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# In Search of Friendship. Maria Sibylla Merian's Traces in Friendship Albums (*alba amicorum*)

Florence F.J.M. Pieters & Bert van de Roemer

This chapter will discuss a specific set of sources concerning Maria Sibylla Merian: visual and textual evidences of her contributions in what are known as *alba amicorum*, or friendship albums. These were special booklets, mostly of oblong format, popular among people in the early modern period to keep track of their social circle and collect tokens of affection or prestige. They served as important testimonies of polite and social conduct. In the German language these books were called *Stammbuch*—a word used by Merian herself—or in Dutch *Stamboek*, terms that are nowadays more associated with genealogical registers of domestic animals and livestock (“studbook” or “herdbook”). They form a fascinating category of ego documents and excellent sources to learn more about the social and cultural circles in which historical persons circulated.

In 1997 art historian Werner Taegert discussed two such contributions by Merian from her German period, but in recent years more have been discovered.<sup>1</sup> Christine Sauer detailed the influence of Merian's early floral designs on friendship album contributions by others in paint and silk in 2017. Her research is published here for the first time in English (see the chapter by Sauer in this volume). The present essay will serve as an extension of Taegert's and Sauer's creditable research and will explore additional material concerning Merian and the tradition of the *album amicorum*. In Merian's case these sources have an additional significance: they form solid reference points in the complex matter of stylistic attribution, as they are certainly done by her hand and are often dated. In this way they can contribute to a better understanding of her total oeuvre.<sup>2</sup> But here we will attempt to gain more insight

into the dynamics of Merian's social network while also contributing to general knowledge on the practice of keeping an *album amicorum*.

Often these *alba amicorum* are seen as predecessors of a person's "wall" on Facebook and Instagram, on which friends and acquaintances leave their comments and pictures. However, these written and painted evidences of social intercourse were less casual and certainly more laborious. Nowadays, more traditional friendship albums are still in use by some artists and art lovers, while many young girls in European countries cherish their poetry albums, full of rhymes, stickers, and sometimes even original drawings by their friends and family.<sup>3</sup> These albums have a long history. Because the most common illustrations in the oldest friendship albums are coats of arms, an old theory presumes that friendship books originated from armorials or weapon books, which were used as identification documents at tournaments in the late Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> Recently, it has been proven that the use of friendship books became popular in the middle of the sixteenth century around the Protestant University of Wittenberg, under the influence of the famous professors Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560). The use of armorials in the genealogical sense was extinct by then. The term *Stammbuch* came into use only towards the third quarter of the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther's signature with accompanying exegetic texts can be found in innumerable "Luther Bi-

bles", and likewise in the *alba amicorum*, which was gaining in popularity at the time.<sup>6</sup> They spread from Protestant to Catholic universities and eventually throughout Europe, only to diminish in the nineteenth century. Keeping an *album amicorum* seemed to be especially popular in the German-speaking countries. Students, scholars, artists, craftsmen, merchants, and other literate people used them as a way to record and remember their studies abroad, but also to collect autographs from nobles and important people.<sup>7</sup> As this tradition was especially popular among cultural and literate persons, it is no surprise that Merian left her mark on this aspect of civilized exchange.

### Roses for Father and Son

The first known example of a contribution by Merian's hand is a drawing with text on paper that is kept in the State Library of Bamberg (Fig. 1). Taegert argued convincingly that this individual sheet was painted for the *album amicorum* of Christoph Arnold (1627–1685), which now resides in the British Library.<sup>8</sup> Arnold was a professor of Greek, Rhetoric, Poetry, and History at the Egidien-Gymnasium in Nuremberg and also a deacon at the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) in the city. In addition, he was a meritorious poet and member of the poetic society in the city, named *Pegnesische Blumenorden* (Pegnesian Order of the Flower), after the river Pegnitz running through Nuremberg.<sup>9</sup> Like all members, Arnold adopted a nickname, "Lerian", derived from the German word *lehren*,



Fig. 1 M.S. Merian, Album leaf with a rose, presumably to be added as the last entry to the *album amicorum* of Christoph Arnold, watercolor, bodycolor and ink on paper, 85 × 136 mm. Staatsbibliothek Bamberg, inv. no. I R 90.

