

Alexander von Humboldt's  
[Universal] Suitcase, Travelling  
from l'*Encyclopédie* (1751-1772)  
to *Kosmos* (1845-1847).  
Uninterrupted Dialogues Between  
Sciences and Arts  
– Román de la Calle

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Landscape painting is a sort of fresh, lively description, adequate and efficient to disseminate the study of nature.

A. von Humboldt *Cosmos*, 1845

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I

The 250<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of explorer, scientist, polymath, Alexander von Humboldt (Berlin, 14 September 1769 - 6 May 1859) is now celebrated – these chronological margins establish a highly precise framework.

Sometimes I think fate has memory and its secret activity is never a coincidence, not completely; the way it shuffles its cards or throws its dice, to allow them room in the folds of destiny. Let me explain. Precisely a year ago – in the Centre Cultural La Nau, of the Universitat de València-Estudi General. Precisely in the (justly called, honouring historic memory) “Academy” Hall we gathered for an exhibition that had been programmed to commemorate the official creation on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1768, of a relevant, illustrious institution of our own: the *Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Carlos* (San Carlos Royal Academy of Fine Arts).

A well known academic institution, as it has also reached 250 years, it counts in its history a number of happenings, moves to other locations in the city. Such removals would follow its well known reformist tasks, consisting in restructuring the studies and the planned development of Fine Arts. Social and educational

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*Alexander von Humboldt dressed as a naturalist-traveller* by Karl von Steuben, 1813, Published in Alexander von Humboldt, *Une amitié de savants au siècle dernier: Alexander von Humboldt et Achille Valenciennes, correspondance inédite*, par J. Théodoridès. Paris, Specia, 1965. Biblioteca Historicomèdica Vicent Peset Llorca, Universitat de València.

progress, perfecting taste and aesthetic research, along with the defense of the heritage collections of the country and the interdisciplinary advancement sciences and arts were the aim; a solid, irreplaceable enlightened program, propitiated by the political skills of the Borbon kings.

Highly significant, in our view, is the fact that the Academy was first established in the university spaces of the city; its symbolism must be particularly considered, as such decision would mean a direct municipal connection.

It was not a coincidence, that the *Reial de Sant Carles* (San Carlos Royal Academy of Fine Arts) and the *Estudi General*, shared spaces for nearly a century, up until the direct effects of Mendizábal's property reform over the Convent of El Carmen (1838). The old convent would become the site of the *Real Academia*, with its School of Fine Arts. This would free spaces that the university itself required and needed. In the time that the two institutions shared space, they jointly developed the art and science hinge, as is proved by the historic heritage collections –drawings and etchings, canvas and board paintings, illustrations and maps– which comprise the respective scientific and artistic collection of both institutions.

However, tightening the threads of a scheduled fate with the turn of a spinning wheel, a multidiscipline exhibition on *Sistema Humboldt. Pensar/Pintar* (Humboldt System. Thinking/Painting), is under preparation, precisely for that same historic "Academy" hall above mentioned, of the *Centro Cultural La Nau* (La Nau Cultural Centre). This is precisely where in the eighteenth century, the *Real de San Carlos* (San Carlos Royal Academy of Fine Arts) taught and officially exhibited their works periodically. Thus, a new distribution of the cards marked by providence, this time applied to the results derived from art research guided by the decisive hand of Nuria Rodríguez Calatayud (Valencia, 1965), She is artist, curator, researcher and lecturer, precisely attached to the mentioned historic link derived from that historic School of Fine Arts, in turn officially transformed (1978) in Faculty, within the structure of the *Universitat Politècnica de València* (Polytechnic University of València).

Let us say, to be precise, *comme il faut*, that we are dealing with someone completely obsessed, for some time now, not only with the relevant character (Humboldt), but also drawn by his complex surrounding story. Such context is the direct result of the Enlightenment thinking grafted with the new emerging Romantic framework, the chronological hinge he lived in. In fact, Alexander von Humboldt was cleverly inclined to project synthetically both

philosophical layers of the era, Enlightenment & Romanticism, over the natural world, which, straddling sciences and arts, he feels passionately seduced him. His encyclopaedic vision, his methodological aim, his empirical rigour, along with a descriptive/narrative capacity and his systematical approach, both aesthetic and scientific to natural history he wanted to put to the use of knowledge dissemination. In this influencing overall research model, he also clearly wanted to introduce the resource of art as a fundamental pedagogic and illustration element. All this are eloquent testimonies of his obvious, committed ascription to the epoch, rich in transformations and changes, that he actively lived in, enjoyed and shared.

It would, therefore, be understood that our researcher has involved herself so openly in the creative study/interpretation of Humboldtian travel adventures and the hermeneutic monitoring of the mentioned aesthetic experiences, subyacent in such documentary efforts, as it is well known, through the results of his different intercontinental activities –a result of his travels– inserted into his clustered, plural scientific discoveries.

Such driftings I have known for some time, even having been involved in them every now and then, with the proposals and works of professor Nuria Rodríguez. These are, in the end, the keys of the present case, which again invite us to this new collaboration, in the mentioned global exhibition, along with other noted contributions and creative searches of her own.

