistemological limitations with which Oviedo had to contend. If chapter 3 provided us with an Oviedo who was enthusiastic about what natural history had to contribute to the colonial project, this one presents us with an Oviedo aggrieved with the state for granting a fellow Spaniard a monopoly on the cultivation and processing of a particular plant, and thereby inhibiting his ability to describe and illustrate it. The chapter also allows us to glimpse an Oviedo frustrated by the challenge of describing and illustrating two species, the cactus and the

iguana, that defied his attempts to capture natural realities using inherited categories and illustrative strategies. Here, more than anywhere in an argument that is constantly attuned to the many obstacles Oviedo faced and the way he tried to resolve them, we find an Oviedo on the brink of defeat by the enormity of the challenge he had set for himself.

I found the final chapter (7) somewhat disappointing after the heights reached by chapters 5 and 6. There, Gansen turns to one of the challenges posed by the Monserrat manuscript, the text that was supposed to become the *Historia general y natural*. She takes a stand in existing debates about when Oviedo made certain revisions in the manuscript, and benefits from access to newly discovered portions of this fragmented text. Basically, Gansen attempts to demonstrate that Oviedo was more systematic and farseeing in his plans for his *magnum opus* than others have made him out to be. While this argument might interest Oviedo scholars, it reads like insider baseball to this reader. I would have loved, moreover, for this chapter to have given way to a general conclusion that said something about Oviedo's significance to sixteenth-century natural history. Having begun with Oviedo's debt to the Renaissance, it would have been appropriate, I think, to end with the Renaissance's debt to him. In the absence of such a conclusion, I found that *Natural Designs*, a deeply erudite book written with breathtaking clarity, came to an all-too-sudden end.

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