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Museum displays exotic insect species

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STAR-LEDGER STAFF

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Insecta Fantasia

Where: The Ballantine House at the Newark Museum, 49
Washington St., Newark

When: Noon-5 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m.
Saturdays and Sundays through June 14

How much: \$9; \$6 children, students, seniors. Call (973)
596-6550.

Seafoam-green leaf bugs, brown cicadas with translucent wings and neon-green beetles are just some of the insects decorating the walls in "Insecta Fantasia," a new and imaginative exhibit that marries insects and interior design at the Newark Museum.

A total of 5,000 colorful exotic insects from tropical countries - as well as objects of interior design from the museum's collection - greet museum visitors, who will have to take a second look to spot the bugs on the walls . . . in frames . . . almost everywhere. This unusual new exhibit is in two children's bedrooms in the museum's Ballantine House.

Visitors enter a fantasy world of insects with real - but preserved, not live - bugs displayed in intricate patterns on top of Victorian wallpaper that's already decorated with printed bugs. Katydid, butterflies, beetles and even grasshoppers are featured as characters in glass "story boxes" that depict fairy tales using molded wax shapes, insects and other decorative items. "The Princess and the Pea," for example, features a beetle resting atop a pile of colorful mattresses.

Bugs are on display in rounded glass frames on the walls or sitting atop colorful spools of thread in glass cases. Some even get to set up house in a beautiful wooden colonial dollhouse.

Bugs are used to create letters of the alphabet and names of different kinds of insects decorating the tops of the walls of one of the two exhibit rooms.

"Insecta Fantasia," which opened Nov. 5, is the first of several new exhibits at the museum celebrating its centennial, coming up in 2009. The museum commissioned textile artist Jennifer Angus from the University of Wisconsin, who's made a specialty of using preserved insects to create art, to decorate the bedrooms of Alice and Percy

Ballantine in the Ballantine House. Both rooms feature diary entries from the children.

The idea of a room filled with bugs may give some the creeps, but these crawlies are not the average insects we find in New Jersey. The display includes species from Malaysia, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Siam, Madagascar and the Galapagos, many of them over-sized and quite beautiful. Some of the green Buprestid beetles featured on one wall even have a poem, nine verses long, etched on their wings.

Most of the bugs are pinned to the wall by their thorax, where the legs and wings connect, noted Sule Oygur, curator of the museum's natural science collection and co-curator of the exhibit. The bugs have exterior skeletons, which make them easier to preserve and use for decoration, she said.

"Through this installation, visitors will have the opportunity to learn both myth and science in an exhibition that brings together the fields of art, history and entomology," says Beth Venn, co-curator of the exhibit and curator of modern and contemporary art and senior curator of American Art at the museum. "It will also help people understand the richness and immensely interesting variety of the insect world while bringing them back to a time when collecting, mounting, identifying and clarifying insects was a common pastime."

Oygur says she hopes the exhibit educates people about insects. She notes that none of the insects used in the exhibit are endangered species.

Visitors will be able to create their own works of art with insects at Insecta Fantasia Family Day on Dec. 27 from noon to 4:30 p.m.

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PHOTO CAPTION: 1. A beetle rests atop a pile of miniature mattresses in a story box illustrating "The Princess and the Pea" at the Newark Museum's "Insecta Fantasia" exhibit. **CREDIT:** 1. ROSS WHITAKER, PIMZLO MEDIA

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