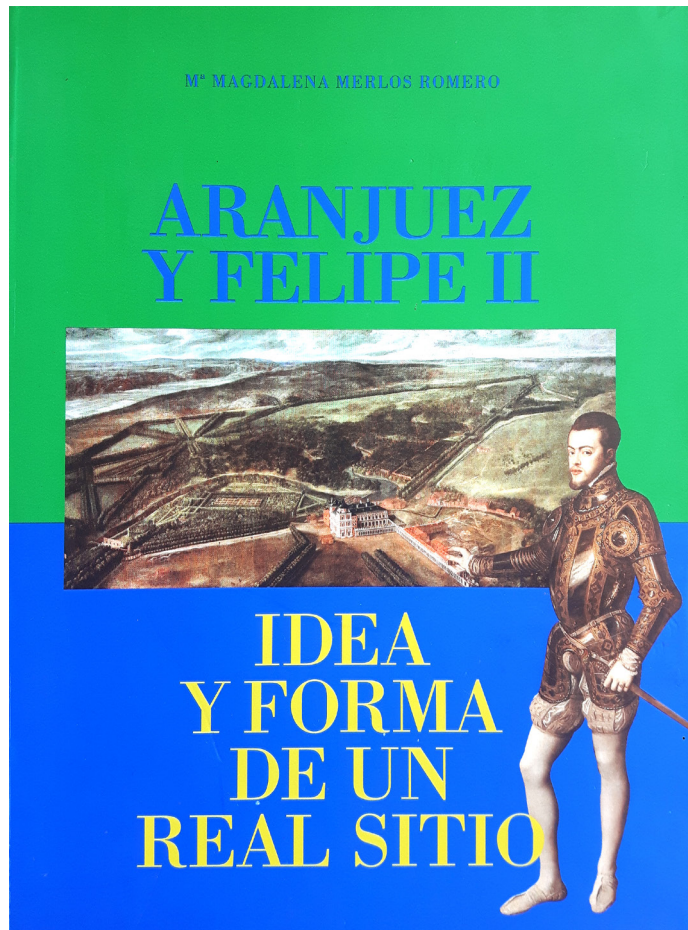


M^a Magdalena Merlos Romero, *Aranjuez Y Felipe II. Idea y Forma de um Real Sitio*, Madrid: Dirección General de Patrimonio de la Consejería de Educación y Cultura, 1998.

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Why write a book review of a book published in 1998? Will it still be useful to the reader? Yes, if the book has gone unnoticed to the general public. Yes, if the book was at the basis of important developments in both heritage and academic contexts.

Magdalena Merlos Romero is best known for her book *Aranjuez Paisaje Cultural Patrimonio de la Humanidad*, published to commemorate the fact that the Aranjuez Cultural Landscape became a Worldwide Heritage Site in 2001. Still, the path that lead to this successful outcome was overlooked.

Paying special attention to the amazing landscape of sixteenth-century Aranjuez, Romero took as a starting point for her work the concept of *genius loci*, as if the idea to create a Royal villa there had occurred to Philippe II due to the exceptional features of the site where the rivers Tagus and Jarama meet. Envisioned as the King's dream, the author follows his desire to expand the territory, not only in Europe, but also in Aranjuez; she describes the construction of infrastructures and the establishment of an effective administration to ensure the maintenance of the villa; and finally, she addresses a more relaxed side of this project by tackling the leisure and recreational facilities created by the monarch.

Following the classical division of Art History, the book is split into two parts: one based on the idea, the second based on the form. Romero's concern with the conservation of the Aranjuez landscape is emphasised in the first part of the book, as she traces its evolution from an agrarian estate to its use as a recreational retreat, and, furthermore, as a cultural landscape. In the second part, Romero explores less usual categories, such as 'administration', 'public good', 'hydraulic systems' and 'navigation', thus enlarging the book's scope – although not as much as one would have expected.

Aranjuez was the mirror of the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century, showing the deep entanglement between the king's ambitions for his villa and for his empire. The king's political ideas translated equally in the empire's administration and in the set-up of the villa's management. Moreover, Philippe II implemented a complex hydraulic system fostered to control the rivers' flows, and a network of *acequias*, channels, and reservoirs that secured the water supply during the dry season and the irrigation of gardens and tree lined plantations along great avenues.

As research is an endless inquiry, and stemming from Romero's work, Ana Luengo Añón (2008) returned to Aranjuez with the ambition of setting it in the broader European cultural context as an outstanding Renaissance garden. Under the umbrella of 'Utopía

y realidad', Romero looks into the projects to build an extensive network of channels, whereas Añón, using the same title, settles the argument for the whole book.

None of the books fully placed Aranjuez in its right place. Romero described the path to UNESCO's classification and Añón inscribed Philippe's villa in the Renaissance culture. None of them accessed Aranjuez as a model/source of inspiration for Versailles.

The rivalry between the Spanish and the French empires has always been addressed through a political perspective, and Aranjuez brings new insights on their competition in what concerns the art of gardens and technology matters. Some of the topics associated with Le Nôtre's signature can already be observed in Aranjuez. The great avenues in Aranjuez's landscape were ripped long before Le Nôtre's plan for Versailles. The design of a semi-circle evoking the sun can already be observed when entering Picotajo, in Aranjuez.

Moreover, the first treatise on the art of gardens written in the Iberian Peninsula was precisely written by a priest dedicated to gardening at Aranjuez. Gregorio de los Rios' *Agricultura di jardines* (1592) stands as inescapable evidence of the Iberian botanical and horticultural development. The book shows the existing expertise on the cultivation of orange trees (the only fruit trees considered as acceptable in gardens due to their beauty and perfume), at a time when oranges were seen as exotics in the rest of Europe (except in South Italy). It also offers hints on the acclimatization of exotic flowers and plants arriving from the New World and Asia.

Even if Aranjuez is not regarded as compelling enough to establish a comparison with its French counterpart, it cannot be disregarded that the Juanelo Torriano's machine built in Toledo, was the only machine of that type built in Europe before Marly's machine, designed to bring water from the river Senna to the water games of Louis XIV.

Although Romero does not offer a new and innovative theoretical perspective on the art of gardens, both the account of the construction of Aranjuez and the

description of the basis for its worldwide acknowledgment as a cultural landscape heritage should make this book of interest to anyone who is curious about the intricacies of the history of the early modern European art of gardens history and the history of technology. Aranjuez must gain prominence in international historiography.