

The First Printed Picture of Indian Corn

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The purpose of this note is to correct, or at least to question, an oft-repeated statement about the first publication of a picture of the Indian corn plant. The point is not one of great importance, but if any statement about it is worth making at all, it is worth while to see that it is correct.

The earliest appearance of the error was apparently in Miall's work on the early naturalists (2). In his account of Oviedo he says (p. 63) that this early Spanish chronicler was the first to publish figures of many American plants, including Indian corn. Later historical works have made the same statement, the context often indicating that they got the idea from Miall.

In a recent work on the literature of maize, Finan (1) treats the question in a way which is likely to continue the error. He gives a conspicuous place to the alleged first figure, stating that it comes from an early Italian edition of Oviedo's work, but he gives no definite citation or other source of his information. In a footnote a little farther along (p. 159) he says that he has examined the first Spanish editions of Oviedo and found no figure of maize. A review of the facts as now known leads us to the conclusion that this figure was not the first published.

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés was one of the colorful personalities of the period of the Spanish conquest of America. Brought up in the royal household of Spain as a companion for the young prince John, he was present, at the age of fifteen, at the impressive court reception given by Ferdinand and Isabella for Columbus on his return from the first voyage to America; and in the ensuing years he heard first-hand the accounts of the New World brought back by the explorers. In 1514 he was sent to Santo Domingo as inspector of mines and supervisor of gold smelting. He returned to Spain on a visit in 1523 and, before his death in 1557, made five more round-trips to America and wrote extensively of his experiences.

While he was in Spain in 1523, his account of what he had seen in the New World elicited so much interest that he hurriedly prepared for the king a summary of a longer manuscript which he had left behind him in Santo Domingo. This *Sumario* was published in Spain in 1526. The first part of the longer work, the *Historia General y Natural de las Indias*, was published in 1535, and there was another Spanish edition in 1547. Other editions followed, but the complete work was not published until 1851.

A few years ago I had the good fortune to examine the first edition of the *Sumario* and the second edition of the *Historia General* in the

Bancroft Library of the University of California and the first edition of the latter in the Huntington Library at Los Angeles. There is no figure of maize in any of them. The *Sumario* has five woodcuts and the longer work some 25 or 30. Various native or introduced plants of the New World, such as the cactus, pineapple, mamey, fig, yucca, banana, and two kinds of manioc, are shown, but no corn. It seems almost certain, therefore, that as late as 1547, Oviedo did not include a figure of maize in any of his publications.

There are two remote possibilities that this conclusion might not be correct. The first is that there may be other editions of which we have no knowledge; but the literature of the period has been so thoroughly catalogued that this seems unlikely. The second possibility is that a figure might have been included in some copies of an edition and not in others. In those days, changes were sometimes made during the printing of a book so that the finished copies were not all identical in content; but to make such an assumption in this case, without some positive evidence, would seem to be taking a long chance.

Meanwhile, the first edition of Fuchs' famous herbal came out in 1542, and his excellent figure of maize seems to have a clear title to the record of being the first to appear in print in any publication anywhere. A copy of this was published in the Proceedings of this Academy in 1945 (3).

The second edition of Ramusio's *Navigazioni et Viaggi*, published in 1554, includes the figure copied by Finan—apparently the one which caused the confusion. Whether this figure was included in the first edition (1550) has not been determined, but this is beside the point since either edition is antedated by Fuchs.

Anyone who examined only Ramusio's Italian edition of 1552 and found there the figure of maize might conclude that it, along with the others, had been carried over from the earlier editions of Oviedo's work. That may be the source of the error. A closer examination of the figures, however, shows that that of maize is not in the same style as the relatively crude ones of Oviedo.

When Ramusio was preparing the second edition of his book of travels, feeling the need of an illustration of this spectacular plant to accompany Oviedo's work, he simply "lifted" one from one of the current herbals. The herbal of Matthioli (edition of 1565) has the same figure, but in reverse; and it will be recalled that copying figures in reverse was a common practice in making woodcuts, when there was no essential difference between a picture and its mirror image. Who made the original drawing and where it was first published have not been determined, but it did not appear in some of the earlier editions of Matthioli, the earliest of which bears the date of 1544.

Literature Cited

1. FINAN, JOHN J. 1948. Maize in the great herbals. *Ann. Missouri Bot. Gard.* 35:149-191.

2. MIALL, L. C. 1912. The early naturalists and their lives and work (1530-1789). Macmillan, London.
3. WEATHERWAX, PAUL. 1945. Early contacts of European science with the Indian corn plant. *Proc. Indiana Acad. Sci.* 54:169-178.

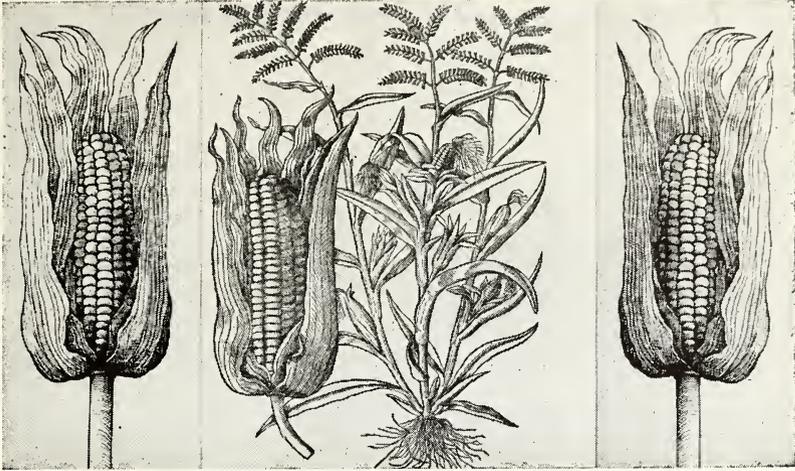


FIG. 1. Early figures of maize. Right, the figure from Ramusio. Left, the same printed in reverse for comparison with Matthiolus' figure (middle), from which it seems to have been copied.