

ESOTERIC OR EROTIC? RUDOLF II AND HIS PRAGUE CHAMBER OF WONDERS

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Individuals fortunate enough to receive a coveted invitation to visit Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II's Chamber of Wonders in the Prague Castle would witness, among the many treasures, paintings focusing on couples scantily dressed and engaged in erotic, if not titillating escapades. Just a glance at the paintings in his collection, a bevy of sensuous nudes, might lead to the conclusion that the Emperor had a penchant for collecting bawdy and amorous art with little more substance than erotic stimulation. After all, Rudolf was a bachelor, and further, equated with being a bit peculiar to the point of mildly insane. However, the art created by his court artists offers far more than sensual delight. They represent the pervading hermetic intellectualism embraced by Rudolf's court entourage. Moreover, although these works are indeed erotic, they are allegories of the alchemic ideal, the pursuit of the philosopher's stone or true spiritual wisdom.

Rudolf's collecting behavior, considered at times eccentric and obsessive, was in fact quite usual for a ruler of c. 1600. Rudolf followed in the tradition of his father and relatives, including his uncle Philip II in Spain. One might suggest another motivating force for Rudolf's patronage, and indeed for Rudolfine art: Rudolf as the master alchemist, the Christian and cultural alchemist of Central Europe. The art or science of alchemy and its related fields of the occult and hermeticism proliferated during Rudolf's milieu. The philosophical goals inherent within this hermetic world permeated the art and collecting goals of rulers, in particular Rudolf II.

Before presenting specifics, I offer a brief discussion concerning the reception of alchemy and its relevance for European courts c. 1600. Alchemy, the roots of which can be traced to 300 BC in Egypt and Greece, and as early as 750 AD in the Islamic world, represented more than the hopeless pursuit of turning base metals into gold. Today, the term alchemy often conjures up the image of the charlatan sequestered in a dark and dank laboratory, pouring over futile books of impenetrable potions and formulas. This derision

of alchemy, however, is a modern construct. For centuries, the pursuit of alchemy was considered a noble quest. It signified a thought process, both scientific and philosophical. Alchemy sought more than the physical transmutation of base metals into gold. The alchemists strived for a gold that was both physical and spiritual. Two branches of alchemy existed side by side: *practica* and *theoretica* (practical and philosophical). As the end goal, alchemists pursued the philosopher's stone, a secret substance and tincture for transforming base metals to gold. But this philosopher's stone was both a practical and metaphysical substance, as it also embodied spiritual and ancient wisdom. Rulers and scholars turned to alchemy for unlocking the secrets of the universe, including the mysteries of creation, the struggles of love, foretelling the future, and mending afflictions of the body. Alchemy pervaded almost all aspects of knowledge, and in essence, of life itself. In many respects, the pursuit of alchemy was akin to our modern day self-help and spiritual wisdom craze, fashioned by figures including Depak Chopra, or the vogue pastime of visiting an Indian Ashram.

With this background in mind, let us explore the concomitant influence alchemy swayed on the arts and visual culture during the reign of Rudolf II. He did not pursue alchemy on his own or in a vacuum. Rather, the House of Hapsburg had a tradition of exploring hermetic and occult philosophy. Rudolf's father, Maximilian II, sent his twelve-year-old son to live in Spain for seven years, where he would have fallen under the spell of the occult embraced by his uncle King Philip II. At the Escorial, Rudolf would have been introduced to an impressive alchemical laboratory and library bursting with humanistic and occult works, including the alchemical opus magnum, *Corpus Hermeticum* by the putative father of alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus.

