José Ramón Marcaida López


Whether manucodes have or have not legs, the question was not trivial. All birds have legs and, as Aristotle himself stated, should a birdlike being have not, something strange happens. Might this something be miraculous, or at least preternatural? A symbol of something unnatural placed by God in nature? The first travelers who described those wonderful creatures seen in the Moluccas in early sixteenth century saw them normal, i.e. legs, they called them “birds of paradise” or “birds of God”. Name, the word, leaves its print on things. Two of such wonderful specimen moored in Seville in 1522, aboard the ships commanded by Juan Sebastian Elcano. Admirable stories and qualities were attributed to them: their plumage beauty was the least surprising, compared to the fact that they never corrupted after death and that, even dead, if their feathers were cut off, they grew back. Manucodes were constantly flying, never rested on earth until, exhausted, they fell dead. Astoundingly, it was when some dissected specimens began to arrive in Europe that it was ruled out that birds of paradise were legless. So was recorded by Cardano, Gesner or Aldrovandi. There were, of course, some skeptical naturalists, like Clusius, who preferred to believe the testimony of Dutch seamen who set sail to Europe with a couple of manucodes and confirmed that they were legs fitted. Notwithstanding, the persistence of images representing legless manucodes in works of seventeenth-century natural history witnesses the triumph of a fictional reality.

The three axes around which José Ramón Marcaida articulates his original answer to a somewhat heretic question converge on the history of manucodes: can we talk about a Baroque science? Or at least, in a lighter version of same question: which were the connections between modern science and Baroque culture? Of course, the query itself seems to contain two assumptions which the author does not avoid questioning. The first one concerns the very possibility of talking about something we might call “science,” with well-defined boundaries and contours, during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a “something” that, if anything, we can describe as “Baroque.” Marcaida is far from accepting such a possibility and prefers to opt for the opening of topics and disciplines, the plurality of viewers, spaces and practices where the knowledge of nature was built at the time. Marcaida submerges in all that “lordly racket” – to use Panofsky’s expression – of knowledge and topics which were shaping what in modern times has come to be recognized as “scientific knowledge.” Through his essay “art” and “science,” the two words that appear in the title of this book, don’t seem to represent anything else than useful abbreviations to refer to kinds
of research and representation of the natural world, among which borders constantly blurred. The book is not about the influence of science in art and vice versa, but about a shared purpose embodied in different forms, spaces and styles.

Marcaida’s approach, in a move shared by many other historians of science in recent decades, departs from the uncertainty in facing the question “What is the History of Science the History of?”. And the alternative, as happens in many other cases, gets too close to the so called “cultural studies.” The second implicit assumption in Marcaida’s question concerns the meaning of “Baroque.” Traditionally used as an artistic category, “Baroque” does not allow an easy imprisonment into a definite chronology. It has been characterized as a trans-historic attitude that persists today, having become even more widely present. The reader will not find in this book a definition of Baroque, but Marcaida seems to be certain about some features that unmistakably characterize Baroque culture: the reflection on the theme of senses deception, the passion for illusion and even delusion (trompe-l’oeil); the ephemeral nature of reality; the compulsive desire to construct an always fleeting reality, the horror vacui.

Cabinets crammed with rare objects and specimens: animals, plants, curiosities, scientific instruments, but also paintings which, in turn, represented another stored heap of objects. The pictorial representations of people watching the collection, as we observe the canvas, created fictitious spaces where the most precious objects accumulated. Marcaida stares into the paintings of cabinets that flooded collections during seventeenth century to draw up his interpretation of collecting as a typically Baroque phenomenon. Indeed, the fascination for painting – especially in the Iberian context – gained ground to the furor of collecting naturalia that had been so successful in the sixteenth century. However, Marcaida, through the analysis of a number of these paintings of cabinets, shows how the naturalistic collecting did not disappear from the scene, but was integrated into the collections of paintings. And I use the word scene, because Marcaida’s thesis about this kind of accumulation is that cabinet paintings give us the key to understand the meaning of a new form of possession of nature: a fictitious possession, an illusionistic effect, the representation of a nature not really possessed but appropriated through the painting. Cabinet paintings stage the “great theatre of the world.” Reality was invaded by fiction, nature supplanted by its image.

Without losing sight of the overall European natural history context, as of the styles in pictorial and literary expression, Marcaida focuses his analysis on the Spanish seventeenth century. It is the Spain of Quevedo and Calderón de la Barca, a country that was beginning to develop his own “black legend,” but where enthusiastic echoes born from the wonders and power which accom-
panied the exploration and exploitation of the New World still resonated. El Escorial hosted the natural treasures from the long exploration journey of Francisco Hernández. In the Madrid Alcázar pictures, natural specimen, scientific instruments, curiosities of all kinds accumulated. Collections gathered by the wealthy, eager to possess an inaccessible, exotic and distant nature, arose everywhere. Cabinets of curiosities were sometimes so mysterious that Marcaida intuits in them the baroque frenzy for the spectral and phantasmagoric. Such is the case of the collection of the extravagant Don Juan de Espina, about which everyone spoke but nobody, or almost nobody, had managed to see; all that people knew about it came from stories, verbal representations and testimonies of dubious reliability. The case of Juan de Espina is carefully described by Marcaida to insist on his concept of a “fictionalization of the collection” as a central feature of the Baroque culture.

The analogy with mirrors games, with illusionistic effects produced by reflecting one image upon another one, is of particular relevance if applied to the work of Eusebio Nieremberg, one of the key figures of Spanish Baroque natural history and to whom Marcaida devotes special attention. The Jesuit Nieremberg did not collect objects, but with his virtuosity and erudition echoed testimonials, descriptions and pictures from other authors, naturalists and antiquarians. Nieremberg’s *Historia Naturae* (1635) is compared by Marcaida to the genre of cabinet paintings: pictures of pictures, representations of representations creating an illusory sense of being in a distant and wonderful reality.

The last section of Marcaida’s book, dedicated to “preservation”, surprises the reader, who would perhaps expect a description of the methods of conservation of natural specimens, stuffing techniques or drawing styles, to save living beings from the ineffable oblivion linked to its putrefaction. Actually, these last pages, even paying particular attention to the pictorial representation as a means of preservation of natural things, concentrates on a reflection on the Baroque leitmotiv of life’s fugacity. The representation of *naturalia* in still life paintings, Marcaida argues, is largely based on information provided by natural historians; however, in the specific context of seventeenth-century Spain, the aim of these natural images is to convey to the viewer the feeling of the vanity and brevity of life. After a century of euphoria, the Spanish Baroque slid towards skepticism, embraced the culture of disillusionment and insisted on the vanity and futility of science. An analysis of some canvas devoted to the theme of *vanitas* brings a neat proof of it.

There was a time, many decades ago, when nothing seemed to be more remote from modern science than Renaissance thought and art: that explosion of hidden forces, spiritual powers, actions at a distance, magical philoso-
phies and practices. However, History of Science managed to erase prejudices demonstrating how all these topics could not be ignored when attempting to understand the origins of Modern Science. There was also a time when Romanticism had to go through a similar process. In recent years we assist to what seems to be the turn of recovery of the Baroque “lordly racket.” Ofer Gal and Raz Chen-Morris, in their *Baroque Science* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), have offered a rigorous and attractive interpretation of the connections between the Baroque culture, experimentation and Optics in seventeenth century. Following the path, Marcaida faces this controversial issue focusing on Natural history and the Hispanic cultural and artistic context during the seventeenth century. His book makes an original contribution to the understanding of the origins of Modern Science and a no less original contribution to the study of the history of Spanish science.

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