

Josefa de Óbidos's *Vedute*: Discovering the Realms of Nature

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Josefa Figueira de Ayala de Cabrera D'Óbidos was a renowned Baroque painter from Portugal who lived between 1630 and 1684. She was an accomplished artist and one of the most notable female artists of her time. Her works included both secular and religious themes, and she used a variety of mediums with great skill. Despite having different surnames, she signed her paintings under *Josepha em Óbidos*. This article concentrates on the artist's landscapes (*vedute*) and integrated still-life paintings (*bodegones*). It delves into her capacity to depict the changing seasons through these themes. Josefa expertly combined Baroque tenebrism and illusionism with her love of Nature, highlighting both the physical and spiritual aspects of the natural world. Her paintings are visually captivating, with beautiful colors and intricate details. She incorporated emblematic and mystical symbolism, which added to their spiritual significance in portraying the flora and fauna of her homeland.

Keywords: flora and fauna, *bodegon*, symbolism, *vedute*, season cycles, the months, Baroque Portuguese

Introduction

The Portuguese Baroque painter Josefa D'Óbidos (1630-1684) signed her paintings as "Josepha em Óbidos"; throughout this essay, I will refer to her by her significant Christian name, spelled Josefa, which means "Exalted by God." Researching Josefa's paintings has been confusing because she has been referred to in the literature by several last names, variants that combine her father's last name, Figueira; her mother's, Ayala; and the city where she lived most of her life, Óbidos in Portugal. Hence these multiple names: Josefa Figueira, Josefa de Ayala, Josefa D'Óbidos, Josefa de Figueira of Ayala, Josefa de Ayala de Cabrera, and Josefa de Ayala Figueira D'Óbidos.¹

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documentation of Luis Filipe Marques de Gama and G. M. de Sequeira; and the classification of flora and fauna in the art of the Figueiras by Son á Talh é Azumbuja.²

This essay consists of two parts. The first one narrates a brief biography of Josefa's artistic life and her fascination with nature. The second part analyzes her landscapes (*vedute*) with flora and fauna and the integration of still-lives (*bodegones*).

Part I

A. Josefa's Artistic Life

Josefa Figueira de Ayala D'Óbidos was born and baptized on 20 February 1630 at the Romanesque Saint Vincent church in Seville (Marques de Gama, 1986a). Her father, Baltazar Gomes Figueira (1604-1674), hailed from Óbidos, Portugal, and her mother, Catarina Camache Cabrera Romero of Ayala (m. 1629), came from Ayala in Andalusia. Josefa's father painted landscapes, religious subjects, and still-lives (*bodegones*) (Estrela & Serrão, 2005; Caetano, 2015, p. 95). He moved from Óbidos in 1624 to Seville for military service and then stayed in Seville to improve his artistic skills (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997a, p. 136; Estrela & Serrão, 2005, pp. 13-15). This Andalusian city was renowned as an artistic center. Diego Velázquez (1599-1660), Knight of the Order of Santiago, was its native painter (Tiffany, 2012), whose *oeuvre* ranged from sacred subjects or religious art to profane themes, including *bodegones*, landscapes, and mythological paintings. Francisco Barrera (1595-1658) was another talented landscape artist from Seville who skillfully portrayed *bodegones* scenes that depicted different seasonal and cyclical months' themes (Pons, 1995, pp. 285-298; Cherry, 1999, pp. 203-205; Pasto, 2002, pp. 62-63).

While residing and serving in Seville, Josefa's father became friends with Joao Ortiz de Ayala, a passionate art collector with a vast painting collection. He also assisted Ortiz with his artistic endeavors. Ortiz had a lovely daughter named Catarina Camacho de Cabrera Romero, whom Baltazar married at the end of 1629 and who later became Josefa's mother.

After the independence of Portugal from Spain, around 1634, Josefa's family moved from Seville back to Óbidos (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 15). Her father wanted to return to his homeland, Óbidos. The city name Óbidos is of Roman-Celtic origin, deriving from the Latin word *oppidum*, meaning citadel. During her family's protracted emigration from Seville to Óbidos, Josefa remained in Seville for another six years under the tutelage of her godfather, Francisco de Herrera, the Elder (1576-1656), a painter of religious themes, and her maternal uncle Bernabé of Ayala (1600-1678), also a biblical painter and a follower of the Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) (Delenda & Ros de Barbero, 2009-2010). Josefa's father possessed an extensive collection of engravings composed by Cornelis Cort (1533-1578), a Dutch engraver who spent twelve years in Italy (Bologna, Florence, Rome, and Venice) reproducing works of prominent painters in those cities (Carracci, Zuccari, Raphael, and Titian, respectively) (Dabbs, 2009, pp. 215-219; Caetano, 2015, p. 94).

² Perym, *Theatro heroico*, was the first to record a biography of Josefa. For recent scholarship, see Serrão, *Josefa de Óbido: e o tempo Barroco*; Serrão et al., *The Sacred, and the Profane*; Serrão et al., *Josefa de Óbidos*, pp. 182-83; Marques de Gama, *O Testamento Inédito da Pintora Josefa D'Óbidos*, pp. 1-20; Marques de Gama, *Arquitectura e Urbanismo*, pp. 99-101; Estrela et al., *Baltazar Gomes Figueira*; Andrade et al., *Josefa de Óbidos e a Invenção do Barroco Português*; Azambuja, *A Linguagem Simbólica da Natureza*; Ripollés, "Josefa de Óbidos e a Invenção do Barroco Português"; and Caetano, "Baltazar Gomes Figueira e Josefa de Óbidos," pp. 91-109.

Like other female painters during the Early Modern Era who came from families of painters, Josefa learned the art from her father and assisted him in his atelier. She was fortunate to receive artistic training from her godfather and maternal uncle. She followed in the footsteps of renowned painters such as Barbara Longhi of Ravenna with Luca Longhi (Cheney, 2023), Lavinia Fontana of Bologna with Prospero Fontana (Cheney, 2020), Artemisia Gentileschi of Tuscany with Orazio Gentileschi (Barker, 2002), and Elisabetta Sirani of Bologna with Giovanni Andrea Sirani (Modesti, 2015), all of whom also learned from their fathers.

