

Botany_Science

MARIA SYBILLA MERIAN

Naturalist, scientific illustrator



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Frankfurt am Main, 2 April 1647

Amsterdam, 13 January 1717

One morning, a magnificent flower had bloomed in the neighbour's garden. Maria Sibylla had never seen one like it; the mottled, fleshy petals looked like the head of a princess; they stood on a straight, sturdy stem while the deep green leaves fell in an elegant pose. Sure that no one was watching, Maria went into the garden, picked up the tulip and immediately rushed into the house, grabbed her watercolours and started to make a portrait of it, minutely depicting every detail. Maria was curious and passionate not only about flowers but also about insects.

One day, she had turned thirteen, and she found a caterpillar during a walk. As with the tulip, she took it home, not only drew it but wanted to see what happened to that magnificent creature, which everyone believed to be magical and perhaps evil because it could transform itself.

Maria Sibylla Merian began to depict the metamorphosis of insects. Her plates showed beautiful flowers, and on them, insects in their stages from caterpillar, pupa and then butterfly, lying on the stem or the leaves or buds as if the plant were the home of that changing and changing family.

Maria lived in Frankfurt in a family of artists; she was also a talented artist who had learnt by observing and studying even though the 17th century was not particularly open to women. As an adult, she married a painter and had two daughters, but her passion for insects and plants did not abandon her. Her ability to represent them was extraordinary. Maria painted in an almost "photographic" faithful manner, and her books were a great success, but not among scientists because the captions were written in German instead of Latin. Maria Sibylla then decided to study Latin, becoming a cultured, independent and talented woman... and a cumbersome one for her husband, who was jealous of her success. Maria left him and moved with her daughters to Amsterdam. She was over fifty years old, but her desire to study and deepen had not diminished, so she decided to leave and travel to the other side of the world, a long and perilous journey. On 10 July 1699, with her daughter Dorothea, she set sail for Surinam. There, helped by the population, they captured and studied frogs and insects of all shapes and sizes. Maria represented them in marvellous and innovative boards in the act of flying, jumping or eating each other, as if they were snapshots of those creatures' lives. Her incredible work became the basis for other scientists, first and foremost Linnaeus, who used it for his cataloguing.