Thus activating the connections between the celebrated dates, those 250 years, it is easy to notice the guiding thread that stitches together the chronological context which is precisely, as we have just indicated, of both the strong "Enlightenment tradition" and the leap towards the "Romantic thinking". Our different main characters -they will turn up in our reflections and paragraphs- would make use of both traditions, in parallel, by strengthening and consecrating the promised "arrival and development of modernity", *pari passu*, in between the dialogic folds of the arts and sciences, straddled on the common border of both intense centuries, the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century.

In sum, three singular dominions, interdisciplinarily connected, display a special interrelation, highly determinant, as we follow the steps of Humboldt. Those are: a) empirical aspirations, applied to the direct study of natural science; b) aesthetic resources expanded in his work to multiple effects, and c) the philosophical potentiality, open to unitary systematisation, eagerly projected from and in the most diverse starting points and dominions.

Perhaps all of it may be traced, in parallel, both in the nooks and crannies of that travel suitcase of Humboldt himself and/or in the collections of the *Biblioteca Histórica de La Nau* (La Nau Historical Library). Certain strands of those diacronic memories could also be rescued, among the files of other Valencian heritage archives, as it will be plausible to highlight in due time.

Even, if I may dare imagining, we could play metonymy -the part for the whole- to interpret the facts and specify the contexts in which we are going to be moving, in this complex exhibition. First, after the pertinent, necessary *Enlightenment preludes*, directly connected with the *encyclopaedist spirit*; later, through the selected readings, for the occasion, of three symbolic blocks of research. All of them appeared in the German framework of that effervescent century: 1) *Aesthetica* (1750) by Alexander G. Baumgarten (1714-1762); 2) a complete series of writings, by one same author, on “Naturphilosophie”, as well as another of his works, *On the Relationship of the Philosophy of Nature to Philosophy in General*, also his talks published as *Philosophie der Kunst* (1802-1805). We are talking about Wilhelm J. von Schelling (1775-1854); finally, as an interreferencial endpiece 3) the summit work *Kosmos* (1845), by Alexander von Humboldt himself, which must not lead us to forget other of his contributions, such as *Essai sur la géographie des plantes* (Essay on the Geography of Plants) (1805), *Vues des Cordillères et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (Researches Concerning the Institutions & Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America: with Descriptions & Views of Some of the Most Striking Scenes in the Cordilleras!) (1810) (a true “model” of work followed, under its influence, by a great many of European and Latin American), or *Essai politique sur le Royaume de la Nouvelle Espagne* (Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain Containing Researches Relative to the Geography of Mexico) (1811) and *Tableaux de la Nature* (Tableaux of Nature) (published in 1808 in German and in 1826 in French).

Humboldt's dedication to his systematical efforts travelling, researching, describing, narrating, representing, implies a true dialogue between image and word, which he developed with his work team. Aimé Bonpland (1773-1858) would be key in it. Together they travelled between 1799 and 1804 in the American expedition, both interested in getting acquainted with the ample variety of physical, natural and socio-cultural realities of that immense continent. They arrived to Venezuela (Cumaná) towards the end of 1799, and they moved South in a zig-zag return journey through the inner region of the Orinoco, up to an area close to Río Negro where the current territories of Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil meet. Later

they arrived to Cuba (1800), to Cartagena de Indias (1801), travelling deeper into the *Virreinato de Nueva Granada* (Viceroyalty of New Granada), which they traversed North to South (currently Colombia, Ecuador and Perú). They set sail, again, to Acapulco, entering the Mexican territory (between 1803 and 1804), reaching Guanajuato to the North and Veracruz to the East. Humboldt returned to Cuba and later travelled to the United States. Such was the itinerary of his journey. However, after his return, he dedicated the rest of his life to writing, systematising his materials and publishing his works, with an intense life of surprising scientific and social relationships.

A studious approach, even if reduced and specific, to this vast, immeasurable program, would be utopian. Even so, may the challenge be formulated here. At least, as a simple sketch of the possible desired itinerary, on our part and that of professor Nuria Rodríguez, in her case straddling research and plastic creation... *D'après Humboldt*.

## II – Between *Naturalia* and *Artificialia*

Let us, then, examine it bit by bit. Actually, the study of the eighteenth century from the specific area of philosophy, selectively strengthening the encounters with the realm of the

Fine Arts, influenced, by the way, our growing interest in the dialogues between art and education of that time. Precisely in that chronologic hinge of the eighteenth century is when an important change takes place between the preceding *cabinets de curiosités* / *Wunderkammern* and the social birth of museums, in the century of lights. To tell the truth, those wonder-rooms were historically the indisputable inoperative predecessors of the museums, with their multiple variations.

The collections of weird, rare objects, along with valuable works, the product of human activity, were for centuries -particularly in the sixteenth and the seventeenth century- extremely widely known, taking the name of their famous owners, under which they were studied and catalogued.

