

In making this work I have not been profit-seeking, and would be content if I just recover the expenses I have made. I have spared no expense in the production of this work, but have had the plates cut by the most famous masters and used the best paper for that purpose, so that it would give pleasure and satisfaction to the art connoisseurs as well as to the amateurs of insects and plants, just as I will be pleased when I hear that I have reached my objective and at the same time will have provided pleasure<sup>1</sup>.

The above declaration comes from the introduction to the monumental work by Maria Sibylla Merian, an artist, researcher and entomologist, published in 1705 in Amsterdam under the title *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*. The words do justice to the impressive artistic quality of the illustrations presented in Merian's work; yet they may also be interpreted as a *pars pro toto* for the majority of other works brought together in large numbers at the second edition of the exhibition entitled 'Plants and animals. Atlases of natural history in the age of Linnaeus' organised at the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów between 6 May and 15 August 2021.

The exhibition 'Plants and animals. Atlases of natural history in the age of Linnaeus' was prepared by the International Cultural Centre in Cracow in cooperation with the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences and Polish Academy of Learning in Cracow, and the Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The originator of the exhibition was Krzysztof Radoszek, a graphic artist, book designer and long-term collaborator of the International Cultural Centre. The concept of the scenario and the choice of exhibits was the outcome of talks and cooperation between Krzysztof Radoszek, employees of the ICC, and Anna Olszewska, a curator of the collections of the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences (Fig. 1). The work on the preparation of the first edition of the exhibition took place during the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic, while its opening was on 18 May 2020, without the invited guests. On the following day, observing sanitary restrictions, the organisers opened the exhibition for the public. In spite of attendance limitations, the exhibition met with significant interest and was favourably received by visitors and journalists. It was accompanied by a beautifully illustrated catalogue, prepared according to Krzysztof Radoszek's

## EXHIBITION 'PLANTS AND ANIMALS. ATLASES OF NATURAL HISTORY IN THE AGE OF LINNAEUS' ORGANISED AT THE MUSEUM OF KING JAN III'S PALACE AT WILANÓW, 6 MAY – 15 AUGUST 2021

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<sup>1</sup> M.S. Merian, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (2016 reprint XL), Lannoo Publishers and Koninklijke Bibliotheek, National Library of the Netherlands in collaboration with Amsterdam University, excerpt 'To the Reader', translation of the original Dutch text into English by P. Lennon, p. 177.





Fig. 1

Banner for the exhibition 'Plants and animals. Atlases of natural history in the age of Linnaeus'

design, featuring texts by Krzysztof Radoszek, Anna Olszewska and Julia Fiedorczuk and an introduction by Agata Wąsowska-Pawlik and Agnieszka Fluda-Krokos, directors of the International Cultural Centre and the Scientific Library of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences. The Wilanów<sup>2</sup> edition of the exhibition was not as much a transposition of the one in Cracow, but an interpretation of its major components in the context of the new venue – the Wilanów Palace, i.e., the former royal and magnate residence surrounded with gardens. During the preparation of the concept for the Wilanów exhibition – which combined the Cracow narrative, where the space of the International Cultural Centre was used, with the Wilanów interiors having their specific styles and functions, and varying sizes – the imposition of numerous restrictions on account of the historical substance was of vital importance. In the ideological dimension, solutions were sought that combined the storyline of the exhibition with the components determining the specific nature of the Wilanów Palace as a museum of culture and nature, where both elements are in a harmonious balance.

The exhibition occupied the entire first floor of the palace. It began in the northern wing and continued in the northern gallery, the premises in the main building (with the exception of the Banqueting Hall), up to the area of the southern gallery. In the first room, which was not an exhibition in the strict sense of the word, the introductory part was presented, comprising a large-format title of the exhibition on the wall and an impressionistic light arrangement, aimed at delimiting the lower zone of the palace with

2 The Wilanów exhibition was the effect of cooperation between Krzysztof Radoszek and two curators representing the Museum, Martyna Sowińska-Pasek vel Paszkowska from the Development Department and the author of this text, Marta Gołąbek, from the Art Department. The spatial arrangement of the exhibition was designed by Professor Barbara Kowalewska from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, while the designs of information boards were created by Krzysztof Radoszek.

the permanent exhibition from the temporary exhibition and preparing the viewers' perception for what was about to be shown to them.

The scenario of the exhibition relied primarily on the visual aspect of the works selected to be shown. The texts presented at the exhibition comprised a personal narrative about the individual experience of nature. Their context did not pretend to be a voice in the in-depth discussion about man's relationship with the world of nature in the context of contemporary dangers (even though this thread was also present due to the selection of works with respect to the visual aspects and the historical context of their creation). The issue of colonialism, which was the backdrop for many exhibits documenting the flora and fauna of faraway regions of the world, was handled in a similar mode. The exhibition 'Plants and animals' was, first and foremost, a feast for the eyes, an opportunity to relish the sensitivity and the mastery of past draughtsmen and engravers who transferred every single detail of a studied object to the paper with contemplative attention.