“to teach”, and a special flower, in his case the wild rose, or *Heckenrose*. For his album, Merian painted a beautiful cultivar rose in full bloom on a curvy trifurcated stem, with an additional bud on the lower stem and some leaves on the upper. In the upper right corner of the sheet, Merian wrote, “Man’s life is like a flower” (“Deß Menschen Leben ist gleich einer Blum”), and below, “Such was painted in honor of the Magister by Maria Sibila Gräffin née Merianin Ao 1675, on February 17th in Nuremberg.” Merian and Arnold must have known each other fairly well, as the scholar contributed three laudatory poems for the two parts of Merian’s

*Der Raupen wunderbare Verwandlung*.<sup>10</sup> Merian probably used his library to make her first steps in studying insects.<sup>11</sup> As Taegert asserts, the inscription is inspired by the Book of Job in the Bible and reflects on the transitoriness of life. The drawing in the album is certainly related to plate 24 of Merian’s first *Raupenbuch* from 1679, which shows a more elaborated version with two extra buds and additional leaves.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the drawing in the album represented a preliminary stage of the published print, or more likely both depictions hark back to one original drawing from which Merian made variations.



Fig. 2 M.S. Merian, Album leaf with a rose, in the *album amicorum* of Andreas Arnold, watercolor and bodycolor on vellum, 187 × 147 mm. Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, inv. no. 1497, f. 271r.

Four years later, in the year 1679 when the first *Raupenbuch* was published, Merian made a comparable drawing, this time for Christoph Arnold's son, Andreas Arnold (1656–1694), who was at the time a student of letters, philosophy, theology, and mathematics at Altdorf University near Nuremberg. Fortunately, this drawing is still in its original state, bound in the album that is kept in the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> The drawing is dated 3 April 1679, around the time Andreas was about to finish his studies, leaving the university in December of that year.<sup>14</sup> The accompanying text reads: “Maria

Sibilla Gräffin Ao 1679 den 3 April, In Nürnberg”, but it bears no pious motto. Since it differs only in details from the aforementioned drawing, it could be that father or son asked Merian to paint the same image.

Other members of Merian's family contributed to the album of Andreas as well. On the same day, her husband Johann Andreas Graff embellished the album with a drawing of a hilly landscape with the temple of Hercules Invictus on the Forum Boarium along the Tiber river in Rome, accompanied by a small fantasy pyramid. Two months later, Merian's stepfather, Jacob Marrel (1614–1681),

painted a wild rose in the album.<sup>15</sup> Andreas Arnold's album is a good example of how these documents went from hand to hand within certain families, so everybody could contribute. These are the only two hitherto known album contributions by Merian from her period in Germany, although there is evidence that she made others and was in high demand.

### Long-Distance Affection

The third piece of "evidence" of a contribution is rather indirect, but no less interesting. In 1685, six years after her addition for Andreas Arnold, Merian wrote two letters to her student and friend, Clara Regina Imhoff (1664–1697).<sup>16</sup> They show how album entries were also made on request and that Merian must have been a sought-after contributor. This is not surprising, as her first publications, the three *Blumenbücher* (Flower Books; 1675–1680), consisted of sets of prints with flowers, bouquets, and garlands that served as models for artists and embroiderers to follow in their own work. In her essay in this volume, Christine Sauer discusses how these examples were repeatedly copied by others and ended up painted or embroidered in friendship albums. Imhoff was part of a circle of friends and students, a *Frauenzimmer* or a *Jungfern Combanny* (a company of young maidens), whom Merian instructed in the art of painting.<sup>17</sup> In her first letter to Imhoff, Merian announces that she will provide "daß beehrte" (the desired) for the "stam bug" of Clara Regina's brother, Christoph Friedrich Imhoff (1666–1723), but apologizes that she did not yet get it done, as

she still was in the process of organizing her things after moving. The second letter, written almost one month later, evidently accompanied the desired entry for her brother's friendship album. She apologizes for writing the "schriff" on parchment, as the album itself was not available.<sup>18</sup> Apparently it was customary to write and paint things directly in the album as it circulated from hand to hand, which was the case with the Arnolds, but it was also possible, like in the case of Imhoff, to make a long-distance entry that would be sent over and later incorporated in the album.

