

# PAINTINGS FROM AN EXPEDI

*There is no more romantic story in botanical history than that of the paintings that were made by the artists of the Royal Botanical Expedition...*

—Rogers McVaugh, 1980

In the heyday of New World exploration about two centuries ago, the King of Spain sent a scientific expedition to Mexico. This Royal Botanical Expedition to New Spain, lasting more than a decade, employed botanists, zoologists and talented artists. It was a great success, except for two things. The findings were never published by the participants and most of the drawings of specimens were lost, seemingly irretrievably.

An unexpected, happy ending has just developed to this botanical tale. The invaluable watercolors and sketches of New World plants and animals were recently found in Barcelona, after having been lost more than 150 years. That collection of about 2,000 pieces now is being housed and cataloged at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation in Pittsburgh.

"Discovering the missing collection is remarkable, and its preservation for scientific research, as well as for its aesthetic value, is now ensured. It is one of the Institute's most significant acquisitions, and is a once-in-a-century sort of occurrence in the world of botanical science," says Robert W. Kiger, director of the institute.

The story of the drawings begins back in 1787 when the King of Spain sent a major scientific expedition to New Spain. The expedition's goal was to inventory new plants and animals found in the area that now is Mexico. The scientists, led by botanists Martin de Sessé y Lacasta and José Mariano Mociño, were to gather

specimens, take notes and have artists draw each unfamiliar plant and animal encountered. Two of the Mexican artists hired for the project were especially talented, one being said to do drawings on a par with the best botanical illustrations anywhere.

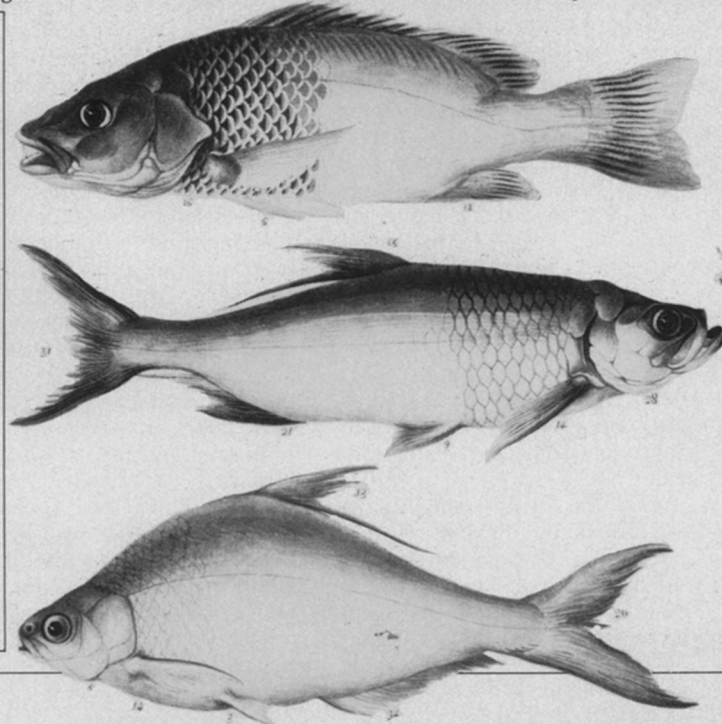
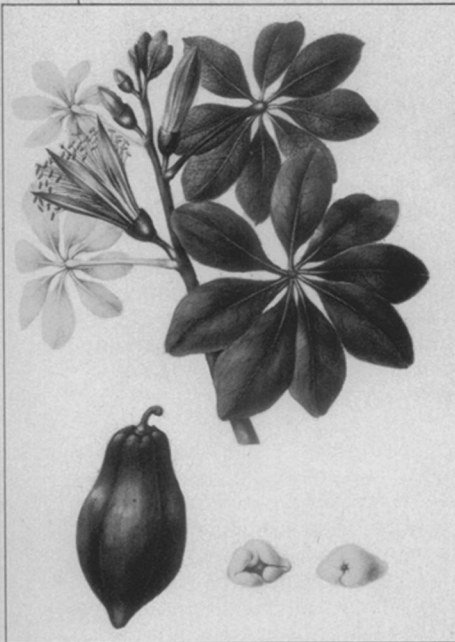
Rogers McVaugh, an Emeritus Professor of Botany at the University of Michigan, who has long studied the expedition, describes its operation. The artists usually did sketches of fresh specimens in the field, often after laborious flower-dissection. "The botanists of the expedition thus seem to have proceeded in a fashion quite unlike that of the modern

student of a new flora, who tends to collect widely, indiscriminately, and in volume, then return to base to study his materials and eventually to report upon them after prolonged periods in the herbarium and library... Sessé and Mociño seem to have written their flora as they went along, making their identifications with the aid of the library and manuscripts they carried in the field, collecting little or nothing that was not directly relevant to the flora, and essentially disregarding all the specimens they had noted and described or illustrated on excursions in previous years," McVaugh says in a 1977 *CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN HERBARIUM*.

