

THE
INTERNATIONAL
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
SURREALISM

VOLUME 1 MOVEMENTS

B L O O M S B U R Y

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SECTION II

CONCEPTS

ALCHEMY

Alchemy was one of many esoteric traditions explored by the surrealists, beginning with their early séance-inspired trance sessions during the period of sleeps (*époque des sommeils*). Literary and visual references can be found to witchcraft, clairvoyance, the channeling of mediums, magic, cabala, astrology, tarot, palmistry, and voodoo. Alchemy's central role among these esoteric traditions was supported in France by the late medieval legend of the Parisian alchemist, Nicolas Flamel and his wife Pernelle, who together supposedly transformed lead into silver and gold. The late nineteenth century Occult Revival was instrumental in revitalizing these traditions in France, and publications on these traditions continued well into the twentieth century. As the surrealist movement evolved, its participants' admiration for alchemy developed beyond a simple metaphor for transformation to a deeper investigation into alchemical philosophy as an alternative to the limitations of rational science.

While alchemical philosophy and practice extend back to late antiquity, each period in its development brought new adaptations to the basic Greek concept of the unity of matter and its composition of the four elements, Earth, Water, Air, and Fire, with their four qualities of hot, cold, dry, and wet. As alchemy migrated through the medieval Middle East, these concepts of matter became polarized into a duality of hot, dry, masculine Sulphur and cold, wet, feminine Mercury, thought to be the two essential components of all metals. These two properties became the two sexualized characters found in alchemical illustrations, often represented as the Sun and the Moon, or a King and a Queen. Within the laboratory, the alchemist would

separate and refine these two properties, and then reunite them in a "Chemical Wedding" to produce their child, the Philosopher's Stone, a powerful catalyst that enabled transmutation. Renaissance Humanism enriched alchemical philosophy with a broader mythic spectrum, prompting some readers of alchemical texts to pursue purely intellectual approaches, rather than engage in laboratory operations.

While the Scientific Revolution drove alchemy to its margins, mid-nineteenth century authors E.A. Hitchcock and M.A. Atwood speculated that the secret of alchemy was really one of self-knowledge, a problematic concept from surrealist perspectives but one from which twentieth century psychoanalytic theories of alchemy of Herbert Silberer and C.G. Jung descend. By the late nineteenth century, historians of science and esoteric practitioners began to re-evaluate the history of alchemy, including the circle around Albert Poisson, a practicing alchemist in France. In 1929 E.A. Grilhot de Givry published his profusely illustrated overview of alchemy and other esoteric traditions. Mid-twentieth century authors Gaston Bachelard, Mircea Eliade, René Alleau, and Eugène Canseliet, among others, offered a diversity of literary, philosophical, and historical approaches to alchemy. Thus, the surrealists' understanding of alchemy drew from a rich mixture of scholarly and more popular texts as the movement evolved. Some, like André Breton and Kurt Seligmann, would seek original manuscripts and early printed books to examine. Others, like Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington, would be drawn to the psychoanalytic studies. Because of the diversity of available sources, each writer or artist whose work reveals an affinity to alchemy must be analysed within his or her individual context. One example is the lively scholarly debate over the significance of



"The Eighth Key of Basil Valentine," image from *Tripus Aureus* by Michael Maier (Frankfurt, 1618). Wellcome Library, London.

alchemy to Marcel Duchamp. Among other influences, the characters of the Bride and the Bachelors in his *Large Glass* (1915–23), have been interpreted as the sexually-charged alchemical couple viewed through the transparency of a glass alchemical vessel.

Surrealist literary references to alchemy began in the early 1920s. In 1923, the names of Nicolas Flamel, Hermes Trismegistus, Ramon Llull, and Cornelius Agrippa were included in a two-page typographic tribute to the surrealists' favorite writers, philosophers and poets entitled "Erutaretil." That same year, Max Ernst painted *Of this Men Shall Know Nothing*, one of his most direct visual tributes to alchemical imagery. During his Dada period in Cologne, Ernst probably read Silberer, who equated alchemical legends to contemporary psychoanalytic theories. Ernst dedicated the painting to André Breton, and wrote captions on the back to explain its enigmatic imagery. The Sun at the top mirrors the smaller Earth below, hidden by a severed hand. A crescent Moon follows and two sets of human legs fused vertically represent the sexual conjunction of the Sun and Moon, Sulphur and Mercury. The centrality of sexual metaphors in alchemical imagery no doubt appealed to the surrealists, as well as its parallels to early theories of psychoanalysis, which connected the alchemical Sun and Moon to the conscious and unconscious mind.

Breton indicated that Nadja (Léona Delcourt), heroine of his 1928 work, was able to identify the alchemical symbols within Ernst's painting due to her clairvoyance. Breton's *Second Manifesto*, 1929, called for the

"occultation of surrealism," a phrase that has sparked a variety of interpretations, but which certainly encouraged continuing explorations of the occult. Breton's referred to Nicolas Flamel, and compared the Philosopher's Stone of the medieval alchemists to the ability of the human imagination to spark transformation. That same year, Robert Desnos published an essay on a manuscript of Abraham the Jew, also supposedly connected to Flamel. Desnos described the alchemical sites of his childhood neighborhood, the fourth *arrondissement* near the Tour St. Jacques. Brassai captured this most alchemical area of Paris in his photographs of Paris at night, as did Breton in his accounts of meetings with Jacqueline Lamba, essays that later coalesced into his *Mad Love*, 1937.

