



Maria Sibylla Merian: Insects of Surinam

Katharina Schmidt-Loske

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At a time when few women were educated or literate and rarely travelled German-born naturalist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) made history with her studies of insects in Surinam. Trained as a copperplate engraver and watercolorist, she documented the metamorphosis of butterflies, laying the foundation for modern entomology. What Merian observed when breeding native species of butterfly triggered her curiosity, and spurred her to further investigation; the development from ovum, via larva and chrysalis, to adult butterfly was not fully understood in the 17th century. And not every pupa developed into a butterfly, which puzzled Merian for a long time.

On seeing a collection of butterflies from Dutch Guiana, modern Surinam, she decided to study tropical flora and fauna, to discover whether the moths and butterflies she saw in collections shared the same life cycle as those she had bred: the egg and caterpillar stage. In 1699 she sailed for South America with daughter Dorothea, the first time any woman had ventured on a journey of exploration on this scale. Having evaluated and categorized her specimens, in 1705 she published her major work *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, in Dutch and Latin. She made 60 copperplate engravings to illustrate the stages of insect development, arranged around the cultivated and wild plants she had encountered on her travels. With its detailed text and imagery, the *Metamorphosis* is the first work on the natural history of Surinam. For 17th century Europeans it was an insight into an unknown world. TASCHEN's reprint of a hand-colored first edition copy includes the complete plates with a commentary by Katharina Schmidt-Loske. Merian accomplished a pioneering achievement of the modern age. This publication pays homage to her work and offers readers an opportunity to appreciate her sumptuous engravings.

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