The expedition spent about 15 years exploring Mexico, and some of the participants traveled into Baja California, Alaska, Puerto Rico and Costa Rica. They sent some materials, including seeds, back to Spain but brought most of the specimens and drawings themselves in 1803.

When they returned to Spain, the expedition members found the intellectual climate greatly changed. The government was in turmoil, and the country was torn by wars. "Conditions were not favorable, to say the least, for publication of expensive illustrated works on natural history," McVaugh says.

With their plans to write a treatise clearly impossible, the expedition members disagreed over what course they should take. In the end, the manuscript of their descriptions and the actual plant specimens were given to an herbarium in Madrid, where the main collection was put into storage and not examined for more than 100 years. Only "duplicate" plant specimens, which the herbarium sold be-



# TION *Long-lost art from biologist-explorers surfaced recently in Spain and has been acquired by an institute in Pittsburgh* BY JULIE ANN MILLER

tween 1814 and 1828 to private collections, were studied by botanists. McVaugh estimates these specimens served as the models for the description of more than 500 new species.

The drawings and watercolors from the expedition were kept by Mociño. Discouraged, aging and exiled from Spain, he brought the priceless collection to Switzerland in a wheelbarrow, the story goes. There he showed the drawings to A. P. de Candolle, one of the great botanists of the day, who immediately recognized their worth. De Candolle and his colleagues described and named hundreds of plants from Mociño's pictures. Because the expedition specimens were not available, the drawings served as the "type," to which other specimens could be compared.

When the political climate in Spain turned more favorable, Mociño decided to return. He wished to have the only tangible results of the long expedition to Mexico and asked de Candolle that the drawings be returned. De Candolle, feeling he could not refuse Mociño's request, rounded up a hundred volunteers to make copies of more than 1,000 of the drawings in ten days. McVaugh says some of these volunteers were well-known artists, but others were "notable for their willingness to cooperate in an emergency rather than for any genuine artistic talent." Mociño had previously given de Candolle several hundred original "duplicate" drawings, where the artists in the field had made more than one picture of a given plant.

Mociño died impoverished in Barcelona in 1820, not long after his return from Geneva. The drawings disappeared. Historians later suspected that Mociño's physician took possession of them, but all attempts to track them failed.

Meanwhile, in Mexico in the late 1800s two editions of the expedition's rough, working manuscripts were published — unillustrated, unedited and full of errors. They contributed much confusion to the botanical literature, giving names to plants often already named by others, because in the absence of drawings, it was impossible to determine whether a plant described in the manuscript was the same

as one described elsewhere.

The happy ending to this botanical romance is that the collection of original watercolors and sketches has unexpectedly surfaced. Several years ago two brothers in Barcelona, Luis and Jaime Torner Pannochia, inherited an interesting collection of plant and animal drawings as a part of their father's library and set out to learn the origin. They eventually determined that they had the long-lost collection from the Royal Botanical Expedition. The drawings had been in the Torner family since the 1880s, but what happened before that is still a mystery.

Concerned about preserving the work and making it accessible for study, the Torners contacted the Hunt Institute, which is part of Carnegie-Mellon University. It took two years for the brothers and the institute to negotiate a purchase price and obtain the necessary report permits and licenses. Finally Kiger and T. D. Jacobsen of the institute traveled to Spain and brought back the treasure.

With the assistance of McVaugh, the initial organization of the collection is underway at the institute. Once cataloged, the drawings will be made available to scientists and scholars. Kiger estimates it will take two years to identify all the plants and animals represented. A selection of the drawings is currently on display.

"For decades, botanists have been looking like crazy for these drawings. The news of the finding was quite a splash," Kiger reports. "We now have botanists writing from all over the world." □

