

“Better than Seeing Fairy Tales”: Contextualizing Curation in the Iberian Atlantic

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An awestruck Albrecht Dürer in 1520 upon seeing a touring exhibit of objects produced by the hands of Nahuatl-speaking peoples that Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés sent from Mesoamerica to King Charles V, noted that, “I saw the things which had been brought to the King from the new land of gold...all the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart as much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marveled at the subtle *ingenia* of men in foreign lands.” Dürer, perhaps the most skilled observer of his time, exclaimed that seeing the glint of a newly conquered civilization was “so much better than seeing fairy tales.”¹ After his arrival in Tenochtitlan in 1519, the conquistador sent a shipment of indigenous objects to Charles V to prove the magnificence of his newly acquired territories and to win the sovereign’s favor for his unscheduled continental incursion. Cortés wrote to the monarch, stating that, “We agreed to write your Majesties sending them all the gold, silver, and jewels which we have obtained in this country over and above the fifth part which belongs to them by right.”² Though Cortés did not provide a manifest for his shipment, the cache almost certainly contained the objects given to him as part of Moctezuma II’s gift which included turquoise and gold jewelry, a cloak, and assorted shields, banners, and regalia.³ The display tangibly placed the “New World” before the eyes of Europeans and proved the existence of lands previously unknown to Christian Europe. The Spanish Crown’s early desire to collect and exhibit its transatlantic empire created a visual vocabulary that claimed (and reclaimed) colonial possessions through the end of the eighteenth century.

This paper asserts the importance of display—through exhibitions and books (which I have termed “paper museums”) to the Spanish imperial project. Curiosity collecting, the formation of private and public collections, and the creation of catalogs and descriptions of exotic wonders were intrinsic operative functions of the Spanish Empire throughout its history. To display the “New World” was to claim sovereignty over it. This paper also asserts that an early modern fascination with collecting and display was linked to the manner in which the Spanish Empire presented itself in the context of the wider world into the eighteenth century. The Spanish Empire was a curated global imperium through the reigns of two separate imperial dynasties, the Habsburgs and the Bourbons.

This paper has been divided into four sections, each constructed to connect earlier processes of collecting throughout the Spanish Empire with later examples, illustrating the notion of the Iberian Atlantic as a curated empire. The first section, “A Culture of Display: A History of Exhibition,” explores a long history of collecting and display throughout Europe and how it continued with the Spanish discovery of

the "New World" in the late fifteenth century. The next section, "All the World's a Page: Curated Books and a Curated Imperium," is an exploration of visual books, such as the Florentine Codex, and how they should be considered "paper museums": a place where the learned can encounter the world and better come to understand (and intellectually control) it. The third section, "Collecting, Display, and the Iberian Atlantic" explores the foundation of the Real Gabinete de Historia Natural (the Royal Cabinet of Natural History) in Madrid at the end of the eighteenth century, discussing it as a descendant of earlier collections of curiosities. The final section, "The Bald Cow and the Documented Empire: An Edict in Motion" seeks to contextualize Bourbon collecting and display in the context of the Enlightenment, the Bourbon Reforms, and a legacy of Habsburg collecting.

By curating a series of pertinent primary sources, this paper demonstrates the ways in which the Spanish Empire distilled the world around it. I seek not to provide a sole explanation for science, curiosity collecting, and museum display in the empire. I seek to present a thoughtfully curated analysis of a way in which the monarchy established its empire throughout the colonial period. The Spanish Empire was an empire of curatorship and display.

A Culture of Display: A History of Exhibition

A desire to catalogue, describe, and present the unknown was long a part of European cultural experience. The wonders Dürer witnessed in the exhibition hall in Brussels did not materialize magically into the view of unsuspecting European eyes. Instead, they were another iteration of a centuries long culture of exhibition throughout Europe.

A culture of display was long a part of the ways in which Europeans deciphered the world in which they lived. Collections in the pre-modern world germinated in church treasuries, including reliquaries and relics of saints. Collections were not strictly ecclesiastical. Notables such as Jean de Berry, King Louis XI, and Cosimo de Medici built their official public collections on the tripartite foundation of a desire to study the natural world, a fascination with the miraculous and the wondrous, and a desire to collect the works of the ancients as well as contemporary marvels.⁴ These collections were called *Wunderkammern* (the plural form of *Wunderkammer*, room of wonders), demonstrating the power, prestige, and cosmopolitanism of their owner.⁵ Marjorie Swann discussed that amassing and displaying such collections created a vocabulary that the nobility could employ to visually establish control and status.⁶ While many of them had great value, they became emblems of power instead of commodities themselves.⁷ Early modern collecting was a mechanism for harnessing and mastering the wondrous by removing exotic objects from their context and placing it into an understood framework and location.⁸ The "New World" was placed into an understood framework through the encountering of its peoples and the objects they created.

