

# Butterflies in art and mythology



# Butterfly Themes:

- Freedom, liberation, salvation
- Soul
- Transformation
- Renewal, rebirth, awakening
- Jesus
- Transition
- Consciousness
- Courage
- Love, hope, joy
- Beauty
- Death
- Femininity

# Freedom – Liberation - Salvation

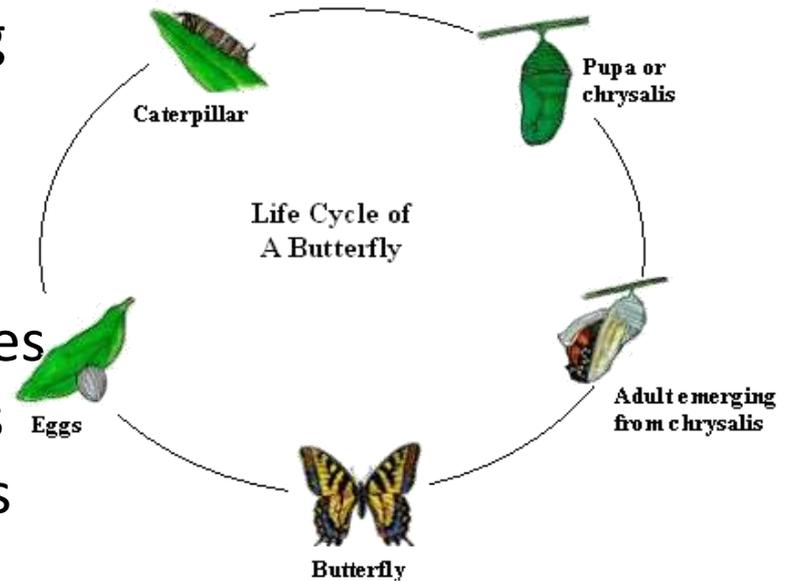
- One of the first things that comes to mind in discussing birds and butterflies is freedom. To be free from gravities pull, free to move.
- Birds and butterflies often have the symbolic meaning of the soul leaving it's corporal body and ascending towards the heavens. So also freedom from the earthly world.

# Soul

- And so we come to the soul. The butterfly often depicts the soul being a thing of pure beauty and free to move between heaven and earth. So we see the themes of incarnation and re-incarnation.

# Transformation

- A butterfly isn't born as such. There is a series of transformations ranging from egg to butterfly. And no matter how beautiful we find the butterfly-stage, the previous stages are to the human eye less cute. So we see the transformation aspect. Going from very earthly, eating leaves, being relatively plain looking and living just above the ground to something that lives in the skies eats nothing but the purest parts of the plant: the nectar and looks divinely colored.



# Jesus

- After having seen the previous themes how easy it is to recognize the Jesus symbolism in the butterfly. Resurrected, divine, the purest, free from the earthly life.

# Renewal, Rebirth, Awakening

- The life cycle of a caterpillar starts as an egg. But the life cycle of a butterfly starts as a chrysalis. But the caterpillar didn't die. He just transforms his body and awakens. Like the Egyptian pharaohs didn't die. Their body might have died but they didn't. They were mummified: prepared, embalmed and placed into a pupa so they could be reborn again into their new state in the afterlife.

# Transition

- There is no end or end-stage. It was often believed that butterflies didn't die (you rarely see a dead butterfly on the ground) but just went to heaven. So a butterfly is an immortal being going from stage to stage.
- See life cycle of the butterfly on slide 5: Transformation.

# Consciousness

- ✓ To enlighten this I would to present the following story of Buddha: It is said that soon after his enlightenment the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by the his extraordinary radiance and peaceful presence. The man stopped and asked, "My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?"
- ✓ "No," said the Buddha.
- ✓ "Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?" Again the Buddha answered, "No."
- ✓ "Are you a man?" "No."
- ✓ "Well, my friend, then what are you?" The Buddha replied, "I am awake."
- We see that after his enlightenment the Buddha transformed into a being that is radiant and peaceful. But we also speak of Buddha consciousness.

