

*Santanderiensia Curiosa Specimina Palmarum*



Since I was very young I have been fascinated by palm trees, with their magnificent height and their exotic plant appearance. I remember the Phoenix Canariensis at the entrance to my childhood school, the Jesuits of Sarriá in Barcelona, where they commanded respect for their size and conveyed a symbolic affirmation of the spiritual righteousness of the school. Although I associate palm trees more with holidays and good weather: two of them flanked my grandparents' beach house on the Costa Brava.



In a picture rescued from a family album, they are still young. Summers on the beach changed the rigidity and tedium of school palm trees for the joy and freedom of palm trees on the sand. When I felt them outside the school discipline, they seemed much more exotic and beautiful, so years later I created a brand, "Palafito Music", with the symbol of palm leaves. I even lined a whole wall in my room with a giant poster of a Polynesian beach full of palm trees (Cocos Nucifera), which I got from a travel agency.



I dreamed of travelling to remote places, fantasizing about the exotic vision of the South Seas: paradisiacal destinations dominated by palm trees on atolls or reef-protected beaches. I can say that I have achieved that goal. I have been around the world and have enjoyed the company of several species of palm trees, within the 2600 variants, in splendid landscapes throughout the geography of the earth. My favourites are the Washingtonia (*Washingtonia Robusta*) and the Nibung (*Oncosperma Tigillarum*).

Palms are also, in a way, travelling plants because they colonize many beaches in tropical and subtropical areas, as their seeds travel floating on the sea carried by storms and tides. This is their most exotic reference, their constant presence on the most beautiful beaches in the world, forming part of the landscape in the most luxurious resorts on all five continents.

Some of these seeds have become coveted treasures. When I first saw it at a collector's house in Barcelona, I was struck by a Coco de Mar (*Lodoicea Maldivica*), one of the largest seeds in the world. These are not exactly the ones that travel floating; they can weigh up to 20 kg. and come from the palm trees endemic to the island of Praslin, Seychelles.

When I received the invitation from my friend Juan Carlos Sanz-Briz to help him with this book, supported by Eva Fernández Ortiz, Director General of Culture of the Santander City Council, I wanted to study the world of palm trees with a certain professional criteria. After months of research, and during the almost two years that we have been working on the project, I have learned a lot about these plants. One of the initiatives has been to become a member of the International Palm Society, to share our mutual interest in palms around the world.

I have read, through the forum of this society, that recently there was an exciting discovery in the world of palms. The discovery in 2007 of *Tahina Spectabilis*, a palm species endemic to Madagascar, the only species of the genus *Tahina*. With a total population in its natural habitat of only 92 specimens, it represents not only a new species but an entire genus in the palm family.

Continuing with the botanical details about palms, about their symbolism in the culture of various civilisations, I can state other curious facts, for example: the palm tree represents and measures the passing of time, as it is the only arborescent plant that during moonrise produces a single branch, so that for every 12 branches of a palm tree, one-year passes. It grows with hardly any water in desert areas, where almost no other species survives, which is why it is the symbol of resurrection, endurance and rebirth. For the Persians it represents life and renewal; in ancient Greece it was a sacred sign of Apollo, who was born under a palm tree on the island of Delos and in Roman culture the palm of the hand was closely associated with victory and later with peace. In Christianity Palm Sunday heralds the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who entered Jerusalem victorious with palms on the back of a donkey, and in Islam palm trees are associated with Paradise.

Today, a sunset with the contrast of tall palm trees on the horizon is undoubtedly the model for representing Paradise on Earth. In artistic expression we find many examples, such as the relationship of the French painter, Paul Gauguin, seeking the plastic representation of paradise in his painting with the palm trees of the tropics.

During the making of this book I have also been able to compare some of the works of other artists such as John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, Sigmar Polke and David Hockney who have explored the power of the palm tree. I was able to talk to John Baldessari at the Venice Biennale, when he was awarded the Golden Lion, the prize for his artistic career in 2009, and during the opening of his exhibition *Pure Beauty* at MACBA the following year.

The exhibition began in the museum lobby with the work "*Brain/Cloud*, 2009". A huge photograph of a palm tree (*Washingtonia Robusta*) facing the sea, with a sculpture of a giant human brain placed next to it, like a white cloud on a wall painted sky blue. The palm tree, an image historically used as the archetype of paradisiacal places, becomes the definition of the "banal" in Baldessari's words.

Honouring his constant controversy and using incoherent images, Baldessari sought to challenge the natural mechanisms we use to collect and analyse visual information. By omitting or highlighting particular elements of each image, he controlled the way in which the viewer's eyes traverse the work, in order to question the validity of the processes of visual communication.