Europeans living on the continent received their chance to encounter actual peoples from the "New World" early in the sixteenth century. In perhaps one of the most bizarre examples of Europe's encounters with the indigenous peoples of the Americas, Cortés sent a large delegation of Mexica performers to the court of Charles V in 1528.⁹ Though part of a larger trickle of indigenous visitors to Europe, the 1528 group proved to be the largest and the most memorable. Among their number was a team of *ullamaliztli* ball players, dwarfs, dancers, and jugglers who toured Europe before performing for the monarch in Valladolid in the summer of that same year.¹⁰ The troupe made a lasting impression at court and performed before various notables (including Pope Clement VII during a brief stint in Rome). Like the objects that Cortés shipped back to the king from the new land of gold, the people became an object to be viewed and studied—less actual individuals than an exotic token of a newly discovered world.¹¹ The traveling Americans spawned a trend of European theatrical mimicry throughout the 1530s.¹² As the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha has argued, the performance of race reduces the colonized culture to the fetishized outsider.¹³ In a European performance of an outsider, cultural differences are magnified, throwing dissimilarities into the light. The unknown becomes definable within a known worldview. An operative force in the courts of pre-contact Europe, an established culture of display, curiosity, and wonder, provided a vocabulary that the Spanish Crown would employ to claim control over their newly acquired colonial domains throughout the colonial period. Through first viewing and then mimicking, Europeans were able to take unknown and exotic customs and peoples from outside of the fringes of their knowledge and place them squarely into a Euro-centric framework of control and colonialism. The close proximity of indigenous peoples in the courts of Europe, followed by the duplication of those people in performance, provided a safe discourse for Europeans to understand and claim control over the growing expanses of the world around them.

Such an encounter also included objects brought from the "New World" to Europe. As mentioned previously, Cortés shipped objects such as turquoise and gold jewelry, a cloak, and assorted shields, banners, and regalia.¹⁴ Many of these objects were symbolically connected to Mexica leadership.¹⁵ In her illuminating chapter in *Collecting Across Cultures: Aztec Regalia and the Reformation of Display*, Carina L. Johnson notes that the collection that Dürer witnessed should be interpreted within the context of royal treasuries throughout Europe. For Johnson, the display of Mexica regalia provided a visual vocabulary for the Spanish monarch to claim supremacy over newfound subjects and lands. For one monarch to own the royal regalia of another was akin to claiming them as a vassal.¹⁶

Johnson's assertion should be taken a step further. When he displayed Mexica regalia, Charles V was creating a visual vocabulary of control that continued far into the Bourbon period. A French translation of Cortés's 1522 letter to Charles V indicated that the Spanish monarchy was now competing on a worldwide stage, noting that

the goods that the conquistador sent to the king were more grand than anything held by any prince in Europe or Africa, as well as any "Christian, pagan, Saracen, or Turk."¹⁷ The display, then, was a calculated means for Charles V to claim an imperium that stretched outside of the borders of Europe, marking him as a global monarch with an unprecedented transatlantic empire. While witnessing the treasure of Moctezuma II was "better than seeing fairy tales," in the eyes of Dürer, the Spanish Crown's ownership of such materials was an assertion of Spanish imperial might and supremacy.¹⁸ Spain, as an imperial powerhouse, had stepped onto the world stage through curatorship.

All the World's a Page: Curated Books and a Curated Imperium

A desire to record and present the "New World" did not end with a shipment of physical objects to the king of Spain. Textual and visual accounts of the people of the newly found continent accompanied shipments of objects to Europe. These texts served as a physical record of European encounter with the "New World" and provided a vehicle for the understanding the Western Hemisphere from the relative safety of a European library. Like collections of objects, these texts presented a curated (and thereby mediated) view of a newly discovered land. Their curators took the world apart and pieced it back together in a controllable and "comprehensive" way. Of particular note, are texts such as *La historia universal de las cosas de la Nueva España* and the Tovar Codex, all of which are preserved documents of colonial interaction and function as curated texts. Both were created as a result of interaction between friars and the indigenous inhabitants they encountered.

It is important to note the overall purpose of such texts—which was to understand Nahua life to aid in the conversion and subjugation of indigenous peoples. These comprehensive, encyclopedic accounts provide an invaluable resource for scholarship but were also weaponized for the colonial project.

These two codices are comprehensive accounts of pre-contact life that present an unparalleled look at Mexica civilization. They are often considered as colonial documents looking back on a pre-colonial past. They take on an alternate cast when viewed in terms of an early modern tradition of collecting and display. It is my desire, then, to read them in terms of collections of curiosities and wonders, like the Brussels exhibit. These texts share an operative similarity with collections of curiosities, as the creators of both sought to take a whole new world of foreign oddity into the framework that was well digested and understood. That presentation was a full and complete analysis of Nahua culture, which had been presented and curated for European understanding.

The most cited account of pre-contact indigenous culture is the bilingual opus *La historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, produced by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún between 1545 and 1590 and preserved most completely as the Florentine

Codex. The text is a comprehensive account over twelve books of the people, animals, and customs the friar encountered and is written in both Spanish and Nahuatl.¹⁹ It is an encyclopedic record of Nahua culture and language. However, in the broader context of the period and Spanish imperial philosophy, Sahagún's text is a method of displaying Amerindian custom and culture for European consumption.

Historia universal is a comprehensive text. The work is a means of a visual presentation of Nahua culture—both in image and in language. In book eleven (*The Earthly Things*), the friar records an account of the cultivation of cochineal, a beetle that yielded a potent red dye that Nahuatl speakers called *nochezli*. Pages are divided into two columns of text—Spanish on the left and Nahuatl on the right. Included also is an illustration, which usually illustrates the accompanying text. The volume was constructed by indigenous hands, who created a visual record of their world. The illustrations throughout the Florentine Codex are fascinating, combining European modes of representation with an indigenous artistic sensibility. In the cochineal illustrations (Figure 1), space is rendered flattened and idealized, with harvested cochineal beetles appearing to be roughly the same size as a house cat crawling along the ground, all depicted as very flat and visually stark. In this way, they are similar to indigenous modes of pre-contact representation, such as the collective images in the Codex Borbonicus (also known as the Codex Cihuacoatl), which was produced either before or immediately after European contact. There are attempts at European mode of representation, such as the foundation of a building depicted in a rudimentary three-point perspective and figures depicted with some modeling. The images are, quite clearly, a visual amalgamation of European contact with indigenous modes of representation.