In 1640, Josefa returned to Portugal and continued her studies in Coimbra. She resided at the Augustinian convent of Santa Cruz as a boarder (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 18). The congregation founded the Collegium Sapientiae, affiliated with the University of Coimbra, in 1527 as a center for academic research and teaching. According to her first biographer, Damiao de Froes Perym, Josefa was an enthusiastic reader, particularly of spiritual and devotional texts. During her time at the religious academy, she found inspiration and likely studied books on the Jesuits, Saint Francis, and the mystical writings of Saint Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), a Spanish religious reformer who founded the Discalced Carmelites and supported the Counter-Reformation movement (Perym, Damiao de Froes, aka Fray Joao de San Pedro, 1763-1740, p. 495). Coimbra was a unique academic and cultural hub with an exceptional university that provided various literary and visual resources on topics such as Nature (flora and fauna), Christian theology, and symbolic references, both physical and metaphysical.

As a result of her artistic ability and Augustinian education in Coimbra, Josefa received a commission from the University of Coimbra to design some images for their *Estatutos*, Books of Rules. Two engravings she composed represent notable female images: Saint Catherine of Alexandria, signed and dated “Josefa [d] Ayala em Coimbra 1646”.³ The other engraving represented a woman as a personification of Wisdom or the Academy, signed as “Josefa d [e] Ayala. Óbidos, 1653.” This latter image derives from a *figurazione* or emblem on the same subject—*Academia*—in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*.⁴

This vital commission acknowledges her artistic talent at an incredibly tender age. The Lisbon Academy of Art awarded her membership based on her exceptional abilities, which she has demonstrated through her expertise in various techniques such as drawing, painting with oils and watercolors, ceramics, and metals (Da Costa, 1931). In painting, Josefa also excelled in depicting themes of landscapes (*vedute*), portraiture, still-lives (*bodegones*), and Christian religious narratives (Figures 1-3).

³ For *The Estatutos of the University of Coimbra*, 1653, see: <https://books.google.pt/books?id=bz836fyh5T8C&pg=PR10&dq=%22josefa%20de%20óbidos%22%20assinada&hl=pt-PT&pg=PR1#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed 15 May 2023); and for an image of Wisdom or Academy, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Josefa_de_Óbidos_-_Insígnia_da_Universidade_de_Coimbra.jpg (accessed 15 May 2023). See Andrews, “Josefa de Ayala e Cabreira’s St. Catherine of Alexandria Altarpiece and Female Empowerment”; and Serrão et al., *Sacred and Profane*, p. 92.

⁴ The first edition of Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (1593) was published without illustrations; the second edition (1603) was published with illustrations, and the book became a significant compendium of emblematic figures (*figurazione*) for European artists and humanists during the seventeenth century. In Spain, particularly in Seville, it was utilized by painters such as Diego Velazquez and Francisco Pacheco. See Barja and Barja, Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1:21-24, esp. 22. Josefa probably was also familiar with Ripa’s text, as she appropriated Ripa’s *figurazione* of the *Academia* for her representation of Wisdom. See Cheney, “Josefa de Ayala D’Obidos’s Self Portraits.”



Figure 1. Josefa de Óbidos, *April*, 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

©Photo credit and Courtesy: Cabral Moncada Leilões,
Art Auctioneers, Lisbon, Portugal/ Vasco Cunha Monteiro 2022.



Figure 2. Josefa de Óbidos, *Still Life with Flowers and Sweets*, oil on canvas, 1676.
Signed and dated *Josepha em Obidos*, 1676. Museu Municipal de Santarém, Portugal.



Figure 3. Josefa de Óbidos, *Holy Family (Gloria in Altissimis Deo)*, 1669, oil on canvas.
Photo credit and Courtesy: ©COLECCIÓN BBV and ©DAVID MECHA RODRÍGUEZ.

She had an energetic personality, was a lover of jewelry (precious stones) and textiles (embroideries, velvet, and silk), was a supportive community member, and was a cattle and landowner. As an animal lover with a humorous character, she named her cows Elegant, Cherry, and Beauty (Marques de Gama, 1986a, pp. 1-20). Although no documentation suggests that Josefa married, there is information regarding her education and daily routines at home as a farmer and agricultural proprietor (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005 pp. 21-24).

In 1661, she received legal emancipation, permitting her to sign business contracts and any legal transactions without her father's authorization, an achievement for a woman in Portugal (Kubler & Soria, 1959, p. 343). According to her last will, discovered by G. M. de Sequeira, we learn that after her father died in 1674, she continued living with her mother and two nieces.⁵ Josefa's father owned mills, farmhouses, agricultural spreads, and a successful artistic workshop. The Quinta at Capeleira was one of her father's favorite farmhouses, depicted in the background of several paintings of the Months (*vedute*) (Bilau, 2023). She inherited these lands and atelier along with her siblings—two brothers who became priests, José and Antonio, and a living sister, Basília. Two other sisters, Luisa and Antonia, died before her. But Josefa left all her share of the inheritance to her family, preferring to support herself through her chosen profession since she was very successful and wealthy. Josefa died at age 54 on 22 July 1684 in Óbidos and was buried in her parish church of San Pedro in Óbidos (*Inventário Artístico de Portugal*, 1949, p. 73; Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 23).

B. Josefa's Reception of Nature

The impact of the discovery of the New World contributed to the collection of natural oddities and the assembly of cabinets of curiosities containing precious artworks (*artificialia*), rare natural objects (*naturalia*), scientific instruments (*scientifica*), and things from exotic lands (*exotica*). This “marvelous world” collection included publications on flora and fauna and emblem books explaining the esoteric meanings and composing rebuses for the reader's delight (Figures 4a and 4b) (Bleichmar, 2008, pp. 63-77; Impey & MacGregor, 2001). Portuguese supremacy in navigation, travel, and discovery of new lands in Africa, Asia, and Latin America further contributed to the literary and visual conception of the exotic, natural, and magical in Nature (Russell-Wood, 1998; Bailey, 2001).

