

Press Release

from 26th September 2023

The philosopher's stone. History of alchemy

studio exhibition

27th September 2023 – 30th June 2024

Immeasurable wealth, eternal youth and immortality: We have always been fascinated by the prospect of what seems unachievable. A unique elixir, the “philosopher’s stone,” promised to make these wishes come true, and for centuries, alchemists attempted to create it. They experimented and wrote tracts – but today, the stone still remains a legend. What does it look like, what is it made of? We don’t know. But its mystery is precisely what makes it so attractive.

A studio exhibition in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum (GNM) featuring around 60 manuscripts and prints, mainly from the 16th and early 17th century, supplemented by pharmaceutical equipment, provides insights into the fascinating and mysterious history of alchemy.

How do we picture a world free of worry and care? Is the light different? In what stunning and swirling colours might the landscapes be bathed? An insight into the 16th century idea of this dream world is provided by precious Splendor Solis manuscripts. Splendor Solis, which translates as “the splendor of the sun”, is a group of illuminated manuscripts on alchemy and some of the most ornated of their kind. Richly coloured, large-scale illustrations of surreal-seeming scenes accompany the texts. But they offer little by way of real explanation: The purpose of alchemistic tracts was not to record and communicate knowledge but rather to mystify alchemy as a secret science.

The pictorial inventions are puzzling and do not have their origins in nature. The meaning of individual figures, animals, astronomical and mathematical instruments is practically impossible to unravel, and the cryptically worded texts offer no help either. So for whom were these manuscripts written? The magnificent decoration of the Splendor Solis manuscripts suggests they were intended for those at the court. Alchemy was the “science of the rich and powerful”, of kings, since only they had the means to run laboratories and purchase rare and costly ingredients.

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“The illustrations in the Splendor Solis manuscripts reveal what the texts withhold,” states Director-General Prof. Dr. Daniel Hess. “They show this magical world beyond reality and give us an inkling of what the philosopher’s stone promised to deliver.”

The studio exhibition was created to mark the acquisition of a rare Splendor Solis manuscript from 1582, which a member of the public had brought to the museum for appraisal. This is an extraordinary circumstance, because only 21 instances of this type of book are known worldwide. The subsequent purchase of the manuscript makes the GNM the only institution owning two of these rarities. Now, they are on show together for the first time. The presentation counteracts the exclusiveness of earlier centuries, when alchemical manuscripts were the preserve of only a tight-knit ruling group.

Mysterious symbols

Not only rulers were fascinated by mystery. Albrecht Dürer addressed the subject in his engraving “Melencolia” from 1514, which shows, along with a winged figure, all kinds of objects like polyhedrons and spheres as well as a crucible over a fire bowl. More publications have appeared about this than any other of his works and yet no-one has managed to decipher all the symbols depicted in the engraving.

Even the depictions of alchemy laboratories are vague: Prints from the 16th century show people in the midst of unusual vessels and scientific instruments such as flasks and alembics, two of which are included in the exhibition. Often, they are being used to mix unspecified ingredients and are positioned next to furnaces in order to heat the mixture.

Experimentation led to a new understanding

While these experiments did not produce the philosopher’s stone, they did lead to other, groundbreaking discoveries, some of which are highlighted in the exhibition: Mary the Jewess, one of the few women in the métier and regarded as the most important alchemist of antiquity, developed first distillation methods in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. Around 1669, Henning Brand accidentally produced phosphorous and around 1700, Johann Friedrich

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Böttger worked out the formulation for porcelain, at that time still unknown in Europe.

A pamphlet entitled “Die Hinrichtung des betrügerischen Alchimisten Georg Honauer an dem eigens aufgerichteten “Eisernen Galgen” in Stuttgart, 2. April 1597” [The execution of fraudulent alchemist Georg Honauer on the specially erected “Iron Gallows” in Stuttgart, 2 April 1597] bears witness to the dark side of a alchemist’s life. Rulers expected alchemists to deliver gold and good health. If this failed to materialise, severe punishment, sometimes even death, loomed. An “alternative discovery” could literally be life-saving.

Mandrakes

Mandrakes are closely connected to alchemy. According to lists of ingredients, however, they were not needed to create the philosopher’s stone. The knotty roots, whose shapes often resemble human bodies, have a healing effect and were said to bring prosperity. Pictorial representations and mandrakes surviving from the 15th to 19th centuries are testament to the huge popularity the roots enjoyed for centuries in folk belief.

Mozart’s “The Magic Flute” and Goethe’s “Faust” both allude to the quest for the philosopher’s stone. Joanne K. Rowling made it popular again through Harry Potter. As the studio exhibition so clearly shows, even though the philosopher’s stone has never been found, it is an inextricable part of our cultural history.

Curator

Dr. Johannes Pommeranz
Head of the Collection of Manuscripts and Rare Prints

The Germanische Nationalmuseum (GNM) is the largest museum of cultural history in the German-speaking region. Since its foundation in 1852 it has been bringing together people and cultures across national boundaries. With holdings of 1.4 million objects, the GNM conducts research and disseminates information on a significant body of the material cultural heritage of Central Europe. Today, it is one of the eight research museums of the Leibniz Association.

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