

Metamorphosis Monday: Maria Sibylla Merian's Metamorphosis Prints



Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) was an early botanical artist and scientist who started studying metamorphosis when she was just 13 years old. She began by rearing silkworms on mulberry leaves and studying their transformation into silk moths. During that time, more than 300 years ago, many Europeans had many theories about where insects came from that we would consider far-fetched today.

One theory was “spontaneous generation,” which speculated that insects sprung from sunshine, fire, dew, dung or mud. Merian suspected that wasn't true, and documented insect metamorphosis (transformation), from egg to adult. Her engravings of insects were some of the first depictions of insect life cycles in European books. She also documented the relationship between insects and plants, and often included insects depicted with their “host plants”—the plants those insects fed upon as caterpillars and depended upon for their survival.

Pomegranate and Menelaus Blue Morpho Butterfly (1702-1703) from Merian's Metamorphosis insectorium surinamensium (Metamorphosis of the insects of Surinam)

Make A Metamorphosis Print

1. Go for a leaf-collecting walk in or around your home and gather leaves that inspire you. Choose leaves that are different shapes and that are strong enough to withstand being painted on.
2. Once you have chosen your leaves, see if you can learn more about the plant. Ask a family member, neighbor, or consult the internet to see if you can find out what the name of the plant is. Then see if you can find an insect, such as a butterfly, that depends on this plant for its survival.
3. Once you've selected your leaf, find a flat surface, such as a table, where you can do this project.
4. Find the thickest paper you have (watercolor or thick cardstock will do.) Find any kind of paint you



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have (block printing ink is ideal, but any thick paint will do). If you don't have paint, markers will work too. If you are working with paint, find a roller, paintbrush or sponge to apply your paint.

5. Paint or coat your leaf with paint using a roller, paint brush or sponge. The leaves pictured here are from the sweet gum tree because it's where the female Luna Moth lays her eggs and is a food source for Luna Moth caterpillars.
6. Arrange your paint-colored leaves on your paper. Put another piece of paper on top of your arrangement and use your hand, a roller, or a heavy book to press down on your "leaf sandwich" so that paint saturates both pages. You just made two leaf prints!
7. Be like Maria Sibylla Merian and draw an insect's metamorphosis. This is the transformation of the Luna Moth, from egg to moth. Can you find the egg, caterpillar, cocoon, and adult moth?



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