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José Eugenio de Olavide Landazábal: Photographs and Lithographs[☆]



José Eugenio de Olavide Landazábal: fotografías y litografías

To the Editor:

In their recently published article in *Actas Dermo-Sifiliográficas*, Conde-Salazar et al¹ pose the question of whether José Eugenio de Olavide Landazábal (1836–1901) is the person depicted on “Plate IV in the section on spontaneous local skin diseases or deformities,”[†] an illustration that is captioned “disseminated canities” (*canicie diseminada*) in Dr Olavide’s own *Atlas of Clinical Images of the Skin and Skin Diseases*.²

The authors reach the conclusion that this portrait, painted and reproduced as a color lithograph by José Acevedo (fl 1850–1905), is indeed of the author of the *Atlas*. As evidence of their “discovery” of an image of Olavide, they compare it with several known portraits of him. They also point to his signature on the illustration in numerous copies of the *Atlas*.

In addition, they show the results of superimposing a digitized version of the illustration onto a digitized photograph published on page 12 of the Barcelona magazine *Iris* on March 16, 1901, stating that the photographer is “unknown”

(*anónimo*). The authors point out the similarity between the clothing shown in the photograph and the illustration, stating, “We can say almost certainly that the portrait carefully drawn and reproduced by José Acevedo for the *Atlas* was based on this photograph of Olavide.”

In their conclusion Conde-Salazar et al¹ note that placing an author’s portrait on one of the opening pages of a book was not unusual in this period. What they find striking about this “apparent portrait,” is that it appears in the middle of Olavide’s work, presenting the author as just one patient among others.

We agree that the illustration depicts Dr Olavide and that it was based on the photograph published in *Iris*. The lithograph is not presented as a realistic portrait, however, but rather as an artist’s interpretation to justify its inclusion in the *Atlas* as an illustration of a so-called disease — even though canities is not a diagnosis as such. The aim of presenting himself as just another patient explains why the author chose to insert a color plate in the middle of the volume, in one of the sections on disease categories, rather than place a photograph at the beginning.

This story was widely known in Olavide’s time, and the fact that it was nearly forgotten shows how little attention is paid to the history of dermatology in Spain. Apart from traces left in oral tradition, there are simple ways to confirm the veracity of the story and, in the process, expand on our knowledge of Olavide.

The photograph referred to by Conde Salazar et al¹ appeared in *Iris* in the context of an obituary³ whose text reads as follows: “Dr Olavide left a monumental work, his *Iconographic treatise* on skin diseases, with its magnificent color illustrations showing the innumerable signs of diseases in patients. Unusually, a portrait of the author appears in the section on canities, by which means the distinguished dermatologist chose to present himself as an example of a patient, even though he only suffered the mild condition of graying hair.”

The quality of the photograph reproduced in *Iris* is poor, but at least one original print has been preserved. It is one of the best images — if not the best — we have of Dr Olavide (Fig. 1).

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[†] Translator’s note: The texts in quotes in this paragraph and any others that come from the article being discussed (Conde-Salazar et al¹) were taken from the open-access English version of that article (DOI: 10.1016/j.adengl.2019.09.001). However, the quote in the seventh paragraph, from reference 3, is from this translator; in it, Olavide’s *Atlas* is referred to as his iconographic treatise, shown in this translation in italics and with a capital letter as in the original.



Figure 1 Photograph of José Eugenio de Olavide Landazábal. Reproduced with the permission of Spain's national library (Biblioteca Nacional de España).

The photographer who took the picture, Eusebio Juliá y García-Núñez (1826–1895), was very well known and active in Madrid between 1855 and 1881. The original, which was acquired by Spain's national library (Biblioteca Nacional de España) in 1997, is an albumen silver print in the form of an oval measuring 69 × 54 mm on a typical visiting card of the period.^{4,5} It is dated between 1879 and 1881.

It is important to remember that although Olavide's *Atlas* bears the publication date of 1873, the illustrations were produced in installments that appeared until 1880 or 1881; thus the dates of the photograph and the *Atlas* are consistent.^{6,7}

We applaud the efforts of dermatologists who are bringing the neglected history of Spanish dermatology to the

forefront once again, and we encourage them to recover the wealth of documentary and illustrative material at risk of being lost.

We mention in passing that the plate that follows the portrait of Olavide in the *Atlas* and that shares its special features — the oval format typical of portraits of the time, a figure dressed in elegant apparel, etc, and the lack of an accompanying case history in the text — is a portrait of Eusebio Castelo Serra (1825–1892). But as Kipling would say, that is another story.

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