



## ***Butterflies, Insects, and Currants, Jan van Kessel***

### **Butterflies, Insects, and Currants**

Jan van Kessel  
Flemish, about 1650–  
1655

Bodycolor and brown  
ink, over metalpoint  
underdrawing on  
parchment  
5 1/8 x 6 11/16 in.  
92.GC.50

Luminous red and white currants provide perches for various species of insects, while others crawl and hover over the page. Moths, beetles, wasps, flies, a ladybird, and a caterpillar are set in different places around the page. Jan van Kessel was one of the first artists to give structure, by using cast shadows to suggest a pictorial space, to scientific analyses of natural specimens. Instead of a specific setting, he preferred to use a blank ground, which allowed him to arrange the insects and fruits according to shifting yet interconnected vantage points (notice that the shadows are not all cast in the same direction).



Van Kessel probably made this drawing in the studio, based on close sketches from nature. He used bodycolor to show volume, as seen in the luminous, patterned wings of the moths. Transparent **washes** create light effects. Dark shadows are cast, from a light source at the top left, along the right sides of wings and underneath the insect's bodies, lifting them from the ground. Van Kessel assembled these insects to emphasize each specimen's distinct forms and markings.

### **About the Artist**

Jan van Kessel (Flemish, 1612–1679)

Jan van Kessel counted his uncle **Jan Brueghel the Younger** among his teachers. He joined the Antwerp painters' guild in 1645 and specialized in small-scale pictures of subjects taken from the natural world such as floral still lifes and **allegorical** series showing animal kingdoms, the four elements, the senses, or the parts of the world. Obsessed with picturesque detail, van Kessel worked from nature and used **scientific illustrations** as sources for the subject of his pictures.

## ***Butterflies, Insects, and Currants, Jan van Kessel***

Scholars trace many of van Kessel's subjects back to prototypes by his predecessors. **Joris Hoefnagel's** works inspired van Kessel's sensitive and delicate drawings of insects and flowers, executed mainly in watercolor on parchment. Van Kessel showed a preference for beetles, caterpillars, and butterflies and occasionally arranged caterpillars to spell out his name. The works of his grandfather **Jan Brueghel the Elder** and **Frans Snyders** influenced his paintings of animals.

### **Questions for Teaching**

What objects and animals do you see in this drawing?

Notice the negative space around the objects. How does this affect the way you look at the insects and fruit?

Which objects or insects are similar to each other? How are they similar? What do these similarities tell you about how these things are related to each other?

How does this image compare to insects that you might find in nature?

This image relates to the tradition of collecting specimens and pinning them to a blank space for observation. How does Hoefnagel go beyond strict observation with this drawing?