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Horticultural Highlights

Juan Sánchez Cotán: Mystical Artist of Horticulture • The Epoch of Philip II: Botanical and Horticultural Impact • Historical Wines of Spain • Historical Wines of Portugal • Iberian Olive Growing in a Time of Change • The Citrus Industry in Spain • Temperate Fruits and Nuts: Iberian Diversity • Tropical Fruit Crops in Spain and Portugal • Postharvest Technology in Spanish Horticulture • Spanish Vegetable Production: Processing and Fresh Market • Horticultural Production in a Natural Park in Portugal • Iberian Ornamentals Industry: Diversified and Innovative • Protected Cultivation in Iberian Horticulture

Symposia and Workshops

All Africa Horticulture Congress • Rose Research and Cultivation • Eucarpia Section Ornamentals • Landscape and Urban Horticulture • Artichoke, Cardoon and Their Wild Relatives • Horticultural Economics and Management • Horticultural Research, Training and Extension • Molecular Markers in Horticulture • Growing Media and Composting



Juan Sánchez Cotán: Mystical Artist of Horticulture

Jules Janick and Ana Luisa González Reimers

The Spanish artist, Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560-1627), had a dual career as a painter of religious subjects and still lifes of which only a few remain. Born in the town of Orgaz, he became a successful popular artist in nearby Toledo, but in 1603 his career took a different direction as he joined a Carthusian monastery as a layperson, and devoted the rest of his life to painting purely religious subjects, many specifically relating to his order (Fig. 1). Oddly enough his religious paintings are now considered unexceptional but his revolutionary, secular, still-life works, painted just before he changed his vocation to a life of contemplation, have placed him as one of the great artists of the Spanish Baroque.

Many of Cotán's austere still-life paintings (Fig. 2A to F) revolve around a simple theme: a collection of common vegetables (cabbage, cardoon, carrot, chayote, cucumber, lettuce, melon, radish); fruits (apple, citron, limonetta, lemon, blood orange, quince); and sometimes dead game birds (chaffinch, common linnet, European goldfinch, European roller, European sparrow, European turtledove, francolin, little bustard, mallard, red partridge, serin, turtledove). These are all organized in a square frame, perhaps a window, with some objects hanging from a string, a common method of preservation at that time, and some nestling on the ledge or leaning on the frame. The individual objects are brightly lit by sunlight shining from the left, but appear against a black background in the style known as tenebrism. The objects in the paintings are isolated from each other and are painted with extreme "photo-realism." We can almost touch and feel them. Their arrangements are not natural, but indicate a definitive, careful placement by the artist. The purpose is not obvious but one feels the artist is searching and striving for some mysterious effect. On 10 August 1603, before Cotán entered his religious order, he made his last will and inventoried his works, which included 11 paintings of horticultural subjects. Fig. 2 A, D, E, F were included indicating the date of composition preceded this date. Fig. 2C is signed and dated 1602. While, there is no way to date accurately the sequence of paintings the fact that Fig. 2B is not mentioned in the inventory suggests that it might be the last painting of the series possibly painted when he joined the Carthusian monastery since it was found there in 1835, when all monastery properties were taken over by the government. The fact that the other paintings were either in his possession or owned by two of his best friends suggests that

they rather than being painted on commission were made for personal reasons.

The almost banal objects have a noble simplicity. Each is treated with intense interest and respect. The arrangements are graceful but unnatural and transcendental, with most items confined to their own space. When the series of paintings are viewed together one gets the feeling that the artist was searching for a particular unfathomable arrangement. Astonishingly, one painting, now labeled Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber, (Fig. 2 E, see also the cover) appears as the epitome of his long search for perfection. It is an iconic example of a still life with a metaphysical meaning constructed from four common horticultural objects spiraling in a descent from heaven to earth. The gashed melon and the slit flesh of the slice show evidence of the human world, yet the juxtaposition of the floating apple, the exploding cabbage head, cut melon and slice with the cucumber balancing on the edge, pointing to the viewer, somehow belong to another concept of the world, known only to the painter. The super-realistic fruits are immersed in a dark abstract emptiness yet their arrangement reflects a deep knowledge of perspective and geometry providing a transcendent contemplation of both nature and the spirit.

