

Review

Marisa Anne Bass, *Insect Artifice. Nature and Art in the Dutch Revolt*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2019, 297 pp. ISBN 9780691177151.



Art and discovery were often impossible to disentangle in early modern natural sciences. When Louis XIV sent the botanist Tournefort to the Levant in 1700, he asked Aubriet, *peintre du roi*, and Gundelsheimer, a German medical doctor, to accompany him. Together, they were to collaborate and identify new plant specimens, examine them, discover their characteristics, and, importantly, produce images of them. This was the best way to ensure that the trip would advance the knowledge of botany. Louis XIV's request was not out of the ordinary. Much earlier, Conrad Gessner's *Historia Animalium* (1551-1558) – considered the first comprehensive zoological work – followed a similar process. The encyclopaedic volumes combined explanatory text and detailed images to educate and inspire nat-

uralists, collectors, and artists. This method of producing knowledge at the intersection of art and science is one that has received increased scholarly attention in recent years. In her most recent book, the beautifully illustrated *Insect Artifice*, Marisa Bass expands her analytical framework beyond the contemplation of collaboration between artists and scientists and the consideration of the distinction between artworks and scientific illustrations. The focus of Bass's work is the *Four Elements*, a series of four small manuscripts produced by the Antwerp-born artist Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600), one of the many artists influenced by Gessner. By examining Hoefnagel's life experiences and what she calls his 'intellectual biography', Bass compellingly argues that the drive to learn about, observe, and illustrate life and nature was not always borne out of only or even necessarily from the desire to create and disseminate knowledge. Furthermore, she contends, it is possible for illustrations to belong to a category of their own, part artwork and part epistemic image.

Bass begins by introducing Hoefnagel, a merchant who became an artist out of necessity. As the Dutch Revolt engulfed his hometown of Antwerp, he felt compelled to emigrate. Unable to carry on as a merchant he turned to art, traveling with his cartographer friend Abraham Ortelius through modern-day Germany and Italy. Hoefnagel settled at the court of Albrecht V of Bavaria and that of his successor, Wilhelm V; he spent the last years of his life at the imperial court of Rudolf II. Drawing heavily from the illuminated manuscript tradition of the late medieval period as well as from treatises such as Gessner's, and inspired by Albrecht Dürer and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Hoefnagel spent decades producing the *Four Elements* (now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.). Each folio consists of a painted gold oval inside which various creatures are illustrated with life-like details. In most instances, there is text above and below the oval, as well as on the left-hand side page, which faces the illustration. The text is most often borrowed from the Bible, although not exclusively: Erasmus and the Italian mythographer and poet Natale Conti, for example, also make appearances. Each manuscript is assigned one of the elements as a theme and is associated with a kingdom: *Ignis* (fire) with insects; *Terra* (earth) with mammals and reptiles; *Aqua* (water) with fish and other sea creatures; and *Aier* (air) with birds. *Ignis* contains the most folios.

Bass sums up her thesis as follows: 'Hoefnagel's *Four Elements* makes sense only when considered in light of the material and humanistic practices that defined his Antwerp years.' Thus, *Insect Artifice* is divided into two parts: part I is entitled the *Hammer and the Nail*, while part II is entitled *Nature's Unmasterable Elements*. In part I, the reader is presented with an intellectual and experiential biography of Hoefnagel: his life in Antwerp before and during the Dutch Revolt; the importance of emblems and mottos in his development as an artist; the creation of his earliest surviving manuscript, *Patientia*; and his participation in what Bass calls the 'monuments of friendship' – *alba amicorum*, letters, laudatory poems, and the like. In part II, Bass analyses the process of production as well as the contents of the *Four Elements* through the filter of the humanistic practices explored in part I. It is in part II that she weaves the argument that the *Four Elements* are the product of the artist's meditations on war, exile, God, and nature and that, as such, they can provide insight into 'the larger world of thought and experience to which [Hoefnagel] belonged'.

In developing her argument, Bass relies upon a mix of examples drawn from Hoefnagel's life and work as well as upon sources with which he would have been familiar. For example, her close examination of Hoefnagel's *Patientia*, in chapter two, convincingly shows the significance of nature and emblems in Hoefnagel's work. Critically, she states that the greatest significance of that manuscript is that it suggests that the *process* of making the book mattered more to Hoefnagel than the finished product itself, and that nature appealed to Hoefnagel as the relief against the angst of his existence as an exile.

