

Pinning Down History

Insects, America, and the Art of John Hampson

By Zoë Samels

Each academic year, a second-year student at the Williams College Clark Art Institute Graduate Program in the History of Art is awarded the Judith M. Lenett Memorial Fellowship in Art Conservation by the Williamstown Art Conservation Center. The two-semester fellowship provides the student with the opportunity to pursue an interest in American art through the research and conservation of an American art object. This year's Lenett Fellow, Zoë Samels, worked with a collage constructed entirely of entomological specimens, from the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. Ms. Samels worked with the guidance of Hélène Gillette-Woodard, head of the Center's objects department. The project culminated in a public lecture and exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art. The article below was excerpted and edited from that lecture.

The tall tale of John Hampson goes something like this. In December of 1906, Hampson, a 70-year-old machinist living in Newark, N.J., was injured after falling out of a moving streetcar. He brought suit against the North Jersey Street Railway Company, seeking \$10,000 in damages because, he claimed, his wounds prevented him from hunting butterflies and beetles—a hobby that required him to walk forty to fifty miles every day.

Neither the veracity nor the verdict of Hampson's supposed lawsuit can be confirmed, but the peculiar project of natural history he left behind evidences his claim of entomological

erudition. Over the course of his life, Hampson created a singular series of intricate collages assembled from tens of thousands of insect specimens he'd caught himself, each work illustrating a colorful scene of Americana. One of these works, Hampson's General Slocum, was the focus of my Lenett Fellowship during the 2011-2012 academic year.

The scant information we know about John Hampson comes from a copy of an obituary clipped from an unidentified newspaper, which also contains the only photograph we have of him. According to the article, Hampson was born in Cheshire, England, where he was trained as a machinist. He came to the United States in 1860. During the Civil War and not yet an American citizen, Hampson worked in the government navy yards. He lived or stayed in thirteen states—picking up an interest in insects along the way—until 1877, when he settled in Newark with his family. He worked briefly for Thomas Edison in the inventor's Menlo Park laboratory. When he died in 1923, his collages were found hanging on the walls of his small home in Newark.

If the fruits of Hampson's labor were not here in front of us, a description of these works would seem as exaggerated as Paul Bunyan's ox or John Henry's race against the steam-hammer. Over a period of roughly fifty years, he created eleven strange shadowboxes from the bodies of more than 70,000 butterflies, moths, and beetles. Hampson collected these specimens on his aforementioned walks, armed with a net and a cyanide-laced

killing jar.

It is tempting to frame John Hampson's reinterpretation of familiar American imagery, which ranges from portraits of presidents and war heroes to intricately designed flags and stars, within the constructs of Outsider, Folk, or Self-Taught Art. Certainly the little we know about him—his day job as a machinist, the excessive scale of his entomological efforts—resists easy artistic categorization. Like many artists whose work is termed Outsider or Self-Taught, Hampson used found materials, drew his subjects from existing visual culture, and kept his works private.

I found it most helpful to think about this work as it relates to American folkways – not only in art, but also in literature and music. Tall tales, blues songs, quilt patterns—these works use the vernacular to give voice to an invisible American experience. Cultural critic Greil Marcus used the term “Old, Weird America” to describe an early anthology of American folk recordings that served to launch the 1960s folk revival. Hampson's work is much the same. I hoped that a closer look at General Slocum might help me understand Hampson's vision of old, weird America.

Hampson's collages piece together their iconic Americana with a kind of entomological pointillism. Though his insect specimens are largely attached intact, the artist did not hesitate to transgress the rules of scientific specimen handling for his own visual ends, often cutting through bodies and wings to get the neat boundaries between shapes that allow him such fine detail. His breakdown of subject matter is similarly fluid: beetles, moths, and butterflies are used for both representational and decorative ends indiscriminately. In all the works, he used the dark thoraxes of insects to create lines that radiate around the central images, infusing them with a rhythmic energy reminiscent of beating insect wings. When I first noticed these lines, I was reminded of Lincoln's famous evocation of the “mystic chords of memory” that sound from battlefields and soldier's graves, which he believed potent enough to one day rebuild a more perfect Union. Hampson's works express this collective American memory, but the world they envision for the viewer remains mysterious.

