

PRESS RELEASE

MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN AND THE TRADITION OF FLOWER DEPICTION

11 OCTOBER 2017 TO 14 JANUARY 2018

Press preview: Monday, 9 October 2017, 12 noon

Städel Museum, exhibition hall of the Department of Prints and Drawings

Frankfurt am Main, 7 September 2017. Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), a native of Frankfurt, was not only a highly prominent naturalist but also one of the most renowned artists of her time. The year 2017 marks the 300th anniversary of her death. On this occasion, the Städel Museum is presenting the special exhibition “Maria Sibylla Merian and the Tradition of Flower Depiction” from 11 October 2017 to 14 January 2018. The show will acquaint visitors with the fascinating and filigree world of flower and plant depiction in drawings and prints of the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.

Developed in collaboration with the Kupferstichkabinett of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Technische Universität Berlin, the exhibition will feature major works by Maria Sibylla Merian in the context of flower depictions by her forerunners, contemporaries and successors, among them the famous *Hortus Eystettensis* by the pharmacist Basilius Besler (1561–1629) of Nuremberg, ornament engravings by Martin Schongauer (ca. 1445–1491), pharmacopeia of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, plant studies from the circle of Albrecht Dürer, and studies of nature by Georg Flegel (1566–1638) and Joris (Georg) Hoefnagel (1542–1600/01) of the period around 1600. Flower drawings by Bartholomäus Braun will also be on view, as will floral compositions by Barbara Regina Dietzsch (1706–1783) and her circle of the eighteenth century. “Maria Sibylla Merian and the Tradition of Flower Depiction” will present more than 150 works in all: sheets from the collections of the Städel and the Kupferstichkabinett, but also valuable loans from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Sächsische Landes- und Universitätsbibliothek in Dresden, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin and the Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg in Frankfurt.

The exhibition “Maria Sibylla Merian and the Tradition of Flower Depiction” is being sponsored by the Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain.

“Maria Sibylla Merian is one of Frankfurt am Main’s most famous daughters. It was here that she received her professional training, and here that decisive foundations

**Städelsches Kunstinstitut
und Städtische Galerie**

Dürerstraße 2
60596 Frankfurt am Main
Telephone +49(0)69-605098-170
Fax +49(0)69-605098-111
presse@staedelmuseum.de
www.staedelmuseum.de

PRESS DOWNLOADS AT
www.staedelmuseum.de

PRESS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS
Axel Braun, head
presse@staedelmuseum.de

Alexandra Hahn, deputy head
Telephone +49(0)69-605098-234
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188
hahn@staedelmuseum.de

Paula Stuckatz
Telephone +49(0)69-605098-268
Fax +49(0)69-605098-188
stuckatz@staedelmuseum.de

were laid for her highly exceptional impact as a natural scientist and an artist. All the more delighted are we to have the opportunity presented us by this anniversary year to mount a comprehensive exhibition on Merian and the tradition of flower portrayal – to which she provided such important impulses – here at the Städel Museum”, comments Städel Museum director Philipp Demandt.

“The œuvre of Maria Sibylla Merian is in a class of its own. This results from the genuine and unresolvable ambiguity that at the same time accounts for the special appeal of her works: artistic and scientific aspects are inseparably intertwined in these depictions, which consistently strike a fine balance between high art and the scientific representation of detail”, adds Martin Sonnabend, head of the Städel Museum’s Department of Prints and Drawings to 1750.

Maria Sibylla Merian

Maria Sibylla Merian is fascinating not only by virtue of her masterfully executed flower drawings, but also in view of her biography, which testifies to her will to assert herself as a woman in a patriarchal society. She was baptized in Frankfurt am Main on 4 April 1647. Her father, the draughtsman, printmaker and publisher Matthäus Merian the Elder (1593–1650), died when she was still a small child. In the workshop of her stepfather, the painter Jacob Marrel (1614–1681), the young Maria Sibylla trained as a flower painter in the seventeenth-century florilegium tradition. One of Georg Flegel’s few pupils, Marrel had come to specialize in flower depiction and was also active as an art dealer. Merian thus spent her youth in an environment that exposed her to the visual arts and the publishing trade, but also – through the practice of painting flowers – to the keen observation of nature. Maria Sibylla Merian grew up in a Calvinist family. This background and the city of Frankfurt were further significant factors in her development. A major European traffic hub, the free imperial city on the Main was one of the continent’s most important commercial centres, at whose trade fairs books, flowers and art – among many other goods – were bought and sold.

