

Natural born beauties

BY JULIE CARTER

It was the nineteenth century obsession with the natural world that led to the acceptance of insects in jewellery.

From the sixteenth century, wealthy merchants and scholars had been collecting natural objects, filling their specimen cabinets with items collected from around the world and competing with one another for ever more exotic specimens. By the nineteenth century - thanks largely to the discoveries of Charles Darwin - the passion had spread to the middle classes, and no parlour was fit for entertaining without a suitably stocked glass-covered box of mounted entomological specimens. Insects were a particular favourite.

In an odd twist, the very creatures that would send most ladies shrieking (were they to find them actually crawling over their person) were those that the jewellers initially chose for their designs. Thus in the nineteenth century it was quite common for a lady to wear a brooch of a beetle or earwig, or perhaps a grasshopper or wood lice attached to her hat. Crystal flies were attached as pendants, and dried scarabs were specially imported to be mounted in earrings, brooches and bracelets. Most insects were presented as a representation, rather than in their dried form, if for no other reason than practicality; as fashion critic Mrs H.R. Haweis wrote in *The Art of Beauty* in 1883: 'A butterfly, though beautiful in itself, would not be beautiful for you as a headdress...whilst leaning against a cushion, the wings would crush and shatter...thus, a butterfly should always be treated conventionally and... in a material such as metal.'

In the mid-1850s, after US navy Commodore Matthew Perry paved the way for trade between the West and Japan, Europe developed a mania for all things Japanese. The simplicity of design and the Japanese expression of the natural world were copied by the Western artists, who began incorporating Eastern

**"Insects are born
from the sun...they are
the sun's kisses."**

*Russian composer Alexander Scriabin
(1872-1915)*



Above: Multicoloured enamel butterfly c.1960s, \$495 courtesy Christopher Becker Antiques, Sydney. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Blue, green and yellow enamelled butterfly c.1920, \$525 courtesy Kalmar Antiques, Sydney; pale blue enamel butterfly c.1960, \$345 courtesy Christopher Becker Antiques, Sydney. Black and yellow enamel bumblebee \$225, and blue and yellow enamel butterfly c.1930 \$630, courtesy Kalmar Antiques, Sydney. Gold beetle brooch, \$645 courtesy Christopher Becker Antiques, Sydney. Reproduction dragonfly brooches from \$225 to \$595, courtesy Kalmar Antiques, Sydney. Diamond encrusted bee brooch with ruby eyes, courtesy Christopher Becker Antiques, Sydney.

influences into their work.

Renowned jewellery manufacturers such as Tiffany and Co, Cartier and Lalique evolved a technique similar to Japanese *shakudo* (adding oxidation solutions to the copper-like *shakudo* to form a purple/black patina often used as a base for gold) to achieve a fine veined effect on the insect wings. The metals used in insect jewellery designs included 18ct to 22ct gold, rose gold, rolled gold, tri-colour gold and silver, as well as electroplating a base metal object to make it look like gold. Popular gemstones included diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, garnets, amethyst, turquoise, aquamarine, corals and pearls, applied to everything from hair jewellery and brooches to earrings, lockets, necklaces, stickpins and rings. And to paraphrase George Orwell in *Animal Farm*, some insects were more equal than others...

The ant

Ants were popular as a symbol of strength and energy, patience and perseverance. They also represent organisation and group planning, because of their colonisation; the Chinese identified the ant as 'the



Natural born beauties cont.

Above left: A set of pietra dura cufflinks and studs with fly motif, \$795. **Above right:** Moonstone spider brooch, \$185. **FRONT COVER:** A pair of blue butterfly enamel earrings c.1960, \$295. All shown courtesy Christopher Becker Antiques, Sydney.

righteous insect.'

The fly

In Middle Kingdom Egypt, membership in the Order of the Golden Fly was a coveted honour and the most valiant soldiers and diligent public servants were rewarded with gold pendants in the form of a fly. The ancient Egyptians admired the fly for its swiftness and persistence, creating 'magic wands' that were carved from hippopotamus ivory and were used to protect the owner from harm.

The beetle

There are as many as one million different species of beetle, making them the largest single order in the animal kingdom. The dung beetle, or scarab, was especially important to the ancient Egyptians, who saw it as a symbol of the sun and eternal life. They wore scarab jewellery for protection, and scarab rings were considered to bring good luck. The scarabs found in the tomb of King Tutankhamun were carved from lapis lazuli, which is not found in Egypt, but imported from Afghanistan – over three thousand kilometres away.

The bee

Bees are generally considered in a positive manner, admired for their industry and the fact that for thousands of years they produced man's only sweetener. Bee-keeping is depicted in Egyptian temple reliefs from the 5th Dynasty (2445-2441 BC), and we know that the Egyptians collected and used beeswax as a paint varnish

and also as a mould-former in metal castings. In jewellery, the bee also denotes industrious teamwork and a sense of order.

The dragonfly

Darwin called them 'the tyrants of the insect world,' but the dragonfly is really just an extremely well-designed creature. It has three simple eyes and a pair of compound eyes that provide a vision of almost 360 degrees, and four wings that move independently. The delicate

The painter Salvador Dali often carried live beetles with him to social engagements.

appearance of the dragonfly has inspired jewellery makers since Victorian times, when they were often set with precious stones to their wings. By the early twentieth century and the emergence of the Art Nouveau movement, dragonflies in jewellery had become graceful and almost ephemeral, their wings set *en tremblant* so they appeared to literally tremble. The wings were often created using enamelling between fine veins of silver or gold, so that when the dragonfly was held to the light there was a gossamer effect. The dragonfly represents a maturity and depth of character, as well as power and poise.

The butterfly

How to present the butterfly as an

ethereal creature of flight? This was the problem facing the jewellers of the early nineteenth century. They resolved the issue by setting the jewellery on the end of a stiff yet flexible wire that quivered and created the movement of a real butterfly. Butterflies were often also made as hair ornaments, to look as though they had recently alighted in the wearer's tresses. In China the butterfly is a symbol of joy; it's also a symbol of transformation. Rather more surprisingly, given its short lifespan, it can be used as a symbol for a long life. This could have its origins with the ancient Greeks, who believed the butterfly was the soul of someone who had passed away.

The spider

An ancient symbol of mystery, power and growth, it's been suggested that the prevalence of spider jewellery is related to the human desire to scare oneself whilst not really being in any danger – a bit like enjoying a horror movie. But in ancient times the spider was also linked to bliss and closely related to love, and it was thought that a bride who had a spider on her gown would have a long and happy marriage.

Ref: Nissenson, M & Jonas, S, *Jewelled bugs and butterflies*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, USA, 2000.

Kalmar Antiques is in the QVB Building, George Street, Sydney city. Tel: 02 9264 3663 or email: kalmar@ozemail.com.au

Christopher Becker Antiques is at Sydney Antique Centre, Surry Hills, NSW 2010. Tel: 02 9361 3244 or email: christophermbecker@mac.com