The authors of the compiled atlases and illustrations were researchers or lovers of nature, who frequently implemented their projects at the interface of two disciplines – nature and art. In many cases, the works presented at the exhibition were the results of systemic studies carried out in line with the canons of science. Nevertheless, apart from such exhibits, the visitors could also see some spontaneous and moving testimonies to the fascination with the world of nature: the works of authors who, enchanted with the divine plan of creation, wished to get to know the world surrounding them as closely as possible and understand the mechanisms governing it. These items, in a number of cases, were milestones leading to the systematics of flora and fauna which was established, and then set in scientific frames, in the course of the second half of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century.

The exhibition, following the original scenario, was divided into four parts, titled 'Silvania', 'Transmarina', 'Mensa' and 'Hortus'. 'Silvania' reveals the world of nature which in childhood we discover as our playground, a site of relaxation as well as the place of our first observations of flora and fauna that, while initially inept, are nevertheless significant from the point of view of the formation of personal sensitivity. This modest beginning was opened with a sequence of important studies: Maria Sibylla Merian's *Der Raupen wunderbare...* (a 1747 reprint), Jean Pierre Bergeret's *Phytonomatotechnique universelle...* (Paris 1783), Eleazar Albin's *A Natural History of English Insects* (London 1720), Cornelius Nozeman and Jacques Teissier's *Oiseaux de la Hollande* (Amsterdam 1778) and Carl Gustav Jablonsky's *Natursystem aller bekannten in- und ausländischen Insekten* (Berlin 1783–1798). As compared to the Cracow presentation, the first part was supplemented with a set of forty illustrations from Krzysztof Radoszek's collection, presenting popular nature publications dating from the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

3 'Silvania' were also enhanced with fine-art decorative elements, which filled the display cabinets in the gallery premises. Their arrangement comprised copies of eggs of domes-

From the ‘Silvania’ section, the visitors moved to ‘Transmarina’. This section, devoted to the exploration of nature in faraway regions of the world, was presented in six rooms on the first floor of the palace. The first room was fully dedicated to the person and the work of Maria Sibylla Merian. As many as four copies of her opus, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, were presented in the cabinets; the book was published as a summary of almost two years of work which the author carried out in Dutch Guiana (Suriname). To allow the visitors to learn the extraordinary wealth of illustrations in Merian’s work and to underpin the visual impressions curbed by the static display of the original volumes, a reprint of the discussed work in its first edition of 1705 was also displayed. Two out of four displayed volumes were loaned from the collections of the National Library in Warsaw – not only as a supplement for the original scenario (taking the volumes from the Institute of Systematics and Evolution of Animals of the Polish Academy of Sciences into account), but also as a ‘temporary return’ of books from the former Wilanów book collection to their old abode.<sup>4</sup>

This is also an opportunity to mention the element that defined the exhibition with respect to the design: these were strips of coloured LED lights running across the floors along the length of the walls. This solution, non-invasive to the historical interiors of the Palace and the items exhibited on paper, allowed for a clear identification of the subsequent sections of the exhibition’s narrative. It is mentioned here in reference to the room opening the ‘Transmarina’ section, as the colour of that section was intense (turquoise green) and attracted the viewers’ attention after the tranquil prelude of ‘Silvania’. In a further part of the ‘Transmarina’ section, presented were four volumes of *Histoire Naturelle* by Georges Louis Leclerc Count de Buffon, dedicated to mammals, on loan from the collections of the National Library in Warsaw, as well as images of cats from William Jardine’s *The Naturalist’s Library* (Edinburgh, 1840).

The cabinet nearby contained old prints showing butterflies and wingless insects, among others from Johann Friedrich Wilhelm Herbst’s *Natursystem der Ungenflügelten Insekten* (Berlin 1800) and August Johann Rösel von Rosenhof and Christian Friedrich Carl Kleemann’s *Der monatlich*

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tic birds in nests and flowers in 1:1 scale and macro scale, made by Dorota Piotrowiak (Sztuka Papieru) from paper, papier mâché and resin mass, as well as Styrodur® encased in ‘cold porcelain’, painted in acrylics. The contents of one of the cabinets was inspired by a vegetal *vivarium*: a collection of graphic reproductions of plants from the illustrated works shown at the exhibition, viewed through the glass of the cabinet; in another one, three biscuit sculptures from the Wilanów collection: *Primula Flower in a Pot* (Wil.691), *Insects* (Wil.670) and *A Crayfish and Frog Fighting* (Wil.714) were displayed.

4 Two volumes loaned for the exhibition are: *Dissertatio de Generatione et Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, Amsterdam 1719, and *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, Amsterdam 1705. The former bears the stamp of the Wilanów Library on the title page and at the top there is a handwritten note: ‘Alex: Potocka née P. Lubomirska’. The latter volume contains an annotation, in Polish: ‘Donated to the Wilanów Library by Antoni Waga, 1869’.



Fig. 2

*herausgegebenen Insecten* (Nuremberg 1746–1761). In the Anteroom, displayed on a structure in the shape of a Greek cross, 240 colourful engravings from the 22-volume atlas of ichthyology by Georges Cuvier and Achille Valenciennes, *Histoire Naturelle Des Poissons* (Paris–Strasbourg, 1828–1849), were presented on eight walls.