Maximilian II employed at his royal court in Vienna *Leibaertzen*, or court doctors, who walked a thin line between magic and medicine. These men were physicians, healers, alchemists and even sometimes astrologers. They practiced a medicine based on the philosophy of Phillipus Theophrastus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus. The theories of Paracelsus became widely known during the two generations after his death in 1541. Paracelsus reacted against the traditional veneration of antiquity by rejecting then popular practice of Galenic and Aristotelian medicine (Debus, 1978: 32). A number of Paracelsian court physicians worked for Maximilian and later for Rudolf,

including Oswald Croll, Julius Alexandrinu, and Bartholomew Gurarinoni (Evans, 1973: 203). Paracelsianism was a complex and often misunderstood system of thought. Among the more revolutionary tenets was that the Prophet Elijah would return as an alchemist and create a new 'chemical' transformation of the world. In medicine and disease, Paracelsus proposed treating like with like, a philosophy eventually leading to modern vaccination, in which patients are inoculated against diseases using small quantities of the pathogen.

Paracelsus decreed the primacy of the four elements, (earth, wind, fire and water), the microcosm of man as a representative of the macrocosm of the world, and, especially for this discussion, raised the level of an alchemist to that of anyone engaged in an endeavor of transformation. According to Paracelsus, an alchemist was not merely the adept who sat in his laboratory mixing powders hoping to discover the tincture for metal transformation. Rather, the innovative scholarship of Paracelsus declared that anyone who began with one material and ended with a more advanced, and noble form was an alchemist. Paracelsus writes that the winemaker, who creates wine from grapes, is an alchemist, as is a weaver who takes silk threads and makes a tapestry. Thus, according to Paracelsus, all artistic endeavors, creating a painting or a sculpture, for example, represent the ancient art of alchemy (Waite, 1967: vol. II, 148).

Paracelsus conceived alchemy as an art that permits the transformation of the invisible into the visible. According to him, "Mighty power is wrought in words, plants and stones." Powers of the stars were thought to be transferred to plants and gems in particular. Alchemical philosophy encouraged interest and exploration in mining and gemology. Maximilian II displayed avid enthusiasm for mining of precious stones. He patronized Leonard Thurneysser (1530-1596) who published *Magna Alchemia*, a work that included sections on Bohemian and Hungarian mining. Endeavors of gemology and metallurgy were similar to alchemy in that the pursuit was physical and financial, as well as spiritual. Precious stones were seen as hieroglyphs, symbols of the mysterious and hermetic world of celestial and natural forces. Precious stones were viewed as the key to the secrets of the universe. One of Rudolf's most erudite stonecutters and gemologists, Tadeas Budeck, wrote an alchemical treatise in which he not only included a translation of Paracelsus, but also described his position for Rudolf as "His majesty's prospector for treasures, metals, precious stones, and all hidden secrets in the whole of nature." This belief in the magical

powers of precious stones gave rise to a prodigious production of exquisite objects fashioned from the wonders of nature and the four elements. Milanese craftsman Ottavio Miseroni was called to Prague, founding an entire workshop of diamond cutting, and creating numerous precious objects from these magical stones. His materials were rare and precious, and he fashioned objects that achieved a much higher level of existence than utilitarian use. A bowl made of jasper almost magically transforms into a human figure, with ripples of black intertwined with flesh-colored striations. Here transformation was at its peak. These objects for the Chamber of Wonders offer visual voice to the potency of alchemic philosophy. In the tradition of Paracelsus, the creators of these objects are alchemists par excellence, transforming earthly materials into magnificent and noble objects of beauty.

Rudolf II was even more fervent in his alchemical pursuits than both his father and uncle. When he moved the court from Vienna to Prague, in part to provide a buffer from the ever-looming threat of a Turkish invasion, Rudolf's welcoming stance towards alchemists became renowned. Like his father, Rudolf patronized alchemists and a street survives today in Prague called the golden lane, or the alchemists' street. Among the most prominent alchemists supported by Rudolf was the German physician Michael Maier from Regensburg. After apparently witnessing a miraculous cure with the intervention of alchemy, Maier decided to dedicate himself to the secret art. He set up a laboratory and putatively successfully performed a transmutation. He traveled to Prague in the first decade of the seventeenth century with the hope of garnering patronage from the open-minded and eccentric Rudolf. And indeed, Maier achieved his goal: Rudolf awarded Maier the titles of Personal Physician to the Emperor, Count Palatine, and Knight Exemptus.