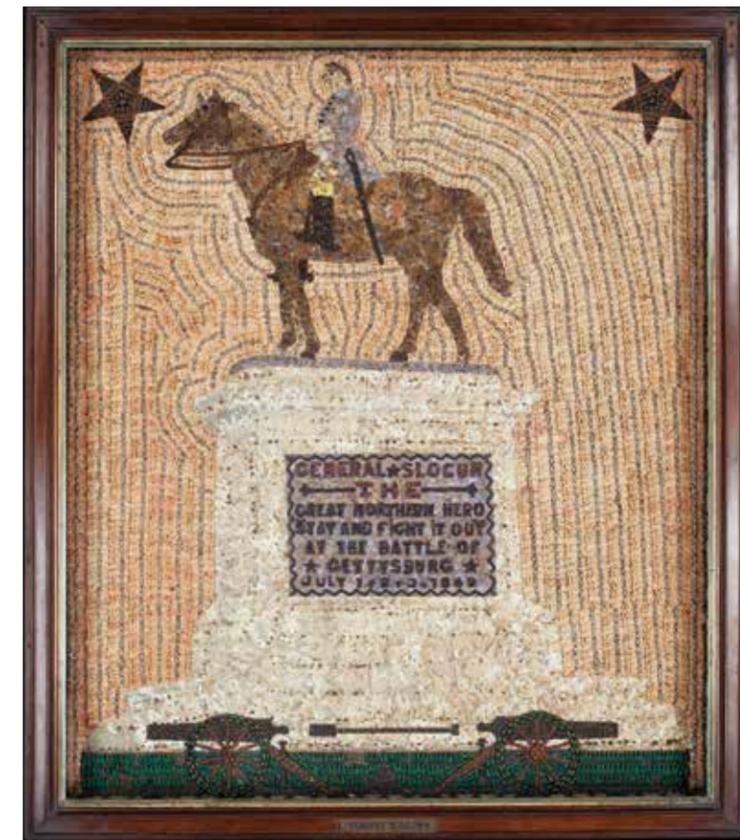
Hampson's entire oeuvre now resides in the collection of the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. Termed “Bug Art” by the museum's staff, the curious collages came into the Fairbanks' collection in 1977 through the estate of the artist's daughter. Seven of these works are currently on display at the museum in two glass-fronted cabinets, sharing the alcove with a giant replica of a horsefly. Three collages: *General Slocum*, a portrait of George Washington, and an

abstract, kaleidoscopic design, are considered too damaged to exhibit. The Fairbanks Museum staff estimate that each collage took the artist three to four years to complete.

Hampson's *General Slocum* shares its basic forms with the commemorative statue of Major General Henry Warner Slocum, erected in 1902 on the battlefield of Gettysburg. The visual parallels between collage and statue are many: in both, the General is on horseback, perched atop a white pedestal bearing an inscription plaque. Hampson also evokes the memorial's placement within Gettysburg's

landscape by including a pair of cannons located in the statue's immediate vicinity.

Slocum led his Union forces in several battles in the war's Eastern Theatre, as well as in Georgia and the Carolinas. During the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, the young general delayed leading his troops into the bloody skirmish, earning him the derisory nickname “Slow Come.” His statue's inscription offers a more favorable view on his leadership at Gettysburg, repeating his entreaty to his fellow Union officers that they must “Stay and fight it out,” as the battle waged on



Above, *General Slocum* by John Hampson, after treatment. Opposite, Lenett fellow Zoë Samels at work on the insect collage.



for three days. Hampson's repeats this maxim in his portrait and crowns Slocum a "Great Northern Hero."

Identifying Hampson's subject matter laid the foundation for my examination of the work's structure and materials, the first step in the conservation treatment. General Slocum is housed in its original pine shadowbox fitted with a matching frame. At one point in the work's history, a roll-down shade was attached at the top, evidenced by visible holes and wear on the wooden frame. As the shade was lifted and the work



Detail of collage, showing Hampson's use of butterflies as line and color. Opposite, a butterfly mounted by the author to study the artist's collecting process.

revealed, one can imagine how the viewer was transformed into a spectator, suddenly privy to a strange sight hidden from view.

The tray's backboard is covered with a wooden pinning platform, which itself is overlaid with sheets of off-white coated paper. Where the specimens have been lost, you can see how Hampson gridded out the marble base section of the collage to guide his placement of the specimens. The butterflies and moths are held in place with thin entomology pins clipped close to the bodies, the wings lightly adhered to the coated paper with a natural adhesive, possibly hide or fish glue. The beetles are affixed to cut paperboard shapes in linear rows with shellac and sometimes hide glue. Hampson camouflaged these supports with paint or wax in corresponding colors.

To create the work's large fields of color, Hampson arranged white and orange moths in neat lines. Smaller shapes, such as the General's indigo jacket and his horse's coat, are constructed from layers of wings stripped from their hosts' bodies. The exact species of these winged insects resist easy identification.

Hampson used beetles of various colors and sizes to add decorative detail to General Slocum. The work exhibits at least six varieties of beetles, four of which I have been able to identify. Ladybugs make up the first two inscription lines, the horse's bridle, the cannon spokes, and parts of the five-pointed stars. Tiger beetles are used exclusively in the foreground, their narrow shape mimicking the green blades of the Gettysburg's lawn. Shiny flea beetles, identified by their black bodies and reddish-brown heads, are used for the remaining lines of Slocum's dedication, on the corner stars, the cannons, and the horse's tiny hooves. Iridescent green dogbane beetles fill in the wheel and star motif along the sides of the tray and the cannon wheels.

