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Maria Sibylla Merian

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**To See for Herself:
Maria Sibylla Merian's Research Journey to Suriname: 1699-1701**

By Catherine Grimm

Maria Sibylla Merian was born on April, 2 1647 in Frankfurt am Main, one year before the signing of the Peace treaties of Westphalia and the end of the Thirty Years War. Her 55 year old father, the famous artist, engraver and publisher Matthäus Merian, died when she was three. About a year after his death, Maria's mother, Johanna Sibylla, remarried the painter and art-dealer Jacob Marrel whose family had moved to Frankfurt from the town of Frankenthal when he was 10, and who also had lived for a number of years in Utrecht, before returning to Frankfurt in 1651. He had been a student of the well-known still life artist Geog Flegel as well as the Dutch painter Jan Davidzs de Heem.¹

From an early age, Merian appears to have been surprisingly adept at pursuing her own interests, without arousing the disapproval of her immediate social environment. This skill would stay with her, even as she grew older and had to deal with prescribed ideas regarding the behavior of women. Concerning this somewhat unusual trait Merian-biographer Natalie Zemon-Davis states:

“We have here not a female mind uneasy with analysis or timelessly connected to the organic [...] but a woman perched for scientific enterprise on a creative margin – for her a buzzing ecosystem – between domestic workshop and learned academy” (Davies 155).

The ability to find and pursue her own way was perhaps also a motivating factor behind the decision, made at various times, to intentionally uproot herself, and move to a new location- first to the Labadist colony in 1685 with her mother and daughters but away from her husband (see Zemon Davis 157) , then to Amsterdam after her mother died in 1690 and then, finally, in

¹ For Merian's biography see Zemon Davis: *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth Century Lives*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995, 140-202, or Wettengl, Kurt: *Maria Sibylla Merian 1647-1717 Künstlerin & Naturforscherin*. Ostfildern-Ruit bei Stuttgart, Gert Hatje, 1997, 38 among others.

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1699 to Suriname with her youngest daughter in order to experience and observe the indigenous insect and plant world for herself.

The area of interest that most strongly arrested her attention when she was young and which continued to hold her interest all through her life, was that of insects in general and caterpillars and butterflies in particular. An initial discovery, namely that some caterpillars developed into more interesting and aesthetically pleasing moths and butterflies than others, is what triggered this life-long interest, and propelled her to begin collecting, feeding and trying to breed as wide a variety of them as she could find. (Merian) The motivation behind her curiosity appears to have been a singular, almost obsessive desire to understand how insects (caterpillars) lived in the natural world, and she went to great lengths, over a very long period of time to gain such knowledge. Merian's remarkable achievements represent, as Sharon Valiant has observed, "the first zoological study and an unprecedented body of work." (Valiant). While this zeal for studying the natural world, brought Merian into contact with others who shared her interests, it also was why, at certain times, she deliberately kept herself apart from the communal world of everyday human interactions. In the introduction to her book on the insects of Suriname Merian describes how the burgeoning passion for studying the life-cycle of caterpillars influenced her personality: "Ich entzog mich deshalb aller menschlichen Gesellschaft und beschäftigte mich mit diesen Untersuchungen." (Merian 7) Kurt Wettengl describes the painstaking, repetitive work, which Merian seems to have embraced unequivocally as:

„empirische Kleinarbeit, die aus verschiedenen Schritten besteht: Merian sammelte zumeist selbst die Insekten, fand durch Beobachtung heraus, von welcher Pflanze sie sich ernährten, beschaffte die Nahrung, züchtete die kleine Tiere in Schachteln, beobachtete

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deren verschiedene Entwicklungsstadien, beschreibe ihren Fundort – also deren Lebensbereich-, ihr Aussehen und Verhalten.“ (22)

Wettengl goes on to emphasize, how her unwavering commitment to this approach allowed her to create her a completely new type of scientific illustration: “Sie [...] schafft aus eigener Beobachtung etwas Neues.” (23) What was new in Merian's works was how she composed her images: instead of depicting only one stage of an insect, she almost always showed them in all the different incarnations of their life cycle, egg, larva, pupa to adult. In addition, Merian liked showing them sitting on a plant that they liked to eat, in order to give viewers a more complete idea of these insects' habits and habitats. As Zemon-Davis has pointed out, Merian was also keenly interested in highlighting the aesthetic nature of her subjects, be they plants, flowers or insects. In this sense one can understand how Merian's artistic sensibility developed from the still-life tradition so many of those in her immediate proximity excelled in (Davies 149).