Alchemical imagery and literary references took many forms throughout the 1930s, with continuing contributions of Breton and Ernst. Breton's *Communicating Vessels* (1932), for example, references double recirculating alchemical flasks as well as a tarot card, "Temperance" in which water flows between two vessels, high and low. In March 1935, Breton and Éluard traveled to Prague to meet with writers and artists, including Vítězslav Nezval, Jindřich Štyrský, and Toyen (Marie Čermínová), whose admiration for surrealism had been growing since the early 1930s. In a lecture there, "The Surrealist Situation of the Object," Breton described Prague as "the magic capital of old Europe." Historically, its alchemical roots were deep, particularly during the reign of Emperor Rudolf II, whose court welcomed alchemists and other esoteric practitioners. The Parisians visited the Golden Lane (Zlatá ulička), where the alchemists worked (more likely goldsmiths and other tradesmen). Their visit to the nearby Star Castle (Letohrádek Hvězda), originally a hunting lodge, was particularly significant. Upon his return to Paris, Breton published an essay, "Le Château étoilé," in *Minotaure* (no. 8, 1936), in which he described the structure, "on the side of the abyss, made of the philosophers' stone," illustrated with frottages by Max Ernst.

Returning to Europe after the Second World War, the surrealists continued their interest in esotericism, as evidenced by the 1947 exhibition of surrealism at the Galerie Maeght, organized by Breton and Duchamp, which incorporated references to tarot cards, esoteric books, astrology, and alchemy. Victor Brauner often combined esoteric traditions as seen in his portrait of *The Surrealist*, 1947, merging the alchemical elements of water and fire with the tarot card of the Magician. Kurt Seligmann published his *Mirror of Magic*, 1948, which examined alchemy and other esoteric traditions,

illustrated with woodcuts and engravings that he had collected, some of which had appeared in earlier surrealist periodicals. Alchemical references were diverse, including those to Paracelsus, the irascible sixteenth-century alchemical physician, who was mentioned by André Masson, Antonin Artaud, and Michel Leiris. Frederick Sommer entitled a photograph *Paracelsus*, 1959, which resulted from his experiments with cameraless negatives begun in 1957. For this image, he applied oil paint between two pieces of cellophane to create a shape that resembled a human torso. While not actually a portrait, the gelatin-silver print suggests an alchemical transformation. Leonora Carrington's 1957 painting, *The Garden of Paracelsus* is filled with black and white figures, horses, griffins, and birds, many of whom carry eggs, a symbol of the alchemical vessel, as they wander through a geometrically-constructed celestial space. Again, while there is no specific reference to Paracelsus, his name in the title signals its alchemical references.

The title of Breton's *Arcane 17*, 1944, was based on a tarot card in which a nude woman balances equally upon the earth and water. In the early 1950s, Breton's interest in alchemical philosophy deepened, enriched by meeting René Alleau and Eugène Canseliet, Fulcanelli's disciple, both men leaders within alchemical circles.

The alchemical publications of Carl Jung must be taken into consideration even though they are controversial for the surrealists because of his reduction of alchemical theory and practice to a kind of internal projection of the alchemist's mind, comparable to his own psychoanalytic theories. Although Jung's work was influential in Germany, England, and the US, this was less so in France, where there was a more active alchemical community and René Alleau, writing in the surrealist journal *Médium*, argued that the experience of alchemy showed that "both practically and theoretically" his "conceptions of the human soul and the universe are false" (Alleau, 1954: 44). Nevertheless, his work contributed to a renewed scholarly interest in alchemy from the mid-twentieth century onward, and his links between psychology and alchemy were influential to Kurt Sellgmann and Leonora Carrington. In Mexico, working closely in their "alchemical kitchens" with Remedios Varo and Kati Horna, Carrington adapted alchemical imagery to proto-feminine aims. Part of Jung's appeal for these women artists may have been his emphasis on the alchemical feminine, concepts he gathered under the term "soror mystica." While gender plays an essential role in alchemical philosophy, practicing

women alchemists, such as Pernelle Flamel, were rare. Carrington paid tribute to one of the earliest alchemical philosophers and practitioners of late antiquity, Maria the Jewess. The painting is filled with enigmatic symbols related to alchemical vessels, furnaces, and symbolic animals, combined with other references to the cabala and goddess imagery. Several women surrealists, including Leonor Fini and Ithell Colquhoun, were drawn to alchemy and other esoteric practices.

Another level to the surrealists interest in alchemy emerged after the 1947 exhibition as they became aware of the existence of practicing contemporary alchemists and made the acquaintance of René Alleau, Eugène Canseliet, and Raymond Abellio, all of whom published in surrealist journals during the 1950s, Canseliet was the student of the mysterious adept Fulcanelli, who had published *The Mysteries of the Cathedrals* (1926) and *The Dwellings of the Philosophers* (1930), claiming that medieval French buildings were part of an alchemical project and contained secret messages. Still more important was Alleau, whose lectures the surrealists began attending in 1952. Two of the younger members of the group, Bernard Roger and Guy-René Doumayrou became his students, and he himself became a kind of proxy surrealist. Roger and Doumayrou, both trained architects, would explore traces of alchemy in the landscape—both natural and human—and establish important links between alchemy and geography. In the late 1960s the Cuban surrealist artist Jorge Camacho would also study with both Alleau and Canseliet and penetrate deeply into the hermetic art, working with Canseliet on his book *L'Hermétisme dans la vie de Swift et ses voyages*.

For the surrealists in Prague, too, the lure of alchemy would be strong in recent years, as a glance at their journal *Analogon* soon reveals, in which we find hermeticists like D.Ž. Bor regularly publishing essays. The painter Martin Stejskal has also undertaken profound study into the subject, having published several books on the subject in Czech, while Jan Švankmajer has recreated an alchemist's laboratory in the basement of his property in southern Bohemia.

The importance of alchemy to surrealism stems not only from its mysterious legends, its traditional opposition to rational science and its sexual metaphors, but also for its essential goal of revolutionary transformation, and for the rich diversity of its philosophy and imagery.

M.E. WARLICK