This focus on defamiliarising visual elements is evident in the use of the palm tree as a simultaneously trivial and exotic iconographic symbol. Having grown up in California, Baldessari had a critical perspective towards palm trees - this iconic emblem of affluence, associated with cities such as Los Angeles, becomes more of a monument to Californian superficiality and phoniness. The plant is not even a native species to the area, and so the artist makes us understand that the connotations of prosperity attached to its image and the Californian dreams that include them are nothing more than just that, dreams.

*"The palm tree has become the symbol of California as Paradise on Earth, the symbol of the American dream".*

The American dream can also be interpreted in the Spanish context with the phrase "making the Americas", one of the most important phenomena in recent Spanish history. In this interpretation, the palm trees that represent the triumph of the Indianos who made their fortune after crossing the ocean between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries gain importance.

Many of the palm trees on the Cantabrian coast and in the city of Santander owe their origin to these adventurers, who emigrated in search of a better life far from their homeland. All these palm trees have the same purpose: to spread the word that the wealthy Indiano, the emigrant returning from "making the Americas", has returned to his place of origin.

Among the Indianos of La Montaña were the Marquis of Comillas, the Marquis of Valdecilla, the Marquis of Manzanedo, the Count of La Mortera, Santiago Galas, Eusebio Gómez and Mateo Haya Obregón. In his honour, in 1978, the Monumento al Indiano was erected at the top of Peña Cabarga, a privileged viewpoint overlooking the bay of Santander and the port from which thousands of emigrants left for the new continent.

My great-great-grandfather, Teodoro Roviralta Figueras (1854-1919) was one of those Indianos who made his fortune importing wines in Argentina. It is said in my family that when he went to ask for his fiancée's hand in Paris, his in-laws, respectable bourgeois of the Belle Époque, asked for letters of reference from their Argentinian partner. The latter, out of envy and jealousy, sent bad reports and was not accepted as a suitor. Teodoro, furious, returned to Argentina by boat and hit his partner in the face with a glove. The duel did not take place, but he demanded that he rectify the reports to return to France after a few months, where he was accepted and was able to marry my great-great-grandmother Sofia Astoul. Years later in 1899, together with his new partner in Barcelona, Dr. Andreu, they built the garden city of Tibidabo in Barcelona, where several palm trees were planted next to his house "El Frare Blanc".

I also emigrated temporarily to America, in search of better study and work opportunities, in the 1980s. In part I also consider myself somewhat Indian because thanks to that effort I have managed to make my way in the art world, achieving my first successes outside my country. I have not yet planted any palm trees after my return to Spain, but in the hope of doing so soon I have started with this book.

*Santanderiensia Curiosa Specimina Palmarum*, is a collection of curious specimens of palm trees from the city of Santander. I wanted to title it under a Latin epigraph, as the names of the various plant species are usually classified in botany.

Bearing in mind the result of the first shots and the terrible computer loss, the second time I took the photographs, I decided to avoid bright sunny days in order to eliminate the great contrasts of light, especially the dark shadows on the crowns of the palm tree crowns. The repetition of the work helped me to prepare myself with the necessary technical resources and to get better images.

Making this book has been for me an exercise in reflection on part of my life and in learning in several ways. The effort, after having totally lost the previous work, has allowed me to focus on details that I had not seen before. The fact of having photographed during the winter highlights the palm trees over the other deciduous trees and achieves a greater tonal quality under cloudy skies.

I remember my first trip to Santander in April 1966, in the company of my grandmother Mercedes Salisachs. On the way to her house in San Sebastián de Garabandal, we stayed overnight at the Hotel Real, with the spectacular view of the bay over the palm trees that still stand in her garden.

I found this fragment in one of her novels where she refers to some palm trees:

"Observing the tiny garden in front of the Banco de Bilbao almost with tenderness: "If I were a child again I would convince myself that this fragment of grass and these small bushes are part of a park". A vast park, full of microscopic beings striving to reach high peaks like humans.

That's what she used to do when she discovered life: imagine poetic impossibilities and live them in her own way as if they were real.

To tell herself that imagination can change life. And strive to see everything differently from the way she has seen it so far.

To contemplate the enormous palm trees that stretch along the pavement simultaneously with the sycamore trees and the street lamps that used to be lit with gas. To think that everything has a meaning; that nothing is there by chance.

I was lucky enough to be able to illustrate and design some of the covers of my grandmother's novels, such as "Along the Shore of Dreams", "Reflejos de Luna", "Bacteria Mutante" or "El Caudal de las Noches Vacías", which has a certain similarity to the cover of this book, Palmeras de Santander.

