

The Morgan Library & Museum Presents

In Her Garden: Women Artists and Patrons in the Natural Sciences, 1650–1800

Tuesday, December 14, 2021, 12–2:30 PM EST, [on Zoom](#)

Kate Heard, Royal Collection, Windsor

“A great naturalist and artist”: The Natural History Illustrations of Maria Sibylla Merian

Maria Sibylla Merian’s (1647–1717) studies of insect metamorphosis have long been the subject of praise and admiration. Particularly renowned is her work on the animals and plants of Suriname, where she undertook pioneering fieldwork from 1699 until 1701. But as innovative as her study of natural history is her work as an artist, who used her skill as a painter to communicate her findings. This paper will examine this dual aspect of Merian’s achievements, showing how she created the beautiful and informative publications that made her name across Europe.

Catherine Powell-Warren, Ghent University

The Bloemenboek as a Meeting Place: Agnes Block’s Collection of Watercolors of Flora and Fauna

Amsterdammer Agnes Block (1629-1704) was an amateur botanist, collector, and patron of the arts. Her collection included more than four hundred watercolors of flowers, plants, and birds, some of which are now in the collection of the Morgan Library & Museum. Block’s watercolors were multivalent: catalogue, record, reminder, study guide. They were also the visual manifestation of an artistic network. Drawing upon the analytical construct of the *album amicorum* of the seventeenth century, this presentation argues that Block’s collection of watercolors functioned as a “meeting place” for artists that included Herman Saftleven, Willem de Heer, Maria Sibylla Merian, Johanna Helena Herolt, and Alida Withoos. Whether collaborating on a watercolor or “visiting” the artworks executed by others, the artists who came to Block’s estate became part of a network of artists and patrons, a network through which they gained access to commissions, knowledge, and sources. In this sense, no document “brings us so close to the experience and ideals” (Reinders 2017) of Block and of the artists that she patronized better than her collection of watercolors.

Joanna Sheers Seidenstein, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge

Women in Nature: Intersections of Gender and Colonial Histories in Early Modern Landscape Representation

In the same years that women like Agneta Block and Maria Sybilla Merian and, less visibly, many people of color, were making enormous contributions to the study of the natural world, landscape representation offered a very different picture of “their place.” Grounded in strands of ecofeminism, this paper explores the depiction of women and of colonized and enslaved individuals in landscape and

garden views as an illuminating context for the practice—and historiography—of natural history drawings.

Natania Meeker, USC Dornsife, Los Angeles

The Lively Plants of Madeleine Françoise Basseporte: Women's Naturalisms in the Eighteenth Century

Madeleine Françoise Basseporte (1701-1780) held the post of *dessinateur du roi* in the Jardin du Roi for almost fifty years, the first (and only) woman to do so. She left behind her many images but scant written records; it is tempting to read her detailed and striking paintings of flowers, fruits, shells, and other objects as speaking for her, but difficult to know what, exactly, these images have to tell us about the woman who created them. In this talk, I will use insights drawn from the young field of critical plant studies to sketch a portrait of the ecosystem that Basseporte inhabited—one that brought together plants and humans, paintings and texts in a network of collaborative and mutualist relationships. I will then take Basseporte's example as an impetus for reflecting on the role of women's naturalisms in eighteenth-century French thought more generally. How did women like Basseporte go about constructing a relationship to nature that was at once satisfying, sustaining, and in certain cases transformative for them and others?

Madeleine Pelling, University of York

The Duchess' Museum: Paper Ecologies and Collaborative Networks at Bulstrode Park

Drawing on works from the Morgan Library collection as well as corresponding archival material, this paper establishes a collaborative triangulation between George Dionysus Ehret (1708–1770), Mary Delany (1700–1788) and Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, 2nd Duchess of Portland (1715–1785), whose estate at Bulstrode Park was home to a vast private museum of natural history specimens and antiquities. The results of their labours – the Duchess' handwritten catalogues, Ehret's anatomical drawings and Delany's watercolour 'mosaicks' – formed part of a wide ranging 'paper museum,' one that augmented the material Portland collection and contributed to prominent eighteenth-century artistic and scientific discourse.