

MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN & DAUGHTERS WOMEN OF ART AND SCIENCE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Maria Sibylla Merian
Branch of a guava tree with pink-toed tarantulas, leaf cutter ants, huntsman spiders, and hummingbird from Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium, 1719.
Hand colored transfer print.
Research Library,
The Getty Research Institute.

GETTY HOSTS FIRST MAJOR U.S. EXHIBITION OF
MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN,
SHOWCASING HER NATURAL HISTORY ILLUSTRATIONS
ALONGSIDE THE ACTUAL INSECT SPECIMENS
THAT INSPIRED THEM

Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center,
June 10 – August 31, 2008

"So I was goaded to undertake a huge and costly trip, traveling to Suriname in America, a hot and humid land where swarms of insects are there for the capture."

-Maria Sibylla Merian

LOS ANGELES—In the 17th century, when insects were called "beasts of the devil," and women were virtually excluded from the field of science, a young German woman named Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) dedicated her life to the study and depiction of the metamorphosis of insects. Merian's extraordinary accomplishments in art and science and those of her most important pupils—her daughters Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria—will be on view in *Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science* at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, June 10 – August 31, 2008, the first major exhibition of Merian's work in America.

The exhibition will explore various aspects of Merian's career, including her hand-colored publications on flowers and insects, her successful business venture in Amsterdam as a specimen-supplier for the collectors and naturalists, and her extraordinary journey to Suriname and the scientific discoveries that resulted. Specimens of actual insects, including the large *Blue Morpho* butterfly, will be included in the exhibition alongside Merian's renderings—providing a rare opportunity for scholars, nature lovers, and families to experience European and exotic insects first hand.

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Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717)

Born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1647 into a family of artists and scholarly printers, Maria Sibylla was exposed to natural history publications at a young age. After her father's death, her mother married the still-life painter Jacob Marrel, who trained her as a flower painter. At the age of 13, Merian painted the transformation of silkworms into moths. This was the beginning of her passionate, first hand observation of insect metamorphosis that eventually led to her groundbreaking discoveries—she was among the first to depict caterpillars, chrysalises, and butterflies in conjunction with the specific plants upon which they fed.

In 1665, she married, and later gave birth to two daughters, Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria. After moving to Nuremberg, Merian continued her work studying the life cycle of caterpillars in the gardens of wealthy citizens. Merian's first publication, the *New Book of Flowers* (1675-80), a modelbook for embroidery and other handicrafts, conveys her ability to masterfully combine her background in publishing and flower painting. In her second publication, *Caterpillars: their Wondrous Transformation and Peculiar Nourishment from Flowers* (1679-1683), Merian presented the various stages of different species' development along with the plants they consumed.

In 1686, she moved to a pietistic religious community in Friesland (the Netherlands) with her mother and daughters, leaving behind her husband—whom she ultimately divorced in the 1690s. While living in Friesland, she resided in the home of the governor of the Dutch colony of Suriname, where she studied South American tropical specimens. After the financial collapse of the community in 1691, she moved to Amsterdam and her work attracted international attention of scholars and collectors. In 1699, Merian sold most of her belongings in order to travel to Suriname with her younger daughter, Dorothea Maria. They remained in Suriname for nearly two years—collecting specimens and making watercolors of the exotic animals and plants—before poor health forced her to return to the Netherlands. Upon returning, she sold specimens and spent nearly four years preparing the publication of her magnum opus *The Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname* (1705-1730).

Merian's work left an indelible impact on the field of entomology. Her meticulous illustrations of caterpillars' life cycles and feeding patterns accompanied by a concise text helped disprove the commonly held belief that insects reproduced by spontaneous generation of decaying matter such as old meat and rotten fruit. Her Suriname Book contains some of the most stupendous and colorful images of nature ever created.

Merian & Daughters

The exhibition at the Getty Center includes 80 objects, including 28 books and 52 framed watercolors, most of which are international loans. The exhibition gives an overview of natural history illustration by Merian's predecessors in Germany and the Netherlands in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries—addressing natural history in relation to the then popular cabinet of curiosities and exploring notions of art competing with nature. Highlights from the Getty's drawings collection of early depictions of flora and fauna, including watercolors by Martin Schongauer, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Hoffmann, Jan van Kessel, and Joris Hoefnagel, will be on view, as well an early work by Merian herself.

Still-life watercolors by Merian's stepfather and teacher, Jacob Marrell, will be juxtaposed with Merian's early work, including her *New Book of Flowers*. Various editions of *Caterpillars, their Wondrous Transformation and Peculiar Nourishment from Flowers* (the *Caterpillar Book*) showcase Merian's remarkable ability to carefully observe the metamorphosis of European caterpillars and meticulously render these transformations. Compared to her contemporaries who also studied metamorphosis, Merian is acclaimed for her unique inclusion of the caterpillars' food source and her more ecological approach to their habit as a whole. Her artistic and entrepreneurial endeavors were continued by her daughters Johanna Helena and Dorothea Maria. After Merian's death in 1717, Dorothea published a third volume of the *Caterpillar Book*, adding 50 more illustrations based on her mother's discoveries. Johanna Helena's watercolors reveal that she was expertly trained in her mother's craft and developed her own career as a botanical illustrator.

The exhibition will explore Merian's life in Suriname and her depictions and firsthand accounts of large, vibrant butterflies, voracious caterpillars and ants, exotic fruits and vegetables, menacing crocodiles and snakes, and treacherous explorations into the tropical jungle. It will also encompass broader environmental and cultural observations about the fetid climate, the local uses of flora and fauna for food, shelter, and medicine, and the issue of slavery. In addition to her prized *Studybook* from St. Petersburg, in which she recorded her observations about insect metamorphosis, many watercolors related to Merian's publication on Suriname will be on display as well as three different editions of her *Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname*.

An exciting aspect of the exhibition will be its interactive component, including a table in the gallery for drawing activities and touch screen monitors that will allow visitors to virtually "turn the pages" of some of the books on view. In addition, the exhibition's Family Activity Guide invites parents and kids to discover caterpillars, beetles, and moths in Merian's watercolors

and books. Special public programs will accompany the exhibition, including gallery talks, an artist demonstration by the world famous botanical illustrator, Jenny Phillips, a lecture by Kim Todd, the author of the recent, acclaimed biography of Merian, garden tours highlighting the plants and flowers in the Getty's Central Garden that relate to the exhibition, two Family Festivals, and Family Drawing Hour (an on-going program led by a professional gallery teacher, which gives families an opportunity to examine works of art in greater depth).

Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters: Women of Art and Science has been organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Museum Het Rembrandthuis, and was supported by the Netherlands Culture Fund of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The exhibition premiered in February 2008 at the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam before traveling to the Getty—the only U.S. venue—to be on view June 10 through August 31, 2008. *Maria Sibylla Merian & Daughters* is curated by Dutch art historian Ella Reitsma and the Getty's presentation by Stephanie Schrader, assistant curator of drawings. The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color companion book co-published by the Rembrandthuis, Waanders Publishers, and the Getty, written by Ella Reitsma. In addition, the Getty has published a delightful gift book (52 pages), which reproduces details of 22 plates from a second edition copy of the *Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname*, held by the Getty Research Institute's Special Collections. It is a vibrant encapsulation of Merian's imagery and includes an afterword on Merian's life and work.

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