There is horticultural information to be gleaned in these five paintings. We can distinguish tree fruits (quince, apple, four types of citrus); root vegetables (radish and various carrots with pigment ranging from white to yellow to purple); and three different cucurbit fruits (a yellow fleshed casaba melon; a cucumber, very similar to modern pickling types; and a chayote, a New World plant from Mexico that may be the first painting in Europe of this species). There are

two species of leafy vegetables: two types of cabbage, a loose heading tronchuda cabbage with thick petioles (Fig. 2D) and a firm heading type (Fig. 2E) common in Europe in the Middle Ages and similar to the modern type; and a type of non-heading lettuce known as Batavia. The most depicted vegetable, found in four of the six works, is cardoon, a well-known plant of Castile whose seed is a common food source of the European goldfinch; carrots and cabbage are found in three paintings.

It seems clear that all the fruit in each painting were not painted from life. For example the cardoon in Fig. 2A (dated ca. 1600) and 2C (signed and dated 1602) are identical in form and position suggesting the latter image was repainted from the former or vice versa, but the cardoons in Fig. 2B and D seem to be unique based on the cut surfaces. It is clear that Fig. 2F was made by reduplicating Fig. 2E and then adding the birds and the chayote. Using transparencies, the common vegetables line up almost exactly. The attribution of Fig. 2F as an original Cotán was once controversial, but the 1603 inventory does describe a still life with four birds.

One of the unique attributes of Cotán's paintings is that the fruits are posed, reminding the viewer of a Caravaggio tableaux. They indicate

Figure 1. Self portrait (right figure) of Juan Cotán from the painting *Aparición de la Virgen del Rosario a San Bruno* (Granada Museo de Bellas Artes).



Figure 2. The horticultural paintings (bodegones) of Juan Sánchez Cotán. A. Cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*) and francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*). B. Cardoon and carrots (*Daucus carota*). This painting is not mentioned in the 1603 inventory. C. Top from left to right: limetta (*Citrus limetta*, probably 'Arancia da Spagna'), apples (*Malus x domestica*), European goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), red partridges (*Alectoris rufa*). Bottom from left to right: six birds on a stick: from bottom to top there are a common linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*), one European goldfinch, two European sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), another European goldfinch, and a male serin (*Serinus serinus*); carrots, radishes (*Raphanus sativus*), and cardoon. D. Top from left to right: blood orange (*Citrus sinensis*), citron (*Citrus medica*), cabbage (*Brassica oleracea* var. *truncuda*), carrots. Bottom from left to right: cardoon, lemon slice (*Citrus limon*), lettuce (*Lactuca sativa*), and quince (*Cydonia oblonga*). E. From left to right: quince, cabbage (*B. oleracea* var. *capitata*), casaba melon, melon slice (*Cucumis melo* subsp. *melo* Inodorous Group), and cucumber (*Cucumis sativus*). F. Birds added to E from left to right: European roller (*Coracias garullas*), European turtledove (*Streptopelia turtur*), little bustard (*Tetrax tetrax*), and mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). The new fruit on the bottom left is chayote (*Sechium edule*).



Naturaleza Siempre Viva

Un bodegón. No es comestible
 Son seres sólo imaginarios
 Con forma y color muy concretos,
 Realidades para los ojos.
 Un gran silencio las envuelve.
 Aparición en la ventana.
 Son meras frutas y hortalizas.
 Membrillo y col penden colgados.
 En la madera del alféizar
 Se apoyan melón y pepino.
 Los objetos-objetos
 Descansan, reductibles
 A su material inerte
 De modo radical,
 Tan intenso, tan puro
 Que la materia alcanza
 Plenitud de sentido,
 Como si revelase
 Ya la noción de Ser
 Ante quien ve y admira,
 De pronto ingenuamente aristotélica.

Nature Always Alive

A still life. Inedible
 Are only imaginary beings
 Of concrete form and color,
 Realities for the eyes.
 A great silence surrounds them.
 An apparition in the window.
 Are merely fruits and vegetables.
 Quince and cabbage hanging.
 On the wooden windowsill
 Lie melon and cucumber.
 The objects themselves
 Rest, reduced
 To their inert material
 In a radical mode,
 So intense, so pure
 That the matter itself reaches
 Full meaning,
 As if to reveal
 Finally the notion of Being
 To the admiring viewer,
 Suddenly ingenuously Aristotelian.