It is fair to understand that in the era of the discoveries and the expeditionary travels such collecting efforts increased, in the European context. Actually, evident dualities between the *Wunderkammern* and the *Kunstkammern*, if their respective purity had been delineated, in the different collections, although this did not happen in most cases, and they commonly tended towards the heterogenous. Such conceptual, distinctive hinge does not become functionally clarifying up until the enlightenment. Such a step would mean the official, systematic differentiation between *art museums* and *natural history museums*.

Not in vain, in those same circumstances, is when the expression *Beaux-Arts* is established and the “Fine Arts System” is defined, not only to organise them, in their famous six dominions of the then Noble Arts, but also to perfectly mark the differences, on the one hand, between Art and Crafts, but also, on the other hand, between Art and Science, with the manifest aim of stressing in the correlated realms of beauty and taste.

The work and figure of Charles Batteux (1713-1780) would have a key role in such historical context, which would convince him to join –in acknowledgment– as a member of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1754) and the *Académie Française* (1761). However, Alexander von Humboldt, on his part would not precisely follow neither this path nor this model, as we will explain. He will look for a “system”, yes, but obviously an *interdisciplinary* one, tending to an explanatory globalisation of the universe, however, not of an intradisciplinary character. We could say that he preferred to follow the suggestive notes in Diderot’s writings in the *Encyclopédie*, clearly referred to the need to strengthen the relational hinge between arts and sciences, as well as between arts with crafts. Time will tell.

Actually, much of those eighteenth century systematising proposals (restrictively defined from the art realm by Batteux), we must remember, in the line of our argumental orientation, that it was in the circumstances of the nascent scientific discoveries, closely linked to the geographical expeditions –already in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries– when the objective or the organisation and classification of as many objects and realities were found and collected, always followed mandatory and necessary pattern of referencing nature itself. *Naturalia*, so. On the other hand, human realisations were compiled and classified as *Artificialia*, resulting in a complex domain which later would require many a finely woven nuance.

However, soon the different kingdoms of nature were, in turn, the unavoidable referents which became the triple classification that unfolded among the concepts *Animalia*, *Vegetalia* and *Mineralia*, projected upon the very collections, diligently gathered, according to their extensions, in each *Wunderkammer*. However, the desire for maximum interconnections, and growing functional rules, put in place in order to finetune the pertinent studies, would soon impose four wide categories in the mentioned diversification. This is, succinctly, how we find the realm of *Artificialia*. Under its denomination, objects created and/or modified by humans are included. In parallel with *Naturalia*, which compiles natural creatures and objects;

*Exotica* would include strange plants and animals; finally *Scientifica* includes those objects which order the great variety of historic scientific instruments, and their differentiated functional uses.

Thus, the solid historical wealth can be understood as an immediate context for the exhibition project by Nuria Rodríguez to face and reference. The commitment, which she shares, when she takes in, as a referential counterpoint of her research work, the study of the *scientific collections*, managed, in its diachrony, by the Universitat de València, which some time ago celebrated its five hundred anniversary. These collections could be enriched, through the unavoidable hinge of art/science relationships. Also contributing to it, the heritage wealth of certain close institutions, which kept a tight correlation and obtained a trustworthy pedigree in Valencian history: the Museum of Fine Arts itself, which soon will celebrate its 180 year anniversary, during this 2019-2020 course (In October 1839 the *Museo Provincial de Pintura* (Provincial Museum of Painting) opened, under the rule of the Commission for Monuments); and the *Real Academia de San Carlos*, which, as previously indicated, is already 250 years old. Within those respective chronologic arcs, in the Valencian panorama all three entities have, with one common impulse, progressively defined institutionally their noted historic heritage and their collections.

### III – Decanting and Transits from *l'artiste savant* to the scientist artist

We must acknowledge that, among the fundamentals of the *Classic French doctrine* was articulated since the seventeenth century and it was key for its hegemony, European influence and its academic consolidation.

It must be acknowledged that among the fundamentals of such doctrine, there existed a certain set of rules, which established the *qualities which would define the ideal artist*, as a noted subject of the practice under *Artificialia*. Such idealistic definition, thus, became aspiration and common pattern in the academic world, in the rest of Europe.

Therefore, within the framework of the academies, the fact that their main estatutory task was lecturing and workshop practice, this is to say, the preparation of artists by institutional decree. This makes us think that the occasional monitoring / control of prevailing pedagogical strategies in the royal European academies which were active at the time, must have been one of their most determining plans.

- a. Indubitably, the conformation of an adequate library, specialised in artistic tasks, their history, techniques and procedures became a goal of the utmost importance. Thanks to this historic dedication, it is possible to explain the considerable bibliographic collections cumulated which currently exists in the different heritage collections, in different countries. Such library collections were steadily acquired following a programme, or formed through relevant donations or exchanges with other institutions.
- b. Likewise, it was required to source materials and teaching instruments, according to the different specialisations, such as drawing, etching, painting, sculpture and architecture, as well as the parallel knowledge that was required for their instruction and development: botany, anatomy, mathematics, geometry...
- (I have always considered that it was highly significant that the *Real Academia* shared quarters with the *Universitat de València* between 1768 and 1848, and it could not have been casual or out of coincidence. Consider what it may have represented, by the way, as mutual influence, for professors and lecturers specialised in these “common” subjects to be physically present, precisely in both studies, sharing the same building, strategies, information and even projects).
- c. As a special factor, we must highlight the ideal profile that artistic education of the time, required academically, according to the inherited classic doctrine, through monarchic power and the parallel pressure of the generalised French culture in the European context. Specifically, three qualities / requirements were officially specified. They were stemming from the encounter of methodological presence of *le génie, l'art et la science*.

