

PRESS RELEASE

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Unknown artist, *Large tropical moths from South-East Asia and America*, hand-colored engraving from Albertus Seba, *Locupletissimi Rerum Naturalium Thesauri* (1734-65)

Passion of Butterfly & Moth Collectors on Display at SBMNH

- *The Collectors: A Life in Lepidoptera* runs April 24–September 7, 2026
- In John and Peggy Maximus Gallery at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History
- Exhibit about butterflies and moths and the collectors who have studied them
- Features beautiful hand-colored antique natural history prints, specimens, and tools

SANTA BARBARA, CA—Butterflies are taking wing on paper at Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, a month before the Museum opens its famous summer exhibit of live butterflies. An exhibition of rare antique natural history prints depicting butterflies and moths displayed alongside actual specimens, *The Collectors: A Life in Lepidoptera* opens April 24 in the John and Peggy Maximus Gallery.

“The life of a collector is obsession and passion,” says Maximus Gallery Curator Linda Miller. *The Collectors: A Life in Lepidoptera* traces that passion for collecting and studying butterflies and moths among naturalists, artists, and collectors from the early eighteenth century to the present day. It begins with Maria Sibylla Merian, who risked life and limb for Lepidoptera in 1699. Setting sail from Holland for tropical Surinam, over 4,000 miles away, she would return two years later bearing eyewitness studies of exotic butterflies and moths. Her subsequent book—*Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705)—turned those studies into ecological compositions showing these beautiful and diverse creatures in relation to their life cycles, habitats, and diets for the first time. The exhibit features Merian’s engraving of a *Rothschildia* silkworm, its caterpillar, and its pupa all carefully arranged around one of its preferred sources of food and shelter: the branch of a Seville orange tree.

“The art on display dates from a time when artists and naturalists began to see insects as a serious object of study,” explains Miller. “The lives of these collectors reveal not only the beauty and mystery of butterflies, but the development of scientific thought over past centuries.” Skilled artists with scientific understanding disseminated knowledge in publications that also advertised the genteel status of their consumers and patrons. An illustration from Jacques-Louis Florentin Engramelle’s *Papillons d’Europe* (1779–93) on display shows how lepidoptery was fashionable: a young lepidopterist stands in open heathland dressed for the *rue Saint-Honoré*, elegantly leaning in to capture a new addition to his collection.

Lepidoptery may no longer be the height of fashion, but the passion for butterflies and moths remains, and its continuation across generations and centuries of collectors has yielded genuine insights for science. Many of the specimens in U.S. museums have been given by avid collectors, and the perpetuation of this labor of love provides data about how insect species and populations change across time and space. “They’re referred to as ‘amateurs,’ but their work is significant,” says Miller. “Their dedication has created a bounty of specimens and data that researchers continue to learn from.”

The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History is no exception to this history of collectors making a difference for science. *The Collectors* pays tribute to four recent donors of specimens, showcasing the gifts and stories of keen lepidopterists Ken Denton, Tom Dimock, and Paul and Sandy Russell. Their distinct contributions have significantly expanded the Museum’s Entomology Collection, enhancing the Museum’s ability to serve as a resource for researchers.

The Collectors is included with admission to the Museum. The Museum is open daily, 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM. For more information, visit sbnature.org/maximus.

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About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

Powered by Science. Inspired by Nature. The Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History connects people to nature for the betterment of both, drawing on collections that preserve the natural and cultural heritage of the Central Coast and beyond. Founded in 1916, the Museum is a private nonprofit supported in part by philanthropy, membership, and visitors. Members visit free. For more information, visit sbnature.org.



Every anatomical detail on the caterpillar is exquisitely observed in this work by Maria Sibylla Merian, *Rothschildia Silk Moth, Caterpillar, and Pupa on Seville Orange Tree*, engraving from *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* (1705).