**Insects Large and Small**

Tiny, age-old creatures, insects make up approximately 70% of all known species on earth, encompassing a rich diversity that continues to grow with every new scientific discovery. These creatures can be found across global cultures—in faiths, beliefs, myths, and aesthetics, as well as poetry, literature, art, cinema, and other fields. Their forms and traits can evoke dread and disgust, yet they are equally enchanting and fascinating. Their life cycle, resilience, striking morphologies, and the metaphors they inspire have long stirred the imaginations of the artists featured in "Insects: Large and Small."

Scientific Aspects: Insects, a class of arthropods, have an exoskeleton, a three-part body (head, thorax, abdomen), and three pairs of legs. They may be winged or wingless, able to fly or walk above or below ground. They exhibit remarkable navigational skills and resilience in extreme temperatures, inspiring admiration for their cooperative social structures and ever-evolving ways of life. Insects play a vital role in ecosystems as pollinators and decomposers, though some can be harmful—as agricultural pests or vectors of disease.

Mythical Aspects: Humanity's relationship with insects has long been ambivalent, ranging from reverence to revulsion. In ancient Egypt, the scarab symbolized renewal and rebirth; it was considered an earthly manifestation of the sun god Ra and was elevated to sacred status. Scarabs adorn countless archaeological finds: jewelry, royal seals, and amulets believed to offer protection in life and the afterlife.

The bee has also enjoyed an exalted status across various cultures. The social behavior of worker bees within the hive serves as a metaphor for cosmic order, diligence, and purity. Among the Maya, the bee was considered sacred and symbolized fertility, spirituality, and abundance, while honey was believed to possess healing properties and was used in religious ceremonies.

Visual Aspects: German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) was among the first to celebrate the beetle in art. His 1505 painting *Stag Beetle*, a realistic painting from observation created decades before the invention of the microscope, placed the insect at center stage—a revolutionary notion in an era that viewed insects as lowly, even abject creatures at the bottom of the hierarchy in Western religious thought, according to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike.

The invention of the microscope in the late 16th century revolutionized the study of insects and their visual documentation. Through its lens, a magnificent, wondrous microworld with intricate anatomy was revealed. Entomologists required detailed illustrations to record their findings—some drawn by their own hand, others by professional artists.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, insects frequently appeared in Dutch and Flemish Vanitas paintings, serving as symbols of the fleeting nature of material existence and the believer's imperative to lead a virtuous life in preparation for the afterlife. Other artists depicted nature as a source of close observation and awe.

In the second half of the 19th century, Victorian fashion went so far as to incorporate live insects into jewelry. This interest in symbols drawn from nature and exotic cultures was fueled in part by archaeological findings unearthed in Egypt.

In the late 19th century, the Art Nouveau movement emerged as a response to the Industrial Revolution and the sweeping social changes that followed,which were reflected in everyday life. It also drew inspiration from Japanese artistic traditions. Its aesthetic principles included curving and flowing lines, as well as motifs from the natural world. In jewelry, insects such as dragonflies, butterflies, bees, and beetles were featured, showcasing innovative use of materials. The insect forms, along with themes of metamorphosis, freedom, and fleeting beauty, were imbued with mystery and evoked enchantment.

The Exhibition: The twenty participating artists offer a window into direct and indirect compelling engagements with insects, viewed from a range of perspectives. Some correspond with or pay homage to artists of the past, echoing symbols of beauty. They explore themes such as the transition between life and death, survival, extinction, childhood memories, the affinities between art and science, as well as beliefs and myths, sharing personal reflections and interpretations.

The exhibition spans a variety of media: painting, photography, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, glass, jewelry, ceramics, and scientific illustration. Featured insects include bees, wasps, ants, butterflies, beetles, dragonflies, mosquitoes, flies, and praying mantises. These insects may serve as an allegory for the universe's perpetual motion and transformation, reflecting both evolutionary processes and their interpretation across cultures throughout human history.

**Irit Levin, Curator**

Assistance in textual content: Dr. Dorit Kedar

Dror Burstein's book *Small World: Portraits of Insects* (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2021) [Hebrew] has been a wellspring of inspiration for this exhibition*.*

Sources: Nigel E. Stork, "How Many Species of Insects and Other Terrestrial Arthropods Are There on Earth?" (2018); David Grimaldi and Michael S. Engel, *Evolution of the Insects* (2005); "*Stag Beetle*, Albrecht Dürer," Education Department, J. Paul Getty Museum website (2008); Janice Neri, *The Insect and the Image: Visualizing Nature in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700* (2011).