Wettengl describes Merian's tendency to depict butterflies alongside other insect species, including parasites, as a sign of her fundamental respect for the fact that different groups of insects live alongside each other in the same eco-system, thus making her perspective an “ecological” one. (p.23)

When Merian was 18 she married Johann Andreas Graff, who had been an apprentice painter of her stepfather's. After spending a few more years in Frankfurt they moved to Nürnberg in 1670, along with their two year old daughter, Johanna. It is here that Merian's disciplined work ethic really began to get noticed. An influential compendium of German artists, “*Teutsche Akademie der Edlen-Bau-, Bild und Mahlerey-Künste*,” written by painter and art historian, Joachim von Sandrart, an acquaintance of Merian and her husband and published in 1675 devotes a chapter to both Merian and her husband. While Sandrart's entry on Graff, emphasizes

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his having been drawn to art on account of his diligent and passionate studies of it, the description of Merian's accomplishments, is quite a bit longer, more detailed and much more effusive in its praise. Sandrart ends his account of Merian with a comment that alludes to her uncanny ability to be highly productive yet also not neglectful of her household duties: "und noch heut zu Tage neben dem regulirten guten Haushaltungs-Führung/ immerdar der Göttin Minerva ihre Tugenden in dergleichen aufopfert."² He holds Merian in high regard and is clearly in awe of her many artistic talents. Helmut Deckert speculates that her artistic superiority combined with an independent spirit and a highly disciplined work ethic, were enough to make her husband unable or unwilling to compete with her.³

Even though the first hand evidence is inconclusive on the matter, scholars still point toward Merian's views on religion as one reason why the marriage was not a happy one. In the introduction to her two volume book on caterpillars Merian indicates that one reason she decided to publish her illustrations was that they presented the public with the wonderment of the divine. ("Gottes Wunder"). She continues:

"Suche demnach hierinnen nicht meine, sondern allein Gottes Ehre, Ihn als Schöpfer auch dieser kleinsten und geringsten Würmlein zu preisen; alldieweil solche nicht von ihnen selbst ihren Ursprung haben, sondern von Gott." (Rücker 11)

When contemplated alongside Merian's unwavering focus on and enthusiasm for her work, quotes like the one above indicate what critics have described as her underlying pantheistic tone.

Understanding the central role that this view of the natural world meant for Merian, makes the

² <http://ta.sandrart.net/567>

³ Deckert speculates: Wollte man nach Motiven suchen, die ihre spätere Scheidung erklären, werden sie in dem grundsätzlich verschiedenen Charakter der Ehepartner und ihrer gegensätzlichen Lebens- und Weltanschauung zu finden sein. Graff schein ein etwas bequemer, sinnen- und trunkefreudiger Mensch gewesen zu sein, schnll entflammt und voller Ideen, aber ohne Kraft sie in die Tat umzusetzen. (Das Insektenbuch, 141).

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drastic step that she undertook in 1685 somewhat easier to comprehend: At that time she left her husband in Nürnberg, in order to join a radical group of pietists, the Labadists, named after their recently deceased leader Jean de Labadie.

Before her departure to the pietist community in the Dutch town Wieuwerd, Merian had already moved away from her husband in Nürnberg, to be with her mother in Frankfurt, where Zemon-Davis surmises she fell under the influence of prominent pietist theologian Philip Jacob Spener, who was in Frankfurt at this time working as a pastor. Another consideration is that her half-brother Caspar was also living with the Labadists and it is not inconceivable that he may have encouraged her to come there.