However, let us examine, with more flexibility and discernment, the strategy in highlighting this trilogy of efficient causes, towards the scheduled instruction of artists.

The *génie* was the natural base of the subject's aptitudes. Demanding its presence –the academic framework– in all its implications, focused on a possible gamut of registers, capable of bringing the subject beyond simple artisan crafts and the regulatory context of guilds. This is to say, the parallel words for the description of the genius could be –in their active combination– imagination, intuition, inspiration, inner strength, taste, judgement or creative freedom.

It is convenient to remember which was the sacred *dictum*, widely spread, of the Royal French Academy: *Libertas artium restituta*. Its mission and goal was to obtain “the freedom of arts”. An adage that travelled across Europe.

As a second concept, *art*, in the sense of *techné*, implied both the command of the doctrine and the effective appropriation of the rules, this is to say, the procedures and programmations previous to the execution, as much as the operative control of the pertinent tasks. At the end of the day, this meant the adequate encounter between both demands, between nature (*génie*) and art (technique), which is to say, between conception and the controlled execution or realisation of the works.

The third step, which is of particular interest here is the efficient co-presence, in the mentioned classical doctrine trilogy, of the *science*. Something certainly novel, in relation to previous received traditions: *Greek* and *Latin* traditions, but also something new before the intense *Italian influence of the sixteenth century*. What would suppose the irruption in history of that new demand, which was going to condition so many things?

Take the notion of science here as a sort of “encyclopaedia of knowledges”, demanded to best nurture the growing demands of the possible works of art and to enrich / perfect the qualified actions of the artist. Thus identifying the novel, powerful ideal of the epoch, which implies to transform the artist into some kind of wise person, while, in parallel, an expansive taste favouring art and poetry that are nurtured through science and up-to-date, which is to say, reinforced by knowledge.

Indubitably, such academic trend (an interest tinged the relationships between art and technique, for instance, as well as between science and arts) would also be internationally relevant when it comes to fundamental contributions in those dialogues going back and forth between art and nature. Later, though, another specific, emerging academic orientation would suffer and wither (*ars versus technica / scientia*) when the whole thing is thoroughly posed again, with the school systematisation of the universe of arts (Charles Batteux). Through that eighteenth century, it would differentiate its identity from crafts and from science.

A good example, paradigmatic even, of such opposition of options in the middle of the eighteenth century will become obvious and documented in the very *Encyclopédie*. The evident, radicalised opposition that is formulated in the article “Art” by Denis Diderot and the term “Beaux-Arts” summarised from the works by Ch. Batteux. Their respective outlooks oppose, with no possible





Histoire Naturelle.  
Fig. 1. Cérveau. Fig. 2. en profile.

*Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, "Tome VI – Planches" / par une société de gens de lettres; mis en ordre & publié par M. Diderot (...) & quant à la partie mathématique, par M. D'Alembert. Paris, chez Briasson, chez David l'aîné, chez Le Breton, chez Durand, 1753. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València

mediation. We find two worlds which would clash, defending different cosmovisions, in relation to how to understand and define the realm of the arts, on the quicksands of Enlightenment.

We could so speak, respectively of a mimetic approach of art to nature, paired with a functional, analytical approach of science to nature; in turn, with the contribution and mediation of art, in many cases. Curiously, both options are perfectly related, in the historic background that justifies—with its presence—this exhibition by Nuria Rodríguez that is the object of our study now.

Previously to *Kosmos* by Humboldt, accepted and integrated as a unitarian, global system, we deduce that the preceding meanders weave and cumulate, comprised by the numerous, historic collections of *Naturalia*. These are directly complemented, in parallel, in series, by no less collections of *Artificialia*. The joint, sustained tribute to nature, through paintings, sculptures, drawings, engravings, books and facsimiles, but also through zoologic, entomologic and/or malacologic pieces.

It is well known that Humboldt, in his formative years, learned drawing and engraving, in Berlin, with Daniel Chodowiecki (1726-1801). In fact, apart from attending to this workshop as an apprentice, he was admitted to the Arts Academy of Berlin, where he even participated in exhibitions, between 1786-88. It is also known that in Paris, once his extended American expedition finished, he took drawing and painting lessons once again (1813), with François Pascal Simon, baron of Gérard (1770-1837).

Without a doubt, apart from painting himself (and particularly drawing and etching), he always preferred to control directly the qualification of his collaborators' work and their commissions, for the illustration of his scientific research work, even of his own journeys and, above all, of his later carefully edited publications. He would say that the goal was to capture adequately nature, both in its details as in the whole. He would not hesitate, either, in demanding—following this line of aesthetic matters—the adequate balance in the pictoric images, between their accuracy and the picturesque. This is well reflected in his correspondence with Johann W. von Goethe (1749-1832), another universal character, who, from Romanticism, would postulate the systematical unity of the universe and the direct interest for nature, as one harmonious entity.

