

A Chorus of Chirps, Hums, and Buzzes: Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Japanese Print Gallery,
May 24, 2019–November 10, 2019

Insects and arachnids have long captivated artists and designers with their darting movements, hypnotizing songs, and attractive shapes and colors. These small, complex creatures have long been the subjects for a wide range of visual arts across different cultures.

After microscopic observations became possible in the 1600s, entomologists hastened to capture the details of their specimens by producing precise illustrations, some of which are included in this exhibition. These scientific works inspired other artists who adapted them for their own endeavors. Insects also appealed to many designers, who arranged and transformed their shapes and forms into patterns for various mediums.

Represented as well in this exhibition are poetic and comical depictions of insects. The impressions assembled here, some made to accompany verse, are imbued with lyrical overtones, while the anthropomorphic portrayals, layered with satirical undertones, evoke mirth and delight.

Wai Yee Chiong
Assistant Curator, Asian and Islamic Art
RISD Museum

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Mori Shunkei, Japanese, active ca. 1800–1820
Tobu Tani Seiko
Tani Seiko, Japanese
Butterflies (Cho), Things Creeping Under Hand 1820
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.607



These two works appear to be scientific renderings, but they do not have the precise treatment typical of artist-entomologist drawings. Artfully arranged and detailed in the most colorful manner, the Dutch watercolor was probably based on entomological drawings and used as a study for paintings.

The Japanese print—strikingly similar to the Dutch print beside it—also draws on scientific illustrations. Its assortment and arrangement of butterflies indicates the artist's knowledge of Western specimens and illustrations. In fact, Shunkei, like many others, were exposed to Dutch studies of nature that pervaded Japan since the 1600s. By drawing on these encyclopedic materials from the West, Japanese artists were able to reproduce similarly lifelike depictions.

Japanese

Stencil (Katagami) with Dragonflies, late 1800s - early 1900s

Mulberry paper with persimmon tannin

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.778

On the left, large and small butterflies flit over bundles of reed, while on the right double-winged dragonflies hover above a latticed background. These intricate designs, carved on mulberry paper and waterproofed with persimmon tannin, enabled the production of repeated patterns on bolts of fabric. Stained with use, the butterfly stencil still retains traces of its past life as a dyer's tool. Often surviving longer than the fabrics they helped create, stencils like these testify to evolving tastes in fashion over time. As objects of beauty, stencils also came to be appreciated by Western artists and collectors who admired their elegant craftsmanship.



Teresa Cole, American, b. 1961

Mosquito Net, from the series "In the Background" 2012

Screenprint on paper

Gift of Yoonmi Nam 2012.120.4

Composed of moths and mosquitoes artfully arranged into a weblike pattern, this print by Teresa Cole draws attention to the illnesses and diseases caused by these winged creatures in parts of the world. Inspired by woodblock printing traditions she encountered during her collaborative residency at Kanishka, a fabric-printing workshop located in Kolkata, India, Cole created this design. Whereas the Indian master printers normally stamp their woodblocks on fabric, here Cole has screenprinted her design on paper.



As the artist describes, these patterns invoke not only the skilled labor of Indian cottage industries, but also the serious danger of malaria in that region.

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Keisai Eisen, Japanese, 1790-1848
Grasshopper on Leaf, early 1800s
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.1168

Keisai Eisen prioritized line over color in this depiction of a grasshopper perched on a leaf, emphasizing the movement and instability of the wavering plant as the insect tries to cling on with legs outstretched. Abrupt lines that articulate the veins of the leaf are combined with the smooth fluid strokes of the plant stems, resulting in a lively composition.

This small picture was part of a harimaze-e, a type of print with several small images impressed on the same sheet. This image would have been cut out then rearranged and reattached with other prints of similar size to form new compositions.



Mori Shunkei, Japanese, active ca. 1800-1820
Wasps and Cicadas on Lotus, from the series **Things Creeping under Hand** (*Chuka senzen*) probably 1820
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.606

Delighting in their autumnal feast, a cicada and wasp busily ravish the withered leaf and dried bud of a lotus plant. Using no inked outlines, Shunkei privileges color in this composition. The artist's practice of painting from real-life observations is also evident in the precise detail of each insect.

Shunkei's illustration, likely inspired by Kitagawa Utamaro's 18th-century book pairing insects with poetry, was originally combined with alternating pages of verses. This image thus echoed the poems it accompanied.