Twelve years later, in 1697, Clara Regina's brother, Christoph Friedrich Imhoff, visited Merian, who was now living in Amsterdam. He brought his *Stammbuch* with him, and Merian admired the entry of her pupil Clara Regina, as she tells in a third letter.<sup>19</sup> Apparently Clara Regina also contributed to her brother's album. Merian expresses her admiration for her pupil's art, but does not mention her own contribution of twelve years earlier. Considering that friendship albums had a broad range of circulation, in time as well as in topography, it is likely that they were talking about the same *Stammbuch*. Also, as Sauer asserts, people were aware that these "were objects with a certain publicity".

At this point we would like to mention another drawing by Merian that is kept in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg and has all the traits of an *album amicorum* contribution (Fig. 3). It is made on parchment in oblong format



Fig. 3 M.S. Merian, Leaf with two butterflies that was once pasted in Merian's *Studienbuch* (preliminary study for *Metamorphosis*, plate 2), watercolor and bodycolor on parchment, 90 × 145 mm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, inv. no. Hz 371.

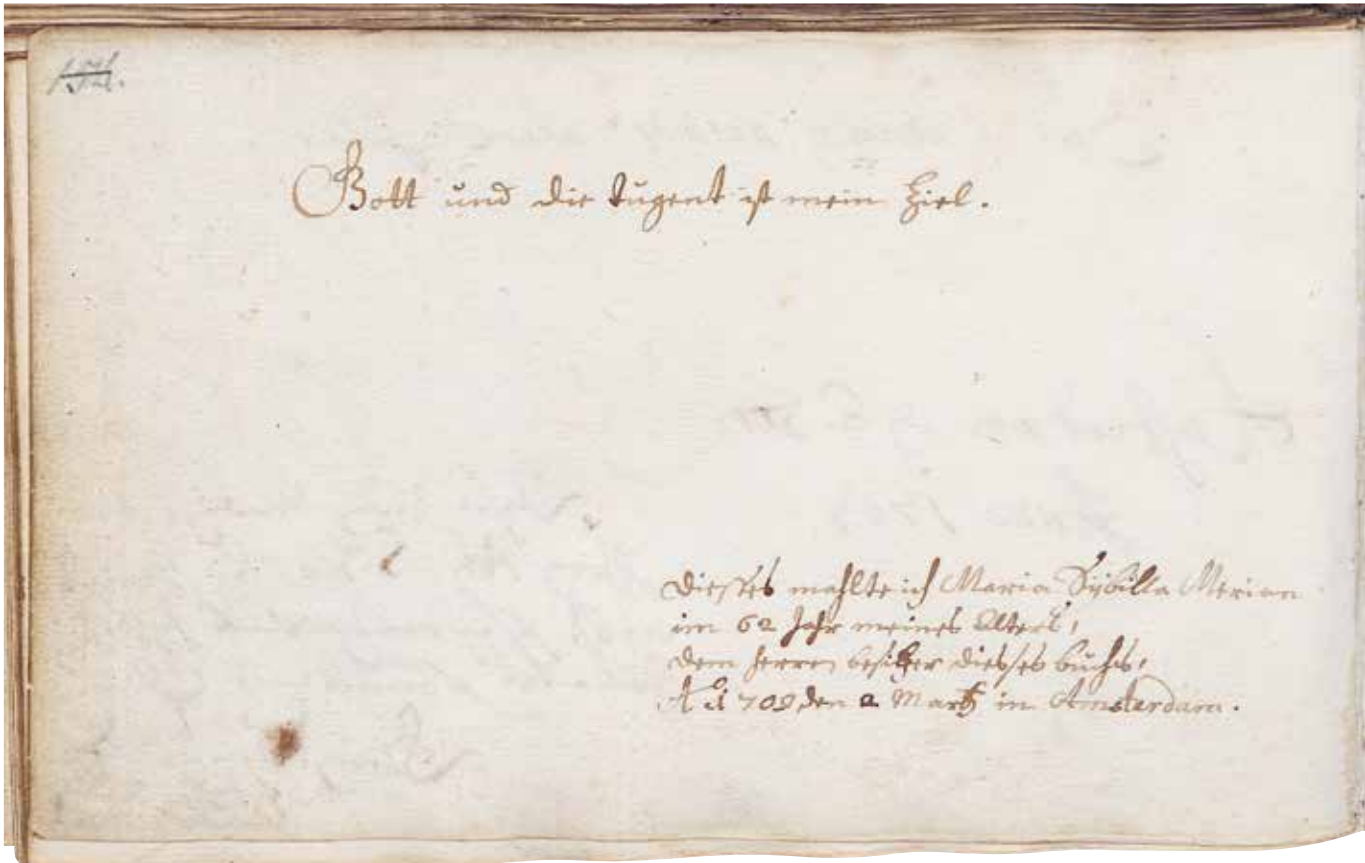
and measures 90 by 145 mm. It also holds a date and a signature: "Amsterdam, den 24 Februario 1706. Maria Sibylla Merian." This is quite strange. It dates from her period in Amsterdam, a year after the publication of *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*. It is a small drawing of two butterflies from Suriname, which also appear in plate 2 of the *Metamorphosis*, where they flutter around a pineapple. Wolf-Dietrich Beer, the editor of the 1976 facsimile of Merian's *Studienbuch*—the book where she kept notes of her observations and her original drawings—thinks this parchment was taken out of this notebook and sold. According to Beer, the

