



BRUCE MUSEUM
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Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science? September 26, 2009 – January 3, 2010

Bruce Museum, 1 Museum Drive, Greenwich, CT 06830



David Teniers II (1610-1690)
Interior of a Laboratory with an Alchemist, ca. 1650
Courtesy of Roy Eddleman, Chemical Heritage Foundation Collections, photo by Will Brown

The Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut, announces the opening of its major fall-winter exhibition, ***Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science?***, opening Saturday, September 26, 2009, and on view through January 3, 2010. Organized by the Bruce Museum, this interdisciplinary exhibition describes the history and significance of alchemy, the precursor to modern chemistry, through artworks and artifacts. It offers a multi-faceted introduction to alchemy from ancient times through its flourishing in the 16th and 17th centuries, exploring the science and art it inspired. Nearly 100 paintings, prints, historical documents, mineral specimens, and scientific instruments illuminate the practice of alchemy and its place in the beginnings of modern chemistry. The exhibition is underwritten by a Committee of Honor under the leadership of the Bruce Museum Science Committee, and with support from the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism, Sun Products Corp., and the Charles M. and Deborah G. Royce Exhibition Fund.

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Alchemy is an ancient discipline that began as part of the worldview of ancient peoples, combining the supernatural with the natural. Dating back at least 2500 years, alchemy has its origins with Greek, Indian and Chinese philosophers who observed the properties of matter and tried to make sense of them. They were familiar with transformations, such as the fermentation of grapes to produce wine, the smelting of ores to provide useful metals, and their own physical changes from conception to death. The exhibition explores the origins of alchemy and its philosophical underpinnings through a variety of objects including a 15th-century Tibetan mandala from the Rubin Museum of Art, and a Persian wine jug and ore specimens from the Bruce Museum collection.

North African Muslims brought alchemy to Europe, where it took hold in the Middle Ages. By the 17th century, it continued as a discipline, although it was not always accepted by the academic community. Many Dutch and Flemish genre paintings of the time depict alchemy as a vain and foolish pursuit, especially for those simply trying to obtain material wealth. Pieter Brueghel the Younger's *The Alchemist*, lent by a private collector, caricatures an alchemist ruining his family in the vain attempt to turn base metals into gold. David Rijckaert III's *An Alchemist Studying at Night* and Thomas Wijck's *The Alchemist and Death* from the Alfred and Isabel Bader Collection incorporate the symbolic elements of the hourglass, a human skull, and the specter of death to represent the fleeting nature of human endeavors.

While the alchemists failed miserably in their attempts to create gold from lead, they succeeded in laying the foundation for modern chemistry and demonstrated the value of careful observation and experimentation. They discovered new substances and developed useful laboratory equipment and new processes. David Teniers the Younger's *Alchemist in His Workshop* from the Eddleman Collection of the Chemical Heritage Foundation depicts an industrious alchemist surrounded by the tools of his trade. The painting is on view and is also the inspiration for a life-size diorama in the exhibition that recreates the experimenter's laboratory. Examples of distillation apparatus and other scientific instruments are also on display courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass, the University of Pennsylvania Library, and Dartmouth College's Hood Museum.

The work of alchemists and artisans resulted in the practical chemistry of manufacturing useful products. Porcelain, dyes, pigments, perfumes, gunpowder, acids, tonics and medicines were made and perfected in the laboratories of the alchemists. The exhibition displays paintings of medical alchemists and objects such as pharmaceutical jars, scent bottles, porcelain and pigments. On view is the 16th-century book of "secrets" by the Lady Isabella Cortese, disclosing her recipes for perfumes and useful household products. Interactive stations allow visitors to explore the chemistry of scent. A display of porcelain cups from China, Meissen, Germany, and Sèvres, France, tell the intriguing tale of the alchemist held captive in Saxony who discovered the secret of creating porcelain as fine as the Chinese wares and of how hard it is to keep a lucrative secret. The exhibition also displays the chemical process that the women of Montpellier, France, used for 700 years to produce verdigris, a prized green pigment.

Where does alchemy end and chemistry begin? The line is blurry with notables such as the 17th-century intellectual Robert Boyle pursuing not only traditional alchemical goals but also scientific experimentation and observations. The exhibition displays images and objects associated with Boyle and the 18th-century researcher Antoine Lavoisier, both considered fathers of the modern science of chemistry.

Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science? is on view exclusively at the Bruce Museum and is curated by the Bruce Museum staff led by Dr. Carolyn Rebbert, Bruce Museum Curator of Science. Dr. John Emsley, science writer and former chemistry professor at King's College, University of London, is a consultant for the show. A richly illustrated digital brochure with an essay by Dr. Rebbert is available on CD for purchase in the Museum Store. An Audio Tour Guide of the exhibition sponsored by Lucy and Nat Day is available free for cell phone users. ***Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science?*** is part of the Year of Science 2009 celebration, organized by the Coalition for the Public Understanding of Science. Visit <http://www.yearofscience2009.org>. For further information, visit www.brucemuseum.org

The Bruce Museum is located at 1 Museum Drive in Greenwich, Connecticut, USA. General admission is \$7 for adults, \$6 for seniors and students, and free for children under five and Bruce Museum members. Free admission to all on Tuesdays. The Museum is located near Interstate-95, Exit 3, and a short walk from the Greenwich, CT, train station. Museum hours are: Tuesday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Sunday 1 p.m. to 5 p.m., and closed Mondays and major holidays. Groups of eight or more require advance reservations. Museum exhibition tours are held Fridays at 12:30 p.m. Free, on-site parking is available. The Bruce Museum is accessible to individuals with disabilities. For information, call the Bruce Museum at (203) 869-0376, or visit the Bruce Museum website at www.brucemuseum.org.