

### Insects and Humans: a relationship recorded in visual art

Humans have evolved relatively recently, in a world long replete with insects. Sharing a world with nearly one million described species of insects (and millions potentially remaining to be described), humans have formed relationships with insects in many ways. Sometimes humans and insects influence each other minimally, other times we profoundly impact each other. Look for evidence of our relationship with insects and it will appear all around you, particularly in the works of artists. Human culture is largely marked by the works of artists, so art can offer clues to the history of our relationship with insects.

It is easy to see why artists might be inspired to depict an insect in their work. We marvel at the diversity of colors, forms, and behaviors of insects. As a species, we domesticate insects and exploit insect products (e.g., silk, beeswax, honey, cochineal, lacquer), include insects in our diet, language and recreational activities, base forensic investigations on carcass-feeding insects, use insects as indicators of habitat quality, use them as model organisms for scientific research, and we pollute or radically alter habitats in an attempt to attract, repel, or extinguish species of insects. Some insects, in turn, pollinate our crops, use our homes for shelter, parasitize our bodies, spread pathogens and allergens, and feed on our resources and excrement and remains. Human-insect interactions are so pervasive that insects often appear as central players, even as symbols, within politics, science and technology, religion, mythology and folklore, literature, poetry, music, the performing and visual arts, and recreation. These cultural products represent some categories of *cultural entomology*, as Charles Hogue defined it, and our relationship with insects has been recorded through the visual arts in ways and for a duration that is unmatched by any other source of information.

#### History of Insects in Visual Art

Artists are influenced by their environment, and there are few places on the planet that are not inhabited or affected in obvious ways by insects. Response to the presence and impact of insects has a long history within the visual arts. Long before written languages existed, humans scratched, sculpted, drew and painted materials that serve as evidence of humans' associations with insects. Our earliest evidence of human-insect relations was inscribed on a bison bone by a Cro-Magnon person—a 20,000-year-old rendering of a cave cricket. A chalk drawing dated 8,000 B.P. depicts a woman gathering honey (Cave of the

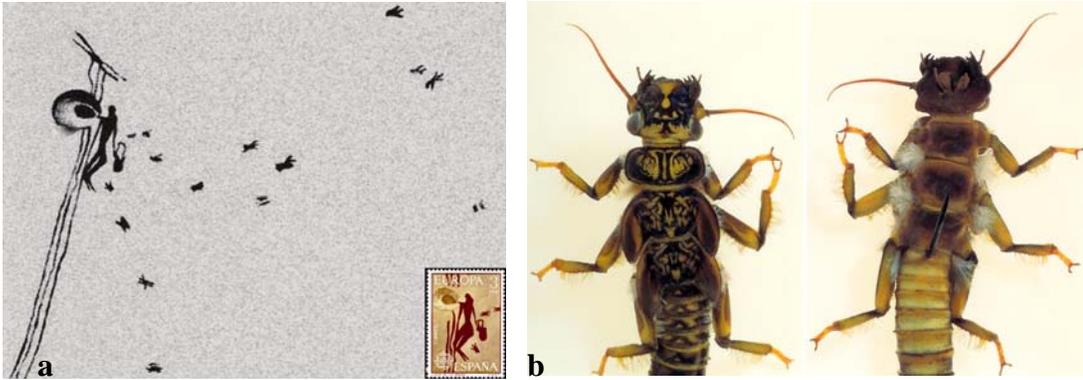


Figure 1. Documentation of human-insect relations. Humans use insects and their products for survival and pleasure. (a) A honey-gatherer was drawn on a cave wall in Spain, documenting an association of humans with honey bees over 8,000 years ago. (detail of cave image, adapted from illustration, <http://www.mdbee.com/articles/cavepainting.html>), (b) A life-size aquatic insect sculpture, “tied” by Bill Logan today, is an extreme example of realistic fly ties commonly used for fishing.