date is the date of sale. There is an empty space in the *Studienbuch* and a duplicate of the green butterfly was later pasted in.<sup>20</sup> A depiction of the flying butterfly can still be found in it, with below, hardly discernible, some pencil strokes that suggest the head of the second butterfly. To our knowledge, there are no other drawings known with dates of sale. We suggest that this drawing might also have been intended for an unknown *album amicorum*, in the manner she made a contribution for Christoph Friedrich Imhoff. A combination is also possible: Merian took it out of her *Studienbuch* to use as a contribution for an album of an unknown acquaintance.

### Tokens of Friendship and Envy

Thanks to a recent inventory project of *alba amicorum* in Dutch libraries by the KB, national library of the Netherlands, in 2014 we discovered probably the most elaborate contribution by Merian's hand.<sup>21</sup> In the drawing, Merian combined a flying lanternfly with two *Conus* shells. On the opposite page she wrote an inscription, dated 2 March 1709 (Fig. 4). She painted this directly in the *Stammbuch* of the Amsterdam engraver and cartographer Petrus Schenck (1660–1711), who was also German and was born in the town Elberfeld (presently within Wuppertal). He was

famous because of his landscapes, townscapes, and maps, and especially his portraits in mezzotint. Furthermore, he was an art dealer in Amsterdam and Leipzig, to which he traveled every year to work in his shop and attend the fairs of the Leipziger Messe. During these travels he took several detours to visit his customers (mostly noble or magistrate), to make their portraits in mezzotint and also ask them to write something in his album. Schenck's album covers the period 1700–1713 and holds 273 inscriptions, among these many names of nobility and royalty. For instance, among the first names