# Courage

- To become a butterfly the caterpillar has to free himself from his earthly form. To go into his chrysalis stage can be compared with Jesus going into the desert for 40 days and nights. Buddha coming into his consciousness. Or what Jung says going through the dark night of the soul. We become ourselves in the purest way. And this takes courage!

# Love, Hope, Joy

- Freed from earthly matters, fluttering from blossom to blossom, drinking the divine nectar. This is the high life. Once we get there it's nothing but joy and divine love. And when we haven't acquired it yet, there is always the hope of getting there.

# Beauty

- For those who never even saw a butterfly: they are stunningly beautiful: Often with incredibly complex figures, color transitions and perfectly symmetrical (to a human symmetry is often perceived as beauty).

# Death

- Like the tarot card of “Death” this doesn’t necessarily mean dying. The Death card is far more likely to represent transformation, passage, change or the end of a certain period.

# Femininity

- The butterfly is often associated with femininity, like most beautiful things are. But it's more than that. Like the (mother)earth is also feminine because of it's nourishing qualities. The story of man the hunter can illustrate the basic male pattern. Men hunt, they want, they roam. Their development is vertical. Women research, nourish, create possibilities. Their development is horizontal. And so the caterpillar goes from male: simple appearance and only looking for the juiciest leaves to eat to female: beautiful and pollinating the flowers.

# Pompeii (30 BC - 14 AD)



On the left we see symbols of wealth and decadence. On the right we see symbols of poverty. In the middle there is the skull, the butterfly and the wheel of fortune.

This mosaic which was beautifully preserved shows us how death cancels out all difference in wealth and class.

# Ancient Egyptian Butterflies



# Albrecht Durer (1471 – 1528)



# Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-1569)



# Cesare Lapini (1848-1888/1898)



# Antonio Canova (1757-1822)



# Antoine-Denis Chaudet (1763-1810)



# François Gérard (1770-1837)



# Otto Marseus van Schrieck (1614-1678)



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# Adriaen Coorte (1665-1707)



# Balthasar van der Ast (1593-1657)



# William Hughes 1842-1901



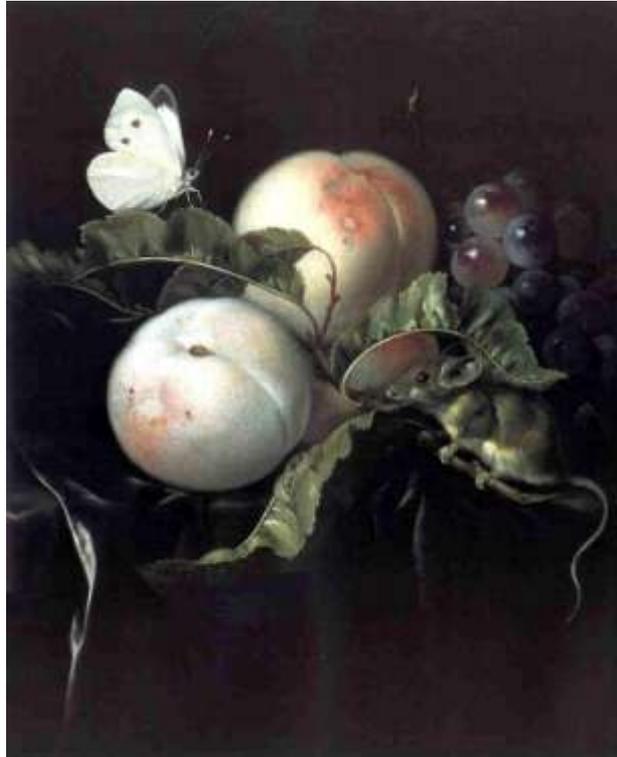
# Jan Davidszoon de Heem (1606-1684)



# Jan van Huysum (1682-1749)



# Willem van Aelst (1627-1683)



# Maria van Oosterwijck (1630-1693)



# Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788)



Notice the dark forest and stormy air in the background. This is not just a painting of two girls!