Spider, Spain). Similar images of bee-handling were painted on rocks in Africa, and advanced beekeeping was depicted in an ancient Egyptian tomb (2,626 B.P.). Prehistoric petroglyphs and pictograms from Europe, South Africa and North America often feature insects, as do millennia-old Native American pottery, Greek ceramics, African amulets, and Asian paintings. Kano Kagenobu produced a scroll of insect sketches in the styles of Asian artists spanning nearly 1,000 years, leading up to his contemporaries of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Artists have included insects in their works for a variety of reasons. Some sought and seek to adorn shelters or garments, or to record observations. Others have imbued insects with spiritual, or supernatural qualities. Supernatural associations with insects are often found in the form of totems and symbols. Totemism, the association of a nonhuman organism as blood relative of a human or clan of humans, is evidenced by totem poles, pictograms, and aboriginal Australian paintings, each of which include insect examples. Totems of ancient Mexico include bees and butterflies—Mayan icons that feature prominently throughout Mexico’s history of art. Investigating these examples of material culture can offer a glimpse into the mindset of ancient societies and their connection with insects.

### Insects as Symbols

Insect symbols can hold great importance within societies, offering clear and powerful visual representations of ideas. Insects have symbolized many qualities, including change, industry, royalty, social harmony, might, pestilence, disease, death, etc. While certain insects inspire specific and somewhat universal

symbolic associations (e.g., flies with pestilence, disease, or death), symbols are often contextually, culturally dependent.

One of the earliest examples of an insect symbol is that of the “sacred” scarab beetle, rendered on papyrus scrolls and tomb walls of ancient Egypt. Egyptians worshipped these dung beetles for their symbolic rebirth (= metamorphosis, ending with eclosion into adulthood), and transport of the sun across the sky (= rolling of dung ball to provide a source of food for young). Insects appeared as Egyptian hieroglyphs at least 5,100 B.P., and can be found as visual relics of many cultures’ creation myths and folk tales. Insects can be found as pictograms in the North American Southwest, as Japanese crests, on European armor, or in medieval manuscripts. During the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) representations of nature often carried meaning, so if a cicada was pictured on a scroll it may have signified immortality, due to a cicada’s extended subterranean existence as an immature. Insect symbols commonly appear in Mexican art, from Mayan icons to José Guadalupe Posada’s satirical symbols of evil and perversity. In modern cultures today, we can find insects symbolically on stamps and currency, in advertisements, even as visual representations of sports teams or military units.

### Insects and art themes

Insects make good symbols because they often induce emotional reactions in humans. Exploiting these reactions, artists have often included insects in their art to more clearly or powerfully express an idea. Politics, war, and environmental devastation are examples of themes that have inspired artists to generate insect art.

Recent examples of politically-motivated insect art include anti-Marxist ants, cockroach executions, a militaristic beetle, and ant flags. The anti-Marxist ants are the product of Alberto Faietti, who has produced books of insects glued to pages. In one work, “the third letter of an ant community to karl marx,” Faietti commented on human socialism by forming elaborate text and equations, ending with the word “NO,” formed by the bodies of ants. The cockroach executions belong to Catherine Chalmers’ photographic and video series. Cockroaches appear to be electrocuted, hanged, or burned in staged executions that provoke questions about human execution practices. The militaristic beetle is the product of “Banksy,” an elusive artist based in the U.K. Banksy secretly hung a piece of anti-war artwork in the American Museum of Natural History — a harlequin beetle equipped with sidewinder missiles and a satellite dish.

Yukinori Yanagi’s art, unlike the previous examples of politically-motivated insect art, displays live insects. In most works, entire ant colonies are mounted in transparent displays of colorful sand arrangements, which form

either political flags or paper currency. The ants displace the sand grains, breaking down the political boundaries initially set up by Yanagi.

Environmentally-motivated insect art is a category that has a more recent history than politically-motivated insect art, due to awareness of large-scale environmental disasters recently affecting our planet. The loss of biodiversity, natural resource depletion, and habitat destruction have all inspired artists to generate insect art. Andy Warhol, although he denied that his pop art had any depth or substance, created a series of prints of animals at risk of going extinct, including a butterfly, that has been displayed by conservationists and others concerned about species losses. Cornelia Hesse-Honegger paints insects with mutations that she has found near Chernobyl, Three Mile Island and other nuclear installations. Artists create such examples of environmentally-minded art in large part to generate attention needed to conserve nature and protect the diversity of life.