⁵ *Inventário Artístico de Portugal, Distrito de Santarém*, 3:73. Will. The legal documents of her last will be discovered in 1949 by G. M. de Sequeira were edited by Luis Filipe Marques de Gama and published by Vitor Serrão.



Figure 4a. Cabinet of Curiosities, engraving in Francesco Imperato, *Historia naturale di Ferrante Imperato napolitano* (Venice, 1672).



Figure 4b. Cabinet of Curiosities engraving in Benedetto Ceruti, *Musaeum Francisci Calceolariii* (Verona, 1622).

Along with this natural world or physical realm was also the metaphysical or spiritual realm;⁶ the Counter-Reformation's strong impact in Catholic countries such as Italy, France, Flanders, Spain, and Portugal

⁶ In discussing concepts about landscape, including physical and metaphysical notions of grace, beauty, and the evocation of nostalgia through the visual awareness of colors, light, and atmosphere, I am influenced by Milani's *L'arte del paesaggio*, pp. 61-85, esp. 71-72.

infused religious imagery with Christian symbolism and mysticism. The proliferation of printed books on natural phenomena was paralleled by the production of religious and emblematic books to assist in the conversion of non-Christians. During the Counter-Reformation, artists often received academic help from humanists and theologians in creating symbolic conceits and puzzle-like (rebus) designs for their secular artwork. This same level of effort was also put into religious paintings, promoting Christian conversion. The Jesuits notably influenced this movement, primarily through Catholic Portuguese explorers in Asia (Brockey, 2014; Ross, 1994).

Josefa's academic and religious education from a convent, coupled with her artistic training from her family, allowed her to expertly capture these solid moral and religious sentiments, and cultural themes, in her artwork. The sensual or tactile quality perceived in her paintings reflects the scientific and philosophical currents of the seventeenth century concerning the natural elements (air, fire, water, earth) and perceptions of the physical phenomena through the senses (taste, smell, sight, sound, and hearing), the cyclical effects of the seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter), and the planetary movements associated with these cycles.

Josefa's theory of nature or landscape is visualized and associated with two aspects of nature: one is the practical formulation or design of a landscape in nature; that is, the physical and material features of nature, such as terrestrial crops and vegetation as well as flowers, plants, trees; aquatic surfaces, such as rivers, ponds, lakes, and the sea; and aeriform phenomena such as sky, clouds, atmosphere. The other aspect is the metaphysical interpretation of nature, the visual response in observing physical nature, which may cause emotional and intellectual reactions, such as evocation of the senses and the spirit. The understanding of cosmic creation and ideas about the soul's movement, such as the Platonic Good or the Beautiful⁷ and Aristotelian explanations of physical phenomena, were derived from ancient Greek philosophy. These concepts were passed down through Baroque humanistic culture.

The ancient metaphysical and physical cosmic understanding of Nature was further conceptualized and visualized in Italian art with the theoretical constructs of spatial illusion and optical observations recalling the theory on perception of Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) on the window motif and the power of the sense of sight described by Leonardo da Vinci (1462-1519) (Shlain, 1991, pp. 56-57, 77-78; Kemp, 1990, pp. 158-172; Brown, 1978, pp. 26, 52). Alberti provided an illusion of a theatrical stage that shows a picture within a picture, a dramatic scenery for interacting with a visual reality through perspectival devices, and visual imagery through the artist's invention. Baroque paintings enhanced this theatrical stage setting, combining layered visual elements and meanings (Edgerton, 2006; Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997, p. 157; Norman, 2001). Leonardo emphasized that the eye was the essential human organ because the "eye is the window of the soul [mind]," which helps understand the natural world (Shlain, 1991, p. 77). Through this function, the artist's eye captures in painting—through chiaroscuro effects, aerial perspective (*sfumato*), and the graduation of colors—the reality of nature, especially seen in landscape scenes.

⁷ Plato, "Symposium," 210e-211d, on the Beautiful and the Good; Plato, *Timaeus*, 33b, 363, 41d; Ficino, *The Philebus Commentary*, pp. 78-110, for an explanation of Plato's Goodness and Beauty; Turley, *Awakening Wonder*, 12-18, on Plato, esp. p. 82, discussing the Platonic view of Nature as *opus naturae*, as well as beauty and love (the good). See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/francis-bacon> (accessed 29 August 2022); Debus and Walton, *Reading The Book of Nature*, pp. 91-110; Brown, *Images and Ideas*, p. 52, on Platonic aesthetics discussed by the Sevillian painter and philosopher Francesco Pacheco (1564-1644) in *Art del la Pintura* (1649).

Baroque artists assimilated these Italian Renaissance optical insights years later in their paintings, displaying illusionism, tenebrism, and *sfumato* techniques. With these techniques, reality and the essence of nature were portrayed in their landscape and still-life paintings, as visualized by Josefa. Her *bodegones*, for instance, depict an arrangement of flowers, fruits, and pastries in a perspectival manner, creating a visual collection that also includes a series of cultural vignettes (Figure 1). Similarly, her *vedute* are landscape compositions representing the months with their natural products of the season, expressing the joy of life through complex perspectival illusions.

