

# Merian and the Pineapple: Visual Representation of the Senses

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## Introduction

The *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705) is the *magnum opus* of an extraordinary woman, Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717).<sup>1</sup> It is a remarkable book, both for the decadently beautiful images presented inside, and also because of the journey undertaken by its author in order to bring it into existence. Her images and accompanying text recorded and reproduced the natural history of the Dutch colony of Surinam. Often when discussed in the literature on scientific observation, as a scientific text the *Metamorphosis* constitutes a replication of the act of observation. Yet as a communication of her experiences in Surinam, we argue that a full appreciation of the text cannot be complete without a consideration of the innovative methods the author employs to convey the specimens discussed and portrayed in the book to the reader. Merian intended this work for her contemporaries first, and as a record of the natural history of Surinam second. For the purpose of our paper we focus on what seems in itself an anomaly: within a book ostensibly about the metamorphoses of the insects of Surinam the first two plates are dominated by a thriving, ripening fruit. In addition, the accompanying text of the first plate does not commence with the insects depicted alongside it, but rather is concerned with the fruit on which they themselves have focused their attentions. On turning the page, to reveal another representation of the fruit, now

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1 Printed in parallel editions in Dutch and Latin, 1705. Reprinted in 1719, 1726, 1730 and reissued in a parallel French and Latin translation in 1771.

ready for consumption, it becomes apparent that the metamorphosis of the fruit is an important choice. The remaining images in the text also exhibit a lush environment full of beautiful fruit, but none are treated quite so favourably, being given the same chance to transform from one form, dangerous and exotically enticing, into another that is equally beautiful, but now attractive, and sweet smelling.

In their combination, the text and images appeal to an interplay of senses of sight, taste, and smell that is crucial in revealing natural history objects found in the colonial space to the reader. We analyze the first two images depicting the pineapple as a means of communicating sense experience and sensorial objects to the commercial and consumer audience across the Atlantic. As artefacts for consumption, they transcend the visual sense. They transpose the act of tasting, smelling, and eventually eating the pineapple, complete with insects drawn alongside, into a much broader sensorial form for Merian's readers. The images of the pineapple – the taste of which is impossible to transmit across such large distances and thus inaccessible to the European sensescape – harness the other senses to the sense of sight through the exquisite pictorial interpretation. We argue that Merian's depiction provided trans-Atlantic access to her contemporaries who bought and read her book.

The large plates depicting pineapples are the first images that a reader of Merian's *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* will see. So large, that she will have to bend bodily over the page, and filled with lush color and lively insects; these plates are intended to impress, and they are notable for having a central focus on the fruit, rather than the cockroaches, caterpillars and butterflies that are implied in the title of the work that contains them. Maria Sibylla Merian's images show a metamorphosis, shifting from the unripe to the ripe pineapple: from the first, spiky, provocative image to the luscious, sumptuous, and appealing presentation of the pineapple surrounded by butterflies. The pineapple, for Merian's early modern European audience, was an exotic, luxurious fruit, embodying the riches and seductions of the New World and the colonial territories across the Atlantic. Like the colonies, the fruit was largely inaccessible in Europe, and the lush presentation of the pineapple is the means by which the readers of the *Metamorphosis* were able to overcome the obstacle of distance, not just through an artefact of vicarious observation, but through a much more encompassing sensorial experience. We show that Merian's choice of a pineapple is a deliberate act to attract the attention of subscribers and patrons who valued the access Merian's work gave them to the natural world.