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WALL TEXTS

Kulturforum, Exhibitions Halls

Matthäikirchplatz, 10785 Berlin

Tue, Wed, Fri 10 am–6 pm, Thu 10 am–8 pm, Sat + Sun 11 am–6 pm

Alchemy. The Great Art

6 April – 23 July 2017

An exhibition by Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in cooperation with the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

Alchemy. The Great Art

Alchemy is a creation myth and therefore intimately related to artistic practice – this idea permeates all eras and cultures, shaping alchemy's theoretical underpinnings as well as artistic creativity. In medieval Europe, alchemy was known as *Ars magna* (the Great Art) and its practice fed into the art of the day. Contrary to the popular misconception that the aim of alchemists was primarily to make gold, there were many adepts who strove for nothing less than the emulation of the divine act of creation itself. Spurred by this goal, they wished not merely to imitate nature through their own creativity, but ultimately even to surpass it. This drive to transmute naturally existing matter into a man-made product still influences artists today, in particular contemporary artists who understand the processual transformation of material as an integral facet of their work. This exhibition traces alchemy's different manifestations in artistic-artisanal practice and visual culture from antiquity to the present. It becomes clear that alchemy remains to this day far more than a fantastic pipe dream of making gold: alchemy is a creation myth and therefore intimately related to artistic practice.

Hermes and Mercury: Father and God

Mercury, the Roman messenger of the gods, who corresponds to Hermes in the Greek pantheon and is also identified with the Egyptian god Thoth, is characterized in antique mythology by cunning and speed. Alongside commerce, travel and the sciences, he is the patron deity of alchemy and is consequently associated with mercury – the only metal that is fluid and hence supple under normal conditions. Out of the literary amalgam of Hermes and Thoth in Hellenistic Alexandria, there emerged the semi-mythical figure of the sage Hermes Trismegistos: this "Thrice Greatest Hermes" was revered as the father of alchemy and the author of influential texts and was viewed well into the early modern era as the transmitter of ancient wisdom on the nature of matter, the spirit and the workings of the universe. The first chapter of this exhibition is devoted to Hermes Trismegistos as a founding figure of alchemy and to the planetary god Mercury/Hermes.

Material Culture: Origins of Alchemy

The historical roots of alchemy lie in Hellenistic Egypt. Here, in a process lasting many centuries, Greek natural philosophy progressively melded with Egyptian metallurgy, medicine and mythology, as the cultural legacies of two civilizations merged. Here, too, we find the earliest evidence of



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a practical alchemy: Egyptian artisans “transmuted” natural matter into malleable materials that could be moulded into artistic form; they practised *chēmeía* (Greek for “metal-pouring”), employed refining techniques and invented the earliest chemically synthesized pigment: Egyptian Blue. The concept of alchemical transmutation also lay behind processing techniques such as the transformation of clear into coloured glass and the imitation of precious stones and metals. Antique material culture is the cradle of the alchemical heritage that, over the course of the millennia, has helped art accrue a wealth of creative means.

Inner Alchemy

Evidence of early alchemical activity is also found outside the Mediterranean sphere. Many commonplace techniques of European laboratories and workshops, such as fire gilding and porcelain manufacture, originated in ancient China. At the same time, Daoist speculation on “The Way” (in Chinese, *dao*) to eternal existence led to an approach that combined science and spirituality and integrated medicine and meditation. *Waidan*, the “external elixir”, involved the pharmaceutical production of chemical ‘liquors’, while *Neidan*, the “internal elixir”, strove for the same results via meditative practice. Prints and paintings of the period offer anatomical ‘maps’ of the body where glass jars correspond to its various vital biological functions. Diagrams in which the human organism is equated with the process in the test tube can be found in Europe, too, in laboratory manuals on spagyric (i.e. pharmaceutical) alchemy.

The Chemical Wedding

Medieval alchemy is dominated by the notion of a Creation that has two poles, whose perfect balance signifies a state of Paradise. It is the task of the adept to bring the polarities back into mutual equilibrium and to wed them to each other in harmony. Underlying this idea is the mercury-sulphur theory formulated by the legendary Arab alchemist Jābir ibn Hayyān. According to Jabir, mixing the two substances in the correct proportions ultimately produces the elixir of life, also known as the philosopher’s stone. To describe this process, alchemy employed powerful images such as the wedding and sexual union of the royal couple. The result of the King and Queen’s fusion – their ‘product’, so to speak – is another of alchemy’s best-known images: the hermaphrodite, who unites all polarities in one figure. This visual representation of a bipolar world picture is a phenomenon that spans the globe, as witnessed by *yin* and *yang* in Daoism, for example, and the marriage of Shiva and Parvati in Hinduism.

