

Plate 11 and Plate 18 from "Dissertation in Insect Generations and Metamorphosis in Surinam"



Plate 11 and Plate 18 from “Dissertation in Insect Generations and Metamorphosis in Surinam,” 1719

A Bug's Life

Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) devoted herself to observing creatures in their natural habitats. At 52, she embarked for Suriname, a Dutch colony in South America. For two years, she recorded flora and fauna populating its gardens, fields, and formidable rainforest.

Take a closer look

These engravings created from Merian's watercolors portray insects and arachnids arrayed on their host plants. Teeming with color, texture, pattern, and minute details, the images marry science and art. Her groundbreaking publication warranted several posthumous editions.

Who knew?

Merian's depictions of metamorphosis helped debunk the belief that bugs generated spontaneously: flies from rotting meat, moths from wool. Before seeing evidence of insects' developmental stages—egg, larva, pupa, and adult—people did not perceive the link between caterpillar and butterfly.

Maria Sibylla Merian, *Plate 11 and Plate 18 from Dissertation in Insect Generations and Metamorphosis in Surinam*, second edition, 1719; Hand-colored engravings on paper, Both: 20½ x 14½ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gifts of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Photographs by Lee Stalsworth



Portrait of Princess Belozersky



Portrait of a Young Boy



Portrait of Princess Belozersky, 1798

Portrait of a Young Boy, 1817

The Eyes Have It

Known for her flattering portraits, **Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun (1755–1842)** earned commissions throughout Europe and Russia. Royalty, aristocrats, writers, and actors alike coveted her idealized renderings.

Take a closer look

The subjects' large, expressive eyes—a Vigée-LeBrun signature—invite our approach. Flawless skin and rosy complexions imply youth and health. Her illusionistic handling of texture distinguished glossy locks, a glinting gun barrel, diaphanous fabrics, and lustrous amber.

Something to talk about

Vigée-LeBrun satisfied her patrons' vanity by rendering them more attractive and approachable than they might truly have been. Today, what techniques do artists use to achieve similar results?

Who knew?

The artist experienced perks and peril as court painter to Marie Antoinette. With the onset of the French Revolution in 1789, this connection to the vilified queen forced Vigée-LeBrun to flee her homeland. In exile for 15 years, her fame ensured her welcome in cities and courts across the continent.

Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of Princess Belozersky*, 1798; Oil on canvas, 31 x 26¾ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Rita M. Cushman in memory of George A. Rentschler; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun, *Portrait of a Young Boy*, 1817; Oil on canvas, 21¾ x 18¼ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth





Collective Memory

For millennia, Australian Aboriginal people have expressed ancient stories, or Dreamings, through body painting, dance, and other ephemeral art forms. Emily Kame Kngwarreye (pronounced koom-WAH-ree) is among the first generation to render these tales in permanent materials.



Yam Story '96, 1996

Take a closer look

Emily Kame Kngwarreye (ca. 1910–1996) earned international acclaim for her bold compositions, handling of paint, and use of color. Here, intertwined lines set against a dark background suggest the aggressive, subterranean root system of the desert yam.

Something to talk about

In addition to providing practical information about the landscape, Dreamings offer lessons in moral behavior. Many cultures use historical, religious, and imagined tales similarly. What stories do you know that present such lessons?

Who knew?

Dreamings are passed down within families. The custodians who inherit a story are the only ones who can represent it. Viewers outside the clan may recognize the narrative, but will never know its full meaning. Kngwarreye was custodian of the Yam Dreaming.