In her paintings, Josefa's varied, rich, and brilliant colors visualized the Baroque style delighting in capturing the effects of the natural world. Scrutiny of physical aspects of nature and its components, vegetation, flora, fauna, and landscapes, were realized in a concrete composition. Light effects bathe the objects to provide inanimate forms the same substance as animated forms. This illusionary effect is achieved by using reflective lights and skillful manipulation of perspective within the space. Josefa invented a theatrical scene with her *bodegones* (Figure 2). This drama is enacted by the inclusion and arrangements of flora and fauna compositions, where objects in these *bodegones* are physically designed to appear metaphorically to engage in a private dialogue through their entities, colors, shapes, textures, and spatial relationships. The same interlocution or interchange of conversation is emblematically implied in the formation of elaborate floral patterns of garlands, plants, and cartouche designs in her religious paintings (Figure 3). However, in her *vedute*, Josefa added another theatrical stage earlier visualized in the *bodegones*. These artistic creations (*vedute*) symbolize the seasons and cycles of the months, featuring rural and urban settings and the produce of Portuguese natural farming and staples. Josefa created visions of a joyous and prosperous life in Óbidos. Her *vedute* become metaphorical jewels of Nature (Figure 1).

Part II: Josefa's *Vedute*

The artistic and emblematic tradition of depicting the cycles of the months, seasons, and labor of the months with their planetary associations known since the Middle Ages was well established in Baroque art by Italian,⁸ Flemish,⁹ Dutch,¹⁰ French,¹¹ and Spanish schools (Figures 5a-5d).¹² Their visualization of this type of cyclical almanac included the realistic depiction of a season or a month with the conceits of the senses, the elements, the humor, and the labor of the month associated with the cycles of life. For the viewer, the paintings evoked emotional and sensual responses and philosophical and spiritual apperception of natural causes (Boutell, 1877, pp. 233-236; Webster, 1938; De Predis, 1490; Schama, 1997; Schneider, 1994; Segal, 1988).

The Figueira family was familiar with the landscape and still-life paintings of Francisco Barrera, a renowned artist from Seville. They lived in the city between 1624 and 1634. His paintings depicted seasonal fruits and vegetables specific to the time of year and month (Enggass & Brown, 1970, pp. 215-216). The paintings depict

⁸ For the image of Vincenzo Campi, see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincenzo_Campi_-_The_Fruit_Seller.jpg (accessed 15 May 2023).

⁹ For the images of Pieter Breughel the Younger, see <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6010101> (accessed 15 May 2023).

¹⁰ For the images of Jan Breughel the Younger and Frans Franken the Younger, see <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5287502> (accessed 15 May 2023).

¹¹ For the images of Nicholas Poussin, see <https://www.nicolas-poussin.com/en/works/the-four-seasons> (accessed 15 May 2023).

¹² For the images of Francisca Barrera's Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter, see <http://viticodevagamundo.blogspot.com/2012/11/seasons-and-months-by-francisco-barrera.html> (accessed 15 May 2023).

seasonal still-life compositions featuring flora and fauna, displayed in interior settings with great attention to detail. They depict tables filled with natural products from the region, and the open windows in the background help to establish the time of day and the season through atmospheric colors.

The Figueira painters were commissioned to create paintings depicting the Months and Seasons for a public or government building (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 21). Scholars are still seeking clarification regarding the patronage, location, purpose, and identification of scenes, as well as the attributions to specific Figueiras, but the patron still needs to be discovered. Some suggest that the paintings in question were explicitly created for the new palace of Don Joao de Mascarehas, the Count of Torre and first Marquis of Fronteira, who commissioned them to decorate his Italianate villa, located in the East of Lisbon, with themes of the Planet of the Gods and the Months of the Year (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997, p. 137).



Figures 5a, 5b, 5c, and 5d. Francisco Barrera, Cycle of the Months, *February and April*, 1640, oil on canvas. Private Collection. *July and August*, 1640, oil on canvas. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

It has been suggested that the portrayal of the Months is a tribute to a specific event in Portugal's history and politics. In 1668, the nation achieved dominance in naval power in Europe (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997; Caetano, 2015, pp. 51, 97). Certain scholars believe that the canvases utilized for specific *vedute* featuring *bodegones* may have had prior use for landscapes. It could be plausible that the inclusion of poems or "naïve rhymes" at the base of the images was at the request of the patron (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 21). The *vedute* paintings display a strong collaboration between Josefa and her father, as seen through their overlapping brushstrokes on the canvas (Estrela, Gorjao, & Serrão, 2005, p. 21).

Paintings illustrating March to September are presently in private collections and are unavailable for public viewing. They may be seen on the premises of Augus de Squiera Sao Martinho, Dr. Carlos Mourisca, Count of Sabugosa e Murça, and their Heirs of the Counts of Arnoso (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997, p. 154). Still, some *vedute* require proper identification, photography, and documentation. The identification and title of the actual month is, in some instances, uncertain. The attribution of the paintings is still in question, with some sources crediting both the father and daughter and others only one of them. This article is based on speculation about the exact authorship of these artworks and the suggestion of some of the months.

Josefa created landscape paintings, known as *vedute*, which show a dynamic interplay between natural and artificial perspectives. In the image, the background depicts natural scenery, while the foreground has artificial structures. The middle ground serves as a bridge between the two, blending the artificial and natural elements. The imagery in the *vedute* is divided into three levels, separated by foliage and a slab or table edge. The background is the first level, followed by a distant Portuguese site. To create a beautiful natural or picture frame within the painting, flowering or fruit trees are placed on the perimeter to separate the first and second levels. The second level is in the foreground and includes both animate and inanimate objects in a *bodegon* design. Finally, the third level is formed by the edge of the slab or table, covered with a green napery, which separates the lower area of the picture plane where a motto or “naïve rhyme” poem is written (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Cheney's *Veduta* Format in Josefa's paintings. ©Photo credit and Courtesy: Pedro Ribeiro Simões.