Rudolf patronized numerous artists with the goal of amassing a magnificent collection of the most promising talent. His court entourage included German artist Hans von Aachen, the Milanese Guiseppe Arcimboldo, and the Swiss-born Joseph Heintz. One of Rudolf's premier artists, Hofkünstler, or court painter Bartholomäus Spranger (1546-1611), had a penchant for bringing to life the numerous couples featured in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. Many of Spranger's works feature nude couples engaged in erotic activity. While these paintings illustrate allegories involving the struggles of sensuality and love, they are not necessarily chamber paintings exclusively designed to arouse the Emperor.

Rather, they represent tenets of alchemical philosophy, in particular that of sexual union as a metaphor for the creation of the philosopher's stone, ambiguity and riddle, reconciliation of opposites, importance of androgyny, eroticism as an allegory for transmutation, and the fixed and the volatile, represented by the male and female respectively. The union of the male and female principals, male mercury and female sulphur is a primary requirement in the practical and theoretical work of the alchemist's transmutation of base metals. The production of the philosopher's stone was likened to the reproduction of man. Thus, there are countless references to the so-called alchemical marriage bed, or the chemical wedding. Even the nudity of the figures references alchemical philosophy, as nudity represents a purification stage in transmutation (Klossowski de Rola, 1988: 28). In alchemy, sexual union between male and female was often invoked as a metaphor for the alchemical union of opposites, the fixed and the volatile. The fusion of the fixed and the volatile is a major stage in transmutation, as its reconciliation is a necessary step toward achieving perfection of the philosopher's stone. The erotic union of male mercury and female sulphur was a metaphor for the transmutation leading to the philosopher's stone.

In Spranger's painting of *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 1), the polar opposites of metals and gender have been reconciled, according to the goals of alchemy. Here mercury is symbolized by the male figure of Adonis and sulphur by the shapely Venus. But, Spranger has not delivered simply an allegory with two figures entwined in an amorous and complicated pose. They represent one. Although everything has its pair of opposites, like and unlike are the same. These two opposite poles of gender harmonize toward the greater goal of physical and spiritual union. All paradoxes must be reconciled in alchemy. This depiction of Venus and Adonis features the union of opposites, the fixed and the volatile: the uniting of the disparate but anomalous sides of God, thus recreating the universe and reaching one of the supreme goals of alchemy. Thus, sexual union represented both the transmutation and the alchemic motto of "that which is two, becomes one."

This unification of opposites, either metaphorically in gender or practically in metals of mercury and sulphur, transported to the next level reaches the stage of androgyny. At this juncture is neither male nor female, but represented in the alchemical figure of the Rebis or hermaphrodite. Michael Maier's great alchemical emblems in *Atlanta Fugiens* feature the Rebis hermaphrodite born from the twin mountains of Mercury and Venus.

This alchemical tenet of androgyny and reconciliation of polar opposites is even more pronounced in Spranger's painting on copper of *Heracles and Omphale* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Here we see Hercules, most commonly the symbol of male strength and potency, although now he is emasculated. He is sitting on the bed, spinning, thus engaged in a female pursuit. He is adorned with not his club and lion skin, rather a dainty headband and bejeweled bracelet. His countenance is enough to indicate his change in status and disappointment in this reversed role. Standing dominant over the male Hercules is Omphale, who wears the lion skin and holds the Club, the symbol of male strength and power. Yet, interestingly, judging from the contour of her nude body, Omphale appears neither decidedly female nor male. Her figure leans much more towards an androgynous state. The victor in this allegory is the harmony of opposites, of both male and female, the androgyne. Standing at the center of alchemic philosophy, the androgyne is in many respects the ideal figure as it represents male and female components that do not neutralize each other, but rather exalt. The androgyne is the result of the male and female coupling, entering a state of "conflictual equilibrium." (Schwarz 1980: 57).