For Merian this move was more than just a change of locale—it was a radical departure from life as she knew it, an indication, that she underwent some sort of spiritual reawakening or conversion experience during this time period. As Zemon-Davis writes:

“It was not just a matter of accepting Jean de Labadie’s teaching that the reign of the great king Jesus Christ was at hand and that Labadie himself was one of its heralds; it was a matter of withdrawing immediately from the violence, pride, and concupiscence of the world and living the life of the regenerate, in full repentance.” (Davies 159)

The move to the property of Waltha at Wieuwerd and into the community of Labadists, did not pose an obstacle to Merian’s scientific studies. On the contrary, it was precisely the interactions that Merian had while living here that helped her form the decision to travel to Suriname. The Sommelsdijk family was one of three shareholders in the newly discovered territory called Suriname, which was “administered as a business enterprise” (Mark Plotkin 78). In 1683 when Cornelius Sommelsdijk became governor, he gave the Labadists some land on the

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Surinam River, which they called "Providence plantation." (Davies) The tropical climate proved to be too much for the colony though and after Sommelsdijk was killed by a mutinous group of own Dutch soldiers in 1688, the Labadists abandoned this outpost. (Holloway) So even while connections to the outside world were limited among the Labadists, these close ties to Surinam meant that Merian was more than likely exposed at Castle Waltha to examples of flora and insects (butterflies in particular) from there, and she probably heard about other collections of natural objects in Amsterdam.

Another component of Merian's budding scientific career, that seems to have fallen into place nicely during her stay with the Labadists, is that while there, she found the time to undertake a radical re-organization of her many illustrations and descriptions. According to Zemon-Davis who has studied the original work, Merian "invented a systematic way to preserve and add to her findings." (Davies 163) This journal, which was discovered in St. Petersburg in the nineteen seventies, provides a comprehensive overview of her illustrations:

Next to each page of journal notes, she placed a watercolor on scrap parchment of the insect life cycle, including everything from eggs to excrement and parasite attacks. [...] Hundreds of tiny masterpieces, all painted from life, fill this scientific document" (Valiant 469)

The fact the Merian decided to create this journal, which began with illustrations she had made when she was only 13, at this place and time in her life, is an indication for Zemon-Davis that it represents Merian's own version of the kind of spiritual autobiography "that a convert would present to a sect to justify entrance" (Davies 164). In 1686, her half brother Casper

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Merian, who had also been living at Waltha, passed away died, and shortly thereafter sources report a final meeting between Merian and her husband, who had travelled to Holland to try and get her to come back with him, but who returned to Nürnberg alone. The couple divorced some years later, and Graff remarried. Merian left the Labadist community with her daughters' in 1690 to go live in Amsterdam, a locale much better suited to her unwavering interest science and illustration.

From Amsterdam to Surinam

In a similar way to what happened after her arrival in the new city of Nürnberg, after resettling Amsterdam, Merian's industrious nature meant she fell quickly back into a demanding routine of research, taking on pupils and making herself known to influential people who shared her interests. Her oldest daughter, Johanna Helena married Jacob Hendrik Holt, who, according to Zemon-Davis "putting the economy of his Labadist days behind him, plunged into the Dutch trade with the West Indies and Suriname." (Davies 166). Merian became acquainted with a number of influential people including Caspar Commelin, the director of the Botanical Gardens, Agnes Block, a well connected breeder of rare plants, the anatomist Frederick Ruysch, whose famous anatomical collection she visited, as well as Nicolas Witsen, president of the East India Company and the mayor of Amsterdam, and another owner of a large collection of insect specimens, many from the East and West Indies. In the introduction to the Suriname work Merian describes how looking at the collections affected her:

In jenen Sammlungen habe ich diese und zahllose andere Insekten gefunden, aber so, daß dort ihr Ursprung und ihre Fortpflanzung fehlten, das heißt, wie sie sich aus Raupen in

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Puppen uns so weiter verwandeln. Das alles hat mich angeregt, eine große und teure Reise zu unternehmen und nach Surinam zu fahren (ein heißes und feuchtes Land, woher die vorgenannten Herren diese Insekten erhalten haben), um dort meine Beobachtungen fortzusetzen.“ (Merian 8)