Japanese
Hokkei, Japanese, 1780-1850
Dragonfly and Water Plants, ca. 1820
Polychrome woodblock print
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.479

Dragging a reed down with its weight, a double-winged dragonfly nibbles at the florets at the end of the stalk in this elegant impression



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of a moment in nature. The artist takes advantage of the narrow format of the paper by extending the water reed beyond the picture plane before arcing it gracefully back into the frame, creating a dynamic yet balanced composition.

Long, narrow formats were often used to produce surimono, privately commissioned luxurious prints that were circulated among members of poetry groups.

Kitagawa Tsukimaro, Japanese, active by 1840, d. 1830

Kitagawa Yukimaro, Japanese, 1797-1856

Yukimaro, Japanese, 1797-1856

Magnolias and Butterfly, 1830s

Polychrome woodblock print

Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 34.626



Illustrated collaboratively by two artists from the Kitagawa school, this painterly image of a butterfly and flowering magnolia branch invokes the traditions and practices of a group now referred to as the Chinese literati. These artists created primarily monochromatic images and considered painting a scholarly pursuit. They frequently collaborated, adding images or verses to each other's work. Japanese artists aspiring to the lifestyles of the Chinese literati emulated the same aesthetics and practices. Although this is a print, it maintains the expressive calligraphic brushstrokes of a literati painting.

Watanabe Seitei, Japanese, 1851-1918

Locust and Gourd, 1868-1912

Woodblock print on paper

Gift of Elizabeth Stabler in memory of George Howard Parker and Louise Merritt Parker 2007.106.1



With its precise, wiry lines, Watanabe Seitei's illustration of a locust on a gourd plant approximates a Western pen-and-ink drawing. Extending diagonally across the picture plane, a tangle of gourd vines and leaves almost camouflage the locust perched upside down. The insect is realistically depicted, its spindly limbs echoing the twirling curlicues of the vines.

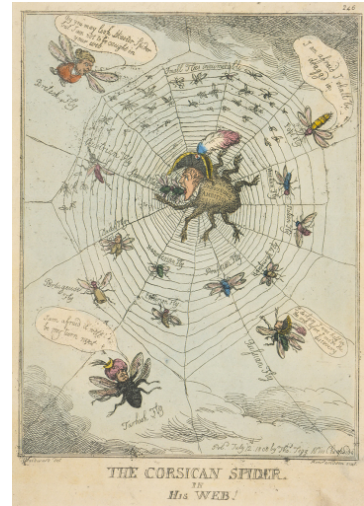
Seitei, who had lived in Europe and studied Western painting, made many designs for ceramics and cloisonné for the Japanese export market.

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Thomas Rowlandson, English, 1756-1827
George Moutard Woodward, British, ca. 1760-1809
Thomas Tegg
The Corsican Spider in His Web, 1808
Etching and hand coloring on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 44.082

Cleverly drawing on the predatory nature of spiders, Woodward and Rowlandson present Napoleon at the peak of his power by depicting him as an enormous Corsican spider, centered in a giant web that has trapped an array of European flies—a reference to his growing empire. As the spider prepares to devour two Spanish flies, Russian and Vatican flies struggle to escape on the outskirts of the web. Still free from Napoleon's clutches, Turkish and British flies defiantly declare that they will not be captured.

Rowlandson and Woodward collaborated on many political caricatures, a number of which included personifications of animals and insects.



Japanese
Stencil (Katagami) with Butterflies and Bundles of Reed, late 1800s-early 1900s
Mulberry paper with persimmon tannin
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.555

On the left, large and small butterflies flit over bundles of reed, while on the right double-winged dragonflies hover above a latticed background. These intricate designs, carved on mulberry paper and waterproofed with persimmon tannin, enabled the production of repeated patterns on bolts of fabric. Stained with use, the butterfly stencil still retains traces of its past life as a dyer's tool. Often surviving longer than the fabrics they helped create, stencils like these testify to evolving tastes in fashion over time. As objects of beauty, stencils also came to be appreciated by Western artists and collectors who admired their elegant craftsmanship.



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Léon Becker, Belgian, 1827-1891

Symphony of the Insects, 1870

Watercolor, gouache, and varnish on paper

Museum Works of Art Fund 60.058

Insects here are portrayed as members of high society, dancing and socializing in a secluded glen of waving daisies and translucent blades of grass. To the right an orchestra strikes a lively chord, while in the foreground a moth with colorful folded wings fawns over her companion. A grasshopper waiter circulates with refreshments as two horned beetles make their way into an open glade to dance.