The *veduta* design resembles the visual style of a Jesuit emblem, which features a tagline at the top or inside the image. The image itself contains a figurative illustration of both natural and non-natural phenomena. The emblem is accompanied by a short poem (epigram) or explanation of the picture, often conveying an educational or moral message (Figure 7). In the Baroque era, communication was closely linked to the Jesuits' prayer book and other religious literature written by respected figures such as Saint Augustine, Saint Francis, and Saint Theresa of Avila. This mode was primarily derived from biblical texts. It was a way to honor God's creations, including nature, as Psalm 148 explicitly states: “Praise the Lord from the earth, sea creatures and all oceans, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy winds that obey his word; all mountains and hills, all fruit trees and cedar.” In the Baroque era, religious symbolism was often used in books about nature. One example is

Fray Isidoro Barreira's *Treatise on Plants, Flowers, and Fruits*, published in 1622 (De Barreira & Isidoro, 1622/1698). This book discusses vegetation and natural phenomena. Josefa probably discovered this source during her studies at Coimbra, which inspired her to imbue her *vedute* with spiritual significance.



Figures 7. Jean Bolland, Emblem on *Castitas minim èsterilis, Fecunda mater gaudiorum*
(My chastity made me barren or Fertile mother of joy),
engraving in *Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu* (Antwerp: Plantin, 1640), p. 184.

Josefa's scenic views, known as *vedute*, are breathtaking representations of the changing seasons and monthly cycles. These artworks skillfully capture the beauty of nature and its many marvels, using complex and symbolic elements that evoke feelings of sensory perception and the pleasures of life. They hold moral and religious meanings that were particularly significant during the Counter-Reformation era in Portugal and other Catholic nations. To safeguard these values for future generations, guidelines were established and enforced.

In this article, I use the term *vedute* to explain the emblematic display of a natural realm in Josefa's paintings about the cycle of the months or the seasons. These *vedute* represent in the background an actual and vivid landscape along with the human activities undertaken in a seasonal or historical reference impacting the culture of Óbidos. The scene's location in the months represents a moment in time and space, whether a rural or urban landscape, under the influence of the mystical and mythical transformation of the atmosphere and planetary cycles (Sobral, 2004, pp. 117-127). The middle ground with its scenes of the daily life and involvement of the people of Óbidos throughout a particular month, contrasts with the foreground (*bodegones*), in which are displayed the products the people have harvested, a collection of flora, fruits, sweets, and culinary enterprises, and manufactured products of ceramics and straw baskets.

These paintings feature a fictional foreground that depicts cultivated, inherited, or nurtured flora and fauna unique to a specific month or season. The combination of these elements with the display of a *bodegon* serves to convey a moral and ethical message about living productively and expressing gratitude for God's gifts, as inspired by religious texts by S^{ra} Violante du C^{eu} (1602-1693), S^{ra} Maria du C^{eu} (1658-1753), Franciscan

spiritual exercises, and the renowned treatise of Fray Isidoro Barreira on the moral meaning of floras and plants.¹³ These landscape images also contain poems written in colloquial language, providing traditional wisdom for understanding the scenery in the background while the vegetation pertains to the foreground. Josefa's descriptions are individual and expressive, much like a guidebook that offers advice on how to live a healthy and wholesome life. Her poetic inspiration comes from popular lyrical sources. With the inclusion of the vernacular sayings, Josefa has fused three conceits in her *vedute*: spiritual guidance, natural beauty, and regional adages—this type of proverbial reference also recalls the epigram with moral messages in Jesuit emblem books (Figure 7).

Additionally, the *vedute* is an ingenious use of perspective that combines natural or physical elements with artificial or metaphysical ones. It contrasts the perception of what is confirmed in the distance with what is constructed in the foreground. Each month, a carefully crafted curved frame separates the foreground from the background and accentuates a specific highlight of that month. Hence, every month has its unique symbols that represent the essence of each month. For instance, March is associated with ash trees and fish, April with orange trees and sweets, May with rose bushes and pheasants, and July with peach trees and vegetables. August is linked to harvest and melons, while grapevines and figs represent September.

A. The Months

In studying the *vedute* and *bodegones* that depict the months, we can understand the artistic and cultural achievements of the close relationship between Josefa and her father and Portuguese customs and culture. It is important to mention that the attribution of the naming of the months to Josefa in this essay does not discount the notable artistic partnership between both Figueiras, father and daughter. This is indicated by their joint signature on specific paintings, such as *March* (Figure 8a), signed Óbidos 1668, although some scholars have raised questions (Caetano, 2015, p. 96; Estrela, 2005, pp. 73-77, 79-82).



Figure 8a. Josefa de Óbidos, *March*, 1668, oil on canvas. Signed Óbidos, 1668. Private Collection.

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¹³ Hatherly, "As Misteriosas Portas da Ilusão," pp. 81-84; Serrão et al., *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 137. In addition, for the identification and the meaning of flowers depicted, I have relied on Azambuja's recent study in identifying many of the flowers and plants in Josefa's paintings based on Barreira's treatise and Mirella Levi D'Ancona's *On the Garden of the Renaissance*, an insightful encyclopedic, iconographic, and symbolic work with Christian symbolism about flowers and plants.



Figure 8b. Josefa de Óbidos and Baltazar Gomes Figuiera, *March*, 1668, oil on canvas.

© Photo credit and Courtesy: Jos é Pessoa, A. N. F.

March

Currently, two known versions of *March* are attributed to Josefa (Figures 8a and 8b). It is possible that Figure 8b was a joint effort between Josefa and her father. The first version (Figure 8a) depicts a harbor scene, beautifully framed by ash trees or cork oak trees, creating a picturesque opening to the background of the *veduta*. In the background of the painting, there is a panoramic view of Óbidos landmarks, including the medieval city wall and the castle. At the foot of this wall is a beautiful coastline with a harbor and beaches where both men and women engage in fishing activities, with the women assisting in collecting the catch. Vitor Serrão believes that the depiction of the naval port records a significant historical and political event (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997, p. 96). This episode involves the arrival of Queen Catherine of Braganza, daughter of King John IV of Portugal, and her party at the harbor of Portsmouth for her wedding celebration with King Charles II of England. The display combines this Portuguese historical event and the local fishing activities on Óbidos's beach. Other interpretations suggest that the background area depicts the beach of Baleal and the port of Peniche, areas of the Tagus River, or Óbidos' lagoons (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997, p. 136; Estrela, 2005, p. 73).