Throughout Humboldt's research trajectory, he would remain ever stimulating, with his artistic training and interest, for numerous painters (European and Latin American too). His influence would be particularly felt in the nuclei of Berlin and Paris, and it would motivate them to readjust their work schedules, to be best

prepared and, following his indications, could contribute to foster landscape painting as the genre and media to disseminate a modern sensitivity, in connection with nature. It was Humboldt's dream to offer artists a near-virgin territory in the history of European art, which would correspond with its own aesthetic treatment (not exactly poetic) of scientific matters. This would be a true interdisciplinary fistful of interwoven realms: science, philosophy, art and history.

With all the stated above, and returning to the academic background of the time, it must be clear that any institutional collections comprised the respective visions / ways to understand the world of *Naturalia*. This effectively confirms the history—that old, constant history—which points out, highlights and makes explicit *le souci du naturel* which defined, *a radice*, the strong classical naturalism, which since the twelve century, progressively strengthen the academic outlook, with certain flexibility and increasing rigour. It would also project it first towards the enlightenment period of the eighteenth century, later, hegemonically, towards nineteenth century romanticism.

In sum, such interest for all things natural was effectively versatile, since it could be founded upon solid philosophical roots; it could be shrouded in deep religious echoes; reclaim strong scientific aspirations; agitate diversified aesthetic options; find a safe shelter in a shared tradition; materialise the extense inventories of heritage collections or, as history reminds us, appeal to the research of modernising technical developments.

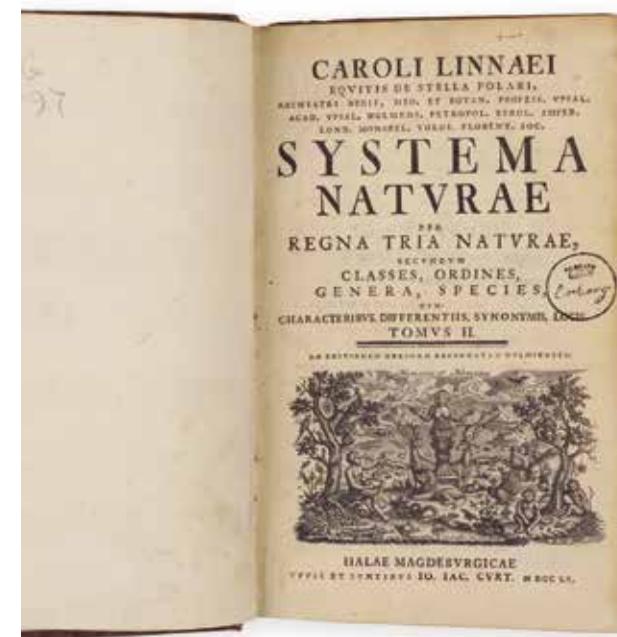
However, the first thing we have to examine, analytically, in this historic, plural devotion for nature, is the common factor—the principle—which has been the foundation of both the tradition of its art results and its functional consolidation from the classical origins up until the first sign of the avant-gardes.

*Mimesis* has effectively been the official key to the artistic approach to nature, which hand in hand has crossed cultures and maintained debates. Also, in this visit to our current exhibition, in order to cover the gamut of proposals offered by Nuria Rodríguez, —after the long shadow of Humboldt's suitcase—we should carry as an hermeneutic *vademécum* some of the keys which have explained and sustained the *imitation of nature*, as a theory, practice and intervention model.

Specifically, upon this path to approach international academic teaching, the abundant heritage collections and their history (derived from such learning to strictly artistic creation and/or to the formation of functional plastic resources for the corresponding



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[1] Claudi Ptolemeu, *Geografia di Claudio Tolomeo* (...) / tradotta di greco nell'idioma Volgare italiano da Girolamo Ruscelli, et hora novamente ampliata da Gioseffo Rosaccio con varie Annotazioni & espositioni & Taulo di Rame (...). Et una breve Descrittione di tutta la terra distinta in quattro libri (...). Venetia, apresso gli heredi di Melchior Sessa, 1598. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València

[2] Carl von Linné, *Caroli Linnaei ... Systema Naturae per regna tria naturae, secundum classes, ordines, genera, species: cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis*. Tomus I [-II]. Praefatus est Ioannes Ioachimus Langius (...). Halae Magdeburgicae, typis et sumptibus I<sup>o</sup>. Iac. Curt, 1760. Biblioteca Històrica, Universitat de València

scientific research), we encounter a double imperative, inherited from the influences which, as previously stated, flowed in its development and consolidation, under the wing of the classical French school. The first imperative was, without a doubt, *to imitate nature*. However, the second, no less relevant imperative, was in parallel, *to imitate antiquity*.

This is why items were collected, to facilitate and study such imitation, while increasing the collections with the main results of those mimetic games. This is why obviously the *Naturalia* would end up establishing close correlations with those of *Artificialia*. The very history of art and the memory of the development of science throughout these centuries stand as proof of it.