Politics, war and environmental damage are only a few of the themes that have inspired artists to incorporate insects in their works. Sometimes themes of natural beauty inspire the artist-artisan to create works for display, or utilitarian value. Cultures within Asia that treasure singing insects, for example, produce art featuring sound-producing insects, or elaborately decorated cages within which they are kept.

Insects serve as tools, including symbols, to evoke emotions. When emotional subjects, such as politics, war and environmental degradation are used as art themes, insects can help to elicit emotions that lend power to these themes.



Figure 2. Insects and conservation. Insects have helped inspire environmental conservation movements, and art by (a) Cornelia Hesse-Honegger and (b) Andy Warhol instill awareness of human-induced environmental damage. Hesse-Honegger documented some effects of nuclear power plant meltdowns by painting mutated insects found within their vicinity, and Warhol included a butterfly in a series of prints featuring animals threatened with extinction.

## History of Western Insect Art

Although a great cultural heritage of insect art is found throughout the world, the most widely documented and accessible materials are associated with “Western” art. Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, insects appeared in Western art as religiously-charged symbols of the soul, ephemeral life, or Jesus Christ—appearing in religious texts and paintings of biblical scenes. Insects also appeared in portraits. Sometimes the realistic depiction of a fly on a portrait indicated that the subject of the portrait had died.

Due to the reformation of the Catholic church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, iconoclasts temporarily instated a ban on religious imagery, resulting in a separation of Western art and religion. As a result, insects were used by artists for different purposes following the Reformation. Seventeenth century Belgium and the Netherlands spawned genres of art that were less religious, resulting in waves of landscapes and still lifes. Marcel Dicke (2000) spent three years documenting 1,942 examples of Western art featuring insects, after which he concluded that the 17<sup>th</sup> century constituted the richest period in Western history, both for total number of pieces featuring insects and diversity of insect orders represented. Most still lifes featured insects, and some, as Dicke calculated, included over 100 insects per painting. Examples of artists include Jan van Kessel the Elder (1626-1679), Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750), Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) and, later, Paulus Theodorus van Brussel (1754-1795). Several still life artists of the same period, most notably Maria Sibylla Merian, extended their talents to develop the science of entomology. Merian, and scientific illustrators since her time, have combined esthetics and realism to promote insect science through centuries of insect paintings and drawings.

Most 18<sup>th</sup> century Western insect art continued in the form of still lifes. Nineteenth century impressionism rarely focused on small arthropods, although James McNeill Whistler used a butterfly as his signature, and Vincent van Gogh prominently painted insects as subjects in the last years of his life. The turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the other hand, exploded with respect to the total number of insect art pieces. Art nouveau, surrealism, modern and contemporary art all prominently feature insects.

Art nouveau embraced natural motifs, and artists included insects in painting, sculpture, and utilitarian design such as glassware, furniture, and ceramics. Emile Gallé produced insectal furniture, and some of René Lalique’s most famous jewelry consisted of sculpted insects, and animal chimeras that display fabricated elements of insects.

“[Lalique] was well-acquainted with the teeming multitude of insects of the meadow that leap from stalk to stalk—butterflies and wasps, grasshoppers, bumblebees, and beetles...” —Yvonne Brunhammer (1998)

The decorative (insect) arts achieved a zenith with Lalique and another French designer, E. A. Seguy. Seguy produced realistic and decorative assemblages of butterflies and other insects to promote the application of nature into the decorative arts.

Surrealism promoted liberation of the mind by attaining a state deemed truer than reality. Insects evidently feature prominently in this surreal state, because insects abound in the works of Salvador Dalí, James Ensor, René Magritte, and other surrealists.

### Modern and Contemporary Insect Art

Modern and contemporary artists from around the world continue to include insects in their work. The diversity of insect inclusions in modern-day art is overwhelming, but one way to examine modern or contemporary insect art is to organize the art by degree of realism. A few examples follow.