Merian's interest in caterpillars hinged on the processes of metamorphosis that these insects underwent. She was always most interested in what Zemon-Davis has called the “interconnected process of change” (Davies 149). Reading the above quote, one can well imagine how Merian's adventurous and intensely curious disposition would have been sparked into action. Consequently she began planning the long and not at all safe journey to Suriname. In June 1699 she traveled to Suriname with her younger daughter Dorothea Maria where she stayed until June of 1701. Mother and daughter lived in the main city of Paramaribo, but also at times went on excursions into mostly undeveloped interior. Zemon-Davis speculates that Merian either bought or was given a few slaves, of which there was one Amerindian man and woman. While traveling to the interior (up the Surinam river) Merian took insect chrysalises and cocoons with her, which were “watched for metamorphoses”. (Davies 176) She stayed for a time as a houseguest on the plantation “Providentia” which is where the Labadists had started (and consequently abandoned) their colony some years earlier.

The Surinam book, with its illustrations of the exotic plant and insect world to be found there, has always been at the center of attention when contemplating Merian's achievements.⁴

Recently attention has focused on what Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff has termed Merian's

⁴ Heidrun Ludwig in her contribution to the Wettengl anthology, makes what seems to me a valid and useful distinction between Merian's „Hauptwerk“, i.e. the Suriname book and her “Lebenswerk” namely the *Raupenbuch*, she worked on basically throughout her whole life. (Ludwig)

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colonizing viewpoint/glance. As she points out the male colonizing view liked to cast these new and remote parts of the planet, as virginal, innocent and pristine. (Wettengl 203). The colonizer appears and adopts the tone and manner of someone who cannot help but attempt to dominate this new space:

Der unbekante Raum wird als ein weiblicher Körper phantasiert, den die männlichen Entdecker begehren, erobern, genießen, vergewaltigen, penetrieren und unterwerfen.
(Wettengl 203)

It comes as no surprise that Merian's approach is quite different. In the introduction she frames the expedition as the natural next step necessary in order for her to satisfy her scientific curiosity regarding habitat and origin of the "beautiful animals" she had seen examples of in the collections of wealthy Amsterdammers. (Merian 8) Because she was one of the few Europeans in the Surinam who was not in some way connected to the thriving sugar trade ("sugar was then the colony's only export and its obsession" (Davies 173)), and perhaps also because she was a woman, she was able to gain valuable insights from the workers and slaves about what they knew of the insects, as well as how they prepared the various, foreign-looking plants and fruits. In this sense the book really was conceived of as an educative introduction to the unfamiliar plants, insects and fruits of the New World. Merian often includes comments regarding how a particular fruit is prepared or eaten and she also frequently includes nuanced observations regarding a particular fruit's taste, texture and shape:

"Der Zweig ist von einem Baum, der in Westindien nach seiner Form Sachelanone (Sauersack) genannt wird. Die grünen Blätter sind schöner als Zitronenblätter. Die Blüte

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ist gelblichgrün und hat dicke Blätter. Die Frucht ähnelt den Melonen. Sie schmeckt säuerlich wie Weintrauben. Sie hat eine harte Schale. Das Fleisch ist weiß, weich und von sehr angenehmem Geschmack. Man kann sie gekocht oder ungekocht essen. Die man kochen will, läßt man nicht reif werden. Man kocht sie mit ein wenig Wasser und Zucker; so ist es ein gutes Essen. Auf den Barbados wird auch Wein aus dieser Frucht gepreßt“
(Merian 36)⁵

Merian and her daughter had to return to Europe sooner than she had planned, because of illness. In a letter to a German doctor, Johann Georg Volkammer, written after returning to Holland and convalescing, Merian describes the illustrations she is drawing, (her preferred material for her works being vellum-“bergament” as she calls it) and also how she bought many specimens home with her after placing them in—an alcoholic solution (“brandenwein”). (Rücker 22) Zemon Davis describes the financial problems associated with both the trip and now the publication of the book, made it necessary for Merian to take time out from this project to do “paintings for a price” for another one. (Davies 178). The book finally appeared in 1705 four years after the journey in a Dutch and Latin version.

