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 Williams Center for the Conservation of American Art. 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.

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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 2021-2022 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 1866. 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 American accent 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 countless specimens 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 visual parables, each with its own visual ends, often cutting through bodies and wings to get to the next boundaries between planes 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, 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 work expresses 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. "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 desirous 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.
revealed, one can imagine how the viewer was transformed into a spectator, suddenly privy to a strange sight hidden from view.

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 striped from their hosts' bodies. The exact species of these winged insects resist easy identification. Hampson used butterflies of various colors and sizes to add decorative detail to General Slocum. The work exhibits at least six varieties of butterflies, 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 1948, 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 is in this box 5751." 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 the General's indigo jacket and his horse's coat, all that remained of the Fairbanks' accession process, but is nonetheless a piece of General Slocum's history. Dated 1948, 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 is in this box 5751." The artist's other collages exhibit similar labels containing equally precise specimen counts.

General Slocum's losses are the viewer's gain, providing a peek into Hampson's working process. That this insider knowledge argument for the inclusion of “John Hampson's Bug Art” not only in the field of art history, but also into the canon of American 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 micromosaics 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 into Hampson's working process. That this insider knowledge argument for the inclusion of “John Hampson's Bug Art” not only in the field of art history, but also into the canon of American 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 micromosaics continue to invite viewers in for a closer look, prompting perpetual curiosity.

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