
This compilation is the result of a multidisciplinary conference held in 2008 at the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden. Each essay was required to enter into a scholarly dialogue utilizing Harold Cook’s Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age (2007) as a starting point. Julie Berger Hochstrasser, an art historian specializing in seventeenth-century Dutch painting, comments on the role of embodied cognition in relation to Maria Sibylla Merian’s contributions to European scientific understanding. Her argument draws heavily on the ideas pioneered by Benedict Anderson regarding the “imagined community” and Bruno Latour regarding epistemology (60, 62). Hochstrasser grapples with the colloquialism, “you had to be there,” as it has been recently been academically defined as dynamical systems theory, embodied cognition, and situated learning, three somewhat divergent concepts which all access the idea that cognition is the result of the interaction between an individual’s mind and the larger environment (67). The most basic level of the relationship between Merian’s work and embodied cognition is explicitly defined by the fact that she needed to be in Suriname in order to process the knowledge she obtained in the way she did: her personal experience was integral to her final product. In reference to Merian’s visual representations of her observations, Hochstrasser notes that “no amount of verbal description could ever communicate the complexity of their (Merian’s specimens) patterns, so meticulously recorded in Merian’s image; this remains decidedly within the realm of perceptual knowledge” (69). This essay provides a useful framework for the study of the observation of new cultures and information, addressing problems including the arrangement of specimens on a page, decisions concerning what information to include or exclude, and the pragmatic issues associated with translation and transportation of knowledge and samples. As a whole, Hochstrasser’s analysis is of interest to scholars interested not only in Maria Sibylla Merian, but anyone concerned with the development of knowledge networks and the evolution of scientific knowledge as it relates to visual imagery.

Review available for consultation:


*Please note that this review is of the text as a whole and is not dedicated to Julie Berger Hochstrasser’s contribution.

-Lauren M. Freese