




Fall 2017

Butterflies and Rebirth

Meredith E. Brown '21, Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wonders_exhibit

 Part of the [Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons](#), [Industrial and Product Design Commons](#), and the [Intellectual History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Brown, Meredith E., "Butterflies and Rebirth" (2017). *Wonders of Nature and Artifice*. 18.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wonders_exhibit/18

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wonders_exhibit/18

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Butterflies and Rebirth

Abstract

During the Renaissance, collectors saw *Morpho* butterflies as beautiful, elegant, and rare creatures. Their exotic origin and sophistication made these fascinating creatures the subjects of scientific observation, decoration, and symbolism. Butterflies of the *Morpho* genus include a wide variety of marvelous, striking, and beautiful species. Home to South and Central America, *Morpho* butterflies thrive in the rainforests of Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela. When Renaissance Europeans began exploring American rainforests, they were quickly captivated by these butterflies. *Morphos* feature vivid blue coloration and iridescence on the dorsal side of their wings as well as a yellow-brown coloration on the other side. [excerpt]

Keywords

Morpho butterflies, Maria Sibylla Merian, James Petiver, Egypt

Disciplines

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/morpho-butterflies/>

Audio guides on the Morpho butterflies and Maria Sibylla Merian included.

Butterflies and Rebirth

By Meredith Elaine Brown

During the Renaissance, collectors saw *Morpho* butterflies as beautiful, elegant, and rare creatures. Their exotic origin and sophistication made these fascinating creatures the subjects of scientific observation, decoration, and symbolism.



Morpho butterfly wings have vibrant dorsal coloration, while the reverse side features brown camouflage. 16.5 in x 8.25 in x 1.5 in, Gettysburg Professor Kay Etheridge

Butterflies of the *Morpho* genus include a wide variety of marvelous, striking, and beautiful species. Home to South and Central America, *Morpho* butterflies thrive in the rainforests of Nicaragua, Colombia, and Venezuela. When Renaissance Europeans began exploring American rainforests, they were quickly captivated by these butterflies. *Morphos* feature vivid blue coloration and iridescence on the dorsal side of their wings as well as a yellow-brown coloration on the other side. Due to upwellings, or winds, from rivers and streams, these butterflies float around in the high canopies of rainforest trees.¹ As these butterflies open and close their wings, the iridescent scales reflect sunlight, creating a fascinating effect for anyone observing from the rainforest floor. But because of their elusive nature, early collectors struggled to obtain *Morpho* specimens, thus making the butterflies rare and under researched. These exotic butterflies were a curious specimen that naturalists and collectors desired deeply. As people began to discover the wide variation of *Morphos*, the butterflies became even more coveted. Naturalists saw *Morphos* as an opportunity to apply scientific classification systems, whereas others saw their diversity as profitable. By offering a wide range of exotic *Morphos*, sellers could appeal to a wider range of buyers and collectors. Today, *Morphos* retain their aesthetic charm but are better understood. One scientific study found that *Morphos* in captivity have low survival rates, possibly because they lack the interaction of a large rainforest ecosystem.² Renaissance collectors probably experienced these high death rates of captive butterflies as well, further limiting their ability to research and observe *Morphos*.

One insect researcher of the Renaissance, [Maria Sibylla Merian](#), contributed greatly to knowledge of tropical butterflies, including *Morphos*. She took an expedition to Surinam of South America to observe plants and insects in their natural habitat. Because Merian went without the incentive of payment and the luxury of European settlements, she embodied the true curiosity of Renaissance naturalists. Merian drew, observed, and cultivated butterflies and later published her findings in the book *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*. Her butterfly images showcased eating habits, life stages, and natural habitats, contrasting the typically ‘perfect’ and symmetrical diagrams of butterflies presented by other Renaissance naturalists. Throughout her book, Merian remarked on the brilliance and rarity of butterflies, explaining that their “beauty cannot be rendered with a paintbrush.” She also noted that *Metamorphosis* is a book for lovers of insects and art, exemplifying the Renaissance interconnection of art and nature.³ [Click here for to view Merian’s book.](#)



Butterfly images by Maria Sibylla Merian often showcased multiple life stages in a natural habitat. From *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*.



