

Miguel de Cervantes: de la vida al mito (1616-2016)

Biblioteca Nacional de España (Madrid)

4 March–22 May 2016

The [exhibition](#) has been put together jointly by Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE) and Acción Cultural Española (AC/E) within the framework of a programme of activities held throughout the year to commemorate the fourth centenary of Cervantes's death. The focus on the prominent author encompasses a three-folded perspective. The man, the personage and the myth are presented with the purpose of providing the spectator with a global vision of the impact of his legacy in the Western World, where his imperishable memory remains associated to the culture of Spain. The concept spreads out an impressive gathering of documents, books, sculptures, photographs, oil paintings, and other artifacts related to the genius. Many pieces come from the holdings of the national library, the main document centre on Hispanic written, graphic and audio-visual heritage. The collection includes other objects granted by most important international archives and institutions – Archivo General de Simancas, Archivo Histórico Nacional, Archivo General de Indias, Real Academia Española, Museo del Prado, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF) and British Museum, amongst others.

Entering the exhibit room the audience is welcomed by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra himself, who introduces the structural axes of the experimental experience. The prelude space opens by placing the figure, of noble origin but impoverished – he was a *hidalgo* –, his military and political career at the very heart of the Monarquía Hispánica and his literature in the context of the Golden Age. The visitor gets spontaneously a sense of who the man of letters was when discerning between real and false autographs, researching into administrative files or studying the first works, his novelistic and theatrical production or the last imprints. The successive sections make the viewer privy to the soldier and the captive, the collector of ballads and the traveler, while paying attention to substantial matters – the genres which he cultivated, his relation with contemporaries, or the rapprochement to religious orders. As it is widely known, Cervantes did not get in life the recognition which he deserved as the best writer of all time in the Spanish language. Unfortunately, he passed by alone and was buried anonymously. Further, the carefully delineated itinerary gives insight to the Battle of Lepanto, the captivity in Argel, and the different stages on which the events of his existence took place, such as Valladolid or Madrid. The centerpieces are allegedly the

certificate of baptism lent by the City Council of Alcalá de Henares and a *libro de difuntos* [book of the deceased] loaned by the Convent of Barefoot Trinitarians. Of course, a privileged interest is addressed to the Quixote – how could it be otherwise.

The wonderful and suggestive materials show, to end the route, the symbolic construction of a complex and multifaceted personality. We can witness to a rich variety of portraits representing the author – judged veritable from the description he made of himself in the *Novelas Ejemplares* in 1613. Engravings in the English editions of the *magnum opus* of 1738 recall that England was a pioneer to acknowledge his mastery, publishing a biography written by Gregorio Mayans y Siscar, a major representative of the first Enlightenment in Spain – together with Benito Jerónimo Feijoo. Later, the Hispano-Moroccan War (1859-1960) and the Crisis of 1898 would contribute crucially to turn Cervantes and his creation, *Don Quijote*, into lasting and enduring representations of Spain. Last but not least, we are still invited to investigate the material presence of this giant of the art of writing in Madrid, embodied in the statue erected in front of the Congress of Deputies in 1835 and the monument raised in Plaza de España in 1929.

While the beauty and merit of this exhibit lies probably in the pertinent selection and exquisite execution what makes it particularly valuable is the delicate and refined curating, blossoming in a flowing journey on the life and works of Cervantes. Notwithstanding, a more risky and innovative approach going beyond the conventional manners of central agencies would have surely been highly appreciated not only by scholars but also by the general public.

Ramón Bárcena Colina
Universidad de Cantabria