

Mexican Fugitives: A Preliminary Investigation of Purple in the Torner Collection

ABSTRACT

The Torner Collection of Sessé and Mociño biological illustrations at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation comprises nearly two thousand watercolor illustrations drawn by the artists Juan Vicente de la Cerda and Atanasio Echeverría y Godoy for the Royal Botanical Expedition to New Spain (Mexico) from 1787 to 1805. Following a comparative botanical and historical analysis of the *Datura* (Solanaceae) paintings, the light rose red color in these works is believed to be a chemically degraded organic purple colorant. Considering this to be relevant to early botanical taxonomy in Mexico, the author initiated a study of materials that could have been used in the watercolors. Historical references on materials and methods for the preparation of watercolors were researched in order to produce standards for analysis. The Mexican dyestuffs examined were obtained from commercial and indigenous sources. Fading rates may indicate standards that stabilize to rose red within the twenty-five year timeframe evidenced in the botanical literature. In view of the historical literature cochineal is considered the most likely fugitive purple. Technical information and a color chart of Mesoamerican purple lake pigments are provided on the author's Web site at <http://www.westringcolor.com/purple.html>.

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