Merian's emphasis on depicting the life-cycle of each insect along with their preferred forms of nourishment, and the fact that she, unlike contemporary male naturalists like e.g. Jan Swammerdam, did not focus on dissecting insects, but rather on how and when the insects passed through their different developmental stages, have led some scholars to speak of her “ecological” vision. I tend to agree with Davis (and Wettengl) who view a specific type of

⁵⁵ Other examples are listed in the introduction to a reprint of the plates from *Insects of Surinam*, p.16 (Katharina Schmidt-Loske)

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protestant religiosity at work in Merian, with its focus on bringing to light “god’s miraculousness” by depicting even the smallest of earthly creatures in all their glory. While it is perhaps overstating it to conclude from Merian’s frequent mention of things that she was told about by her “her Indians” or “her slaves”, that she adopted some kind of anti-colonial or protofeminist stance, while in Surinam, it nevertheless seems quite clear from her comments, that she was not favorably inclined towards the Dutch colonists, whose interests circled purely around trying to achieve as much profit as possible from the sugar trade/industry. For someone as curious and observant about their natural surroundings, the colonists lack of interest in anything beyond sugar must have been hard for her to understand, just as she herself was considered an anomaly by the same colonists:

Die Menschen haben dort auch keine Lust, so etwas zu untersuchen, ja sie verspotten mich, daß ich etwas anderes in dem Lande suche als Zucker. Doch meiner Meinung nach könnte man viel mehr Dinge in dem Wald finden, wenn dieser passierbar wäre. (Merian 80)

The unusually harsh lives of the Amerindian and African slaves on Surinam, at the hands of the colonizers, cannot have gone unnoticed by someone as sharp-eyed as Merian. In what is perhaps today the most often quoted passage from the book, Merian describes how the female slaves would use the seeds of the “Flos Pavonis” plant to induce abortions, so their offspring wouldn’t be born into slavery. (Merian 99)

In general I concur with Zemon-Davis’ description of Merian’s tone in the Surinam book as „ethnographic“: “Just as she did not classify the species of flora and fauna, so she did not

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classify the customs of Amerindians and Africans. Her observations were particular, linked to individual plants and insects, an extension of her sense of the relationships in nature.” (Davies 187).

Looking back, Merian's character trait alluded to at the beginning of this essay, i.e. her uncanny ability to follow her own goals and ambitions, thereby making a name for herself quite independent of any male patronage, is what seems to have propelled her through life. As Merian biographer Helmut Kaiser states:

„Erstaunlich ist, daß Maria Sibylla all diesen an sie vermittelten traditionellen Normen zum Trotz in allen Lebensbereichen zu eigenen, zum Teil abweichenden Standpunkten gelangen, ihre Talente ausbilden und ihren Neigungen nachgehen konnte, sei es in Ehe, Kunst und Wissenschaft oder im Glauben. Unabhängiges Denken und Handeln, Geduld, Gottvertrauen, Liebe zu ihren Mitmenschen, besonders zu ihren beiden Töchtern, später auch aufopferungsvolle Pflege ihrer Mutter zeichneten sie aus, verbunden mit einem unerschöpflichen Schaffensdrang und einer grenzenlosen, forschenden Neugier (Kaiser 24).

It was this ability to focus on her own goals and values that took Merian from Frankfurt to Nürnberg, Castle Waltha, Amsterdam, Surinam and then back again. Despite not receiving much in the way of financial benefits for her work, one cannot help but think that in many ways her life was more fulfilling and gratifying than the lives of many other women from the same period. The desire to know, understand and “see” for herself is what allowed Merian to structure her life in her an independent yet not isolated manner. And her works today, after falling out of favor

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with nineteenth century systematic and taxonomical biology (Kaiser 13) have found a new audience that appreciates the connections that are revealed due to her dual aptitude for both art and science. She was, in many ways a woman who was far ahead of her time.

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