Rudolf's court artists addressed this notion of the double thing or the hermaphrodite in Spranger's painting of *Salmacis and Hermaphrodite*, a highly mysterious painting, replete with alchemic references. Even the dark tonality, with marked contrasts of light and dark heighten the esoteric, cryptic mood. According to the legend, as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (IV-370-380), Salmacis on the left is a nymph, who falls in love with the young Hermaphroditus. He does not return the love of Salmacis, so she appeals to the gods to be joined with Hermaphroditus and is granted her request and they are united in waters of a spring. The painting by Spranger has captured the moment before unification of the two principles, symbolizing the tension preceding transmutation, and the discovery of the elixir of life. Dark corners are everywhere; this is a secret affair, as this process must be veiled and shrouded in mystery. In particular, Spranger shows Salmacis shielding her face with a red velvet cape that she seductively drops to the ground before she enters the mercurial and transfixing waters. Salmacis heightens the sexual and erotic tension by pulling at the strap on her sandal, lifting one leg up to knee length, thrusting outward her pelvis. The male and female sources of reproduction are directly in alignment as well. The allegory of the myth, that of transformation, or transmutation, reveals itself in this work.

Water represents the purification process of alchemical transmutation, while the hermaphrodite is the Rebis, or double thing, a primary symbol in alchemy. As told in Ovid, Salmacis and Hermaphrodite, "...their two bodies, joined together as they were, were merged into one, with one face and form for both. They were no longer two but one." The Hermaphrodite or Androgyne of the Wise is born from the union of the twin principles (sulfur and mercury, or male and female elements), who enter the mercurial Bath. This, like the mythical fountain where the nymph Salmacis swam, has the property of turning both sexes into one: that is, it dissolves the bodies radically in such a way that, once recomposed in the Fixation, they are One (Klossowski de Rola: 102).

Spranger is best known for his renderings of amorous couples, often entwined in mannerist as well as erotically charged poses. The axiom of *solve et coagula*, or the fixed and the volatile, is expressed to its most refined degree in several of his works created under the patronage of Rudolf. Spranger's drawing of *Neptune and Coenis* from around 1585 embodies the alchemical notion of the union of opposites, and the fixed and the volatile. The drawing elicits a decidedly sexual tone; Neptune caresses the nipple of Coenis, emphasizing the desire of and the activity of sexual union. The union of the couple is sanctified and mediated by Cupid who flies directly above the couple strewing flowers. Neptune, representing the fixed principle, anchors Coenis against his body, with only one of his legs visible. At first glance, it is somewhat unclear as to if the other leg reaching down to the ground is that of Coenis or Neptune, as well as that of Coenis' thigh. Furthermore, the artist has veiled the pelvic region of the couple. While the figure of Coenis covers the pelvic region of Neptune, his drapery, flying upward serves to both cover Coenis and to imply Neptune's male potency. It is not a coincidence that the upswept thigh of Coenis originates from the point of Neptune's pelvis. Not only compositionally does this composition reference alchemic philosophy, but also thematically. The female Coenis was turned into a male upon her request to the Gods. Thus, the hermetic notion of man embodying both genders is manifest. According to Hermes Trismegistus, "man is androgyne, because he comes from an androgyne father" (Copenhaver, 1992: I:9).

Spranger's painting of *Vulcan and Maia* (fig. 2) depicts Vulcan emphatically encouraging Maia to enter his bed, which Cupid reveals as he lifts the drapery. There is no confusion as to the wish of Vulcan, and as Maia's left foot coyly steps onto the bed

platform, and as she already has one hand discreetly placed upon the bed, there is the allusion to the likely outcome of this gentle, playful amorous struggle. Indeed, the work is focusing on the prelude to sexual intimacy, and displays erotic overtones, but there is a heightened sense of purpose to this otherwise predominantly erotic theme. We find a deeper level of meaning embodied in this work when examining the writings of one of Rudolf II's last confessors, Johann Pistorius of Nidda (1546-1608). Pistorius, who played a vital role in the public and private life of the Emperor, wrote a treatise on the cabala and included a number of works by other authors, forming a compendium of current hermetic philosophy. Within this treatise, published in 1587 in Basel, Pistorius included Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore* (1501-02), which featured a long dialogue about love and sensuality between the protagonists Philo and Sophia. Ebreo's work is essentially an expostulation of Neoplatonic theories of love. According to Ebreo, carnal love, espoused in the painting of Vulcan and Maia, for example, is infused with hermetic and cabalistic goals. The dialogue of Phil and Sophia in Ebreo's manuscript touches upon the fusion of the female and male principles: "the union of copulation...makes possible a closer and more binding union, which comprises the actual conversion of each lover into the other, or rather the fusion of both into one, every diversity and distinction between them being eliminated as far as possible." (Ebreo, 1937:54).