Images of butterflies from Merian's *Metamorphosis* book have been used to construct this 3-D model, located in the Gettysburg Cabinet.

Other Renaissance naturalists collected and displayed butterfly specimens as well. James Petiver, an English apothecary and naturalist, placed his butterflies in a book immediately after collecting so that the wing color would not be rubbed off. He then pressed his butterflies between sheets of mica, a transparent mineral, so that both sides of the wings could be studied. In later years, naturalists instead opted to display butterflies in glass boxes with their wings spread open. In both cases, collectors prioritized protecting the specimens. Collectors also considered the aesthetic appeal of butterflies and often displayed them artistically.⁴ The upper-class especially wanted to show off butterflies as art to emphasize their rarity and elegance. Because of their significant visual appeal, butterfly collections often served symbolic rather than scientific purposes.⁵

Emblematic, or symbolic, decorations of butterflies during the Renaissance stem from ancient butterfly art. In ancient Egypt, Tiger butterflies were painted on the temple walls of the Tomb of Nebamun.⁶ These Tiger Butterflies were also featured on other Egyptian tombs, and they were often depicted as disproportionately large. Size was an important factor of Egyptian art, corresponding to an animal's hierarchical importance. By enlarging the butterfly, Egyptians symbolized the high-class of butterflies.⁷ In a similar way, Renaissance collectors displayed butterflies as high-class objects to elevate the elegance and quality of their collections.



Tiger butterflies (near the hunter's elbow) painted on an Egyptian tomb wall. *Tomb of Nebamun*, [The Open University](#).

Ancient Roman symbols also influenced Renaissance interpretations of butterflies. One image of a crab holding an open butterfly appeared on Augustan Roman coins. Renaissance scholars viewed the butterfly on the coin as symbolic of Psyche, the Greek goddess representing the human soul. Other interpretations viewed the butterfly as a symbol of life, immortality, victory over death, and hope (because butterflies are drawn to light). The rebirth of caterpillars into butterflies also represented the rebirth of knowledge in the Renaissance. As a result, Renaissance book makers, such as Paul Frelon, used the image of the crab holding the butterfly as a publishing trademark.⁸



Publishing mark of Paul Frelon, circa early seventeenth century. *Marques typographiques*, [L.C. Silvestre](#).

The historic symbolism of butterflies contributed to the emblematic and aesthetic appeal of butterflies in the Renaissance. However, some naturalists, such as Maria Sibylla Merian and James Petiver, did devote time to observing butterflies in a scientific manner. Whether displayed scientifically, artistically, or symbolically, butterflies were beautiful creatures that captured the imagination of the Renaissance.

The Gettysburg Cabinet displays blue *Morpho* butterflies and a box of additional butterflies, both courtesy of Gettysburg College biology professor Kay Etheridge. These displays represent the

type of exotic and beautiful insects that were collected and showcased during the Renaissance. The Cabinet also features a 3-D display of Merian’s butterfly artwork, constructed to show the life stages of metamorphosis observed by Merian.

1. DeVries, P.J.; Martinez, George Eujens. “The Morphology, Natural History, and Behavior of the Early Stages of *Morpho cypris* (Nymphalidae: Morphinae)-140 Years after Formal Recognition of the Butterfly,” *Journal of the New York Entomological Society* 101, no. 4 (Oct 1993): 515-530.
2. Ibid.
3. Attenborogough, David; Owens, Susan; Clayton, Martin; Alexandratos, Rea, *Amazing Rare Things: The Art of Natural History in the Age of Discovery*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.
4. MacGregor, Arthur. *Curiosity and Enlightenment*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.
5. Ibid.
6. Attenborogough, David; Owens, Susan; Clayton, Martin; Alexandratos, Rea, *Amazing Rare Things: The Art of Natural History in the Age of Discovery*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.
7. Haynes, Dawn. “The Symbolism and Significance of the Butterfly in Ancient Egypt.” M. Phil. Thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2013.
8. Deonna, W. “The Crab and the Butterfly: A Study in Animal Symbolism,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 17, no. 1/2 (1954): 47-86.