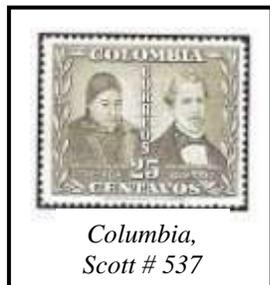


JOSE CELESTINO MUTIS (1732 – 1808)

by Jackson Albuquerque, MSU #109



Jose Celestino Mutis was born in Cadiz, Spain in April 6, 1732. He studied medicine at the University of Seville and on July 5, 1757 he received his doctorate in medicine. From 1757 to 1760 he was interim professor of anatomy in Madrid. During those same years he continued to study astronomy, mathematics, and botany at the Migas Calientes Botanical Gardens.

From 1763 until 1783, Mutis concentrated on commercial and mineralogical projects, expanded his collection of flora and fauna, studied the social and economic conditions of the viceroyalty, and continued his work in medicine. He was in regular correspondence with scientists in Spain and elsewhere in Europe, particularly Carolus Linnaeus. His work on the species of *Chinchona* has lasting influence.

He determined the longitude of Bogotá by the observation of an eclipse of a satellite of Jupiter and had a significant role in the construction of the national observatory.

On December 19, 1772 he was ordained a priest. However, he had problems with the church due to his belief in Copernicus' system and experimental methods. In 1774 he wrote "Sustentation del Sistema Heliocentrico" for defense in the Inquisition about Copernicus' theory and modern mathematics, inspired by Isaac Newton.

Mutis led the Royal Botanical Expedition, begun in 1783, for 25 years. It explored some 8,000 km² in a range of climates. He developed a meticulous methodology that included the harvesting of samples in the field with detailed descriptions and data on the surroundings of each species and its utility. He sent more than 8,000 plates, maps, correspondence, notes and manuscripts to Spain. These treasures arrived safely at Madrid in 105 boxes, and the plants, manuscripts, and drawings were sent to the botanical gardens, where they were relegated to a tool-house. His museum consisted of 24,000 dried plants, 5,000 drawings of plants by his pupils, and a collection of woods, shells, resins, minerals, and skins.

The legacy of Mutis is extraordinary. His work went beyond the organization and leadership of one of the most important European scientific expeditions of the New World: he directed a generation of Latin American botanists and scientists, as well as the establishment of the first Latin American scientific institute. Mutis represents a superb example for botanists. His perseverance, work ethics and love for the country that adopted him are examples for many of us who often need to carry out our research with limited resources.



Because much of his botanical work was lost or unpublished, he is known to history not as a great scientist, but as a great promoter of science and knowledge. He died in Bogota, Colombia on September 11, 1808.

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