

**THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT,
FROM THE SYMBOLIC
TO THE SCIENTIFIC.**



Aurelians

**Words by Dana Covit.
Photography, creative direction, and
styling by Nong Rak. Makeup by Layla Clapton.
Modeled by Jakara Rogers and Sophia Flores.**





Butterflies...are like dream flowers
—childhood dreams—which have
broken loose from their stalks and
escaped into the sunshine.

—Miriam Rothschild



A single butterfly is a thing of disproportionate beauty. You could understand why a person might feel compelled to snatch one up and pin its wings inside a frame. But a swarm, an abundance of butterflies—they are a kaleidoscope, a flourish of natural might, powerful and mystifying at once. As luck would have it, the word for a group of butterflies is, in fact, a kaleidoscope. Isn't it nice when language works out that way?

As I am writing this, a kaleidoscope, then, of butterflies—painted ladies—is migrating through Los Angeles and its sprawl. They are tumbling down the hillsides like wind-drunk leaves. They are drifting and darting over the highways in waves, on a one-way passage from the deserts near the California/Mexico border up to the Cascade Range. You would be hard-pressed to have a conversation with someone in the city and not find talk turn to these winged visitors. We are transformed by their presence—and that has long been the case.

As diurnal creatures, we share the same waking hours with butterflies. They occupy all manner of environments—coastal cliffs, jungles, suburban backyards, and even, especially during migration periods, cities. They belong to the order *Lepidoptera* (derived from the Greek word for 'scale' and 'wing'), which also includes moths (one way to tell the two apart: due to their wing physiology, butterflies flutter, moths buzz). Some of the colors we see are a butterfly's pigment (usually oranges, yellows, and blacks), whereas the more brilliant or iridescent hues are structural—the way light reflects off wing scale. Some butterflies have elaborate patterning and the names to prove it—fritillaries and peacocks, for example. Some are ghostly and ethereal, like the whites and sulphurs of the *Pieridae* family. Some we bestow with power and title, like admirals

and monarchs. Metalmarks and swallowtails tell us what sets them apart in their names alone. Butterflies communicate via trails of scent, ripples mostly undetectable to us, but distinguishable from species to species. Some are musky, others sweet, some are ever so citrus-inflected. Certain butterflies may drink from toxic flowers to infuse their small bodies with poison—all the better for staving off predators.

All butterflies follow the same life cycle. And it's no wonder, really, that they're so associated with transformation and possibility. The splitting open of the quiet chrysalis, the bursting forth of airborne color that was once a chubby caterpillar is awe-inspiring—bizarre and otherworldly. To add to their ineffability, the adult life of a butterfly is often no more than a few weeks—some a bit more, some less, some as little as a few days. All that work, for such a short span of time... and for no apparent evolutionary reason, either. Butterflies are pollinators, but compared to bees? Well, there's no comparison. With an air of poetic drama, butterflies seem to embody the glory and finiteness of living.

The ancient Greeks used the same word for butterfly as they did for soul (as in, the soul of the dead): *psyche*. Then, excavated from beneath the volcanic ash of Pompeii, mosaic butterfly wings were found nestled alongside skulls and wheels—messages of death, rebirth, time, and transformation. In China, butterfly symbolism has ancient roots in the philosophical text, the *Zhuangzi*, wherein a philosopher dreams he is a butterfly and emerges from the sleep pondering identity, illusion, and the possibility of transformation. In 17th century Europe, Dutch Golden Age artists painted lush, life-like butterflies in their still-life compositions—but the inclusion remained gestural, abstract. They stand in for Christian values of life and death, hope, the soul, goodness and evil; their multivalent meanings transform from one painting to the next, with no import or scientific gravitas given to the butterflies themselves. They are mysterious and beautiful—and that is enough.