However, mimesis –mentioned now in its globality–is, by the way, an explanatory foundation as old as vague, since it effectively admits plural versions, and it always is valid according to its possible interpretations. It is well known that such principle can move, hermeneutically, from *radicalised realism* to *extreme idealism*, going through the entire gamut of possible *naturalisms*.

Let us remember. When we walk through the historic collections (*Naturalia* / *Artificialia*) –among pieces accepted as specimens, extracted from nature itself, for their singularity, or strangeness and/or among proposals carried out by the human subject, from investigative creation, applying the mimesis of nature, we must eye with clarity the interpretative key that is our starting point, now transformed into a question: How is nature understood? How is nature assumed? In other words, before each piece exhibited, we would have to ask *which is the model of nature* that the artist, the scientist, the collector has activated in each instance...

Without a doubt, Alexander von Humboldt –whom we can strategically take, in this case, as a convenient excuse for reflection about the subject–more than once would have asked himself about *the model of nature that would be convenient to imitate*, in his drawings and pictoric representations, in his sketches, notes, graphic annotations, ever oscillating in his documentary praxis between the whole panorama and the painstakingly analytical fragment. In fact, Humboldt, as we have already noted, had received art training both before and after his travels. Same thing could be traced in an entire group of renowned naturalists of the time (some of them more *buffet naturalists* than travellers). They would always keep the drawn image as a determining key in their work, and some of them are C. Linneo (1707-1778), Georges-Louis Leclerc, Count of Buffon (1707-1788), José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808), Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck

(1744-1829), Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) or Charles Darwin (1809-1892), to mention but a few, in this bisecular context.

*How to understand nature then?* This and other possible detailed answers would descend in different facets/options, as we can infer, with only quoting/reviewing some of them. We could list, at least, the following: a) accepted nature, for its force and rotundity, as a spectacle, as a grand and external power; b) nature as daily life, assimilated to life itself in its functional ordinariness, attached to *bon sense*, to daily, practical common sense; c) specific human nature, in its identity particularity, this is to say, in its scene which embodies the representation of feelings and pations, open too to their corresponding study; d) conventionally accepted nature a strict scientific truth, as the universally accepted, as a direct result of empiric experiences, magnified, by the way, by painters-travellers and/or scientists-artists; e) nature as the shelter of the exceptional, the marvellous, eminent fruit and model of fantasy, of the exotic and surprising; finally, f) perfected nature, selected by the history of representation and by the subject-artists, by idealising it for their own artistic production.

It is widely known that the generalised exchanges between nature and art have crossed every culture and have historically found shelter in any of the *Wunderkammern*, to consolidate in great part of our numerous museums. However, it is also true that in the sources of our Aristotelian thought and cultural heritage are justly recognised –especially his *Poetica*– where the thesis of *mimesis* is historically made explicit and upon which it is founded.

1.-*Poetica* 1448 b. “imitation is connatural to human beings from their childhood [...] and everybody enjoy with the exercise of mimesis”.

2.-*Poética* 1447 a. “[The arts] are all mimesis [...], however, they differ ones from others in three aspects: either they imitate with *different* media, or they imitate *different* things, or they imitate *diverse forms* and not in the same way”.

This is to say, the viable questions which Aristotelian *Poetica* directly suggests are summarised, in operative form in three questions: *with what media is mimesis tackled?, what is imitated?, how is it imitated?* From these threads, directly linked to artistic praxis (autonomous or heteronomously accepted), the yarn of the more solidly established art theory will be conformed. This is directly connected with nature and the doctrine of classicism would be relaunched,

thus being definitely introduced in the academic framework and in later history.

The teaching activities in the royal academies and in the schools of fine arts and other European specialised teaching establishments will progressively systematised, along centuries, the diverse ways to understand *mimesis*: a) as a *copy*, profusely detailed and scrupulously close to the natural model; b) as *perfecting* nature itself (selecting, combining, idealising); and c) as a *relatively expressive and free intervention* before the model.

In the end, these are some notes on a journey that, academically, travels for centuries between “what is” and “what may be”. To tell the truth, such aspects can be verified in the materials exhibited within the *Naturalia* of our museums and institutional collections. This is to say, in the painstaking “Academies” shown and extracted from the conserved collections; in the numerous books that study anatomy, botany and/or zoology, masterly worked, as documents, coming from the archives of universities. Also landscape paintings of all kinds, every still life paintings in museums, which eloquently speak of the different ways to understand *physis* and our complex relationships with it.

In the observation and enjoyment of such works, the restrictions placed upon *mimesis*, in art praxis, can be studied through academic teaching strategies. It is not coincidental that the norms and rules that were the key upon which the pedagogy stemming from *l'École classique* pivoted. This is why the academies did not hesitate in assigning the artist and their work a social mission, an educational category. With the same eagerness and rigour a code of doctrine would be imposed upon it. Obeying the rules, the artist will reach their goal.