The composition of the *bodegon* in the foreground is imaginative, with a collection of seafood arranged on ceramic plates and rustic straw baskets. Framing the *bodegon*'s scene is a large sea bass hanging from tree branches on the right side and several codfish from tree branches on the left, forming the frame of a picture window. The seafood selection is impressive, depicting various fish commonly found in the Portuguese sea. The spread offers mouth-watering options such as oysters, clams, and crabs, as well as beautifully displayed perch and whitefish on handmade ceramic plates. In a horizontal movement, a large onion, a ceramic bowl filled with sardines, and sea crayfish scattered throughout complete the display of this succulent assembly.

Fortunately, the vernacular poem is still readable at the border of the painting, despite not being present in other months. It reads: "March may not have many fruits, but it offers an abundance of codfish, shellfish, crab, and fresh fish." This poem enhances the beauty of the fishing scene, with the fishermen in the background and the collection of fish in the foreground, creating still-life imagery for the *bodegon*. The collaboration between Josefa

and her father is evident in the second version of *March* (Figure 8b). This is clearly shown through comparison with his *bodegon* at the Louvre (compare Figures 9 and 8b).



Figure 9. Baltazar Gomes Figueira, *Still-life with Fish*, 1645, oil on canvas. Louvre Museum, Paris.



Figure 8b. Josefa de Óbidos and Baltazar Gomes Figueira, *March*, 1668, oil on canvas.

© Photo credit and Courtesy: Jos é Pessoa, A. N. F.

Josefa's other versions of *March*, now in private collections, were probably commissioned by another patron or the same patron who wished for specific changes in the painting. There are a few notable differences in the background scene representing the different placement of fishing or navigating boats and less visual clarity of the portrayed figures attending the beach. The skyline with cumulus clouds depicts a sunset scene. The same collection of baskets with fish is seen in the foreground. But there are changes in the display of an onion—partially peeled—here centrally placed, and fewer sea crayfish are dispersed through the table.

April

In *April*, Josefa created a tranquil scene encouraging people to relax and savor the start of Spring (Figure 1). The image's background depicts a rural setting with a landscape, a farm—the family farm, La Quinta Capeleira.

Cattle caretakers and shepherds attend to the livestock—sheep, goats, and cows. In the far-left distance, a small church is visible, reflecting the religious sentiment of the village.



Figure 1. Josefa de Óbidos, *April*, 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

©Photo credit and Courtesy: Cabral Moncada Leilões,

Art Auctioneers, Lisbon, Portugal/ Vasco Cunha Monteiro 2022.

Josefa skillfully directs the viewer's gaze from the foreground to the background of the painting, using subtle shades of orange. In capturing the beginning blooming season of Spring, April, the window frame of the painting shows a cluster of oranges hanging from a luscious orange tree balancing on the opposite side with ash trees starting to flower.

The orange coloration intentionally highlights the activities of a farm woman tending to an animal's care in the background. In contrast, another farm woman carries a sizeable clay water pitcher on her head to water the stables. Josefa has chosen the orange color to connect with the object's symbolism displayed in the *bodegon*. This unique arrangement of these objects in the still-life is ingenious. The military or naval jacket of orange color lies on the table in the center of the composition. Its placement is balanced on each side with intricately woven baskets filled with homemade pastries and pink and red flowers at each end. Notably, the basket includes red carnations, which are known to symbolize admiration and love, as well as orange blossoms, violets (symbols of purity of heart and humbleness), and a Caesar weed or pink burr, an Asian flower found in maritime forests that is commonly associated with military valor.

Josefa created a powerful imagery of peace to honor the Portuguese military and naval soldiers. The symbols consist of a Portuguese sword resting on military clothing, including an orange army jacket with white embroidery along its edges and heraldic shield designs on the sleeves. A white embroidered cloth, possibly a scarf, is also placed beneath the coat to emphasize the message of peace further. Josefa highlighted Portuguese women's textile and weaving skills in creating various types of clothing for household and industrial purposes. In the painting, an intricate lace cloth is designed to partially cover the baskets containing pastries, while the plain fabric, functioning as a scarf, is placed under the military jacket.

In between a fancy basket filled with pastries, flowers, and a military jacket, there is a cloth pouch that catches the eye. It is artfully crafted with beautiful red and purple regional flowers at the bottom. The bag is

partially opened, revealing gold and silver coins known as *reales*, used as currency in Portugal during that time. The coins are designed with Portuguese royal insignias or devices (compare Figures 10a and 10b).



Figure 10a. Portuguese *reales*. Photo credit: Numismatic Company, NGC.



Figure 10b. Josefa de Óbidos, *The pouch*, April, det., 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection. ©Photo credit and Courtesy: Cabral Moncada Leilões, Art Auctioneers, Lisbon, Portugal/Vasco Cunha Monteiro 2022.

Josefa has added another folkloric element to the still-life complex. She placed a worn hat on the military jacket, like those worn by farmers or fishermen. This similarity reveals the militia and the laborers' patriotic commitment to Portuguese territory.

A cluster of red and white ribbons adorns the hat to give it a personal touch of a celebratory event or to remind the Portuguese of the royal flag colors at the time. She also conveys to the viewer the Portuguese craftsmanship of making handmade artifacts such as baskets from their regional oak trees and lace napkins or tablecloths woven by the women of Óbidos. This artistry of making them beautiful objects and functional items such as scarves and linen cloths is paralleled with the practical art of cooking delicious pastries, sweets, and loaves of bread.

Regrettably, the vernacular poem is partially illegible. However, the readable portion mentions “Basket of Flowers in April ... Alleluia when at dawn they appeared ...”. This is a tribute to and celebration of the abundant gifts of Spring.