But around this time, an artist named Maria Sibylla Merian began to do the work of freeing butterflies from the symbolic realm. Born into a family of artists in 1647 and married by age 16, Merian published the first in her trilogy of flower engraving collections in 1675. Still, her truest love remained the caterpillars and butterflies she had admired since childhood. In 1679, Merian published *Caterpillars, Their Wondrous Transformation and Peculiar Nourishment from Flowers*, based upon observations of metamorphosis made from her own garden. Twenty years later, she set out on an expedition to South America accompanied by her daughter. Their journey to Suriname, then a Dutch colony, predates Darwin's voyages by more than a century. There, Merian spent two years collecting specimens and illustrating, and in 1705, *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensum* was published. Her detailed compositions of the life cycles of the creatures she studied are regarded as the first to radically break rank and depict dynamic ecological scenes and behaviors. Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish naturalist responsible for the taxonomy classifications still in use today, would go on to use Merian's drawings to classify some 100 species of insects decades later. Today, Merian is regarded as a forebear of modern entomology and ecology.

Though women's scientific contributions were routinely downplayed or overlooked—women were not admitted to the Linnean



The ancient Greeks used the same word for butterfly as they did for soul (as in, the soul of the dead): psyche.

— An *aurelian* is a butterfly fanatic; the word comes from aurelia, another term for a chrysalis (because *aurum* means gold in Latin, and some chrysalises turn golden just before the butterfly emerges).

— Above my bed / another sky / with the wings you sent / within my sight / all pain dissolves / In another light. / Transported thru / time / by the butterfly. — from *Noguchi's Butterflies* by Patti Smith, a poem inspired by the butterfly collection Frida Kahlo hung over her bed, a present from Isamu Noguchi.



BROCCOLI LOVES

1. Dogwood Botanicals Folk wisdom and butterfly-attracting dogwood trees inspired these earth-conscious hemp extracts. Presented in Partnership with Dogwood Botanicals (dogwoodbotanicals.com).
2. *Blooms: Contemporary Floral Design* If a bookworm metamorphosed into a butterfly, it would read Phaidon's (phaidon.com) collection of arrangements by 80+ flower artists.



Society until 1904, even though Carl Linnaeus himself actively referenced Merian's body of work in his own research—the study of butterflies became a haven of sorts. Emma Hutchinson (1820-1906), a Victorian lepidopterist, went so far as to title her 1879 book *Entomology and Botany as Pursuits for Ladies*. Perhaps taking this advice, Margaret Elizabeth Fountaine, born in 1862, spent her life and considerable fortune traveling the world collecting butterflies. She visited some sixty countries and kept detailed journals with notes and illustrations; she published in *The Entomologist's Record and Journal of Variation*, and contributed specimens to the British Museum. In 1898, she became the only female member of the Royal Entomological Society. These women, with their curiosity and attention trained on butterflies, helped cultivate substance beyond symbolism. Their work seeded the perspective that butterflies are unique, complex creatures—valuable, fascinating, and worthy in and of themselves.

As you read this, that kaleidoscope of painted ladies traveling across Los Angeles will have reached their final destination in the Pacific Northwest. They will all have died some time ago. Many will have laid their eggs, to begin the sublime cycle of toil and transformation all over again. Perhaps these women of the world of *Lepidoptera* saw something of their own condition and ambition in their winged subjects. After all, radical change is the foundation of butterflies' impossible-seeming existence—a declaration that anything might be possible, and that what's possible might change everything.



Featured clothing and props are vintage or made by Nong Rak using vintage textiles, and all butterflies used were ethically sourced.



Inside a chrysalis during metamorphosis, a caterpillar releases enzymes which liquefy its entire body, minus a few essential groups of cells called "imaginal discs," essentially consuming itself in order to become a butterfly.



3



4

BROCCOLI LOVES

3. Lobmeyr Balloon Double Painted Butterfly Glasses Inspired by Maria Sybilla Merian's engravings, these delicate specimens are available at MARCH (marchsf.com). Photography by Ben Kist for MARCH.

4. Sunday Goods Spark Effect Pen An energizing vape makes a hike to see the monarch migration even more magical. Presented in partnership with Sunday Goods (sundaygoods.com).