We face a constant labour of comparing between *imitations* and *models*. Such path leads directly to a sort of codification of art. Could it be surprising the explicit cult of Aristotles? There are rules, which knowledge is a must for the artist to succeed. At most, the specific contents of the rules will be discussed, not their very existence. With this background we move in this tense, protracted history that is our subject now.

We were talking about restrictions to *mimesis* in academic praxis, consolidated throughout the centuries. a) First restriction: harmonising the demands of *imitation* with the needs of *beautification*. This is how art (*techné*) and beauty (*kallós*) are harmonised sharing a common horizon in art praxis. It would be convenient to differentiate between those features which are *essential and permanent* from the characters approached through *mimesis*. We

are referring to those which cannot be modified, and those *variable elements* which could be altered, according to the established plan for production. b) Second restriction: a servile imitation can be conceived next to a free imitation (according to procedures). This is to say, totalities can be imitated, or parts of nature. This would be chosen specifically for the given project, according to its functions (as it is the case of painters-travellers) and/or of the scientists-artists, as we have been remarking. Stemming from this, the academic command of the different established *models in search* of the beautiful, interesting, expressive, characteristic, dramatic, or sublime. The different aesthetic categories would always be, in those cases, directly connected to their function.

The academics and scientists who were dedicated to this, knew well in their teaching work, that such set of possible elections by the artist, in reality, also implies a *construction of nature*, establishing a model, language and poetics, a work of art, and a testimonial document. At the end of the day, it is clear that the artist selects, either following *aesthetic concerns or moral inclinations*. This is why, finally, it is about imitating *what is beautiful* (looking for aesthetic beauty), *what is correct* (propitiating moral beauty), or *what is characteristic* (searching for archetypal beauty, registered/inserted among the very scientific parameters).

Let us focus on the studies and research work by Humboldt himself, in which the traces of numerous keys to future disciplines can be found. These disciplines are currently developed within the framework of human and social sciences (geography, demography, history, sociology or economy)–along with the diversified contributions characteristic of natural sciences (botany, physiology, zoology, as well as observations dedicated to climatology, agronomy, meteorology, mineralogy, and some calculation elements in the realms of oceanography and astronomy, as well as quotations and notes from other authors. Actually, he carefully tends to the literary foundations of his writings, in order to articulate a sort of narrative. The spine of his argumentations runs parallel to the river of images he contributes. Perhaps we could propose that he is a scientist-artist, in this historic background we are travelling through.

Finally, in our virtual visit to the common context of *Naturalia* –as a privileged place for reflection, fruition and the discovered interest for the meandering of history–we can discover that nature is “elaborated” by convention, tailored to the taste of the times, according to the expectations of *bienséance*, that which is considered to be adequate, correct and desirable. Therefore, we can say that nature becomes a model for art by a process of selection

and styling. Thus, we abruptly meet the idealised conception of nature, in the arms of academic proposals *le beau* is the objective of art (this is the origin of the consolidated expression *Beaux Arts*). What is beautiful implies a depurated nature, which does not admit what is imperfect or strange. Again, we notice the progressive derive from the *Wunderkammer* to the *Kunstammer*.

This is why we could speak of two states of nature, in artistic activity. a) *Material nature*, real, empirical, as such, which can seduce us and attract us, when we meet it, as we eagerly collect, or in our mimetic-scientific efforts (*la grossière nature*). b) *Ideal nature*, rationalised, ordered and refined by spirit (*la belle nature*).

However, which of those two should be imitated? Academicism would ask the question, openly between two models and two inclinations: naturalism and idealism, scientific search or base aestheticism, still perhaps surviving the final tracts of romanticism. This is where an important part of our history sinks its roots.

One more observation to end with. When it comes to the referred *nature of choice* –through the remarks associated to the classical School, as a starting point of development–, the interest strongly focuses on *human nature as a model*. The rest, *nature of the environment*, would be taken as a background, as the pertinent context for representation. Except, of course, by scientific research, which travels, exploring the world, with the artistic hinge as a master key to nature.

Briefly, it is about establishing the difference between nature as something *external* and surrounding, and the *inner* nature –the human heart– which opens up a new realm of preferences. With this, art gets intensely close to psychology. One more time, *Naturalia versus Artificialia*. Imitating *all of nature* is not the purpose here, neither it is to imitate *nature as such*, which mesmerised Humboldt, but to adequately program it according to our aesthetic / moral intentions; as a haven for creation.

The normative voice *l'École classique* will be heard again in the academic classrooms. Beautiful things are the only thing that interests, is imitated and is selected. This is a beauty linked to conventions: to taste and/or reason, good sense and tradition. *La nature c'est la raison*. Under the guise of nature, art often gets closer to *empirical mimesis*, in the research proclaimed by science and/or by art, in *idealised mimesis*, from a selective gaze which conforms the model of our constructed environment.

Along with *imitation of nature* we would also find *imitation of the ancestors/ancestral cultures*. This is one of the main clichés in our historical academic itinerary; we could not possibly tackle

it on this occasion, in spite of its relevance in the complex realm of imitation. Already Horatius in his *Poetica / Epistola ad Pisones*, in verses 268-269, stated clearly what should be done on the context of mimesis: “[...] Vos exemplaria graeca // nocturna versate manu, versate diurna” (“you must turn over and over, reflecting night and day, on the Greek models”).