The images are accompanied by text, in both Spanish and Nahuatl. The cochineal illustrations are accompanied by text that reads:



Figure 1: Unknown artist, "Cochineal Harvesting" in Bernardino de Sahagún's *La historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, between 1545 and 1590, fols. 216 and 217 of book 11. Image courtesy of the Medicea Laurenziana Library, Florence.

Its name comes from the *nochtle* and *extli* [blood] because it is formed on the nopal and is like blood, like a blood blister. This cochineal is an insect; it is a worm. The cochineal nopal is the breeding place of this cochineal. It lives, it hatches on the nopal like a little fly, a little insect. Then it grows; then it develops; then it increases in size. It fattens, it increases much in size, it thickens, it becomes round. Then it envelops itself in fat. When the worms are distended, they come to rest just like blood blisters. Then they cover themselves with a web. Then they die; they fall; also they are heaped together, swept up. With a broom they are heaped together.²⁰

The cochineal description is representative of the degree of description found throughout the work, including on pages that detail the different sorts of butterflies that one can find throughout Mexico and the seeding and tilling of maize.

Historia universal is not the only curated text from the period. Another example is the Tovar Codex (also known as the Ramirez Codex). The Tovar Codex is a volume commissioned by Juan de Acosta, a Jesuit missionary and naturalist, from Juan de Tovar, who probably based the work off an earlier, lost Nahuatl text.²¹ Juan de Tovar traveled throughout the region of Tula interviewing Nahuatl people and commissioning indigenous artists in order to compile the materials for the completed manuscript.²² The volume contains a history of the Mexica accompanied with painted images illustrating life in the Triple Alliance up and to the arrival of Cortés. The text ends with a fascinating series of textual gymnastics where the author attempts to reconcile the Nahuatl calendar and cosmology with the Gregorian calendar.²³ The images in the Tovar Codex are vivid with color and are also, like the images in *Historia universal*, made by indigenous hands, such as the personifications of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli with skull racks at the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan (Figure 2).

These visual representations of an unfamiliar culture became the precursor to another sort of visual mode: the “paper museum.” The so-called Codex Barberini, titled *Libellus de Medicinalibus Indorum Herbis* (Book of the Medicinal Herbs of the Indians) of 1552, was produced by Martín de la Cruz in the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco and translated from Nahuatl into the more European-friendly Latin by Juan Badiano. *Libellus* is the

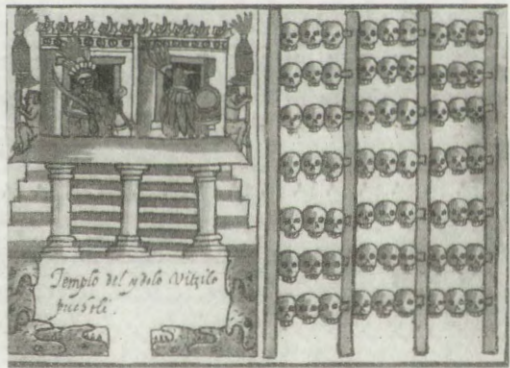


Figure 2: Unknown artist, “Tlaloc, Huitzilopochtli, and Skull Racks at the Templo Mayor,” The Tovar Codex, c. 1585, recto 122. Image courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

first extant pictorial record of Nahua herbs and medicine and was a combination of descriptive text and visual imagery.²⁴ Cassiano dal Pozzo, the secretary of Cardinal Barberini, produced a famous copy of this text at the beginning of the eighteenth century that was included in his encyclopedic volume *Museo Cartaceo* (Paper Museum), where it was referred to as an *Aztec Herbal*. The *Museo Cartaceo* consists of over seven thousand drawings and prints produced by Cassiano dal Pozzo and his brother, Carlo Antonio dal Pozzo in the first half of the seventeenth century. Cassiano dal Pozzo's work was meant to be a completed catalogue of all of human knowledge that was present in the exhaustive collection of Cardinal Francesco Barberini, to make the collection accessible for use to scholars.²⁵ What matters most for this study is not Cassiano dal Pozzo's later copying and use, but in his concept of the *Museo Cartaceo*, the paper museum. The *Museo Cartaceo* marks a desire to represent the known world and make it accessible to the viewer: to use visual media as a stand in for encountering the real thing. If we are to understand *Wunderkammern* as an early example of a museum, a way of encountering and understanding the world, then it is only fitting to understand visual catalogs of *Wunderkammern* as functioning in the same way.

It is beneficial to take a page out of Cassiano dal Pozzo's conceptualization of the paper museum when considering texts such as *Historia universal* and the Tovar Codex. While both codices present a documentation of cultural ways of life and not a *Wunderkammer* collection, they present a sum of knowledge for understanding and consumption.²⁶ Just as a collector curating a *Wunderkammer* would chose objects to place near each other, Juan de Tovar and Bernardino de Sahagún (and their band of Nahua artists) curated entries in the Tovar Codex and *Historia universal* to produce a mediated view of the "New World." Both volumes present a fascinating curation of the world of the Nahua. They contain images that would have been foreign to a European Catholic audience (such as the skull racks of the Tovar Codex), but also contain information about the bounty and value of newly acquired territory, resources, and skills. All of these are brought forth to create a visual representation of the full breath of the developing empire—of peoples that had been brought to the light of Catholicism from the assumed darkness of savagery and of their useful and valuable modes of production.

