



Introduction

The selection of Maria Sibylla Merian's work depicted here shows the wide diversity of natural life that she studied, recording and depicting it with great care. In her own words, in her work "studies of caterpillars, worms, and maggots are depicted, showing how they change in colour and form when they shed their skins and finally change into butterflies, moths, beetles, bees, and flies. All these little creatures were placed on the plants, flowers, and fruit which they ate for nourishment; I have also included here species of West Indian spiders, ants, snakes, lizards, rare toads, and frogs, all of which I myself sketched and observed from life, with the exception of a few..." (from M S Merian and S O'Brien-Twohig, *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium* (or, Transformations of Surinamese insects), *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, Vol.45, No.1, pp.22–23, 2012).

Merian's illustrations of flowering plants, with insects at various stages of their life cycle depicted feeding and resting on plants (Figures 1, 2 and 3) were more realistic and a departure from the style of other illustrators of her times, who tended to depict insects in more static arrangements, disassociated from the plants on which they fed. In this, she was a pioneer who recognized the importance of plant–animal interactions between specific insects and host plants. She drew flowers with such attention to detail that they are instantly recognizable, centuries later (Figure 4). Studies of her insect illustrations by contemporary taxonomists indicate that many of them can be identified to the genus and species level, centuries later, a testament to the accuracy of her portrayal (in addition to the unquestioned beauty and artistic calibre of her illustrations).

Merian drew insects feeding on exotic tropical fruits such as bananas, pineapples and guavas (Figures 5, 6 and 7, respectively), exciting substantial attention from Europeans not just interested in the insects, but also in these economically important plant species. She was as keen an observer of aquatic life as she was of tropical and temperate terrestrial plants, as Figure 8 demonstrates, with its careful depiction of a water scorpion, a water hyacinth, and a frog, with its eggs at the base of the water plant, or Figure 9 with a coral snake and crocodile, or Figure 10, with its careful depiction of an incredible variety of seashells.

Harini Nagendra

Email: harini.nagendra@apu.edu.in



Illustrating Nature

by Maria Sibylla Merian



Figure 1. A parrot tulip, auriculas, and red currants, with a magpie moth, its caterpillar and pupa.



CLASSICS



Figure 2. From *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, Plate XLVIII.



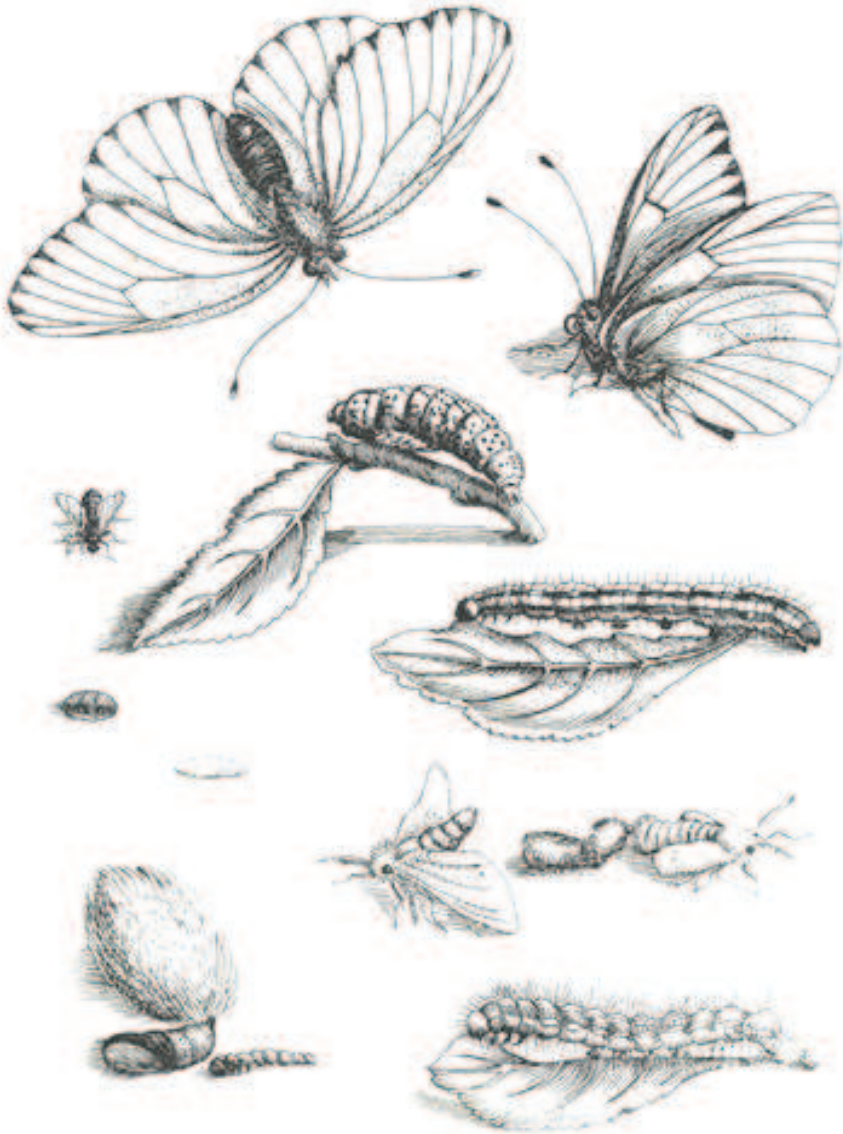


Figure 3. Plate LXXXV, from *Erucarum Ortus Alimentum et Paradoxa Metamorphosis* (1679–1717).



CLASSICS



Figure 4. Tulips.





Figure 5. Inflorescence of banana.



CLASSICS



Figure 6. Pineapple and cockroaches.



CLASSICS



Figure 8. Water scorpion , frogs, tadpoles and water hyacinth.



CLASSICS



Figure 9. Spectacled caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) and a false coral snake (*Anilius scytale*).



Figure 10. Seashells.