The way Josefa designs the *bodegon* composition with woven baskets is reminiscent of her previous works, like the artwork *Still Life with Watermelon and Pears* of 1670, an oil on canvas painting now at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon (Figure 2) and her *Still life with Fruits, Vegetables, and Flowers*, 1660–1670, oil on canvas, in a private collection (Figure 11). No magenta color Her way of arranging fruits and flowers in a straw basket and putting vegetables in a ceramic bowl was inspired by other artists who used baskets to show their objects, like Francisco Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose* of 1633, oil on canvas, now at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, CA (compare Figures 12 and 11).



Figure 12. Francisco Zurbarán, *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose*, 1633, oil on canvas. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, CA.



Figure 11. F Josefa de Óbidos, *Still Life with Fruits, Vegetables, and Flowers*, 1660-70, oil on canvas. Private Collection. ©Photo credit and Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons.

Like Josefa, other female painters of the Baroque era included elements of nature, regional cuisine, and personal symbolism in their paintings. Josefa's still-life style parallels the works of French painter Louise Moillon, Dutch painter Clara Peeters, and Italian painters Fede Galizia and Giovanna Garzoni. Notable are the paintings of Louise Moillon's *Bodegón with Fruits* of 1637, oil on canvas, now at the Thyssen Museum in Lugano/Prado (Figure 13); Clara Peeters's *Still Life with Sweets, Garnet, Gold Cup, and Porcelain* of 1660–1670, oil on canvas, in a private collection (Figure 14); Fede Galizia's *Still-life of Apples, Pears, Cucumbers, Figs, and a Melon* of 1625, oil on panel, now at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Figure 15), and Giovanna Garzoni's *Still-life with Bowl of Citrons* of the 1640s, tempera on vellum, now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA (Figure 16). In the end, Josefa's still-life paintings display Portuguese fruits, flowers, and sweets arranged meticulously in ceramic and straw bowls.



Figure 13. Louise Moillon, *Still Life with Fruits*, 1637, oil on canvas.
Thyssen Museum, Lugano/Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain.



Figure 14. Clara Peeters, *Still Life with Sweets, Garnet, Gold Cup and Porcelain*, 1612-1618,
oil on canvas. Private Collection.



Figure 15. Fede Galizia, *Still Life of Apples, Pears, Cucumbers, Figs, and a Melon*, 1625, oil on panel.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.

Credit line: Gifts from Roger Sant, Deborah Burkland, and Patron's Permanent Fund.



Figure 16. Giovanna Garzoni, *Still Life with Bowl of Citrons*, 1640s, tempera on vellum.
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA.

May

The black-and-white photograph of the painting shows a window frame adorned with flowers, possibly peonies or roses, while pheasants hang from a tree on the other side. In the middle ground, two groups of people enjoy themselves in a cultivated landscape (Figure 17). One group is dining in an open area with a beautiful mountain view in the background while the other group, under a tent, is arranging the dinner setup and playing music. A significant building that resembles a nobleman's mansion stands behind them. Because of the architectural design, this edifice may refer to the Italianate villa of the First Marquis of Frontiera (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997a, p. 137).

The *bodegon* in the foreground displays a basket of flowers, a ceramic milk container covered with cloth, a custard tart, and a basket of cheeses. Flowers of rose bush peonies, daisies, and fuchsia are a complete visual

delight. The vernacular poem reads: “May is all flowers/ Pick up a rose if you wish/ Berries and bright greens/ Partridges for the males” (Serrão, von Barghahn, & de Moura Sobral, 1997b, p. 155).

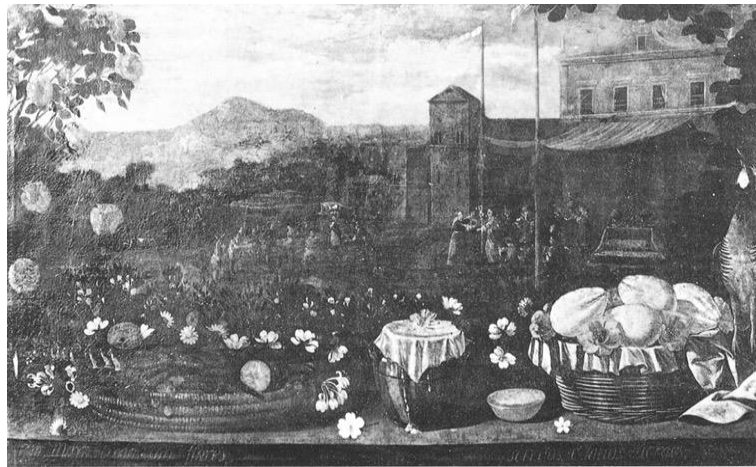


Figure 17. Josefa de Óbidos, *May*, 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection.
©Photo credit and Courtesy: Archivio M.N.A.A., Lisbon, Portugal.

July

The vernacular poem of *July* reads: “The boys jump into the water and make bubbles/ while the wood trees shed/ in July, the vegetable gardens are watered” (Figure 18) (Serrão, 1993, pp. 154-159). Watering the plants not only improves the quality of the soil but also offers an opportunity for summer water activities, making it a fun form of entertainment for young people.



Figure 18. Josefa de Óbidos, *July*, 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection.
©Photo credit and Courtesy: Archivio M.N.A.A., Lisbon, Portugal.

In the black-and-white photograph of *July*, the window frame is designed with a beautiful peach tree visible on one side, while a stunning flowering olive tree adds to the scenery. The background shows an extensive landscape combining rustic, urban housing, and rich vegetation. Once again, the favorite farmhouse of the Figueiras, the Quinta Capeleira, is part of the scenery. While men and women cultivate the soil, young boys enjoy swimming in ponds or streams, as the inscription records it.

The *bodegon* displays a collection of flowers, fruits, and vegetables—the richness of the summer harvest. Some flowers can be identified as jasmine, daisies, and roses. The fruits, such as peaches, are displayed on plates, while pears and apples are in front of a large wooden basket containing vegetables, such as onions. On the right side of the *bodegon*, there is a tall exotic gourd placed vertically (Coutimbo, 2017, pp. 215-234). And in its center, a large bunch of spinach is displayed horizontally between the peaches and the basket containing onions—a luscious display of fruits and vegetables.