Rather than being seen as solely accounts of a pre-contact past, works such as *Historia universal* and the Tovar Codex should be seen through a double lens of wonder and representation. They are objects of wonder because they both represent a culture that is foreign and strange and were made by indigenous hands—in a way they are autoethnographical representations of colonial conquest. They are a produced, comprehensive, and presented account of all of the extant knowledge of pre-contact Nahua life for European consumption and understanding. They are both an object of curiosity and an object of conquest. Like the collection that Dürer witnessed

earlier in the century, they were produced by indigenous hands and present the existence of empire—without a Spanish imperium they would have never been created. Throughout the Habsburg period, representatives of the monarch collected information and proof from lands and peoples under Spanish control. In an era before photography, paper museums, just like their *Wunderkammer* counterparts, created a vocabulary that both produced knowledge and highlighted the power of the monarchy. Visually presenting the “New World” granted the monarchy the political capital necessary to claim possession over lands that many Europeans would never see. In this way, Spanish supremacy was defined by collecting. The empire defined itself, its territories, and claimed its colonial subjects by collecting, contextualizing, and display. Such trends would continue throughout the colonial period, and, as we will explore, would continue after the monarchical crisis of the eighteenth century.

Collecting, Display, and the Bourbon Iberian Atlantic

Trends of curatorship continued as operative functions of the Spanish Empire into the eighteenth century. With a newly installed Bourbon dynasty after the destabilizing War of Spanish Succession, it became more necessary than ever for the Crown to define its Empire and assert its leadership as stable and concrete. Throughout the court, thoughts shifted to a series of sweeping legislation known as the Bourbon Reforms, which ideally would consolidate royal supremacy.²⁷ Scholars have long debated the efficacy of the Bourbon Reforms, which have historiographically swung from a successful suite of legislation to a political pipe dream too large to realize. The reality of reform was probably somewhere in between—the Crown dreamed big and that dream was mediated on the ground by those living throughout the Spanish Empire in ways that followed local contingency, need, and resources.²⁸ The newly installed Crown and its representatives sent expeditions into the Americas to map the territory in an effort to understand Spanish colonial possessions in order to exploit them for profit.²⁹ While not necessarily their immediate intended goal, the Bourbon expeditions provided a new influx of materials from the “New World” that trickled into European collections that provided a latticework for the newly installed dynasty to build upon a cohesive display of empire.

In addition to conducting research trips, scholars around the monarch believed it imperative that Spain possessed a national *Wunderkammer*, because serious discussions of science had shifted from Spain to the rest of Europe. Spain had fallen behind. In response, Ferdinand VI formed the Real Gabinete in 1752, but it languished as a glorified warehouse of crates and cartons.³⁰ As the eighteenth century continued, the Bourbon Crown began to espouse the notion that the collection should be cultivated in an official manner in order to be influential within the European scientific community. The intelligentsia surmised that the best way to achieve this goal was to build a relationship with a prominent collector who would both contribute to the national collection and help grow it in the future. In 1771, Charles

III acquired the famed *Wunderkammer* of naturalist Pedro Franco Dávila. Dávila's collection, which was known as *El gabinete de historia natural y de curiosidades del arte y de la naturaleza* (Cabinet of Natural History and Curiosities of Art and Nature), was considered to be a rival of the royal collection of the King of France—a distinction which, no doubt, delighted Charles III when he acquired it as part of his own cabinet.³¹

Dávila was a ravenous collector who often stole objects he coveted from friends. He was, however, a gifted antiquarian and naturalist. In exchange for the donation of his collection, Charles III named him the Real Gabinete's lifetime director in October 1771.³² Through his long history of collecting (and theft), the director had cultivated a vast network of associates, which helped grow the institution's renown. He was part of an elite, cosmopolitan class of scientists that was beginning to emerge at the end of the eighteenth century.³³ Five years of set up followed, with the Real Gabinete opening to the public at the beginning of November in 1776, located half a mile from the Palacio Real on the Calle de Alcalá, near the royal post office.³⁴ A stampede of visitors eager to view the collection flooded into the galleries, which raised questions from Dávila about the security of the collection so much that he called in armed guards (the throng nearly trampled a watchman, who fled the museum for his life).³⁵

As a result of the Crown's (and Dávila's) desire to collect everything, the Gabinete contained a wide array of objects that were outside of the scope of modern natural history. Among the collection were paintings by Diego Velázquez, objects from pre-contact indigenous civilizations, and a variety of non-biological samples. It was a selection of everything from within the realm brought together for public consumption.³⁶ In its presentation, the Real Gabinete was similar to other *Wunderkammeren*, building on both contemporary and historical traditions of display, showing a "complete" view of the world the Spanish were vying to control.