The back of the work bears a paper label that is neither original to the frame nor part of the Fairbanks' accession process, but is nonetheless a piece of General Slocum's history. Dated 1938, it reads: "Picture made of butterflies and beetles collected and made by the late John Hampson in the year of 1904. The number of butterflies and beetles used in this picture is 9,751." The artist's other collages exhibit similar labels containing equally precise specimen counts.

General Slocum's most visible damage was the loss of thousands of moths and butterflies across the statue and its pedestal, giving these sections a haziness at odds with Hampson's usual visual clarity. All that remained was a field of empty pins, its ground littered with bits of wings and desiccated bodies. The damage was the result of a second-wave insect occupation, this time as an infestation of pests that treated the collage as a boxed lunch. While no active pests remained, their dried larva cases were scattered throughout the tray. For reasons unknown, the orange-hued butterflies and the beetles proved unappetizing and remained intact.

Along the sides and bottom of the collage, a number of beetles had come loose from their paperboard supports and collected along the bottom edge. The patches of exposed

adhesive and shellac they left behind showed signs of flaking, cracking, and discoloration. Because such a brittle support leaves the beetles particularly vulnerable to vibration, even regular handling of the work could have caused damage and had to be carried out carefully.

The work's wooden backboards were unstable, having bowed outward over time. Such flexing can occur when boards are exposed to changes in humidity or if the grain of the wood is incorrectly aligned. Storing the object on its back, as happened with General Slocum, can exacerbate this problem. The flexed backboards had placed stress on the pinning board and coated paper, causing a two-inch tear in the paper immediately above the inscription plaque. Throughout my treatment, I was careful to always rest the shadowbox on several layers of foam padding.

Once the areas of instability had been documented, one step remained before I could begin treating the collage itself. Because Hampson used a variety of organic and inorganic materials, I needed to be sure that the adhesive I used to reattach the insects and repair the paper tear did not put the work at risk for further deterioration. This was a particular challenge given the dearth of conservation scholarship on preserving insects in a work of art rather than preventing or eradicating them.

I began cleaning the collage with a soft-bristled paintbrush, dusting each beetle body and around the paperboard shapes. I also removed debris, insect casings, or loose specimens from the work's surface, paying particular attention to the bottom ledge of the frame. I decided not to clean the moths or butterflies because of their fragility, although I did dust the exposed entomology pins. If a beetle came loose during the cleaning, I set it aside and marked its original location. Across the statue and pedestal, I adhered any fragments of butterflies and moths that seemed in danger of becoming completely detached from the work. I decided not to attempt any additional liquid cleaning of the exposed pins or tacks due to the risk of corrosion. The only inorganic materials in General Slocum were dark glass spheres and beads for the eyes of both horse and rider and for Slocum's buttons. These were cleaned with a solution of fifty percent de-ionized water and fifty percent ethanol applied with a cotton swab, taking care to prevent any of the solvent from bleeding into the surrounding insect materials.

The tear in the paper support could not be repaired with Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste, as originally hoped. The aging paper was too brittle and the crack too narrow for this relatively invasive technique. Instead, I brushed a small amount of BEVA adhesive on top and under the overlapping tear, just enough to lightly saturate the paper. A small piece of wet

strength tissue paper was laid on top to soak up any additional moisture and secured with a small weight. The collage was loosely covered and allowed to dry overnight.

The shadowbox's glass front was cleaned with a solution of deionized water and ethanol and large cotton swabs. After drying, I repeated the process with a microfiber cloth. This completed, the shadowbox was reassembled and the change was striking. The rows of orange moths seemed to radiate out in frozen waves from the work's central figure. Each insect was identifiable as a discrete form. Issues of stability aside, a good cleaning was primarily what General Slocum needed.

Like any good tall tale, the story of John Hampson leaves me with the suspicion I've been hoodwinked, both by the artist and the curious collages he left behind. With a folk hero's confidence, Hampson placed his work comfortably between entomology's rational empiricism, the mutable mythology of American history, and art's mysterious draw. Attempts to locate a singular meaning of Hampson's work get lost somewhere between his hazy biography, his orderly rows of insects, and his choice of iconic historical subjects. And yet, these moth-strewn microcosms continue to invite viewers in for a closer look, prompting perpetual curiosity.

When General Slocum returns to the Fairbanks Museum & Planetarium later this spring, it will be hung alongside several of Hampson's collages in much better condition. It might seem a mistake to reinstall a work so damaged. Yet in some way, General Slocum's losses are the viewer's gain, providing a peek at Hampson's working process. That this insider knowledge does little to dampen the compelling weirdness of these works, that it in fact only makes them less comprehensible, is a strong argument for the inclusion of "John Hampson's Bug Art" not only in the field of art history, but also into the canon of America's tall tales. **C**

