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Beauty of the plankton: from the first issue of Haeckel's Art Forms of Nature

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► **To cite this version:**

John Dolan. Beauty of the plankton: from the first issue of Haeckel's Art Forms of Nature. Journal of Plankton Research, 2023, 10.1093/plankt/fbac076 . hal-03943595

HAL Id: hal-03943595

<https://hal.science/hal-03943595v1>

Submitted on 25 Oct 2024

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EDITORIAL

Beauty of the plankton: from the first issue of Haeckel’s *Art Forms of Nature*

When asked “why study plankton?” We might invoke carbon flux, climate change, etc. If the answer seems inadequate to explain a devotion to plankton, do not hesitate to say that the organisms of the plankton are gorgeous, “art forms of the drifting world”. It is not difficult to provide evidence. The beauties of the natural world, both aquatic and terrestrial, were famously popularized by Ernst Haeckel in his *Art Forms of Nature* (*Kunstformen der Natur*) published in 10 installments or issues from 1899 to 1904. Each issue consisted of 10 large format plates most depicting a particular taxon. The illustrations inspired architects and artists of the early 20th century. Plankton researchers can point out that plankton dominated the first issue of 10 plates. It is likely that choices of which organisms to depict were carefully considered as the success of the work would rely on the reception of the first issue. Haeckel chose to showcase the art forms of the plankton. The first plate showed phaeodarians of the marine microzooplankton (Fig 1). The second plate was devoted to foraminifera with a centerpiece of *Globergina globulosa* of the marine plankton (Fig. 2) The third plate depicted ciliates both benthic and planktonic with the tintinnids of the marine plankton prominent. The fourth plate showcased diatoms, both benthic and planktonic. The seventh was given to siphonophores in living color and the eighth, likely the best known of all 100 plates, showed spectacular medusa (Fig. 3). All in all, of the 100 plates of Haeckel’s book on the art forms of nature, 37 were devoted to taxa of the plankton, solid evidence of the beauty of the plankton, explaining in part his own devotion to plankton research!

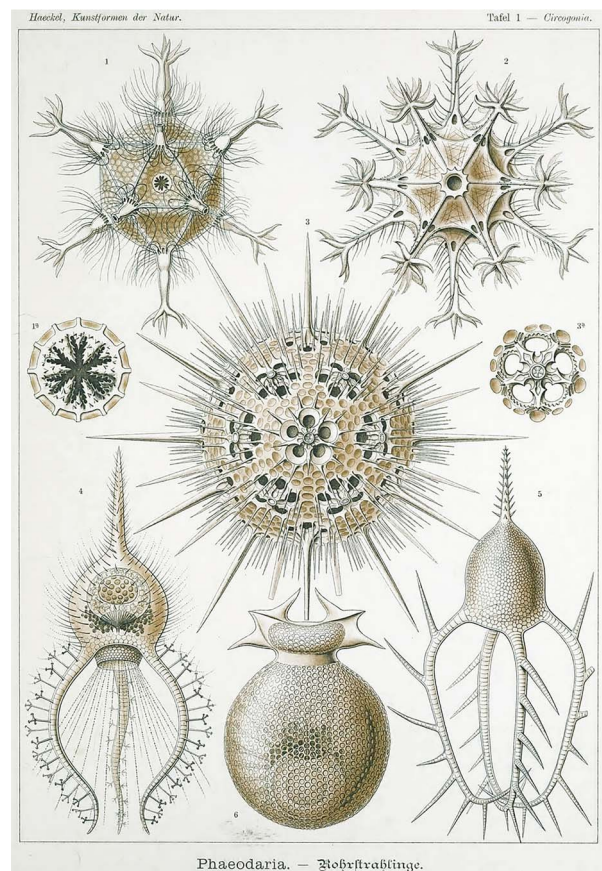


Fig. 1. The first plate of Ernst Haeckel’s *Art Forms of Nature* depicting phaeodarians of the deep sea plankton.



Fig. 2. Plates 2, 3, 4 and 7 showing the beauty of foraminifera, ciliates, diatoms and siphonophores.

Haeckel, *Kunstformen der Natur*.

Tafel 8 — *Desmonema*.



Discomedusae. — Scheibenquallen.

Fig. 3. Plate 8 showing the beauty of medusa.

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FURTHER READING

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