In 1665, Merian married Johann Andreas Graff (1636–1701), a pupil of Marrel’s. Shortly after the birth of their first daughter, the family moved to Nuremberg, Graff’s native town. There he sold maps and topographical views of buildings, and Merian also contributed to the family’s living: with flower paintings in the florilegium tradition, lessons for ladies in the embroidery and drawing of flowers, and the sale of drawing utensils and paints. Her first publication, the *New Flower Book*, accordingly contained decorative floral motifs intended for use as models for drawings or patterns for embroidery. She also continued to pursue her observations of nature, and in 1679 published her findings in the first volume of her work *Caterpillars, Their Wondrous Transformation and Peculiar Nourishment from Flowers*. With this book, Maria Sibylla Merian broke new scientific ground: there had never before been such a

comprehensive, carefully documented and complete description of the metamorphosis of caterpillars taking the symbiotic relationship between the insects and their host plants into account. The *Caterpillar Book* not only made Merian famous but was also an economic success. After the death of her stepfather Jacob Marrel, Merian, her husband and their (meanwhile) two daughters moved back to Frankfurt, where her mother still lived, and where she published the second volume of the *Caterpillar Book* in 1683.

Not many years thereafter, Maria Sibylla Merian made the far-reaching decision to join the radically reformed Labadist community in Wiuwert, Holland, along with her two children and her mother. This brought about her separation, and ultimately her divorce, from her husband. After several years in the Labadist community, and following her mother's death, Merian revoked her citizenship of Frankfurt and moved to Amsterdam, where she dealt in paints and painting and drawing utensils and collected and sold preserved animal specimens. At the end of the seventeenth century, accompanied by her younger daughter, she embarked on a journey to the Dutch colony of Suriname in South America – an undertaking as adventurous as it was expensive in those days. The two women's stay in the foreign land, which included numerous expeditions to the rain forest, lasted nearly two years. Merian was thus the first ever to travel the northern South American country for purposes of natural history research, as well as the first woman to devote herself to the study of tropical flora and fauna. In 1705, after her return to Amsterdam, she published her treatise *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* in Latin and Dutch. A third volume of the *Caterpillar Book* came out shortly after her death on 13 January 1717. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), like Merian a native of Frankfurt, dedicated a few brief but fitting lines to her: in his view, her narrative depictions of plants and insects constantly oscillated “back and forth between art and science, between the contemplation of nature and painterly purposes”.

The exhibition

“Maria Sibylla Merian and the Tradition of Flower Depiction” features Merian's artistic predecessors, whose tradition she built on, while also shedding light on what constitutes her independence within that tradition and showing how flower depiction developed after her, and under her influence. The exhibition narrative begins considerably before Merian's own time with a large selection of floral depictions in illuminated books, early prints, engravings, and woodcut illustrations in **herbals and pharmacopoeias** of the fifteenth century. With his early flower portrayals, **Georg Flegel** (1566–1638) continued the pioneering depictive tradition – based on the study of nature – of **Albrecht Dürer** (1471–1528) and circle, developed it further, and influenced his pupil Jacob Marrel, Merian's stepfather. Likewise in Flegel's day, **Joris (Georg) Hoefnagel** (1542–1600/01) – a native of Amsterdam who lived in Frankfurt for a time – produced emblematic flower and insect pictures, which his son **Jacob**

Hoefnagel (1573–1632/35) then went on to publish in delicate engravings, thus making them accessible to a larger circle of artists and other interested persons. The show contrasts Hoefnagels' small-scale artworks with what may have been the most ambitious publication of the time: the ***Hortus Eystettensis*** by the pharmacist Basilius Besler (1561–1629), published in 1613. This book would come to serve as a model for numerous florilegia. With the help of such compendia, garden owners could eternalize the wealth and botanical quality of their flower collections. Particularly in the seventeenth century, gardens and valuable plants were a precious asset, a circumstance to which the florilegia of the period – collections of splendid gouache drawings on vellum or exclusively printed volumes of large-scale coloured engravings – bear witness. Accompanied by two further examples – one with flower portraits by the florilegium painter **Bartholomäus Braun** (ca. 1626–1684) –, the multi-volume **Florilegium of Count Johannes von Nassau-Idstein** (1603–1677) is one of the show's major highlights. A small part of this flower book, which has long been known and has already undergone thorough analysis, is in the holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Two further albums, on the other hand, were only discovered a few years ago in the Städel library, having found their way into its holdings during a mid-nineteenth-century inventory and remained there ever since. The two splendid books, still clad in their original red velvet-covered bindings with fire-gilded fittings, were the first acquisition made for the Städel drawing collection. The exhibition is presenting them to the public – and the accompanying catalogue is publishing them – for the first time. **Maria Sibylla Merian** will hold pride of place in the exhibition with a group of extremely rare early works as well as a number of drawings bearing a direct relation to her scientific publications such as her flower books and the *Caterpillar Book*. New findings will be presented on the making of the precious gouache drawings on vellum for the *Caterpillar Book*. Also on view are several works whose traditional attribution to Maria Sibylla Merian has been questioned or disproved in recent years – an indication of the fact that her œuvre has yet to be treated to comprehensive critical study. After Merian, the show continues with the artistic flower depiction of the eighteenth century, represented by the Dietzsches, an artists' family of Nuremberg whose most prominent member was **Barbara Regina Dietzsch** (1706–1783). Finally, it offers a look ahead to the incorporation of plant depictions in landscape painting as well as the process by which natural history details took on a life of their own in the study sheets of **early German Romanticism**.