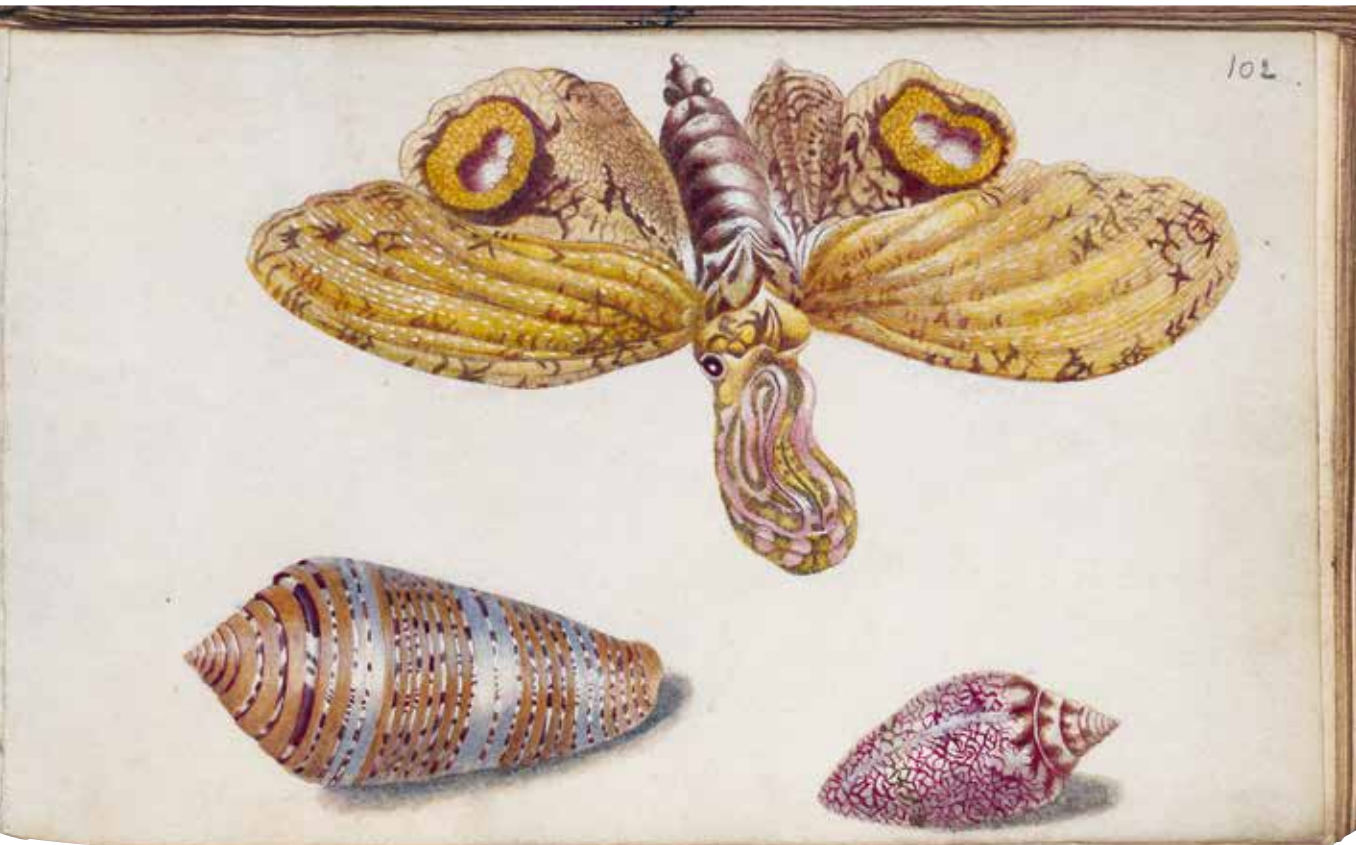




occurring in the album are Georg Ludwig, Elector of Brunswick-Lüneburg (from 1714 also King George I of Great Britain and Ireland), Anton Ulrich, Duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, and Friedrich August I “the Strong”, Elector of Saxony and King Designate of Poland, who appointed Schenck as his “court engraver”,<sup>22</sup> More important for our purposes, the album holds many names belonging to Maria Sibylla’s network, such as Christian Schlegel (1667–1722) of Arnstadt, with whom she corresponded, her nephew

Johann Matthäus Merian (1659–1716) (later Von Merian, after having been raised to nobility in 1706),<sup>23</sup> and Amsterdam mayor Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717), whose cabinet Merian visited to study insects. Schenck and Merian obviously circulated in the same social networks. Schenck started his career in Amsterdam as a pupil of the cartographer and publisher Gerard Valk (1652–1726), who also sold Merian’s Suriname book in his shop at Dam Square and married Valk’s sister, Aafje, in 1687.

Fig. 4 M.S. Merian, Album leaves with lanternfly and two shells, in the *Stammbuch* of P. Schenck, watercolor, bodycolor and ink on paper, 118 × 193 mm. Leiden University Libraries, inv. no. LTK 903, f. 101v-102r.



Maria Sibylla Merian's inscription in Schenck's *Stammbuch* is particularly interesting. It reads:

*God and virtue is my aim.  
this I painted Maria Sibylla Merian  
at 62 years of age,  
for the gentleman owner of this book,  
Anno 1709 on the 2nd of March  
in Amsterdam.*<sup>24</sup>

The pious phrase “God and virtue is my aim”, or translated more freely “To God and virtue I aspire”, could be traced back to the penultimate line of a poem written by the contemporary and popular German poet and educator Christian Weise (1642–1708); the poem was also known in those days as a “mountain song” (*Bergliedchen*).<sup>25</sup> According to an authoritative book on *Stammbücher*, Christian Weise's rhymes were often cited in such books at the time.<sup>26</sup> The poem instructs how one should deal with envious people in a righteous way. The last of six verses reads:

*Though people often envy me  
God's will is only to indulge  
and thus in adverse times  
my bliss delights me still  
To God and virtue I aspire  
and thus I have what I desire.*<sup>27</sup>