The full scope of the collection, and its context among the Spanish colonial project, can be well appreciated by studying Juan Bautista Brú's 1784 *Colección de láminas que representan los animales y monstruos del Real Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid* (The Collection of Plates that represent Animals and Monsters of the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid). Brú, the painter, designer, and chief dissector of the Real Gabinete, provides an illustrated account of the animals and "monstrous" specimens collected by the Real Gabinete from throughout the world. Over its two volumes, *Colección de láminas* describes and illustrates seventy-one different specimens, all from around the globe (both from Spanish zones of control and otherwise). Brú conducts his descriptions of specimens held in the Real Gabinete throughout his text in similar ways. He makes no distinctions between curious items and regular ones and places them in dialogue with each other, both narratively and visually. In a text that covers seventy-one animals, specimens of curious nature number just five, placed throughout the narrative. For example, the first six entries of the first

volume contain, in order, a specimen of a sea lion, a manatee, followed by a chicken with three feet, a green oropendola, a hare with two bodies, and a golden heron. A pivotal point here is the normalcy with which curious specimens are included; they are not separated from their "non-monstrous" counterparts, but are placed randomly throughout. Brú notes that he hopes that "this collection could guide *aficionados* of natural history to examine the exquisite specimens from many countries which are in the Real Gabinete de Historia Natural. I hope to show a complete collection of what is presented in this Real Gabinete."³⁷ Certainly, the seventy-one specimens that Brú describes are not the complete collection of the Real Gabinete, which was, by all accounts, vast and inclusive. They are, however, largely representative of the collection as a whole and should be understood both as a document of that physical collection and as a "paper museum" (like *Historia universal* and the Tovar Codex) in its own right.

Brú's illustrations from the Real Gabinete are rendered in a naturalistic idealism. Though they existed in the collection as taxidermized creatures, they adorn the pages of *Colección de láminas* as living creatures inhabiting a landscape rendered in exacting detail; the animals inhabit an environment. Two great examples of this are the illustration of a three-legged chicken (Figure 3) and the green oropendola (Figure 4). The images are near each other, with the oropendola being the specimen after its more curious counterpart. They are both portrayed as scientific specimens—that is to say they are rendered in exacting detail, showing all parts of the animal, with a scale of inches added to show their relative size. The birds are rendered in schematic views that allow the possessor of the book to dissect the creature as a subject of study rather than an actual animal, a stand in for physical study. Such a representation was typical of images made throughout Spanish scientific trips to the new world. As Daniela Bleichmar has shown, such schematic views represented an idealized version of reality which could be understood as the colonialist's eye focusing on the



Figure 3: Juan Bautista Brú, "Three Legged Chicken," in *Colección de láminas que representan los animales y monstruos del Real Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid*, 1784.

wonders of the world over which it was claiming possession.³⁸ By portraying these creatures in such an exacting way, Brú was showing them as objects to be understood and studied, and thereby something over which to claim mastery.

It is prudent to return to those shipments of peoples and artifacts from Mesoamerica to the court of the Spanish King—those jugglers and ball players—and think of the ways in which their performance, in fact their very existence, both highlighted colonial control and provided a framework for normalization. In bringing Nahua performers to entertain the courts of Europe, the Spanish monarchy was asserting its dominion over them, showing the importance of their mission, and stressing the outside nature of what they encountered on the other side of the Atlantic. At the same time, though, they presented indigenous culture and material culture to the public for dissection and consumption. Through encountering the other, the other became a part of an understood world view and a world order. Brú's choice to put these very different specimens together, one right after the other, both emphasizes and normalizes the curiosity of the three-legged chicken. By placing it among other, normally legged animals, the extra leg becomes all the more curious. However, by placing it in the company of other, normal animals, the chicken also becomes normalized. Another animal in a vast scientific menagerie.

Much can be gained by placing Brú's account into dialogue with other curated texts—most namely Sahagún's *Historia universal*. The texts serve as a presentation of an experience that the reader is not witnessing first hand. Like *Historia universal*, Brú's text should be viewed as a whole complex tapestry of separate parts. Moreover, specimens that could be considered curious or wondrous were considered on an even foothold with more traditional samples. Three-legged chickens and normal-legged crocodiles together forming a complete narrative. Brú's text provides an account of the wonders of Dávila's Real Gabinete and of the far-reaching tentacles of the Spanish Empire, which had been able to collect, preserve, and display such specimens to the public. The text (and by extension, the Real Gabinete itself), functions as a



Figure 4: Juan Bautista Brú, "Oropendola," in *Colección de láminas que representan los animales y monstruos del Real Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid*, 1784.

presentation and contextualization of the wonders of a world that was constantly being dissected and collected.

Additionally, much can be gained by looking at the Real Gabinete and Brú's text in the context of science in the Spanish Enlightenment and the ways in which that stream of intellectualism influenced legislation. As director, Dávila informed colonial policy at the end of the eighteenth century. This is most evident in a 1776 royal edict housed at the John Carter Brown Library, in which the monarch encourages the authorities in control of the provinces of the Spanish Empire to "prepare and send to Madrid all of the curious natural things that you encounter in the lands and towns in your districts; and send them for the collection of the Real Gabinete de Historia Natural that His Majesty has established in this Court for the benefit and instruction of the public." The edict is broken up into several sections, in which instructions are given for the collecting of specimens from the three branches of natural knowledge—mineral, animal, and vegetal. Additionally, it ends with copious instructions on the preservation of specimens for transport to the Real Gabinete. Preparators throughout the world were to use current best-practices for the collection and preservation of specimens that would eventually become both visual proof of a Spanish imperium and a collection for the edification of the public. From the specificity of its instructions, it is clear that a specialist like Dávila was either the primary author or was heavily involved in its drafting.

