

BRINGING IN THE MAY: MARIA SYBILLA MERIAN AND THE VIRGIN MARY

by Erica Vinskie

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May has arrived with a burst of bloom in garden and field, and so this May issue of The Global Spiral features the botanic illustrations of 17th century German naturalist, Maria Sybilla Merian. Merian's life and work is the subject of a new exhibit at the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam and a new book titled, *Chrysalis: Maria Sibylla Merian and the Secrets of Metamorphosis*, by Kim Todd.

Born in Frankfurt into a family of printers, engravers, and decorative artists, Merian's vast and emancipating talent would take her far in life – from joining a radical Pietist community in the Frisian borderland at age thirty-nine, to a subsequent divorce from her husband of over twenty years, to starting her own publishing venture in Amsterdam with her daughters using her maiden name, to an excursion in Suriname to study caterpillars at the age of fifty-two.¹ Well over a century before Darwin's fateful trip to the Galapagos, this remarkable woman was chronicling the flora and fauna of the South American rainforest not in words, but in stunning imagery.

Merian's illustrations are renowned not only for their detailed accuracy, but for their vibrant intensity of color, especially her unparalleled use of cochineal red, coupled with radiant oranges and purples.² And unlike the immortal gardens of the gods depicted in the master works of earlier generations, Merian's hand-colored engravings reveal a symbiosis of growth and decay, plant and animal, life, death and metamorphosis.



Maria Sybilla Merian (1647-1717), Parrot Tulip. Black chalk, body color and water color on vellum. 12.5x10".

¹ Ingrid D. Rowland, "The Flowering Genius of Maria Sybilla Merian," *The New York Review of Books*, 56 no. 6 (April 2009).

² Ibid.

May is also, respectively, the month of Mary whose association with the flora of Scripture was extended by the writings of the early Church Fathers.³ Marian flower symbolism, and Mary's connection to gardens and the month of May, is intimately intertwined, however, with ancient folklore predating Christianity. As is well known, goddesses of the ancient Greek and Roman pantheons were represented by particular flowers such as the poppy and violet for Aphrodite or the narcissus for Persephone.⁴

During the Middle Ages, popular folk traditions surrounding flowers and the month of May became associated with the Blessed Mother. Pre-Christian May Day celebrations, honoring new life, took on renewed significance as an occasion to honor Mary as the mother of all growing, living things.⁵ Revelers would rise before dawn and head into the fields and forest to "bring in the May" by gathering dew spangled flowers and greenery. These would then be made into garlands for adorning the May Queen. This tradition continues in many churches today where statues of Mary are crowned with wreaths of fresh flowers during May processions.

Another Marian tradition continuing from the Middle Ages until the present day is the cultivation of Mary Gardens. Mary Gardens sprung up around Medieval monasteries and countryside as serene devotional spaces for reverencing the Virgin. These fragrant gardens were abundantly seeded with species of flowers thought to represent Mary's virtues, such as the alabaster white snow drop for her purity, lily of the valley for her tears, and in a reinterpretation of the pagan past, Aphrodite's violet came to symbolize Mary's humility.⁶

It is not clear from the little we know of Maria Sybilla Merian's interior life how influenced she was by her religious piety in her love of natural philosophy. We do know that she was a devout Calvinist who discerned the workings of God in every mundane event and secular vocation. We can just imagine how she might have applied this same religious devotion and perceptibility to imaging the creation. In perceiving the virtues of the divine Mother in nature itself, Marianists too have peered behind the veil of change to glimpse the eternal. Through Merian's art and Marian floral symbolism, we catch sight of a kind of sacred imagination that affirms how, as St. Paul teaches, through things visible, we learn of the invisible.

³ Cf. St. Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins*, Book II, "Blessed Virgins, who emit a fragrance through divine grace as gardens do through flowers..."

⁴ Harold N. Moldenke, "Flowers of the Madonna," *Horticulture* (December 1953).

⁵ May was the month dedicated to the Roman goddess, Flora, goddess of bloom and spring.

⁶ For more on Marian flower symbolism, cf. Vincenzina Krymow, *Mary's Flowers: Gardens, Legends, and Meditations*, (Cincinnati: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2002).