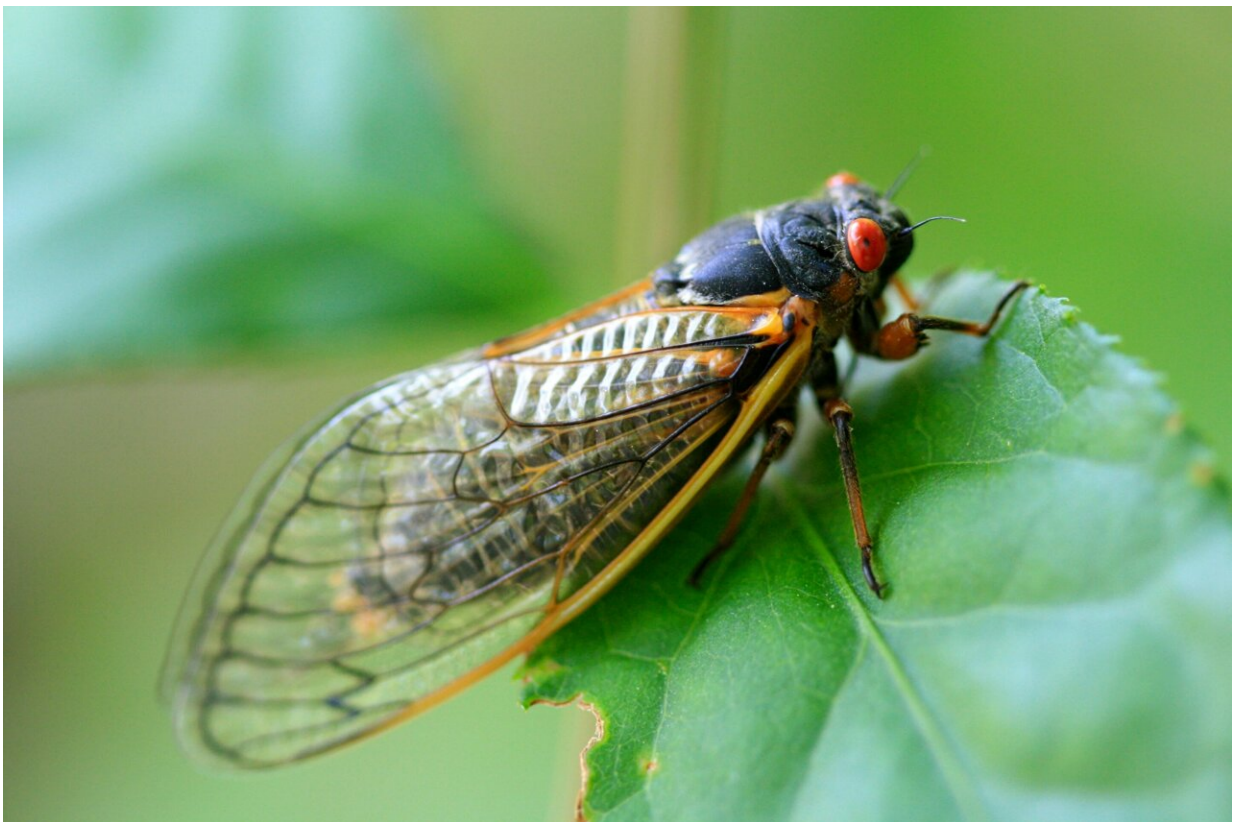


Artists, entrepreneurs transform cicadas from 'ick' to 'in demand' while building community

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Cicadas seem to be everywhere these days.

They're crawling up from the ground and will soon be singing from the treetops all over Illinois as the [life cycles](#) of two broods coincide for the first time in more than two centuries. But they're also on stickers, wall art and graphic novels, on witty Tees and Taylor Swift shirts, on sculptures and even dinner plates.

Going from bug to fad, [cicadas](#) have been embraced by artists and entrepreneurs showcasing products that celebrate this rare, shared event.

"It's more than just an item," said Nina Salem, founder of The Insect Asylum, an Avondale-based museum of zoology leading a citywide effort for amateur and expert artists to buy or sponsor over 1,000 giant plaster cicada sculptures to be decorated and placed around Chicago. "It's an experience, and it's an opportunity to join a community."

Some entrepreneurs, including Salem, are longtime insect enthusiasts who love cicadas in their rough, natural beauty and want to share that love. Others, trying to overcome their own aversions, are making less realistic, more appealing merchandise.

"I took the Chicago flag and desecrated it with cute little happy cicadas," said Trayce Zimmermann, a Chicago PR specialist who started the website Cicadapalooza. "And I added the music twist (referring to the site's takeoff on Lollapalooza) because a trillion of them are coming out to sing. There you have 'cicada chic'—something that is fun to wear for people who don't like the ick factor."

Local artists and entrepreneurs say they hope to encourage the public to embrace the insects as part of community building.

"In terms of fostering collective identity and the desire for people to make art and buy things related to it, there are parallels with any unusual events," said Ginger Pennington, a Northwestern University professor

specializing in consumer psychology and human motivation.

"I mean, there's the eclipse, there's COVID, of course, or when the Chicago Cubs won the World Series in 2016. We've seen merch just explode, partly because we all feel like we're part of the special, unusual thing that happened and it binds us all together."