From the 1776 decree, it becomes apparent that the Real Gabinete, despite being born out of an enlightened imperial desire to modernize, it was an inheritor of traditions of displaying curiosities that had existed for centuries previous. In a strictly functional sort of way, the 1776 decree called upon a preexisting framework of empire that had existed since Spain began to expand across the Atlantic. In calling out to a vast network of viceroys, governors, *corregidores*, *alcaldes mayores*, and those in charge of provinces, the Bourbon monarch was able to assert dominance over his empire. While the Crown was beginning to exhibit the fruits of their scientific labors with the Real Gabinete, science was long part of the Iberian imperial project. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has written in his *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations in the History of Science in the Iberian World* (2006), the first hand study of the natural world through botanical specimens, indigenous bodies, and the land itself (all essential parts of the scientific revolution) had their antecedents in the early colonial Iberian Atlantic.³⁹ This took the form of a culture of experimentation and the search for knowledge for financial gain, best capitalized in the form of cartography and natural history, fields marginalized in traditional narratives of the Enlightenment.

The Real Gabinete was most certainly a descendant of collections of curiosities that were brought back from the "New World" and shown to the public. These collections had been built upon a framework of empire and shown as a way of supporting that empire, an heir of a long tradition of display and curation that had existed

throughout Europe for centuries. The Real Gabinete, though, should also be seen as a descendant of a desire to catalogue the world and to use that knowledge to claim mastery: a descendant of works such as *Historia universal*, which were used to understand the Nahua in order to convert and subjugate them more effectively. Collection, display, and wonder were tied together in an inescapable bond that held the Spanish imperial project together.

The Bald Cow and the Documented Empire: An Edict in Motion

Two years after the royal edict of 1776, a farmer found a bald cow on his property near Veracruz. Local agents of the Crown considered the bald cow a marvelous specimen that should be preserved and studied. As the monarch decreed, information about the find was prepared and shipped across the Atlantic. Scientifically, a bald cow was not particularly intriguing—one would assume it would be the same as a normally pelted cow. However, it most certainly adhered to the Crown's request to catalogue anything from the animal kingdom that was "very curious or rare."⁴⁰ There was information to be gleaned, knowledge to be generated. A drawing of the cow was quickly produced and shipped across the Atlantic to Madrid and the Real Gabinete.⁴¹

The 1778 bovine curiosity typifies the ways in which the Spanish Empire functioned. Understood through the lens of scientific thought in contemporary Europe, the bald cow is an outlier. While it was scientifically interesting, it did not broaden scientific knowledge the same ways that other shipments from the "New World" would. However, when understood in the context of the ways in which the Spanish monarchy defined itself, the bald cow becomes normalized. While sent back to the monarch as a curious thing, the cow becomes just another touchstone of imperial control exerted through scientific cataloging and display. Images were made, shown, and understood, and control was exerted. The Crown decreed that such objects be brought to Madrid, and it was made so.

The cow could be seen as part of the wave of science that was occurring as a result of the 1776 collection decree and the Bourbon Reforms of the late eighteenth century. Much scholarly ink has been spilled on the Bourbon Reforms, a set of sweeping legislation meant to consolidate royal supremacy. The thought among reformers was that rather working with the apparatus of the Empire, the process would be streamlined and the monarch would solidify sovereignty over his holdings: a legislative break from a Habsburg past. Scholars have long debated the efficacy of the Bourbon Reforms, viewing them on a scale from a legislative success to a total failure. The reality was though, that the Crown dreamed big and that dream was mediated on the ground by those living throughout the Spanish Empire in ways that followed local contingency, need, and resources. To better know the land that they ruled, the Crown and its representatives sent expeditions into the Americas to map the territory in an effort to understand Spanish colonial possessions in order to exploit them for profit. While

not necessarily their immediate intended goal, the Bourbon expeditions provided a new influx of materials from the "New World" that trickled into European collections that provided a latticework for the newly installed dynasty to build upon a cohesive display of empire.

Crown endorsed collecting had long been part of the Spanish Empire and was directly codified in the 1776 decree that demanded that agents of the monarchy everywhere aid the Real Gabinete in the creation of a complete reckoning of the wonders of what had become a global empire. Such an edict enjoyed a healthy pedigree from the past—reaching far back into the history of the Empire to a gift that a monarch gave to a representative of another, starting centuries of colonial rule. Objects that were collected from the time of Cortés onward provided a visual vocabulary that emphasized imperial control. When Sahagún wrote about the process of cultivating and harvesting the cochineal beetle, he was creating a curated text within an established framework for understanding the wider world that echoed throughout the colonial period, a "paper museum" through which Europeans could understand the world that they had encountered and, ultimately, subjugated it. Lands and peoples could be claimed and reclaimed by documentation and display, by both asserting their place as an object of wonder and by normalizing them. In the same ways in which the original shipment that Dürer witnessed in Brussels provided a vocabulary for control, Dávila's collection (both from his own halls and the result of the 1776 decree) at the Real Gabinete acted as a visual representation of imperial might. It was not necessary, then, a new strategy of imperial image making like the Bourbon Reforms that solidified the might of the Bourbon monarchy, rather the newly installed monarchy employed the tactics of their predecessors, building on strategies that had existed and functioned for two centuries of colonial rule. Rather than a reform, the formation of the Real Gabinete and the scientific advances of the eighteenth century were a retrenchment into the past of the empire.

Returning to the exhibit that one of the greatest artists of Northern Europe encountered at the beginning of the sixteenth century, one smiles at the thought of objects from the "new land of gold" that were "so much better than seeing fairy tales."⁴² Dürer's reaction aside, it is my opinion that exhibit in question provided the existence of lands recently encountered and provided a framework throughout the colonial period to claim imperium—by displaying, by curating, by describing, the crown and its agents were able to both contextualize the "New World" and make it a tangible part of European understanding. It both existed and was the sovereign property of its discoverers—the Spaniards. A new dynasty after a bitter war, the Bourbons needed to prove that the fairy tales, and their dominion over them, were true. To do this, they relied on the functions that had been previously set out—of display, encounter, collection, and contextualization—to place the "New World," now long part of the Old one—firmly under their control. Displaying objects in the Real Gabinete asserted Spain's place in the Enlightenment. Bourbon collecting projects

made the "New World" and the Spanish Empire tangible as it had from the time that Dürer saw the objects from the land of gold. The bald cow, a small scientific curiosity, becomes proof of the tale the Spanish monarchy had asserted all along—Spanish imperial might throughout the known world.

