Museo de las Conceptas

Una historia que enamora

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Dr. Fabian Leon

Dr. Leon is a professor and researcher at the University of Cuenca, and a pharmacist by trade. According to León, his lab is “leaving behind pure ancient knowledge due to new knowledge”. He and his team extract compounds from different medicinal plants, and study them to determine the scientific backing behind their observed effects, and how they can be used in the medical field.

One example of his work is with a model for bacterial infections. To begin, he dries and processes plants known to have antibiotic properties, puts them in an ethanol solution, and extracts the compounds to observe how bacteria react.

El Museo de Las Conceptas: A Brief History

The museum’s foundation comes from a 16th century monastery, originally owned by a wealthy Cuencan widow who felt called to bequeath her home to the Cuencan Church. Monasteries play the role of housing religious communities that live in seclusion from an often secular society. This monastery in particular sheltered cloistered nuns, who are Catholic women that have been consecrated to God. They vow to remain inside the convent for the rest of their lives and devote themselves to prayer, study, and community life. In accordance with the condition made by the Cuencan widow, the first of the cloistered nuns to live in this monastery were her three daughters. From then up until the 20th century, the monastery went on to shelter generations of cloistered nuns who, in addition to praying and studying, created magnificent pieces of art.

In 1980, the cultural department of the Central Bank of Ecuador proposed that the monastery be transformed into a museum of religious art that could display its artistic beauty to the city. The goal was to create a museum that would communicate the history and importance of religious culture to each and every visitor.
This proposal was eventually put into place and six years later, El Museo opened its doors. The museum presents a variety of immaculate work created by the nuns that lived out their lives in the monastery, as well as donations made from community to the nuns over the past 400 years. Although the monastery no longer stands, the cloistered nuns still remain, living in confined quarters of the museum, only to emerge during closed hours to clean. Along with their normal studies and devotions, these nuns pay a large contribution to maintaining the cleanliness of the facility and its artifacts. One can marvel at this upkeep while touring the 21 total exhibits present throughout the museum, 18 of which are permanent, and 3 rotational. Each of them features a large collection of religious paintings, sculptures, furniture, and toys that all pertain to a specific theme of the exhibit.

The Nuns of the Monastery

A group of nuns inhabit the monastery that is connected to the museum. They use the plants in their everyday lives, from culinary to medicinal purposes. The monastery holds its own gardens, containing many of the same plants as the gardens, but occasionally they will use plants from the museum’s gardens if needed.

For example, the nuns use plants such as rue for “bad air”, and aloe for inflammation. Mother Abadesa says, in the context of what plants are the most important, that “From my vision they are all because they are the work of God each has its own detail that elevates the spirit towards the creator.”

The nuns described how the gardens have changed over time, with new plants coming to Ecuador with the Europeans, and given to the monastery as gifts from religious benefactors, resulting in the diverse gardens here today.
Isabel Lituma

Isabel Lituma is a local Curandera, or healer. Every Friday, she comes to the museum to perform spiritual cleansings called “limpias”, which attract many people. She has been performing the traditional cleansing for 27 years, since the government legalized the practice. Prior, it had been illegal, due to being considered “witchcraft”.

The limpias use a large variety of 9-10 plants, many of which are contained in Las Conceptas, intended to cleanse the body of bad energy and evil spirits. For example, a plant called rue is included to ward off bad energy, and help babies sleep. In addition, the cleansings are a popular tradition during the new year, to start the new year with clean energy and spirits.

This guidebook was designed by students from Worcester Polytechnic Institute in collaboration with the museum to help guests to enjoy a greater experience inside the gardens. Please take time to observe the variety of plants contained here and relax in the serene environment.

We thank you for visiting us here at El Museo de Las Conceptas.

The Symbols in This Guide

- **Medicinal**– Any plant that has a use in healing or medicine.
- **Culinary**– Any plant that is used in making food.
- **Symbolic**– Any plant that is used to represent something.
- **Aromatherapeutic**– Any plant used for therapy/relaxation, mainly in teas, oils, or perfumes. Plants known for their scent.
- **Spiritual**– Any plant that serves a purpose in spiritual or religious traditions, or has a backstory based in spirituality.
Origin

Lavender is originally from the Mediterranean, Middle East, and India. From the mint family, it is well known for its beauty, fragrance, and many uses. Due to this, lavender spread quickly across the world and is commonly cultivated today.

Lavender
Spanish Name: Lavanda
Latin Name: Lavandula

Lavender can be used as a disinfectant and antiseptic for injuries.

Its most common uses are due to its attractive smell. It is commonly used for aromatherapy, and assisting in sleep and stress relief.

