

HEADING REPORT(H)A: Environmental Stories

Portrait of a Flora: José Quer y Martínez and the Botany of Enlightened Spain (1762-1764)

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Figure 1: Botanical allegory in José Quer y Martínez's *Flora Española* (1762-1764). Source: Biblioteca Digital del Real Jardín Botánico (CSIC).

A military surgeon and physician, José Quer y Martínez (1695-1764) travelled with the Spanish army across Spain, France and Italy, and took part in the capture of Oran, in North Africa, in 1732. Along the way, he gathered seeds, living plants and herbarium specimens, and visited botanical gardens and naturalists across Europe, from Pisa to Bologna, by way of Montpellier. This field experience, accumulated over decades, would later underpin one of the most ambitious botanical projects of Enlightenment Spain.

In 1755, Quer was appointed first professor of the newly founded Real Jardín Botánico de Madrid, a post he held until his death. It was in this institutional setting that he gathered the material collected over a lifetime into the work that would make him known: the *Flora Española, ó Historia de las plantas, que se crían en España*, first published in 1762.

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Originally planned in eight volumes, the work was eventually completed in six, the last two prepared after Quer's death, in 1764, by his successor at the Botanical Garden, Casimiro Gómez Ortega. In total, the *Flora Española* describes around 2,600 plant species – overwhelmingly common plants of the Iberian landscape – and remains today a reference source for reconstructing Spanish vegetation before the great agricultural and urban transformations of the 19th and 20th centuries.

The first, largely introductory volume includes a vehement defence of the superiority of Tournefort's method over that of Linnaeus – a stance that would later contribute to the work's relative neglect, as Linnaean nomenclature imposed itself as the international standard. Self-taught, Quer remained faithful to a classificatory system already in retreat across scientific Europe, revealing the tensions of an Iberian botany seeking to assert itself against the growing hegemony of Swedish models.

It is this ambition to assert a place of its own that the opening engraving of the first volume seems to announce. Beneath a sky of clouds torn open by beams of light and a sun bearing a human face, an elegantly dressed man points to a flowering plant before a barefoot child. The Latin inscription accompanying the scene suggests that the flowers 'shall appear', turning the botanical gesture into something close to an act of revelation: scientific knowledge as a light that brings forth, before a new generation, the plant wealth of the Spanish landscape, until then scattered and anonymous.

More than a decorative frontispiece, the allegory sums up the programme of the work itself: converting field observation, accumulated across a lifetime of travel, into a systematic inventory and a lasting record of Iberian flora – a gesture that, despite the relative eclipse of Quer's work as the Linnaean model rose to dominance, continues to be recovered today by botanists and historians of science as an essential testimony of Enlightened Spain.

Reading suggestions:

Quer y Martínez, José. *Flora española, ó Historia de las plantas, que se crían en España*. Madrid: Joaquín Ibarra, 1762-1784. 6 vols.

Gómez Ortega, Casimiro. *Elogio histórico de Don Joseph Quer, cirujano consultor del Ejército... y primer profesor del Real Jardín Botánico de Madrid*. Madrid: Joaquín Ibarra, 1784.

Colmeiro, Miguel. *La botánica y los botánicos de la Península Hispano-Lusitana: estudios bibliográficos y biográficos*. Madrid: Imprenta y Estereotipia de M. Rivadeneyra, 1858.

Terrada, María Luz López. La introducción de la botánica moderna en España. Valencia: CSIC, 1987.

Aedo, Carlos, et al. "A botanical survey of Joseph Quer's Flora española." *Willdenowia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 243-259.

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