It might be a coincidence, but there is a strong connection between the theme of envy and the insect depicted in Schenck's album. In a manuscript kept in the Artis Library of the University of Amsterdam, written by an unknown

naturalist-entomologist, there is an account of a discussion between Merian, the anonymous writer, and the famous anatomist and collector Frederik Ruysch (1638–1731). The lanternfly was the matter under debate.<sup>28</sup> In her Suriname book, Merian depicted the insect with a large-headed green fly that, according to her, was a preliminary stage of the lanternfly. Ruysch and the anonymous writer tried to convince her of her mistaken insights, saying that this was impossible and against nature, but—as the writer states—she still depicted them together. After recounting this discussion, the envious writer states that the work of Merian holds incorrect observations and there is not “much of substance” in her books. Furthermore, he considered it ill-fit for a woman to crawl around in bushes. He states that Merian's main motive was to become famous. Merian's phrase, “God and virtue is my aim”, can be read as a direct answer to this accusation. The fact that this man obviously had plans to publish a treatise on the metamorphosis of European insects himself, which never was published, might be cause for his harsh criticism and envy. Is it a coincidence that Merian painted exactly this lanternfly in the *album amicorum* and combined it with a devout sentence from a poem entirely on the subject of envy? Did Petrus Schenck, like her, a successful German immigrant in Amsterdam, know about this discussion? We do not know, nor is the identity of the mysterious envious writer known. However, this entry in a friendship album shows

that these documents not only express friendly relationships, but also indirectly can be connected to relations that entail envy.<sup>29</sup>

Below the insect, Merian painted two shells; on the left, a *Conus aurisiacus* and, on the right, a *Conus textile*. Merian might have painted the latter especially for this occasion, but the *Conus aurisiacus* is known from another source; it is depicted in *D'Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* by Georg Everhard Rumphius (1627–1702), a book about the crustaceans, shells, and minerals of the Indonesian archipelago, published in the same year as Merian's *magnum opus*.<sup>30</sup> The shell and the drawing are discussed in greater detail in the chapter by Van de Roemer in this volume, where this friendship album entry is used in matters of attribution.

### Sociable Portraits

Merian was not only represented in friendship albums through her art, but also through her effigy. Recently we discovered that the drawings made for the now lost *Stamboek* of Johanna Koerten (1650–1715) were accompanied by two portraits of her, made by others. Koerten was a renowned Amsterdam paper-cutting artist and widely known all over Europe at the time. In 1701 the aforementioned Petrus Schenck made Koerten's portrait in mezzotint, which is reproduced here to give an impression of his art (Fig. 5). The legend below the portrait was written by Katharyne Lescailje (1649–1711), one of the first Dutch female poets whose works were published during her lifetime, and



Fig. 5 D. van der Plas (design), P. Schenck (etching), Portrait of Johanna Koerten, 1701, mezzotint on paper, measuring inside of plate margin 245 × 181 mm. Courtesy RKD, The Hague.

reads: “Honor this Icon in whose soul and scissors wonders be created / Turning mere paper into priceless crafty artful clips.”<sup>31</sup> Koerten's *Stamboek* was so famous that two anthologies of laudatory poems written by different authors over the years were published, in 1735 and 1736. Her *Stamboek* surpassed the typical *album amicorum*, as it consisted of several folio bindings with poems, inscriptions, calligraphies, and portraits (many representing Koerten herself), as well as the traditional friendship album entries. It was auctioned in separate

pieces around 1751, and since then its contents have become widely dispersed. An auction catalogue in the library of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam gives a detailed overview of its contents.

Concerning Merian, the auction catalogue mentions two drawings with flowers and fruit by her, and two portraits depicting her.<sup>32</sup> One portrait was done by her son in law, Georg Gsell (1673–1740, here spelled as “Gesellen”), who married her youngest daughter, Dorothea Maria (1678–1743). Gsell’s posthumous portrait (dates of birth and death are faintly visible next to the coat of arms) is reproduced and discussed in detail in the chapter by Lieke van Deinsen in this volume (Fig. 1, p. 216). An inscription at the bottom left corner tells us the drawing originates from Koerten’s collection: “Uit ’t kabinet van juffr. Koerten Blok”. The auction catalogue reveals that this portrait was attached on a double folio with a drawing of fruit. It also mentions a second portrait in red crayon by one of the Houbrakens. This portrait was accompanied by a floral wreath, designed by Merian, below it. This item is most likely still present in the Artis Library. In a copy of *De Europische Insecten*, a floral wreath on paper is pasted opposite the title page that correlates with the description in the catalogue (Fig. 6). It garlands an undated dedication by Maria Sibylla Merian to Johanna Koerten, consisting of a small poem in Dutch. The

hand-colored etched floral wreath had served 35 years before as the engraved title of Merian’s *Neues Blumenbuch*. It is a lovely piece of text on female friendship:

*I’ve given thee fruits drawn  
with pencils,  
Johanna, fine and famous all ‘round.  
With artful use of paper and scissors  
Thine album may be richly enhanced.  
M. S. Meriaan<sup>33</sup>*

It is very well possible that this item was auctioned in the middle of the eighteenth century and ended up in this copy of Merian’s book in the Artis Library. This poem was also reprinted, with slight linguistic alterations, in both abovementioned anthologies of poems. This collection holds a second poem by her daughters Johanna Helena (1668–1730) (married to Jacob Hendrik Herolt) and Dorothea Maria, but written for their mother. The poem reveals that it once accompanied a drawing with fruit, flowers, and worms offered to Koerten—which is probably the one mentioned in the auction catalogue. Remarkably, this drawing is presented here as a “joint venture” between the mother and her two daughters, which reveals something about early modern concepts of authenticity and authorship while also raising interesting questions about our present-day fixation on attributing artworks to a single person:

Fig. 6 M.S. Merian, Dedication for the *Stamboek* of Johanna Koerten, on a hand-colored etching, the wreath from the *Neues Blumenbuch*, pasted in the front matter of a copy of *De Europische Insecten*, 21 x 15.5 cm (plate). Artis Library, Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam, AB Legkast 018.01.



Aan  
Juffre  
JOANNAXOERDEN  
Blok  
K heb u penceelen oeft geschonken  
Joanna wyd en zyds berugt  
Door konst papiere Schaaren vrugt  
Oft mee moegt in uw Stamboek pronken  
M. S. Meriaans

M. Sibilla Merian.

Dear friend, with thy  
Silhouette Paper-cutting  
So innovatively employed  
and never enough praised  
Thou hast connected thy skilled  
Art with ours.

Therefore, as a token  
of great appreciation,  
A Mother and her two  
Daughters come offer  
Thee these strokes of the brush, a sketch  
With fruits and creepers foliated,  
As fixed as it may be transmogrified.

This wishes to bring forth an emblem  
Exposing the inconstancy  
Of human life, brief as it is and transient,  
Varying from hour to hour, continually,  
As if it cried to thee Memento Mori.  
When Fruits and Flowers wilt and wither,  
They'll bud to life once  
more through seed.  
The Caterpillar turns its  
whole manifestation  
Into a Pupa, as if unmistakably dead,  
Yet soar the sky a moment next.

Thine art, o KOERTEN, has bloomed,  
And as ripened fruit, it has matured;  
Insignificant on the face of it at first,  
Crawling along the surface of the earth  
but metamorphosed taking to flight  
propelling the air with quivering wings  
to all four quarters of creation.  
Thus will thy soul and body in the end  
After the farewell even get more lure.  
And lightened by  
the shedded mortal frame  
Thou wilt ascend to heaven  
with that delight

That warmed thy soul when earlier alive;  
This the brush wanted to demonstrate,  
Without the need to have it said.

For MARIE SIBILLA MERIAAN,  
J.H. HOROLT [sic], born MERIAAN,  
D.M. MERIAAN<sup>34</sup>

The research into Merian's contributions in *alba amicorum* will be an ongoing process as more and more libraries in Germany and the Netherlands publish their hidden treasures on the Web in high-quality digitized representations. Each album that is now opened to a wider public forms a *Fundgrube* of texts and images that not only reveal new threads in an intricate web of human relationships but also open a door to intimate and singular artistic production that has not yet attracted very much attention from researchers. Recently, a drawing of a head of a woman in red crayon in an *album amicorum* kept in the Herzogin Anna Amalia Bibliothek in Weimar was recognized as a portrait of Maria Sibylla Merian.<sup>35</sup> However, there is no inscription or other indication in the album that this is really Merian. Even though there is a faint likeness with the two other known portraits of Merian, we consider the evidence too insubstantial to be certain. Yet this example shows how many hidden fragments are still to be unearthed in these albums, and also points to the caution with which these fragments should be arranged and ordered. As material objects of the past, the albums themselves form important knots in the intricate networks of human relationships, civilized conduct, and artistic expressions.