By way of further example, in the final chapter Bass discusses the relationship between Albrecht Dürer's *Stag Beetle* (1505), one of the most famous insect illustrations of all time, and Hoefnagel's reproduction. This discussion provides a vivid visual example in support of her argument that above all, Hoefnagel was awed by nature as a creation of God and moved to meditate upon it. Hoefnagel used Dürer's illustration as a model, but he

modified the body of the beetle by adding links between the torso and the head (missing in Dürer's original) and manipulated the shadow to make it seem as though the beetle might be leaving the page any moment. In doing so, Bass writes, Hoefnagel declared his respect for Dürer, but insisted that nature (that is, God) be given primacy. For Hoefnagel, the stag beetle was a metaphor for the anxiety one feels about something that is known, but not understood – in his case, war, God, and nature. This was the anxiety that informed much of his adult life, and the production of the *Four Elements*.

Bass introduces some interesting concepts throughout, some of which not commonly used in art historical research. For example, Bass's reliance in chapter three on the landscape architecture concept of *genius loci* – the genius of the place – is interesting and insightful. She applies the concept, which she cites for the proposition that nature and landscape have an innate character which influences what and how we build on them, to Hoefnagel's travels and the engravings and descriptions he produced for Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg's *Civitates orbis terrarum* (1572-1617). She suggests that throughout Hoefnagel's contributions to the *Civitates*, 'Antwerp surfaces as a site of memory'. By drawing significance from the relationship between Hoefnagel and Ortelius and their travels together and relating them to Hoefnagel's artistic production in the *Civitates*, Bass articulates a concept of 'place' as the intersection of geography, location, and setting, but also as involving the contextualisation and circulation of knowledge, which is very effective.

As stated at the outset, Hoefnagel focused extensively on *Ignis*, and so does Bass. While Hoefnagel could draw from existing works in illustrating *Terra*, *Aqua*, and *Aier*, there were very few sources available to him when he illustrated *Ignis*. His work, therefore, is almost entirely based on observation, hence the belief amongst some scholars that the *Four Elements* constitutes proto-science. Yet Bass insists that is not the case. She reminds the reader that the *Four Elements*, as a manuscript, could have been intended for a small audience only, as opposed to the wide dissemination of knowledge. Furthermore, the work is not encyclopaedic and no attempt at categorisation emerges. Instead, Bass proposes an appealing alternative: what Hoefnagel produced was analogous to a 'paper museum' – a collection of images, objects, and letters assembled by the artist for private use and limited circulation among friends and collaborators. These paper museums were common amongst collectors: Ulysses Aldrovandi, for example, had a rather famous one.

The *Four Elements* have been the subject of comprehensive scholarship most recently by Thea Vignau-Wilberg in *Joris and Jacob Hoefnagel. Art and Science around 1600* (Berlin 2017). Vignau-Wilberg, who has written extensively about the significance of emblems in Hoefnagel's work, situates the *Four Elements* both within Hoefnagel's oeuvre and at the origins of natural science. Marjorie Lee Hendrix and Janice Neri, who have also researched and written about the *Four Elements*, focus on the place of the manuscripts within the realm of nature painting and at the origins of the natural sciences, respectively. Given the broader analytical framework used by Bass, *Insect Artifice* adds materially to the body of scholarship on these important manuscripts.

This otherwise superb book is occasionally marred, though only slightly, by relying on florid expression when simple declarations would do: '*Acqua* weighs in as the least ample volume' surely could have been rendered as '*Acqua* is the shortest manuscript'.

Finally, a note on the production value of the book. Just as the work of Hoefnagel was heavily influenced by emblems, *Insect Artifice* references the relationship between text and image with the inclusion of eighty or so pages of full-size colour plates reproduced from the *Four Elements*, bound in the literal middle of the book – much as they are at the heart of Bass's inquiry. A combination of rigorous scholarship and marvellous production, *Insect Artifice* is a model for art historians and publishers alike.

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