

Discussion Questions for

Maria Sibylla Merian: Artist, Scientist, Adventurer

By Sarah B. Pomeroy and Jeyaraney Kathirithamby

1. Both Maria Sibylla's biological father and stepfather had careers in the arts and publishing. They encouraged the young artist to pursue a career in the arts. How do you think it influenced the artist's relationship with her own daughters?
2. Maria Sibylla's stepfather, Jacob Marrell, introduced her to the art of miniatures flower painting by artists like Georg Flegel. How do you think this education in painting and drawing influences her early work?
3. Alongside Jacob Marrell's pupils, Maria Sibylla learned how to draw, mix paints, paint in the watercolor, and make prints. Can you identify a time when you "learned by doing"?
4. Describe how Maria Sibylla's images of caterpillar metamorphosis disproved a long-held belief that insects reproduced by spontaneous generation from decaying matter such as old meat or rotten fruit.
5. Later in life Maria Sibylla moved with her two daughters and elderly mother to a religious Protestant community. How did this change affect her life and work?
6. What innovations did Maria Sibylla use in her paintings?
7. What role did science and technological advances have in Maria Sibylla's work?
8. Maria Sibylla and Dorothea sailed for Surinam in 1699—what events were occurring in North America, Europe, and Asia at this time? What was the role of woman in most cultures at this time in history?
9. Maria Sibylla always painted insects with their host plant, but in Surinam, she never painted sugar cane. Explain her possible reasons.
10. Maria Sibylla's daughters played a large role in her work as a professional artist. On page 55, the Scarlet Ibis from Surinam is thought to have been painted by Dorothea instead of her mother. What evidence did art historians use to make that claim?
11. What role did Maria Sibylla's daughters play in preserving and spreading the legacy of their mother's work?

About This Book:

Science and art combine in this captivating, lushly illustrated biography of Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), one of the world's first entomologists, who was also a botanist, naturalist, and celebrated artist. This fascinating STEAM title begins in 1660 when, at the age of thirteen, Merian began her study of butterfly metamorphosis—years before any other scientist published an accurate description of the process. Later, she and her daughter Dorothea ventured thousands of miles from the Netherlands to the rain forests of South America seeking new and amazing insects to observe and illustrate.

The J. Paul Getty Museum

