Nicolaas Struyk (Amsterdam 1686–1769)

A King Crab, Lizards, Spiders and a Beetle

Bodycolour and watercolour on paper with period black and gold ruled beige card mount
44.4 by 28 cm; 17½ by 11 in.

Provenance
Private collection, Switzerland.

Literature
T.O. Weigel, 1862, catalogue XIII.
H. A. Hagen, *Biblioteca Entomologica*. *Die Litteratur über das ganze Gebiet der Entomologie, bis zum Jahre 1862*, Leipzig 1862-1863, Vol. II, p. 394.

Little is known about the mathematician Nicolaas Struyck's childhood and education.[1] He was born on 21 May 1686 in Amsterdam as the son of the goldsmith Nicolaas Struyck Nicolaaszoon, a faithful member of the Lutheran church. As a little boy he went out with his father catching butterflies. Soon Struyck was in contact with collectors of natural history specimens and assembled a modest collection. By 1718, Struyck had produced six substantial folios with insect drawings. Later in life he was to write that "formerly, insects were my favourite pastime". Struyck never married and died in Amsterdam in 1769. At some point, Struyck's love of natural history morphed into a passion for mathematics. In the field of mathematic he remained a collector: instead of chasing butterflies, he collected empirical data with the aim to discover lawlike patterns.

Nicolaas Struyck, *Verschuyden Uyt-lansche Insecten, 1719*. Bodycolor, grey wash and ink, 447 x 280 mm. Present whereabouts unknown

Nicolaas Struyck, *Insects*. Transparent and opaque watercolour and grey wash, 444 x 281 mm. Minneapolis Institute of

The curiosities and natural history specimens in Dutch collector's cabinets of the late seventeenth century were after all perceived as a small-scale reflection of the world. Struyck started his mathematical work around 1712, when he was 26 years old. Like many beginning mathematicians at the time, he first performed calculations of solar and lunar eclipses. In his *Uytreekening der kanssen in het speelen* ("Calculation of Chances in Games") published in 1716, Struyck displayed his interest in probability calculus. He continued his research into comets to the end of his life. After the publication of his *Inleiding* ("Introduction") in 1740 he carried on tirelessly. The many references to books and papers in foreign journals show that he read profusely and carried on correspondence with colleagues in many countries. However, since his books were published in Dutch, Struyck never received international recognition.

All Struyck's drawings have the same contemporary black and gold ruled beige card mounts, so-called Seba mounts. Three title pages with Struyck's signature, dated 1715 and 1719, also support the idea that these sheets originated from albums. The 1719 title page bears the

[1] H. J. Zuidervaart, *Early quantification of scientific knowledge: Nicolaas Struyck (1686-1769), as a collector of empirical data*, p. 127

inscription “Verschyden, Uyt-lansche Insecten, geteekent na het Cabinet van d’Hn. Seba, J. ten Kate, &c., versamelt door N. Struyck, junior, 1719”, suggesting the drawings were executed after insects in the cabinet of Albertus Seba and others.[2]

Nicolaas Struyck, *Four beetles and a Flying Stink Bug*. Pen, ink, watercolour, gouache, 437 x 288 mm. Jean Paul Getty Museum, 2007.28

Around 1700, East-Frisian born Albertus Seba (1665-1736) opened a pharmacy near the Amsterdam harbour.[3] Seba delivered drugs to the V.O.C. ships departing to the Far East, asking sailors and ship surgeons to bring back exotic plants and animals used for drug preparation. Seba also started to collect snakes, birds, insects and shells bought from, or traded with, the sailors. From 1711 on, he provided drugs to the Saint Petersburg court. After Seba promoted his curiosa to the head-physician to the tsar, Robert Arskine, Peter the Great bought the complete collection for 15,000 guilders in 1716. Seven months later, seventeen trunks arrived in Saint Petersburg. With Seba as an intermediary, the famous botanist Frederik Ruysch also sold his collection to the tsar. From 1728 until 1830, both collections were exhibited in the tsar’s Kunstkammer in Saint Petersburg.

After the sale of his first cabinet, Seba immediately began forming an even more extensive one. He was able to take advantage of Amsterdam’s preeminent position in overseas trade to collect exotic specimens and had numerous foreign contacts in Ceylon, Virginia, Arabia, Greenland and elsewhere. While the second cabinet is documented in the Thesaurus and some specimens from both cabinets survive in Saint Petersburg and Paris, there is no pictorial record of the first cabinet. Possibly, Seba commissioned Struyck to draw all the specimens before shipping the collection to Russia. Struyck’s drawings may be the sole survivors of a long-lost extensive pictorial record of specimens of Seba’s famous natural history cabinet. These drawings were most likely included in the six folios with 271 drawings of insects and butterflies, birds, shells and plants— each carefully mounted—in Struyck’s possession.[4] The undertaking of such an elaborate project can only have been done for a wealthy patron interested in science and nature. It would have been a long-term commission, begun well in advance of the 1719 date on the title page.

[2] National History sale, Sotheby’s London, 8 November 2000, lot 155 (10 drawings).
[3] Zuidervaart, *op.cit.*, p 127, fn. 10 Cf. Smit et al., Hendrik Engel’s *Alphabetical List*, no. 1485.
[4] Hermann August Hagen, *Biblioteca Entomologica. Die Litteratur über das ganze Gebiet der Entomologie, bis zum Jahre 1862*, Leipzig 1862-1863, Vol. II, p. 394.

In the present drawing Struyk constructs an airy stage in which disparate arthropods and reptiles are held in suspension against a largely unmodulated ground. At the centre, a king crab is presented as the sheet's structural anchor, its carapace and legs built up in warm brown bodycolour over grey washes.

Struyk counters the central mass with three peripheral notes. At upper left, a black spider is rendered as a compact, velvety mass - opaque, absorbent, and slightly softened at the edges. At upper right, a slender lizard is set on a diagonal, projecting from a twig that enters from the margin. Below, a second blue lizard is lightly grounded by a narrow band of green wash.

Two miniature accents refine the sheet: a bright red beetle provides a sharp chromatic counterpoint to the otherwise restrained palette, while a tiny spider below the crab appears over the faint evocation of a web where an even smaller, trapped prey can be seen.