



Butterfly, Caterpillar, Moth, Insects, and Currants, Jan van Kessel

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Jan van Kessel

Flemish, 1650–1655

Bodycolor and brown ink over metalpoint underdrawing on vellum

5 1/8 x 6 11/16 in.

92.GC.50



Background Information

In this drawing, luminous red and white currants provide perches for various **insects**, while others, including a moth, ladybug, caterpillar, and fly, are set in different places around the page. Jan van Kessel was one of the first artists to create horizontally arranged drawings of fruits and flowers, giving structure to scientific analyses of natural **specimens**. He used cast shadows to suggest a pictorial space in his drawings. 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. 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 moth and butterfly. Transparent **washes** create **light** effects; a light source at the top left creates dark shadows along the right sides of wings and underneath the insects' 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, 1626–1679)

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

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Kessel worked from nature and used **scientific illustrations** as sources for the subjects of his pictures.

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 **Roelandt Savery, Frans Snyders,** and Van Kessel's grandfather **Jan Brueghel the Elder** influenced his paintings of animals.

Questions for Teaching

What do you see in this drawing?

What types of lines do you see?

What types of shapes? Which shapes are organic and which are geometric?

Where do you see similar lines or shapes?

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?

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

How do these insects compare to those you might find in nature?

This image relates to the tradition of collecting specimens and pinning them to a blank surface for observation.

How does Van Kessel go beyond strict observation with this drawing?