Invoking curiosity

In the gift shop at the Bess Bower Dunn Museum of Lake County, a stand is brimming with cicada-inspired items: books, wall art, postcards, keychains, pins, stickers, even gold dangly earrings and necklaces with stone pendants shaped like the insect. Walking into the new exhibit—"Celebrating Cicadas" open through Aug. 4—visitors are greeted by an inquisitive cicada nymph with bulging red eyes.

The insect is on a mural illustrated by Samantha Gallagher from Gurnee, who has combined her passions and studies in art and entomology into a career of drawing scientific illustrations of insects. It is one of 11 illustrations she was commissioned to draw for the exhibit.

"The biggest compliment I can get with my art, especially with my subject matter being insects, is when somebody says like, 'Well, I don't usually like bugs, but I like yours, yours look friendly, or yours are beautiful,'" she said. "That's exactly what I'm trying to do: Instead of invoking feelings of fear, or disgust, which is really common. ... I try to invoke more curiosity, and maybe even compassion."

Some of Gallagher's art prints are being sold in the museum gift shop, but she's also selling other items online, including tote bags and phone cases.

"Some people want that souvenir, they want to feel like they're part of

something bigger, especially something temporary and fleeting like that," Gallagher said. "If you're here, you can participate in it. And maybe you will, whether you want to or not. So, when in Rome, right?"

The large-scale collaborative sculpture project led by The Insect Asylum locally was originally conceived in Baltimore for a 17-year periodical cicada emergence there in 2021. Salem said she wanted to bring this "Cicada Parade-a" home to celebrate this year's double emergence.

"This has been a really beautiful moment in history, so we're really happy to celebrate it," Salem said. "The whole spirit of this project was to help gain some perspective for the cicada emergence. Because we know so many were having anxiety about it, we wanted to bring something beautiful to it, that encourages education."

Love them or hate them, one thing is evident: Cicadas bring out strong emotions, according to Pennington. But relating to them through art and merchandise can help humans channel and cope with these emotions, whether they're positive or negative.

"Some people like the really detailed, scientific illustrations. Those people see the art and the wonder in it," she said. "For some people, it's fear and disgust, so some of the information and the art and the merch kind of helps them overcome that. After seeing a stuffed animal, the cicada T-shirts—that's kind of a coping mechanism. You can see it in this abstract way, and the cuteness of it instead of the gross, realistic aspects of it that people find scary."

Good publicity

Others who are less enthused by the noisy visitors are trying to embrace cicadas on their terms. When Zimmermann first learned of this year's cicada emergence, she said she scrolled online through pages and pages

of "uninspired" and "gross-looking" cicada products. She couldn't fathom using or wearing any of it.

She decided to make "cute" designs to put on T-shirts for friends and family. But she didn't expect the popularity her side hustle has since amassed.

"Everyone loves it. And I'm not a T-shirt salesperson," she said. "I'm a publicist, but I gave it a little PR magic, and now I'm up to my eyeballs."

Zimmermann said she thinks the excitement of an event this widespread has shifted the majority of the public's perception in the last few weeks; personally, she feels she can coexist with the insects now, though at a safe distance.

"Their reputation has improved, but they're still icky!" she laughed. "I don't want them in my hair."

According to Pennington, that's part of the power of social influence. "You're seeing other people engaging with (cicadas), making merchandise and making art about them. And it does alter our perceptions and our behavior," she said. "So we're more likely to conform to that normative influence and we're more likely to engage if we see other people engaging."

Zimmermann said she has felt this shared engagement.

"It's our emergence, and it's a way to commemorate it," she said. "And you'll have this T-shirt in 10 years and say, you know, 'I was there.'"

A sense of belonging

At The Insect Asylum—which has long had a cicada logo—there is a

shelf with cicada creations from local artists and small businesses. From Ampersand Curiosities, there are ethically sourced cicadas that have been crystallized with blue, red, silver or purple shimmering minerals, selling for \$95.

Other items include band T-shirts and posters for the "Summer '24 Scream Emergence Tour" across Midwest and Southeast cities. Salem, the museum's owner, said they're running low on cicada merchandise because they've sold so much over the last few weeks.

Volunteers and friends have helped Salem cast over 1,200 cicada plaster sculptures to be decorated and distributed around the Chicago area for the art project. Even as they ramp up the public installations, the museum's basement was still piled up with blank-slate statues ready to be embellished. Salem said the project's reach has exceeded their expectations for 600 sculptures.

Pennington explained that shared events help break down barriers that typically divide people, especially in the contentious social environment of this day and age.

"We're so often focused on differences and now, all of a sudden, we're all going through a similar thing together," she said.

Like the eclipse, such an event also helps put those differences, and one's reality, into perspective.

"These long, 17-year-old cycles ... make you realize all this time has gone by," she said.

"For all this chaos that's been happening in the political world, and (cicadas have) just been down there, just hanging out. So it kind of lets you zoom out to this bigger perspective of, all this time has gone by and

there's this same cycle of nature that just keeps on plugging along, exactly the same every 13, every 17 years. It's a little bit humbling."

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