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 College 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 from 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 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 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 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 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 walking 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 2021-2022 academic year.

I found it most helpful to think about this work as it relates to American folklife— 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 American landscapes and symbols in a kind of entomological pomposity. Though his insect specimens are largely attached intact, the artist did not hesitate to transcend the rules of scientific specimen handling for his own visual ends, often cutting through bodies and wings to get the neat boundaries 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 nursing 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 soldiers’ 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 above with a giant replica of a honeybee. 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 in 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 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 revealed, one can imagine how the viewer was transformed into a spectator, suddenly privy to a strange sight hidden from view.

The shadowbox’s glass front was cleaned with a solution of denitized 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 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 damper 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.