Artists – Artisans – Alchemists

Towards the end of the Middle Ages the alchemist enters the stage of art in his role as creator. He is no longer obscured behind the divine creation of earthly nature, but appears in his own right: the figure and person of the alchemist are deemed worthy subjects of art. The image of the alchemist busy at his work becomes a topos of visual art that is characterized by different types, who formed their own professional group, as it were. Particularly common is the motif of the impoverished would-be maker of gold, who lives among the chaos of his laboratory and whose experiment fails spectacularly. But we find many neutral representations, too, in which the adept toils at his still or descends into the mine to extract the terrestrial

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essences of the seven planets – the metals; he sets up ovens, flasks and apparatus and he weighs, mixes, boils and sublimates. Another type, meanwhile, is the charlatan, who seeks to hoodwink his clientele for his own self-serving purposes – and who in the 15th century is already part of the alchemical pictorial repertoire.

Ora et labora: The Philosopher's Stone

The pursuit of alchemy is a combination of theoretical study and practical labour, as symbolized in the concept of the laboratorium – a word derived from the two key Latin elements *labora* ("work!") and *ora* ("pray!"). This section of the exhibition brings together a wide range of objects that testify to the breadth and variety of the alchemist's labours. The representation of a mine, for example, illustrates the notion of an alchemical "first matter" (*prima materia*) that must be extracted from below ground, while the laboratory book contains practical instructions on matters such as distillation and the correct use of tools and instruments. In a different sphere, the chemical processes of the Great Work taking place in the phial are translated, by the high art of alchemical visual allegory, into a pictorial language that only initiates can read. The section ends with a look at how alchemy facilitated the breakthrough of its rational sister, chemistry.

Homunculus

Homunculus is the natural progression, so to speak, from *The Chemical Wedding*, which is located in the room directly above us. What we see here is the artificial life created in the phial by the alchemist with his substances and his equipment. The alchemist builds his own world, fashions his own beings; he assumes the role of a demiurge or a small god. The symbolic human figures found in medieval manuscripts and printed editions of hermetic texts, which present alchemical life in the test tube, soon evolve into the dangerous scientific activities of doctors Faustus and Frankenstein; and what in the huge *Ripley Scroll* is still a hybrid artistic world becomes, in the hands of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Mary Shelley, the terrifying vision of an artificially created being that has got out of (laboratory) control – a scientific taboo that is today coming ever closer to being shattered.

The Cabinet of Art

In their search for the philosopher's stone, the formula for making gold and the recipe for a universal panacea, some industrious experimenters managed – more or less by chance – to produce substances, composite materials and technologies of enduring cultural historical significance. Alchemy's most important legacy thus includes not only the foundations of modern chemistry, but also the alleged by-products of alchemical experiments, such as porcelain, gold-ruby glass and phosphorus. In this way, the alchemist's laboratory – which in the Baroque era was frequently found at the courts of princes, usually not far from the art collection and the cabinet of curiosities – became a breeding ground of diverse "creatures", which are here assembled into a "Cabinet of Art". In arriving at such new inventions and discoveries, the alchemist understood himself as a creator who not merely strove to imitate nature as closely as possible, but rather to bring forth his own creations.

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The Mute Book: An Artist's Book on the Great Art

The *Mutus liber* or Mute Book is a celebrated alchemical treatise. This book, however, is by no means mute: it tells its tale of alchemical transformation in an eloquent manner – not in lengthy explanations but exclusively in fifteen large woodcuts, intended for immersive contemplation undistracted by any accompanying text. As an analysis of the plates reveals, their subject is nevertheless the practical, material alchemy carried out in the laboratory. The cycle centres on the collection of the celestial or hermetic dew and its catalytic effect in the alchemical process of transformation. The fame of the *Mutus liber* ultimately arises out of the radical decision by its author to communicate his message solely through images – to rely, in other words, exclusively on the power of art. We are dealing quite literally with an artist's book of alchemy.

Synthetic Worlds

The understanding of the alchemist as a creator, conceived in the laboratories of the early modern era, paved the way for a creative alchemical practice that flourished even after alchemy was succeeded by the modern natural sciences. The idea of alchemy as a cultural technique intimately related to artistic production remained firmly in place throughout the 19th century. It was reinforced in particular by photography, born out of chemical laboratory practice. With the artistic creations of the 20th and 21st century oriented towards a material aesthetic, the concept of the alchemist-creator assumed renewed relevance, one it continues to sustain in the era of digital, bio and gene technologies. In the final "synthesis", it becomes clear: alchemy is a phenomenon that, from its earliest origins, has wedded scientific and artistic endeavours and therefore appears thoroughly modern from today's perspective.

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