Jorge Guillén
 Sánchez Cotán, San Diego, California
 A don Emilio Orozco Díaz

a fascination with perspective and indeed one book in his library is a 1583 treatise on this subject by Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola (*Le due regole della prospettiva*). The geometry of the six arrangements appears to be influenced by the geometrical shape of the cardoon, which, depending on the orientation, is a growing or decaying exponential curve. In Fig. 2A, which contains the cardoon and a francolin limply hung in space, this curve is made from the base of the cut root, upward away from the eye of the viewer bisecting the plane of vision. In Fig. 2B, the growing exponential curve starts with one carrot pointing away from the viewer, and continues through the cardoon that leans against the side of the frame. In Fig. 2C, a similar arrangement is made but the space above the curve is filled with citrus, apples, and birds. It is interesting to note that the cardoon in Fig. 2C is identical to the one in Fig. 1A. Finally in Fig. 2D, there is a completely new arrangement. The wilted cardoon has collapsed and is placed unceremoniously on the ledge along with a lemon slice, a loose lettuce head, and a quince, while the base of the hanging objects (blood orange, citron, cabbage, and carrots) creates an almost descending linear slope from left to right. The effect seems chaotic and unsettling. The masterpiece (Fig. 2E) was created with five

objects (quince, cabbage head, melon and slice, and cucumber) spiraling in the window frame. Marvelously, the spiral, admittedly somewhat ambiguously, is in the shape of a helix, presaging the structure of DNA! The curve formed by the bottom of the birds in Fig. 2F creates a complementary helical form. Do we have premonition of the double helix? Mystery of mysteries.

Cotán has infused horticultural objects with multiple meanings. We know these common objects as food for our bodies but they represent something much more in the eyes of the artist, food for the soul. Cotán has arranged them so that they represent life itself – the components of a mysterious universe descending from heaven to our hearts.

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The Epoch of Philip II: Botanical and Horticultural Impact

Cristina Castel-Branco and José Tito Rojo

The reign of Philip II corresponds to a key period in European history that had great impact on botany, horticulture and pharmacy. Philip, son of Charles V of Spain and princess Isabella of Portugal, reigned over Spain (1556-98) and Portugal (1580-98). The Crown dominions ultimately included Naples, Sicily, the Netherlands and the Duchy of Milan, together with the dependent territories in America, Africa, and Asia. Philip II was also honorary King of England, as a result of the terms stipulated in his marriage to Mary Tudor. With his kingdom extending to almost the entire world the political circumstances and consequences of this moment in time were exceptional. This epoch, a time of adventure and travel, made it possible to incorporate rich discoveries from the Orient and the Americas into Europe. The impact was far-reaching and transformed the daily lives of Europeans to include their eating habits, medication, and the plants used to decorate their homes and gardens. The vast documentation gathered for the 400th anniversary of the birth of Philip II, confirms that the King was fond of gardens and curious of plants; his cabinet was decorated with plant illustrations and floral engravings. Scientific and artistic testimonies indicate that the events in the reign of Philip II left a lasting imprint in botany and garden art.

ASIAN ENCOUNTERS

When Philip II (Fig. 1) arrived in Portugal, in 1581, to get to know his latest possession he was impressed with its exuberant gardens and fountains, which were described with delight (Andresen et al., 1998). At that time, caravels, frequently leaving from Lisbon, had reached India since 1498, Brazil since 1500, and Japan since 1543. An intense trade had been established, importing valuable goods including new plants, spices, and medicinals that contributed

to botanical science, medical progress, daily nutrition, and the beautification of gardens.

The exotic plant novelties adapted well in Portugal, where climate and soils are diverse and freezes rarely occur. The introduction of the sweet orange (*Citrus sinensis*) to Lisbon during the 16th century (Castel-Branco, 1998b) had intense consequences in eating habits and garden art. Filipe II was duly impressed: “*They gave me the other day, what I am sending to you now in this box. They told me that it’s a sweet*

Figure 1. Felipe II. Ticiano Vecellio, ca. 1550. Galeria Palazzo Pitti, Florencia.