August

The painted window is framed by an arch composed of a blooming ash tree and a laurel tree with large branches where a male and female European goldfinch cavort (Figure 19) (Serrão, 1993, p. 157; Caetano, 2015, p. 103). Their beautiful colored feathers of white, yellow-orange, and black with a crest of red color enhance the rich orange and white colors of the object in the *bodegon* in the foreground. The background shows a rural landscape featuring trees and farmhouses; some recall Josefa's family agricultural estate in the Quinta Capeleira. Various human activities take place in the fields. Some involve tending to and feeding animals on the farm; others include women gathering vegetables and fruits and picking flowers from the gardens. Serrão suggested that the woman choosing flowers at a distance could be Josefa dressed in folkloric Sevillian clothes (Serrão, 1993, p. 157). Some other individuals work in the agricultural grounds, tending to the crops of corn or wheat during harvest season. Josefa's harvesting construct recalls Pieter Breughel the Elder's *The Harvesters* of 1565, oil on wood, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Figure 20). Breughel's *Harvesters* captures the labor during the hot August when farmers are cultivating the wheat and taking rests to lunch or to cool off during this intense labor.



Figure 19. Josefa de Óbidos, *August*, 1668, oil on canvas. Private Collection.

©Photo Credit and Courtesy: Pedro Ribeiro Simões.



Figure 20. Pieter Breughel the Elder, *The Harvest (August)*, 1565, oil on wood. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The harvesting during the month of August is also visualized in a Jesuit emblem book, *Imago primi saeculi Societatis Iesu* by Jean Bolland, in the Emblem on *Castitas minimè sterilis* (My chastity made me barren) or *Fecunda mater gaudiorum* (Fertile mother of joy) (Figure 7) (Bolland, 1640, p. 184). The picture (*pictura*) inside the cartouche depicts a man using a scythe to cut wheat and bind it in stalks during August. The astrological band indicating this time of year displays the zodiac signs of Leo, Virgo, and Libra. As there is no clear documentation for this month, August is traditionally associated with the harvest of cereals in both visual arts and agricultural customs of the time. This indicates that the harvest usually occurred in August, not June or September.

In the foreground, Josefa's *bodegon* (Figure 19) displays handmade Portuguese pottery with a beautiful visual study of round-shaped bowls. The artist is comparing the handcrafted products, the bowls, with those created by nature, such as melon, white melon, and honeydew melon. She has also associated natural fruit with their cuisine of jams and juice, as seen in orange ceramic containers. A flaming orange flask in a straw basket on the left probably contains delicious nectar, the popular drink *aguardiente*—fermentation of rice with fruits—while on the opposite side, a similar orange flask holds jasmine flowers.

Accompanying these fruit products with their intense sweet smell are the flowers of jasmine, whose white color and aromatic scent also perfumed the scene. Unfortunately, the inscription of the poem only shows us a few words: “Melons and Watermelons ... are rich gifts of nature.” Probably a poetical reference to melons from S óror Maria do Céu offers the symbolic connection with Josefa's imagery; for example, Maria do Céu wrote that “the Melon is heavy in wisdom,/ for the letters it creates,/ it is sweet, is cleared, / that it will not be discreet without the sweetness” (Hatherly, 1997, p. 78).

September

September, an oil on canvas painting at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence, was attributed and identified recently by Serr ão to the Figueiras (Figure 21) (Fragoso, 2009, pp. 93, 97). The compositional design of this *veduta* resembles the others discussed here. A window frame is created to separate the background view and the foreground *bodegon*, and a folkloric poem is inscribed on the edge of the painting. An elaborate vine tree with

grapes frames the picture window separating the *veduta*'s background, which shows a village surrounded by mountains. In the foreground, the *bodegon* is a rich display of harvested fruits of the summer months, including those specially cultivated in September, such as figs, grapes, and plums. Apricots or peaches are on a silver plate, and succulent figs are in a straw basket. At the same time, plums, raspberries, melon, honeydew melon, white melon, watermelon, pears, black grapes, and persimmons present a fanciful display along the table. The collection of these fruits provides a tasty and beautiful feast. Regrettably, the vernacular poem is not visible.



Figure 21. Josefa de Óbidos and Baltazar Gomes Figueira, *September*, 1668, oil on canvas. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy. ©Photo credit and Courtesy: Professor Vitor Serrão.

These landscapes display beautiful skies that indicate the time of day and season through atmospheric lighting effects, sky coloration, and cloud positioning. For example, a March sunrise, an April mid-morning, an August mid-day, and a September sunset. Josefa has demonstrated a keen ability to appreciate the beauty of nature and expertly integrate it into her paintings.

Conclusion

With the artistic displaying of illusionism, tenebrism, and *sfumato* techniques, the essence of nature was portrayed in these Figueira landscapes and still-life paintings. The *bodegon* forms a visual collection that also includes a series of vignettes depicting an arrangement of flowers, fruits, and pastries in a perspectival manner. Similarly, the *vedute* are artistic creations that symbolize the seasons and cycles of the months, expressing the complexities of perception and the joy of life.

Thus, Josefa and her father visualized in these paintings through flora and fauna a physical and metaphysical love for nature. In addition, she and her father recorded the ample harvests of Óbidos's farms and the diligent effort required to cultivate the fields and tend to the livestock. They also emphasized the sense of fulfillment that accompanies the successful performance of these tasks. They drew comparisons between household tasks and crafts, production of goods, and culinary expertise.

In composing images with symbolic flora and fauna, in *vedute* and *bodegones*, they provided to and for the viewer a pedagogical visual response to be experienced through the senses in observing physical beauty in nature. Furthermore, the visualization of a spiritual evocation can elicit an emotional and intellectual response, leading to

a deeper understanding of the cosmic gifts bestowed by God's creation. These images are visually appealing and constitute a guide for living a virtuous and prosperous life based on Christian teachings.

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