In the monastery, Lavender was used in the Garden of the Smells to ensure the smell of the cemetery did not reach the main halls.
Jasmine
Spanish Name: Jazmín
Latin Name: Jasminum

Origin
The name is derived from the Persian word “Yasmin”, meaning “gift from god”. It is believed to have originated in the Himalayan region of western China, and spread very quickly to warmer tropical and temperate regions of the world, due to its beauty.

Jasmine is typically used for the treatment of liver pain due to liver disease or cirrhosis, as well as general stomach/abdominal pain.

Jasmine’s scent is very strong and pleasing, so it is used in many creams, lotions, and perfumes as fragrance, and can also be used in green tea.

Jasmine symbolizes many things, including purity, strength, modesty, and simplicity. It is said that the use of jasmine oil will bring these traits.
Rosemary water is good for the hair and face; and used to clear vision; and wash burns, ulcers, and rashes. You swallow the leaves and flowers in order to cure rheumatism.

Rosemary is used often to flavor foods, such as beef, pork, or stuffing.

Rosemary is an important plant in Limpias (spiritual cleansings). It is said to ward off diseases and evil, as well as attract good luck. It is also used to cleanse children of bad energy.

The name "rosemary" derives from the Latin for "dew" (ros) and "sea" (marinus), or "dew of the sea". The plant is native to the Mediterranean area, and thrives best near the sea.
The common fig tree is native to the Middle East and western Asia, and is now cultivated worldwide, due to its popularity as both a fruit and ornamental plant.

The fig tree is heavily symbolic, due to its presence in the Christian Bible. In the Bible, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they covered their naked bodies with leaves from a fig tree. Now, the fig leaf is a symbol of peace and prosperity.

The common fig is grown widely due to the taste of its edible fruit, eaten fresh or dried.

The milky sap of the fig tree was commonly used to treat calluses and warts.
Madonna Lily
Spanish Name: Azucena
Latin Name: Lilium Candidum

The bulb of the Madonna Lily is used to create a poultice for tumors, ulcers, and external inflammations. However, it is rarely used anymore, due to the rarity of the plant.

Origin

The Madonna Lily is native to the Balkans and Middle East, and has been naturalized worldwide due to its beauty.

The Madonna Lily symbolizes purity in the Roman Catholic religion. Depictions of the Virgin Mary often portray her holding these flowers, or with them nearby. In addition, it is said that when Santa Mariana, the “lily of Quito” died, a bed of these flowers grew where her body lay.
Sweet Passionfruit

Spanish Name: Granadilla
Latin Name: Passiflora Ligularis

Origin
Sweet passionfruit is native to the Andes Mountains, mainly in Peru, but also including Ecuador, Bolivia, Columbia, and Venezuela.

In addition to being delicious, the seeds of the sweet passionfruit can be lightly roasted, and used to treat ulcerations.

The most common use of sweet passionfruit is as a food. The pulp inside is very sweet and rich with vitamins.
Lemon Verbena

**Spanish Name:** Cedron

**Latin Name:** Aloysia Citrodora

Lemon Verbena leaves are often used to add lemon flavor to dishes such as poultry or salad dressings, as well as to make sorbet. It is also commonly used in tea to add lemon flavor and scent. Also, it works as an insect repellent. Lemon Verbena is also used to help with anxiety, dysentery, and diarrhea.

Lemon Verbena originated in South America, and in the 17th century, the Spanish brought the plant back to Europe.

**Origin**

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**Origin**

Angel’s Trumpets are native to the tropical regions of Ecuador, as well as the Andes. They are quite sensitive to weather, so they haven’t been moved far from these locations.

Heated leaves of the Angel’s Trumpets can be applied to the skin to help treat many neurological conditions. In addition, the plant can have hallucinogenic effects when consumed, alongside other effects of the toxins in the plant.

There are a great deal of spiritual effects associated with Angel’s trumpets, including attracting angels and spirits, serving as a link between the human and spirit world.
Origin

Gypsy’s Earrings are native to South America, and are one of a large variety of types of fuchsia. It gets its name from the long bunches of flowers that grow on it.

The flowers (a type called Pena Pena) can be used to relieve stomach pain, as well as treat infections.

Gypsy’s Earrings are used in Limpias, in the large bunches of flowers intended to ward off bad spirits and energy.

Aloe

Spanish Name: Sabila
Latin Name: Aloe Vera

Origin

Aloe is originally from the Arabian peninsula, but is now grown in tropical regions worldwide, as well as grown decoratively in pots.

Aloe is used for a wide variety of medicinal purposes. Mainly, it is used as a gel to treat damaged skin and hair. It can also help with lung illnesses when boiled in milk. Additionally, there are drinks made with aloe said to balance the bodies alkalinity and help digestion and heartburn.