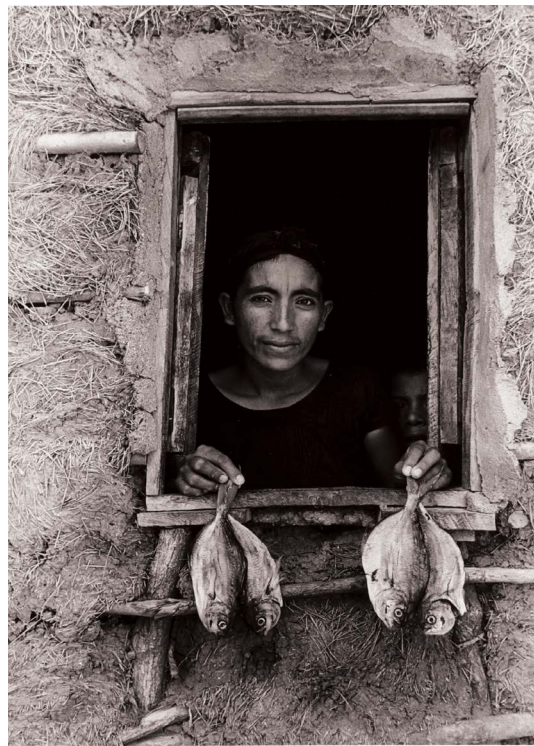
Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Yam Story '96*, 1996; Acrylic on canvas, 47 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 36 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of the Collection of Margaret Levi and Robert Kaplan; © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VISCOPY, Australia



Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora
(Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert)



Cuatro Pescaditos
(Four Little Fish),
Juchitán, Oaxaca



Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora
(Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert), 1979

Cuatro Pescaditos (Four Little Fish),
Juchitán, Oaxaca, 1986

Pride of Place

Photographs by **Graciela Iturbide (b. 1942)** provide an intimate look at the daily lives, special occasions, and surroundings of those she portrays, including the Seri people of Mexico's Sonoran Desert and the matriarchal society of Juchitán, a center of indigenous Zapotec culture.

Take a closer look

Iturbide's works often feature sharp angles, low perspectives, tight framing, and tonal nuances. These formal and compositional choices aggrandize her subjects—figures appear larger-than-life and fleeting moments seem timeless.

Something to talk about

The artist celebrates the strength and independence of women. How does she represent these ideals in her images?

In her own words

"Photography for me is a ritual. To go out with the camera, to observe, to photograph the most mythological aspects of people, then to go into the darkness, to develop, to select the most symbolic images."

Graciela Iturbide, *Mujer Ángel, Desierto de Sonora (Angel Woman, Sonoran Desert)*, 1979 (printed 2014); Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Cindy Jones; © Graciela Iturbide, Image courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art, NYC

Graciela Iturbide, *Cuatro Pescaditos (Four Little Fish)*, Juchitán, Oaxaca, 1986 (Later print not dated); Gelatin silver print, 18¼ x 15 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Charles and Teresa Friedlander, in honor of his mother, Jacqueline S. Friedlander; © Graciela Iturbide



Bullets Revisited #3



Bullets Revisited #3, 2012

Beauty and the East

Moroccan-born **Lalla Essaydi (b. 1956)** questions stereotypes imposed on her by West and East. Her depictions challenge voyeuristic male fantasies of seductive nudes prominent in 19th-century Western painting. Equally, they address gender issues in Islamic culture.

Take a closer look

Consider the artwork from afar. Move closer. The shimmering, mosaic-like backdrop resolves into its component parts—polished bullet casings. For Essaydi, these evoke violence and reference her fears about growing restrictions on women in the Arab world.

In her own words

"Beauty is quite dangerous, as it lures the viewer into accepting the fantasy."

Who knew?

Essaydi uses henna to write stream-of-consciousness Arabic calligraphy on her models. Henna painting—applying patterns on women's skin for major life events—is a female tradition. Calligraphy, on the other hand, is a male practice. The artist subverts gender norms by merging art forms.

Lalla Essaydi, *Bullets Revisited #3*, 2012; Three chromogenic prints mounted to aluminum, 66 x 150 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Purchased with funds provided by Jacqueline Badger Mars, Sunny Scully Alsup and William Alsup, Mr. Sharad Tak and Mrs. Mahinder Tak, Marcia and Frank Carlucci, and Nancy Nelson Stevenson; © Lalla Essaydi