“Maria Sibylla Merian and the Tradition of Flower Depiction” is accompanied by an extensive museum education programme ranging from general and evening guided tours and events in the framework of the Städel's “Kunst und Religion”, “Barrierefreies Kunsterlebnis” and “KUNSTKOLLEG” series to studio and school-holiday courses for children. The programme will also feature various events in cooperation with the Frankfurt Palmengarten: “With a calm hand and a practised

eye" in the "KUNSTKOLLEG Aktiv" series (21 October 2017), a guided tour of the Bromeliad House followed by a drawing course taught by the botanical painter Sue Hénon (4 November 2017), a guest commentary with Karin Wittstock, who is in charge of the Palmengarten's cultural programme (19 November 2017), and a guided tour on the topic of "Maria Sibylla Merian and the Flora of Suriname" with Palmengarten custodian Hilke Steinecke (22 November 2017). On Wednesday, 8 November 2017, the Städel Museum will moreover present a reading with Barbara Beuys in the Metzler Hall, at which the author will introduce her biography of the artist Maria Sibylla Merian recently published by the Insel Verlag. For the complete framework programme, see www.staedelmuseum.de. (Most of these events will be in German.)

**MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN
AND THE TRADITION OF FLOWER DEPICTION**

Curators: Dr Martin Sonnabend (Head of the Collection of Prints and Drawings to 1750, Städel Museum), Dr Michael Roth (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett)

Exhibition dates: 11 October 2017 to 14 January 2018

Press preview: Monday, 9 October 2017, 12 noon

Location: Städel Museum, Schaumainkai 63, 60596 Frankfurt am Main

Catalogue: To accompany the exhibition, the Hirmer Verlag has published a catalogue with 256 pages and approx. 178 illustrations, edited by Michael Roth, Magdalena Bushart and Martin Sonnabend with assistance from Catalina Heroven, with a foreword by Heinrich Schulze Altcappenberg and Philipp Demandt. In German. 29.90 euros (museum edition)

Information: www.staedelmuseum.de, info@staedelmuseum.de, telephone +49(0)69-605098-200, fax +49(0)69-605098-112

Visitor services: telephone +49(0)69-605098-232, besucherdienst@staedelmuseum.de

Opening hours: Tue, Wed, Sat, Sun 10 am – 6 pm, Thu + Fri 10 am – 9 pm, closed Mondays

Special opening hours: 31 Oct. 2017, 10 am – 6 pm; 24 Dec. 2017 closed; 25, 26 Dec. 2017, 10 am – 6 pm; 31 Dec. 2017 closed; 1 Jan. 2018, 11 am – 6 pm; 8 Jan. 2018, 10 am – 6 pm

Admission: Tue–Fri: 14 euros, reduced 12 euros; Sat, Sun and holidays: 16 euros, reduced 14 euros; families 24 euros, free admission for children up to twelve years of age. Groups of at least ten persons who would normally be charged the full admission fee: reduced admission per person. Groups are required to book in advance: please call +49(0)69-605098-200 or contact info@staedelmuseum.de

Advance ticket sales online at: tickets.staedelmuseum.de.

General guided tours of the exhibition: Fri 6 pm, Sun 2 pm. The number of participants is limited; no previous reservations necessary.

Accompanying programme (excerpt):

KUNSTKOLLEG Aktiv: "With a calm hand and a practised eye", 21 October 2017, 1 to 5 pm

Maria Sibylla Merian. "Pineapple with Cockroach": drawing course with guided tour in the Palmengarten, 4 November 2017, 1 to 5 pm, Palmengarten Frankfurt

Guest commentary with Karin Wittstock: "Botanical Painting Between Art and Science", 19 November 2017, 12 noon, Städel Museum

“Maria Sibylla Merian and the Flora of Suriname”: guided tour in the Palmengarten with Palmengarten custodian Hilke Steinecke, 22 November 2017, 6 pm

Reading with Barbara Beuys, 8 November 2017, 7 pm (admission from 6.30 pm), Metzler Hall, Städel Museum, admission: 14 euros, reduced 12 euros, tickets available online from mid-September at tickets.staedelmuseum.de

(Most of these events will be in German.)

Social Media: The Städel Museum is communicating the exhibition in the social media with the hashtags #MSMerian and #Staedel.

Sponsored by: Kulturfonds Frankfurt RheinMain