In addition to the allegorical and overtly sensual themes painted by Spranger and his colleagues, the religious paintings also reflect, albeit more subtly, hermetic aspirations. In alchemic philosophy, Christ has been likened to the Philosopher's Stone. He, like mercury, is the *prima materia* from which all evil, sin, and illness can be cured. Christ shares this affinity with the philosopher's stone as his martyrdom was compared to the martyrdom the metals endured in order to achieve purity before transmutation. Christ's miraculous birth, his baptism, death, and subsequent resurrection paralleled the aurifictive and aurifactive journey of the transmutation. The alchemical Christ is known as *Christ Lapis*, and became an image surfacing in the sixteenth century after appearing in *Rosarium philosophorum* and *Book of Holy Trinity*. Christ is redeemer of man, just as the philosopher's stone, the secret Elixir will bring redemption and universal harmony to the world. The trials of the life of Jesus are parallel to the trials undergone by mercury and sulphur during the Work (Battistin, 2007: 270). Several Rudolfine paintings focusing on traditional religious themes

painted by his court entourage offer a duality of meaning. The Christian faithful and the occult enthusiast would comprehend the relevance and potency of Spranger's painting of the *Resurrection of Christ*, now in the Prague Strahov Monastery, or the mystical *Baptism of Christ* in the National Museum of Wrocław, Poland. These elegant works illustrate the apogee of transformation and eternal spiritual fulfillment.

Heretofore, I have interpreted paintings in Rudolf's collection from a compositional and thematic standpoint through the prism of hermetic philosophy. Even more obscure, but powerful was the application of alchemic philosophy to stylistic goals of the artists at Rudolf's court. The alchemic penchant for ambiguity and stylistic riddle is present in Spranger's drawing in the Louvre of *Judith and Holofernes*. Judith, triumphantly holding the severed head of Holofernes, is an elegant figure, but curiously stationary and striding at the same time. This is typical of Spranger's stylistic ambiguity and that of the alchemist. Further, the execution of this drawing is based upon the hidden harmonies of alchemical thought. The continuum of flowing lines which are suddenly halted, resulting in a pulling and pushing of form, plays itself out in the oft-repeated hermetic axiom of *solve et coagula*--or the volatile and the fixed. The ancient wisdom of the alchemists relates that what is fixed must be made volatile, and conversely, what is volatile, must be made fixed. With respect to Spranger's drawing, although there should indeed be strokes at these points of void, they are omitted. However, cognitively we know they are there. Spranger dissolves the contour strokes of Judith's leg while at the same time crystallizes them with their inherent continuation in the mind's perception.

In conclusion, the artists working for Rudolf II were not practicing alchemists. However, the language of the alchemists, mysterious, sometimes frustratingly obscure, but engaging all the same, spawned a new outlook on life which permeated the visual arts. Alchemical philosophy endeavored to unravel the secrets of creation, and Rudolf's artists in turn responded with their solutions to the visual representation of these metaphysical riddles. These artistic solutions populated Rudolf's Chamber of Wonders with a marvelous array of objects, reaching an apogee of creativity that embraced spiritual aspirations, offering humankind an alternative, if not magical kaleidoscope of the future.



Figure 1: *Venus and Adonis*. Bartholomäus Spranger. 1597 c. Kunsthistorisches Museum. Wien.



Figure 2: *Vulcan and Maia*. Bartholomäus Spranger. 1590 c. Kunsthistorisches Museum. Wien.

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