Certainly he insists that absolute originality is a myth, since each artist is a tributary of their antecessors. Also, that such is the reason why imitation is the common rule. Antiquity thus becomes, in parallel, an intensive source for artistic work. With it, nature and history are presented to us as fundamental references and banisters for artistic production.

An explanatory topic in academic world repeats that ancient cultures/the ancestors have given us, in their work, a sort of “second nature”, a nature that is idealised, clean from random imperfections, of confusions and identity marks which belong more to that “first nature”, the real, empirical one.

This would explain why imitating the ancient ones we would also diligently imitate that ideal nature (*la belle nature*). After all, *the principle of imitation of the ancient ones* has its foundations, in turn, on *the principle of imitation of nature*. Old Giulio Cesare Scaligero (1484-1558) already insisted, and would always prefer and recommend to choose to imitate whichever could be best adapted to the times, to the predominant taste of the context.

#### IV – Post Scriptum

*Sistema Humboldt. Pensar/Pintar* (Humboldt System. Thinking/Painting) presents itself very clearly as a timely specific lesson, directly linked with the interest for nature, throughout the centuries. This is a panorama of proposals executed under the complex, diversified dome of artistic mimesis, scientific research and historic documentation. The theme that it considers is that of the simple collectionism of objects and works, diacronically deposited in the museum institutions between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.

Humboldt was aware of the importance of landscape and the increased aesthetic sensibility that it implied, and of what it could mean for the art history of his time, through different research around natural history. In numerous fragments of his work this was made explicit, proving that he was not a stranger to the history of the different disciplines that he frequented.

“Art history shows us how landscape painting, in its autonomy, and apart from the historical element, has gained importance. It now conforms a separate genre. It shows how, for instance, the

presence of human figures in such landscape representations has but animated a region completely covered in mountains or forests, or complementary delineated perhaps the walkways of a garden or perhaps the seashore. This is how the differentiated separation of history and landscape paintings has been progressively prepared, which best classifying distinction has encouraged the progress of art, in the different times of its development.” (Humboldt, 1874)

At the beginning of our reflections we noted how the notions of “system” applied to science and arts, to the surrounding nature and to the universe in its globality –*Kosmos*– was formed along modernity. We quoted Baumgarten, with his effort to complete the system of academic philosophy with Christian Wolff (1679-1754). His *Aesthetica* was a contribution posed as *cognitio sensitiva perfecta*, in parallel and differently from the science of logic (*cognitio intellectiva*) and facing joint perception, acting in daily life (*cognitio sensitiva imperfecta*). Such contribution meant a new philosophical realm, focused on a double disciplinary gradient (aesthetics and art theory).

We also referred to Schelling and his powerful philosophical elaboration, particularly his *Naturphilosophie*, of strong deductive character, in the heart of the impressive global construction that his idealism was maturing. Precisely both of them, and many other thinkers of this historic panorama, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, would be direct sources for Humboldt, as has been proved in numerous, detailed studies that have been dedicated to him for the 250 anniversary of his birth.

His “system” is inductively elaborated, due to his empirical methodology, typical of a scientific researcher who would also be familiar with the English philosophy of the time. This is why in correspondence with Schelling some discrepancies between the two thinkers would arise. They would be mostly methodological differences, as it was not difficult to guess. However, the constructive arch of their common systematic aspirations, with nature visible in the background, is a fundamental feature of this intrahistory. It is a way to understand and explain the universe –*Weltanschauung*–, which also efficiently harbours the development of the arts and

*Nuria Rodríguez has decided, through her studies, her eager collecting, and her paintings, to carry out, with the discretion that is one of her characteristics a secret archaeology of her particular aesthetic time. Paradoxically, it is transformed into a sort of rearview mirror looking into the future.*

the sciences, perhaps following what Diderot delineated in the *Encyclopédie*, as we have attempted to note briefly above.

The constitution of natural history, in the empirical climate in which it develops [within the framework of classical doctrine and its later influences] is not experience that pushes, whether we want it or not, the access to a knowledge that the truth of nature had been jealously keeping. Natural history –which precisely appears at that time– is the space open in representation to an analysis which anticipates itself to the possibility of naming. It is the possibility of SEEING what can be SAID, which, however, could not be said, consequently, nor seeing from a distance if things and words, different to one another, were not communicated from the beginning of the game, in a REPRESENTATION.

Michel Foucault. *Words and Things*  
Ch. V, epigraph 2, p. 130-131.

With this play between seeing, saying and representing, that has been proposed in this occasion, Nuria Rodríguez has decided, through her studies, her eager collecting, and her paintings, to carry out, with the discretion that is one of her characteristics a secret archaeology of her particular aesthetic time. Paradoxically, it is transformed into a sort of rearview mirror looking into the future. In that complex spiderweb of ideas, projects, realisations, sketches, works and alined suggestions –kept at the bottom of her artist-traveller wardrobe-suitcase– she has captured more than one, as [in my case] I have been trying to prove all the way here.