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NOTES

¹ Albrecht Dürer, *Albrecht Durer: Diary of His Journey in the Netherlands, 1520-1521*, trans. and intro by J. A. Goris (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1971), 53-54. Dürer witnessed the collection in Brussels, where Charles V was serving in his capacity as Holy Roman Emperor.

² Stuart B. Schwartz, ed., *Victors and Vanquished: Spanish and Nahua Views of the Conquest of Mexico* (Boston and New York: Saint Martin's, 2000), 77; *Hernando Cortés: Five Letters, 1519-1526*, ed. and trans. J. Bayard Morris (Routledge, 1928; New York: Norton, 1991), 16-20. The fifth part or *quinto* real refers to the conquistador's traditional tribute to the Spanish monarch from explorers and miners.

³ Bernardino de Sahagún describes the cache as follows: "Then they [the Mexica] dressed up the Captain. They put on him the turquoise serpent mask attached to the quetzal-feather head fan, to which were fixed, from which hung the green-stone serpent earrings. And they put the sleeveless jacket on him, and around his neck they put the plaited green-stone neckband with the golden disk in the middle. On his lower back they tied the back mirror, and they also tied behind him the cloak called a *tzitzilli*. And on his legs they placed the green-stone bands with the golden bells. And they gave him, placing it on his arm, the shield with gold and shells crossing, on whose edge were spread quetzal feathers, with a quetzal banner. And they laid the obsidian sandals before him. And the other three outfits, the gods' appurtenances, they arranged in rows before him." It is important to note (really just for the man's character and the flavor of the colonial experience) that immediately

after this gifting, Cortés ordered the envoys to be put in irons. Schwartz, ed., *Victors and Vanquished*, 95.

⁴ Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 171-73. One cannot help but be reminded of the Medici family, the de facto rulers of the Florentine Republic. Among the collection of Lorenzo il Magnifico were ancient wonders as well as the art of his contemporaries (such as Sandro Botticelli and Michelangelo), whom he ravenously cultivated and collected. Such a vast collection became a meeting place for Florentine intellectuals and one of the great think tanks of the Italian Renaissance.

⁵ Jan C. Westerhoff, "A World of Signs: Baroque Pansemioticism, the Polyhistor, and the Early Modern Wunderkammer," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62, no.4 (October 2001): 633-50.

⁶ Marjorie Swann, *The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 20.

⁷ Carina L. Johnson, "Aztec Regalia and the Reformation of Display," in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, eds. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 87.

⁸ Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion*, 34.

⁹ I have elected to use the terms "Mexico" and "Nahua" to describe the people that Cortés encountered in the Basin of Mexico. The term "Aztec" is a constructed term that emerged in the nineteenth century. "Mexico" refers to the political entity that formed the Triple Alliance. "Nahua" refers to the larger ethnic group of speakers of Nahuatl who made up the Mexica but were not exclusively Mexica.

¹⁰ The ball players were depicted in a series of drawings by Christoph Weiditz in 1528 when they were at the court of Charles V. Weiditz created drawings of much of the shipment of Mexico that Cortés sent to the court. For more information, see Jean Michel Massing, "Early European Images of America: The Ethnographic Approach," in *Circa 1492: Art in the Age of Exploration*, ed. Jay Levenson (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 515-20.

¹¹ For more on contextualizing the bodies of the colonized, particularly through art, see Ann Rosalind Jones, "Ethnographer's Sketch, Sensational Engraving, Full-Length Portrait: Print Genres for Spanish America in Girolamo Benzoni, the De Brys, and Cesare Vecellio," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Print Studies* 41, no. 1 (2011): 137-17; Peter Schrag, *The European Mind and the Discovery of the New World* (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1965).

¹² Max Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 176.

¹³ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 131.

¹⁴ Dürer, *Albrecht Dürer*, 53-54.

¹⁵ Arnold Bauer, "The Material Landscape of Pre-Columbian America," in *Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15-45.

¹⁶ Johnson, "Aztec Regalia and the Reformation of Display," 87-88. For more information on gift giving among Amerindian cultures, see Seth Mallios, *The Deadly Politics of Giving: Exchange and Violence at Ajacan, Roanoke, and Jamestown* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

¹⁸ Dürer, *Albrecht Dürer*, 53-54.

¹⁹ For more on ethnography and European encounters in the "New World," see Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The Amerindian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

²⁰ Bernadino de Sahagún, *La historia universal de las cosas de Nueva España*, eds. and trans. Arthur O. Anderson and Charles E. Dibble (University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, 1982), 239.

²¹ Juan de Tovar, *The Tovar Codex*, 1584, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

²² J. H. Parry, "Juan de Tovar and the History of the Indians," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 121, no. 4 (August 1977): 316. Parry notes that the friar was well known as a preacher, saying that "Admiring contemporaries called him [Juan de Tovar] the Mexican Cicero; but he was more than a gifted linguist and a popular preacher. He was a capable ethnologist and a sympathetic but clear-headed student of Indian tradition, who made critical use both of Indian painted codices and of oral evidence supplied by Indian informants." Written in 1977, Parry's read on Juan de Tovar still holds up—Tovar should be considered both as someone grounded in earlier European traditions and as someone who understood well the indigenous world into which he had become a part.

