Art Forms in Nature

This is an unusual Classics, as we are reproducing here, not Ernst Haeckel’s writings but his illustrations of the biological world instead. Haeckel was not only a biologist par excellence but also an accomplished artist with outstanding power of observation and a passion for Nature. *Kunstformen der Natur* (*Art Forms in Nature*) is a marvellous collection of biological illustrations, in which Haeckel highlighted the diversity, geometry, and beauty of the living world. The *Kunstformen* consists of 100 lithographic and halftone prints based on Haeckel’s sketches and watercolours, which were often created on the spot during his field trips. Many of the organisms were also first described by Haeckel himself. The book has organisms ranging from radiolarians, foraminiferans, and flagellates to diatoms, red algae, fungi, sponges, corals, jellyfish, siphonophores, brittlestars, spiders, boxfish, hummingbirds, and antelope. The emphasis is not so much on taxonomy (which Haeckel has contributed to elsewhere, see General Article on Haeckel in this issue), but on symmetry, shape, and texture. As one goes through the pages of the *Kunstformen* (full book available at http://caliban.mpiz-koeln.mpg.de/haeckel/kunstformen/Haeckel_Kunstformen.pdf and at https://archive.org/details/ArtFormsOfNatureByErnstHaeckl/page/n1 and plates available at various sites), the diversity of shapes and forms is striking. Ethereally floating, beautifully coloured jellyfish and siphonophores provide a striking contrast to the spiny spicules of corals and rigid spirals of ammonites detailed in black and white. Radiolarians and foraminiferans are rendered in almost unbelievably intricate detail – their fine structures have been subsequently confirmed with the use of electron microscopy. Many plates offer views of organisms from various angles, illustrating symmetry of form and some anatomical details. The emphasis on form and geometry and contrasts of delicate details and sharp edges leave one marvelling at Nature itself and Haeckel’s visualisation of it. Haeckel’s tendency to idealise Nature is evident in some plates and this style of almost surreal depiction has had a strong emotional appeal to artists and is thought to be a forerunner of the Art Nouveau movement.

I hope you will enjoy the selection of plates from the *Kunstformen* reproduced here and are inspired to visit the complete book.

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Kunstformen der Natur (Art Forms in Nature), Haeckel 1904. Published in installments of 10 plates between 1899 and 1904.

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