

Zephyr's wings: Tiepolo's imagination or the antlion *Pseudimares* Kimmins, 1933 (Neuroptera, Myrmeleontidae) as his model?

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ABSTRACT

When Giambattista Tiepolo, in his painting 'Triumph of Zephyr and Flora', gave Zephyr dragonfly-like wings with eyespots, was he inspired by pure imagination or did he have an insect he had previously seen in mind: the rare and astonishing *Pseudimares*? It is impossible to be sure. The authors of the present note point out the innovatory characteristic of the pictorial arrangement adopted by Tiepolo for the wings, compared with stylistic elements which were fashionable before and during his epoch, and suggest the reasons why we cannot rule out that the artist could have been inspired by a model, a specimen of *Pseudimares*, two centuries before the scientific discovery of this very rare antlion, at present only known from Iran and Morocco. A short account is provided on the bio-ecological significance of the eyespots found on insect wings.

KEY WORDS

Giambattista Tiepolo; XVIII century; fine arts; science; Neuroptera; antlions; eyespots.

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By "wonder" I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention (Greenblatt, 1990: 20).

INTRODUCTION

In the third decade of the XVIII century, Giambattista Tiepolo (Venice, March 5, 1696 - Madrid, March 27, 1770) painted his 'Triumph of Zephyr and Flora' (Fig. 1), a large (225 x 395 cm) oil painting nowadays housed at the Ca' Rezzonico Mu-

seum, Venice. In this work the artist did not adopt a canonical representation of Zephyr.

Indeed, he did not paint Zephyr with the traditional bird wings found in the reference iconological manual of his epoch, the Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (published in a great many editions; as examples we cite the second edition, which was the first to be illustrated, and a late posthumous edition in German: Ripa, 1603, 1704) (Fig. 2) (Ashton, 1978).

Tiepolo did not even use butterfly wings, the other symbolic image had been adopted since antiquity for certain winged personifications (Ronchetti, 1922: 986) (1).

(1) It seems fitting to mention Psyche, a mythical character, but first and foremost a word which in ancient Greek indicated both the spirit of life, the soul, and the butterfly (or moth), which recalls the first meaning, with its metamorphosis and flying away.



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Figure 1. Giambattista Tiepolo, 'Triumph of Zephyr and Flora' (Ca' Rezzonico Museum, Venice, Italy).
 Figure 2. Some stylistic canons from a posthumous *Iconologia* by C. Ripa (1704). Zephyr, the West Wind, is represented (with bird wings) in picture no. 12. The other three Winds are to be found in pictures no. 11 (East), 13 (South) and 14 (North). Figure 3. The nymphalid *Inachis io* (Linnaeus, 1758) offers one of the most common examples of eyespots on the dorsal surface of the wings (left figure) whilst the ventral surface (right figure), uniformly blackish-brown, disguises the butterfly settled with folded wings on tree-bark and rock (photos by Paolo Mazzei).



Figure 4. Tiepolo's Zephyr and a *Pseudimares*: a close-up comparison of their wings; actual length of the antlion wing approx. 5 cm (the photo of antlion by Gabriel Martínez del Mármol Marín).

A late example of this is to be found in 'Flora and Zephyr' (1875) painted by the French William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Eyespots and sense of wonder

The Venetian artist made his choice in order to foment a sense of wonder in the observer, giving

Zephyr four dragonfly-like wings, each with a very large apical eyespot (2).

Barcham (1996), one of the principal Tiepolo scholars, outlines the pictorial enchantment of the wings but he does not relate this to biological considerations, which would almost certainly have been alien to him. Eyespots, particularly on the wings, are widespread mainly among Lepidoptera.

(2) The idea of painting Zephyr with delicate, membranous dragonfly-like wings seemed to be the most suitable pictorial arrangement to evoke a light breeze, harbinger of Spring. Probably for this reason the choice of dragonfly wings was followed also in the nineteenth century by a painter from Cremona, Gallo Gallina; this artist, when he frescoed 'Zephyr abducts Flora' (1832) in the Ala-Ponzone palace of his native town, gave Zephyr graceful, uniformly dark-bluish damselfly-wings (see Magri, 2004), clearly inspired by a common calopterygid.

Such spots signal astonishment, amazement, instinct to flee. One of the main hypothesized functions of eyespots is that they deter predators (particularly insectivorous birds) by intimidation, preventing the latter from initiating an attack.

Most discussions of eyespots functioning as intimidation devices generally argue that they function by resembling the eyes of the predators' enemies (Fig. 3), although some recent investigations also present other aspects (Stevens, 2005; Vallin et al., 2005; Stevens et al., 2008a, b). On the other hand, neither dragonflies (Anisoptera) nor damselflies (Zygoptera) with eyespots on their wings seem to exist (A. Tabarroni, in litteris).

Zephyr's wings are, therefore, astonishing and peculiar, corresponding perfectly to the definition of "wonder" as proposed by Greenblatt (1990).

Imagination or inspiration?

We do not know what guided Tiepolo's genius when he created such a daring hybrid between a butterfly (or moth), and a dragonfly (or damselfly). Certain commentators assert it was pure imagination (Chiappini & Veneziani, 2003), another (Magri, 2004) thinks that the wings were simply 'stolen' from a dragonfly, but this is not what the neuropterologist Monserrat (2010) believes: he finds a "surprising or casual" similarity with the adult antlion *Pseudimares* (Neuroptera Myrmeleontidae). Only two very rare species are presently known as belonging to this spectacular genus, one found in southern Iran (Kimmins, 1933), the other in Morocco (Aspöck & Aspöck, 2009). The very limited information available on both species, probably living in oases, is summarized by Pantaleoni et al. (2012).

The similarity between the pattern of Zephyr's wings and that of *Pseudimares* is not superficial, as the close-up comparison demonstrates (Fig. 4). If Tiepolo drew only on his imagination for his representation of Zephyr's wings, we are confronted with a very surprising coincidence. But is the hypothesis that the Venetian artist could have observed a *Pseudimares* at all feasible?

Giambattista Tiepolo spent his life principally in the Venice Republic, a seafaring state with a dense network of mercantile exchanges throughout the Mediterranean Sea. He himself was the son of a "mercante di negozi da nave" [merchant trading by ship] (Pallucchini, 1968).

In the late sixteenth century and through the seventeenth century Europe witnessed the spread of the 'Wunderkammern' rich in exotic finds, the forerunners of natural history museums (Westerhoff, 2001). Furthermore, of the European towns, Venice, together with for instance Amsterdam, during his epoch was characterized by a high patrician culture, with a strong interest in art and science (Burke, 1973). We therefore cannot exclude that the Master had the opportunity, for one reason or another, to see a specimen of this remarkable antlion, later being inspired by it.

There is no sure proof in favour of either of the two hypotheses: that of a fortuitous resemblance or that of an inspiring model, in the latter case simply recalled from memory by Tiepolo. However, both hypotheses contain an element of the extraordinary, thus exciting a sense of wonder, at least on the part of the authors of this note.

The former because it would indicate a nearly perfect coincidence between the imagery of a great painter and the true world. The latter because of the amazing trace an unusual and wonderful living being could have left behind, two hundred years before its official discovery and first description.

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