²³ Juan de Tovar, *The Tovar Codex*.

²⁴ Martín de la Cruz, *The Badianus Manuscript: (Codex Barbarini, Latin 241) Vatican Library; An Aztec Herbal, 1552* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins Press, 1940).

²⁵ Cassinao dal Pozzo's work has recently been published as a multi-volume work by the Warburg Institute, covering a staggering thirty-three volumes. Of particular note to this essay is Cassiano dal Pozzo, *The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo: A Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 8, *The Aztec Herbal*, eds. Martin Clayton, Luigi Guerrini, and Alejandro de Ávila (London: Harvey Miller, 2009).

²⁶ Such foliated collections existed throughout Europe, gaining popularity in the seventeenth century. Most famously, the Danish antiquarian Ole Worm published his *Wunderkammer* as the Museum Wormianum in 1654, which includes the bulk of the collector's extensive collection with images and Latin textual commentary on the finer points of the objects and the collection as a whole. Likewise, Ferrante Imperato, a Neapolitan apothecary, published an illustrated account of his cabinet of curiosities in 1599 which he titled *Dell'istoria naturale*, which emphasized his

credibility as collector of natural history specimens and a learned scholar. These examples are all curated texts—they should all be considered “paper museums.”

²⁷ Gabriel R. Paquette, *Enlightenment, Governance, and Reform in Spain and Its Empire, 1759-1808* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 2. As Gabriel Paquette puts it, “the old order, with its robust corporate entities, superabundance of privileges, and regional semi-autonomy was to be suppressed. In its place, reformers sought to erect a unified nation state, subservient to the monarchy, and fashion it into the generator of a new patriotic state.” The Bourbon Reforms, then, were to be a narrowing of the privileges of the aristocracy ending in the consolidation of the power of the monarchy.

²⁸ Key studies that analyze the on the ground effects of the Bourbon Reforms are Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, Sexuality, and Illegitimacy in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Adam Warren, *Medicine and Politics in Colonial Peru: Population Growth and the Bourbon Reforms* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Pamela Voekel, *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002); David Weber, *Bárbaros: Spaniards and Their Savages in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); and Jeremy Adelman, *Sovereignty and Revolution in the Iberian Atlantic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁹ See, among others Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation: Explorations of the History of Science in the Iberian World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Daniella Bleichmar, *Visual Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Raymond Craib, *Cartographic Mexico: A History of State Fixations and Fugitive Landscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Neil Safier, *Measuring the New World: Enlightenment Science and South America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

³⁰ Silvia Spitta, *Misplaced Objects: Migrating Collections and Recollections in Europe and the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 51.

³¹ María de los Ángeles Calatayud Arinero, ed., *Pedro Franco Dávila: primer director del Real Gabinete de Historia Natural fundado por Carlos III* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, 1988), 57. A 1753 inventory of Dávila's collection is broken into 16 categories, ranging from shells, rocks, minerals, crystals, fossils, archaeological materials such as clothes and weapons, bronzes, miniatures, paintings, scientific equipment, to books and manuscripts (60-61).

³² *Ibid.*, 114.

³³ Spitta, *Misplaced Objects*, 52.

³⁴ This location can be seen on G & L Bartholomew's 1893 map, “Plan of Madrid,” that was printed in Edinburgh.

³⁵ Spitta, *Misplaced Objects*, 52.

³⁶ See J. Miguel Morán and Fernando Checa, *El coleccionismo en España: de la cámara de maravillas a la galería de pinturas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1985). The Real Gabinete contained a gallery of paintings, which included three by Murillo, three by Cano, one by Velázquez, two by Claudio Caello, two by Carreño, two by Alonso de Arco, two by Camilo, three by Matthias de Torres, three by Herrera el Viejo, one by Senero, and a possible painting by Mengs. See María de los Ángeles Calatayud Arinero, ed., *Pedro Franco Dávila*, 104.

³⁷ Juan Bautista Brú de Ramon, *Colección de láminas que representan los animales y monstruos del Real Gabinete de Historia Natural de Madrid, con una descripción individual de cada uno, Tomo 1* (Madrid: Andres de Sotos, 1784), vii. "Esta colección podrá guiar los aficionados a la historia natural, y servir para examinar con utilidad las exquisitas producciones de todos países, que encierran los hermosos gabinetes de historia natural, y en especial hacer conocer los individuos del reyno animal. Espero formar una colección completa de todos los objetos que presenta este Real Gabinete."

³⁸ Bleichmar, *Visual Empire*, 7.

³⁹ Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Instrucción hecha de orden del Rei N.S. para que los virreyes: gobernadores, corregidores, alcaldes mayores é intendentes de provincias en todos los dominios de S.M. puedan hacer escoger, preparar y enviar á Madrid todas las producciones curiosas de naturaleza que se encontraren en las tierras y pueblos de sus distritos, á fin de que se colloquen en el Real Gabinete de Historia Natural que S.M. ha establecido en esta Corte para beneficio é instrucción*, 4. "Muchas curiosidades y cosas raras."

⁴¹ Don Pedro Antonio de Cossio, "Diseño en colores de una vaca sin pelo que nació en una Hacienda de Vera Cruz," Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Mapas, planos, etc.: México, No. 350.

⁴² Dürer, *Albrecht Dürer*, 53-54.