It shows their first steps into adult life, the cruelties of the world. It's just as hard for them to step into this unknown territory as it is to their parents who have to let them go.

Also notice how the oldest of the two already has some self-consciousness, she's more careful, more adult. While her younger sister is almost naïve in walking towards the butterfly. If we keep in mind that butterflies, in art, were sometimes used to show the person had died we can even let our imagination run more wild on this painting!

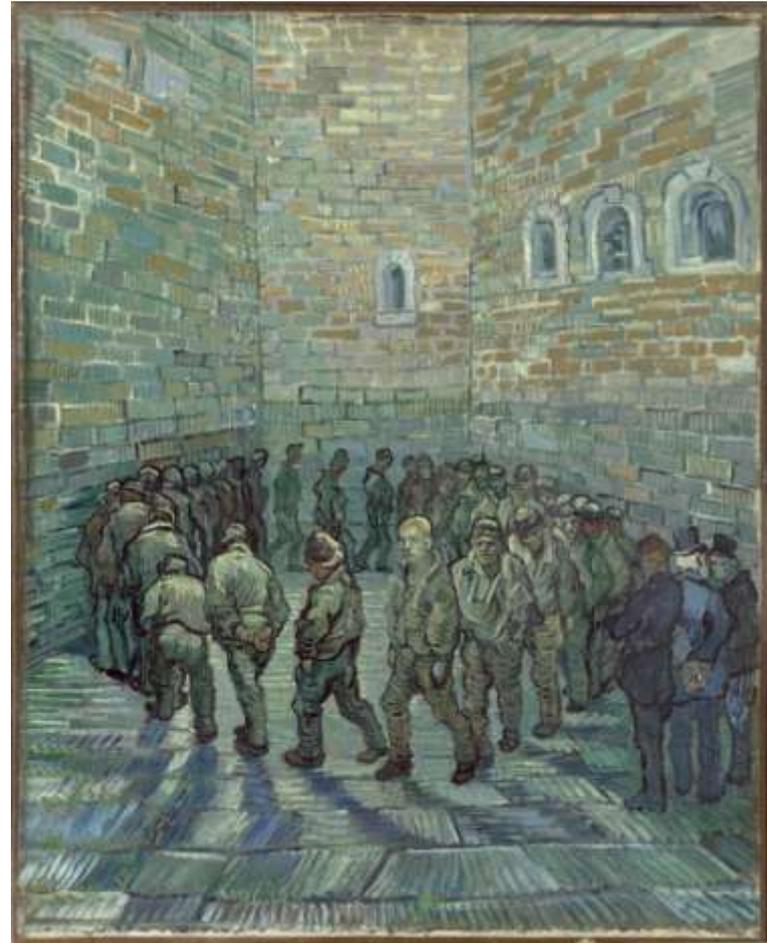
# Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)



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Two butterflies arise from the Courtyard. Symbolizing the desire For freedom from the prisoners.

And also showing their process Of transformation. They are no Longer criminals they have changed And are ready to be productive Members of society.



# James Ensor (1860-1949)



# Picasso



# Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972)



# Salvador Dali



# Pablo Picasso



In 1937 Picasso

# Sergei Rimoshevski (1964- )



Damian Hirst (1965 - )



# Audrey Flack (1931- )



Combining beauty and Horror, imprisonment and liberation of the soul. We see symbols of WWII, concentration camps.

And also the butterfly shows the transition to heaven where there is plenty and roses are blooming. Or everything in reverse: the lives they left behind.

# Bethany de Forest (1966 - )



# Margit Koretzova 1935-1944



# Acherontia Atropos

- The Death's-head Hawkmoth with its skull shaped pattern on the back is has a mythology and folklore slightly deviating from the other butterflies. It's mainly associated with the supernatural, evil and several superstitions.



# Madame Butterfly



# Summary

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- Transformation, renewal, rebirth, awakening
- Consciousness
- courage
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