

A BUTTERFLY JOURNEY

MARIA SIBYLLA MERIAN
ARTIST AND SCIENTIST







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PRESTEL

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PROLOGUE



And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat.

And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Genesis 1:24–31 (King James Version)



וְכָל הַחַיָּוִת אֲשֶׁר בְּרֵישׁ הָאָרֶץ

THE ERA



It was a strange, wondrous and immensely eventful era into which Maria Sibylla was born on 2 April 1647 in Frankfurt am Main. The Thirty Years' War was still raging. It had pitted the Protestant and Catholic powers against each other and turned nearly all of Germany into a battleground. It came to an end with the Peace of Westphalia, signed in the year after Maria's birth. The coins minted in commemoration of this event bore the words "Pax optima rerum" – peace is the greatest good. And yet the peace did little to change the fact that, for many who had survived war, pestilence and hunger, the end of the world and the Last Judgment seemed as close as ever. For them, life was a fear-filled wait for Apocalypse, which they knew to be inevitable. The Creator's plan could not be anything else. Indeed, it was high time, for mankind's sinfulness was growing unbearable, the morals of the ruling classes were on the decline, and more than a few wallowed in luxury. Some people, meanwhile, looked to the past and decided to resurrect Antiquity, claiming that it had been purer and better.

Like a dark omen, the vineyards began to die. The summer rains would not end, so entire harvests rotted on vines that had once been rich in fruit. And there were few reserves for the ever longer and colder winters – the Little Ice Age ruled the weather. Wherever one trod, one encountered countless weeds

and thorns. Were these not proof enough of how far the world was from Paradise, which had not known such plants? There were always plenty of signs of the coming end of the world. People's certainty as to its approach was far from new, however. Their ancestors, too, had awaited its coming, as had Martin Luther, whose Reformation had deeply split the Christian church. While some waited, others hoped for the thousand-year reign of Christ. But they were all aware of the *memento mori* present in so many paintings of the era (which would later be called the Baroque) and in the songs warning that human life could end at any time, burst like a shimmering soap bubble. And the poet Andreas Gryphius proclaimed: "What is Mankind? : a dwelling for grim sorrows, / A ball of false fortune, a will-o'-the-wisp of these times. / A stage for bitter fears, beset by sharp pain, / Snow soon melted, candles spent."

And yet, some people could sense something new in this era. Something that was still very tender, that at times disappeared before growing stronger again; something that could barely be named. Like a scent in the air that ignites the senses although one never noticed it before. It was something predicted by none of the prophecies in the calendars, reported by none of the growing number of newspapers. And yet the attentive reader was aware that new things were taking up more and more space, for the young medium reported increasingly on current events. This, too, was a sign that the present day was growing in importance. The calendars now left more space for entries of one's own, and people become increasingly aware that they could shape their own lives. Some people, artists and scientists,

began to increasingly look upon the world and worldly phenomena through different eyes, in new ways and with a more conscious awareness than ever before. They explored the skies, nature, and man with previously unheard-of scientific interest, and in so doing made discoveries that increasingly shook the earlier worldview to its foundations. Even if some could not, and others would not see it: It was not the end of the world. A new era had begun.