Léon Becker, an illustrator also known for authoring scientific articles on insects, displays his deep entomological knowledge and his extraordinary draftsmanship, merging these interests to create a whimsical drawing that is visually delightful.



Indian

Design for a Palanquin, ca. 1850 - 1890

Graphite, ink, and watercolor on paper

Gift of Catherine and Ralph Benkaim 1986.151.10

Composed of a menagerie of different animals, this ornate drawing of a palanquin, a structure used to carry a person, was made to suit the tastes of Europeans working for the East India Company. The palanquin's carrying pole is fronted by an elephant with an upraised trunk and ends with a snarling cheetah. The front of the box is decorated with a winged lady whose body curves downwards to meet the open mouth of a hound-like beast with leopard spots. Mounted on the beast is a smiling lion, its tail echoing the curving shape of the structure.



Dutch

Jan van Huysum, Dutch, 1682-1749

Studies of Butterflies and Insects, late 1600s-early 1700s

Watercolor on vellum

Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.089

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Jean-Emile Laboureur, French, 1877-1943
The Entomologist (L' Entomologiste), 1932
Engraving on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 53.010

Through a screen of plant tendrils and foliage teeming with snails, spiders, wasps, and butterflies, the solitary figure of an entomologist is visible in a grassy glade. With his back turned to the viewer, he appears completely absorbed in his surroundings. Like this entomologist, artist Jean-Émile Laboureur was fascinated by insects and spent many hours closely examining them.



This idyllic scene understates the level of detail and complexity of the engraving. Laboureur's technical mastery is evident in his ability to render spatial recession and fine details using varied marks.

Jacob Hoefnagel, Flemish, 1575 - c.a. 1630
Joris Hoefnagel, Netherlandish, 1542-1600
Theodor de Bry, Netherlandish, 1528-1598
The locusts have no king, yet all of them march in rank. Proverbs 30, 27, Archetypa studiaque patris Georgii Hoefnagelii, Frankfurt, 1592
Engraving on paper
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2006.117.2



These detailed renderings of plants and insects recorded a new way of looking: through a microscope. Given the ability to magnify the smallest details of a specimen, artists took their subjects to a heightened level of realism. These models became not only useful for scientific study, but also as sources for paintings and illustrations, inspiring artists from different cultures. Notable too is the religious undertone of these works, each inscribed with an Old Testament verse that contemplates the natural world.

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Jacob Hoefnagel, Flemish, 1575 - c.a. 1630

Joris Hoefnagel, Netherlandish, 1542-1600

Theodor de Bry, Netherlandish, 1528-1598

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. Isaiah 40, from "Archetypha studiaque patris Georgii Hoefnagelii" 1592

Engraving on paper

Walter H. Kimball Fund 2006.117.3



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Japanese

Picture Book of Antique Objects (Kokizufu), late 1800s

Woodblock-printed book

Transferred from the RISD Library, gift of Mrs. Carroll Miller 49.405



The books and textiles in this case show the process of designing and the use of insect patterns across different mediums. The butterfly, depicted in its natural form and as a stylized pattern, appears here in printed designs for robes and ceramics, and as patterns in dyed and woven fabric.

Japanese

Kimono Designs, 1800s

Woodblock-printed book

Museum Collection 49.430



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Japanese; Edo
Textile of Butterflies and Reeds, 1800-1849
Resist-dyed cotton
Gift of William Ely 37.288

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Japanese
Textile, 1800s
Silk woven with gold thread
Gift of Sogo Matsumoto 05.043

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Otto Dix, German, 1891-1969
Illusion Act (Illusionsakt), from the portfolio *Zirkus* 1922
Etching with drypoint on paper
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2012.115

In *Illusionsakt*, Otto Dix etched a magician conjuring a fantastical image of a human spider, using the drypoint technique to create the web of lines surrounding the terrifying creature. For Dix, the illusionary world of the circus was a means of escape from the horrors of postwar Germany. As a soldier during the war he had witnessed the evanescence of life, which he expressed in this dreamlike image that highlights the fleeting nature of circus performances. Part of a circus-themed series, this etching reflects Dix's criticism of the German bourgeois and his sympathy for circus performers and those on the fringe of society.