I lived with her for 53 years, from my early childhood until the last days of her life, sharing intimate moments of artistic and literary reflection. I learned a great deal at her side. I would have very much liked to invite her to write a few words in this book, but I perceive from another dimension that she is guiding me as I compose this text.

I have subsequently visited La Montaña and the city of Santander on several occasions, and in all these situations I have found it to be a unique and special place. Now I know its neighbourhoods and streets better thanks to the palm trees. As David Hockney said: "Sometimes it takes a foreigner to come and see a place and paint it. I remember someone saying that they had never noticed the palm trees here until I painted them".

I hope that someone will be able to comment the same about the curious specimens of palm trees in Santander, when they see my photographs. Duplicating the work has led me to take many more photographs which have not fit in this book, but can be seen on the web:

[www.palmerasdesantander.com](http://www.palmerasdesantander.com)

As a reference in the history of photography in the 19th century, we can see the importance that palm trees played, above all, in the development of botanical photography and travel photography. In the early days of photography, one of the most common botanical subjects was palm trees. Many early botanical photographers, such as Anna Atkins and William Henry Fox Talbot, captured images of palms to show the capabilities of the new medium. These early images of palms were often used in scientific publications and as reference material for botanists and naturalists. Palms played a prominent role in travel photography during the 19th century and in visualising the cultural movement of Orientalism, as Europe watched with curious eyes as the neighbouring Ottoman Empire decayed. To be an Orientalist meant going out to explore the Orient, yet some artists never left the studio, devoting themselves to imagining, aided by travel literature or the odd print or daguerreotype that came from there. In fact, Orientalism was a somewhat imagined movement. As travel became more accessible to the upper classes, photographers documented their journeys to exotic locations, including tropical regions where palm trees abounded.



*Cocoa Palm Retalhuleu, Guatemala, 1877. Eadweard Muybridge*

These photographs were often used to create travel albums and were also displayed in galleries and exhibitions, showing the beauty and diversity of the natural world in contrasting contrast to the illustration of their lives.

One notable photographer who captured images of palm trees was Eadweard Muybridge. In the 1870s he travelled to Central America and photographed a variety of tropical plants, including palm trees. His images, celebrated for their scientific accuracy and attention to detail, helped establish him as one of the foremost botanical photographers of his time.

In addition to their scientific and aesthetic value, images of palms had commercial applications. Photographers sold them to publishers who used them in books and magazines to illustrate travel, botanical and other stories. Palm trees were especially popular in advertising, where their exotic appearance was used to promote luxury goods and tropical destinations, presenting the unknown, the mysterious and the forbidden. These images not only showed the beauty and diversity of the natural world, but also played an important role in the development of the photographic medium itself.

Returning to this book, I would like to thank Fernando García-Barredo and Gema Martínez Viura for their work on the final design and supervision of printing and binding. In the last few days before going to press I asked Juan Carlos to help me with the task of "walking the book", that simple exercise of putting the pages on the floor and starting to check the pagination sequence, walking the book from start to finish, to find the right rhythm and visual breaks from the blank pages, in our case in green. I learned that trick from my graphic design teachers at the Basel School and Rhode Island School of Design. They, in turn, learned it from their teachers at the Bauhaus and from Alekséi Brodóvich, the great Russian photographer and designer, who was for many years artistic director of Harpers Bazaar in New York, promoter of other great artists such as Blumenfeld, Cartier-Bresson and Man Ray, as well as instructor of Richard Avedon and Irving Penn.

I think that, between the two of us, we have managed to give it the right rhythm. This book can now follow a gentle jazz beat at the foot of a green palm tree, accompany classical Mondays in the auditorium of La Magdalena, or the sweet steps of a bosanova:

*[...] Depois, na Praça Caymmi  
Sentir preguiça no corpo  
E numa esteira de vime  
Beber uma água de coco  
É bom!*

*[...] Depois sentir o arrepio,*

*Do vento que a noite tras,  
E o diz-que-diz-que macio,  
Que brota dos coqueirais...<sup>1</sup>*

*[...] Later, in Caymmi Square  
Feeling lazy in my body  
And on a wicker mat  
Drinking coconut water  
It's good!*

*[...] Then he feels the cold,  
Of the wind that brings the night,  
And the soft whisper,  
From the coconut trees...*

*Miguel Soler-Roig Juncadella*

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<sup>1</sup> *"Tarde em Itapoã", 1977  
Toquinho y Vinicius di Moraes*