Realistic insects: Realistic renderings of insects in art share a history harkening back at least to Albrecht Dürer's *Stag Beetle* (1505). Realistic insects in contemporary art include paintings by Mark Fairington, life-size sculptures by Bill Logan and Tom Friedman, and magnified insect sculptures by Patrick Bremer and Lorenzo Possenti.

Realistic insects in unnatural settings: Surrealists' works often fall in this category, and M. C. Escher's illusory visions included ants and sequences of metamorphoses. David Prochaska depicted insects on a series of cans of insecticide, April Vollmer creates woodcuts of insect arrangements, and Karen Anne Klein produces still life thematic compositions that almost invariably feature realistic insects.

Loose renderings of insects: As with chalk drawings of early honey-gatherers and Van Gogh's impressionist pieces with insects, Joseph Beuys, Graham Sutherland, and Jean Émile Laboureur may have interpreted the lives of insects accurately, but depicted the actual insects with less scientific rigor.

Fantastical or abstract insects: Finally, the abstract representation of insects dates to stone drawings, insect totems and symbols, and is often extracted more from the mind of the artist than from the source of inspiration. Some modern examples of insect abstractions include works by André Masson, Joan Miro, Alexander Calder, Sue Johnson, and Francisco Toledo. Charles Burchfield suggested the presence of singing insects by painting waves representing sound generated by the insects.



Figure 3. Insect esthetics. Art and design often incorporate nature. (a) A "Singing Shawl" incorporates the green metallic forewings of beetles (Pwo Karen people, Northern Thailand/Northeast Myanmar, collection Victoria Z. Rivers), (b) E. A. Seguy promoted nature's beauty in design, and (c) Karen Anne Klein augments still lifes with insects (details from Entomological Cabinet of Curiosity).

### Insect Art Media

Insect art can be made with any material, including the insects themselves. Beginning with bison bone and chalk on stone, insects have been depicted with materials ranging from metal cast from the lost (bees)wax process, to tattooed human flesh. Painted insects adorn Mimbres pottery from the North American Southwest, Greek ceramics, and Egyptian frescoes, along with most insect art throughout history. Sculpted insects can be carved, as with Edo Period insect wood carvings in Japan or Antonio Canova's marble sculpture *Cupid and Psyche*. Sculpted insects can also be cast in a variety of materials, woven, or constructed from such random ingredients as Play Doh, "fuzz," and plastic hair (Tom Friedman's sculptures). Many insect artists use photography (e.g., works by Jacques Kerchache, Gregory Crewdson, and Catherine Chalmers), or film.

Insect bodies can themselves be used as art media. Henry Dalton, a Victorian microscopist, arranged individual scales from butterfly wings into microscopic still lifes, and Jean Dubuffet assembled collages of entire butterfly wings. Some traditional people in the Amazon rainforest enhance their beauty by wearing jewelry composed of damselfly or beetle wings. Others display intact insect corpses in their works: Alberto Faietti adhered insects to pages of books (mentioned above). Kazuo Kadonaga reared 110,000 silkworm moths until the immatures attached their cocoons throughout wood crates, where they were ultimately killed and displayed. Jennifer Angus decorates entire rooms with geometric insect arrays and Jan Fabre coats structures with beetles or beetle wings, including ceiling and chandelier in the Royal Palace of Belgium. Other artists display live insects. Yukinori Yanagi produces live ant displays

(mentioned above) and Hubert Duprat manipulates immature caddisflies so that the cases they build are constructed of jewels supplied by the artist.

Insects have always been a part of the cultural history and creativity of our species. The spectrum of insect art recorded on the walls of ancient caves and on artefacts of past civilizations, and the exhibits and festivals dedicated to insect-related art found in the streets and galleries of modern societies are a testament to this long and interesting relationship between insects and human artists. Insects provide inspiration, subject matter, and sometimes even the raw materials for the artisan. The ubiquitousness of insects and the boundless imagination and creativity of humans should ensure the continued relevance of insects in the artistic ventures of humans well into the future. Ultimately, all art can reveal aspects of our history, and insect art documents the history of our relationship with insects.

#### Further Resources

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