The Middle Room was devoted to colourful birds: twenty prints with images of parrots and toucans from the work of François Levaillant, *Histoire Naturelle Des Oiseaux de Paradis et Des Rolliers* (Paris, 1806), excellently rendered by illustrator Jacques Barraband and the engravers Jacques Louis Pérée and Louis Bouquet, were displayed on three of its walls (Fig. 2). Displayed in a large cabinet, astoundingly skilfully made prints with images of monkeys, executed in a technique rarely presented at the exhibition, namely lithography, constituted a supplement to the exhibition of the overseas avifauna. The graphic works of Ulisses Aldrovandi, the father of modern zoology and the naturalist representing pre-Linnaeus humanistic natural history, offered an eloquent juxtaposition for the scrupulous and anatomically precise illustrations of monkeys and birds.

From the aviary created in the space of the Middle Room, the visitors' route led to the Quiet Room, where began the part of the exhibition titled 'Mensa'. Old prints illustrating the species of plants and animals which function primarily as consumer goods were presented in a cabinet whose size resembled a dining room table: carp and catfish from Marcus Elieser Bloch's work *Ökonomische Naturgeschichte der Fische* (Berlin

View of the 'Transmarina' section of the exhibition with a display of illustrations from the fish atlas by Georges Cuvier and Achille Valenciennes, *Histoire naturelle des poissons*, Paris, 1828–1849



Fig. 3

View of the 'Mensa' section of the exhibition which was located in the Quiet Room. In the foreground, a cabinet with old prints supplemented with cutlery from the Wilanów collection

1782–1784), species of domestic fowl and citrus fruit from Jan Jonston's *Historia Naturalis* (Frankfurt 1650–1653), as well as an interesting domestic publication devoted to apiculture, *Description of a Bee Farm in Szczorsze Prepared in 1785* (original Polish title: *Opisanie gospodarstwa pszczolowego w Szczorszach sporządzone roku 1785*) by Joachim Chreptowicz.

An important element of this part of the exhibition were the eighteen-century mezzotints by Richard Earlom after the paintings of Frans Snyders – compositionally sophisticated displays of vegetables, fish and herbs (Fig. 3). The mode of their presentation evoked associations not only with the commercial context of a marketplace, but with a thoughtful arrangement aimed at showing the entire wealth – not only of the natural resources at contemporary people's disposal, but also of the seventeenth-century Spanish Netherlands. Additionally, cyanotype prints showing the plants associated with table culture – rosemary, parsley, coriander, basil, mint and others – were displayed in revolving photograph frames.<sup>5</sup>

The last section of the exhibition, 'Hortus', opened with a garden-related display in a cabinet in the southern alcove. The display case at the entrance to the room presented *Jardin de Malmaison* (Paris 1803–1806), a work by one of the main protagonists of this part of the

<sup>5</sup> The photograms were prepared for the exhibition by Professor Izabela Zajęc from the Faculty of Conservation and Restoration of Artworks of the Fine Arts Academy in Warsaw.



Fig. 4

exhibition, Pierre Joseph Redouté. The large vertical cabinet in the room<sup>6</sup> was filled with an arrangement devoted to herbaria and prepared by the Museum's Education Department (Fig. 4). In the southern gallery, in the last room of the visitors' route, the walls were decorated with twenty-eight lithographs from Johann Simon von Kerner's work *Hortus Semper Virens* (Stuttgart 1795–1829), and the exhibition was supplemented by Redouté's drypoint copperplate engravings from his posthumously published work *Le Bouquet Royal*, made available by the National Library, which are an example of first-rate botanical illustration.

The 'Hortus' section of the exhibition, view onto the cabinet with a display devoted to herbaria

The former library cabinets, presently not performing their original function, were positioned in the space of the gallery (Fig. 5). Their presence required – similarly to the display cases in the northern gallery – a thematically adequate arrangement. Three cabinets featured vessels from a set made in the factory of Duc d'Angoulême, with decorations typical for the *Flora Danica* tableware, while another two contained compositions made of dried seeds of exotic plants. The exhibition of flowers in graphic arts was supplemented with a set of Wilanów's Meissen vases with floral decorations sculpted in the round.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> It is a cabinet created especially as a space to display small items (busts of famous Poles), made in the workshop of Karol Minter; it is planned to be an element of a new permanent exhibition dedicated to the art collecting activities of the Potocki family.

<sup>7</sup> Namely, three Vases with covers and two Vases without covers (Wil.3136–Wil.3140).



**Fig. 5**

View of the ‘Hortus’ section of the exhibition in the southern gallery of the first floor with a display of illustrations from Johann Simon von Kerner’s work *Hortus Semper Virens*, Stuttgart 1795–1829

The last library closet was filled with lush artificial vegetation, which overcame the structural frames of the furniture, reaching beyond it. This element of the design, ending the narrative about the ‘plants and animals’, was a travesty, in a micro-scale, of the ever-fascinating phenomenon: the inconceivable power of nature which, when left to its own devices, will gracefully conquer the work of human hands.

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