

Exhibition "Metamorphoses and Transmutations"

19 May -18 June 2023.

Museum of the Lubomirski Princes

Ossoliński National Institute

Wrocław

Introduction:

As early as in the sixth century BC Heraclitus of Ephesus proclaimed that the only constant in life is change. The constant changes in nature and the endless cycle of birth and death fascinated philosophers, poets, artists and also alchemists. The ancients explained such a world order through mythology. The creators of literary and pictorial works sought to freeze time in their works while reflecting its inexorable movement. Alchemists believed that through transmutations they could control the process of change in animate and inanimate matter. The exhibition presents works of art and old prints related to the passage of time and the symbolism of alchemical transformations. The exhibits come from the Art Department of the Museum of the Lubomirski Princes, the Department of Old Prints of the Ossolineum Library and a private collection.

Room I:

Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), nicknamed the 'Velvet Brueghel', was an eminent Flemish painter and draughtsman. He was born in Brussels, into a family that had been involved in painting for generations: his early education was provided by his grandmother, the miniaturist Maria Bessemers. He created works for the Archbishop of Milan, the Archduke family in Brussels, Emperor Rudolf II and King Sigismund III Vasa. He presided over the painters' guild in Antwerp and belonged to the elite Romanist association. He collaborated with many artists, such as Peter Paul Rubens. Brueghel was one of the most prominent painters of allegory, and his smooth, 'velvet' compositions are full of elaborate symbols and details.

As a native of Antwerp, **Hendrik van Balen (1575-1632)** was associated with the local painting guild from his youth. His education in Italy had a decisive influence on his work. This can be seen both in the way he painted his works and in the subjects he took up, such as paintings with mythological content. The artist was also a sought-after master painter: he trained at least 27 pupils. He willingly collaborated with his friend 'Velvet Brueghel' and his son Jan the Younger (1601-1678). Such collaborative paintings included human figures executed by van Balen and landscape backgrounds painted by the Brueghels.



Herman van Swanevelt
Mercury Silencing Battus
2nd quarter 17th century, etching

In Swanevelt's print, Mercury-Hermes is the god of transformation. He has the power to transform his face to become unrecognised and to turn others to stone. The scene depicted is the climax of one of the songs of Ovid's ancient poem *The Metamorphoses*. Battus witnessed the theft of Apollo's flock by Mercury, pledged to keep silent, but tempted by a high reward confessed everything. The old man depicted in the centre is punished for betraying the secret entrusted to him by Hermes and transforms into a rock before our eyes.



Johann Wilhelm Baur
The Rape of Proserpina
ca. 1639, copperplate, private collection

Illustration for Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Proserpina was kidnapped by Pluto and abducted to his subterranean realm. Her mother Ceres, goddess of the fertility of the earth, brought eternal crop failure into the world out of grief. After negotiations, Pluto agreed that his wife should stay with her mother on earth for a while and only spend three months a year with him in the realm of the dead. This myth explained to ancient people the variability of the seasons. Winter was the time when Proserpina lived with Pluto, and Ceres, suffering from longing for her daughter, deprived the earth of fertility.



Jan Brueghel the Elder and Hendrik van Balen
Nuptials of Proserpina (The Rape of Proserpina)
ca. 1600, oil on canvas, private collection

The story of Proserpina is only the starting point for a complex pictorial rebus. An allegory of the endless cycle of life can be found in the work, for example in the figure of the winged serpent - the ouroboros. The constant dying and rebirth of nature is also symbolised by the unbreakable bond between Ceres - goddess of life and harvest - and her daughter Proserpina - protector of the dead. Other possibilities for interpreting the painting are the hermetic references to the philosophy of nature and the four elements, as well as alchemical transmutations of matter.



Unknown draughtsman from the Rudolphine school
The Rape of Proserpina
16th/17th century, pen and ink on paper

This time, the depiction of the scene of Proserpina's abduction is an opportunity to show off the artist's skill, drawing two naked bodies twisted in dynamic movement. For years, the Rape of Proserpina was considered a neutral academic subject, an opportunity to show the contrast of male strength and female delicacy. Nowadays, new trends in art studies allow for different interpretations. Might the popularity of such depictions have influenced the popular idea of femininity and masculinity in society?



Jan Brueghel the Elder
Landscape with Hermes, Helios and Selene
ca. 1600, oil on parchment

The landscape by Brueghel does not represent a real place, but is part of an intellectual game full of hidden meanings. Alchemical treatises may be the key to understanding them. Hermes (the symbol of mercury) heading towards the Sun and the Moon (symbols of gold and silver) would be a subtle reference to transmutation. Mercury was, according to the alchemists - as a liquid metal capable of taking all shapes - an essential ingredient in this process. The stone bridge that Mercury must cross foreshadows the harmonious union of opposites and becomes a suggestion of the transition of one metal into another.



Caspar Freisinger
Mercury Looking after Painting
4th quarter 16th century, pen and ink on paper

In this exceptional drawing, the German Mannerist artist depicted an allegory of the art of painting. Again, the main character is Mercury-Hermes, who embraces Minerva-Athena, the patroness of wisdom and art. In the hand of the goddess, the palette and brushes can be seen. Through this union of the deities, painting becomes a discipline combining erudition and eloquence with craftsmanship and the ability to transform paint into a painterly masterpiece. The caduceus in the hand of Mercury is symbolic of painting's advancement into the ranks of the intellectual 'liberal arts'.



Giuseppe Camerata and P.J. Cutin
after Thomas Wyck, *Chemist*
1765, etching

The print after a painting by Thomas Wyck is a typical representation of a scientist in a laboratory. Leaning over a book, the scientist combines theory and practice: we witness an experiment being carried out on the hearth visible behind the chemist. A myriad of tools, instruments, vials and vessels present inside enhance the atmosphere of intense work and mystery. The strange creature hanging from the ceiling may be an allusion to the powdered fragments of dried animals that the then contemporary chemists used in their experiments.



Jan Styfi after Jan Matejko
Sędziwój - the Alchemist
1869, woodcut

The alchemist Michał Sędziwój was a frequent guest of King Sigismund III Vasa in Kraków. There are even conspiracy theories that his alchemical experiments caused a fire at the Wawel Castle, which resulted in the capital being moved to Warsaw at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1869, Matejko painted a picture illustrating a successful alchemical transmutation that allegedly took place at the court of the Polish king. The painter masterfully orchestrated the climactic scene of acquiring gold and theatrically rendered the various emotions and reactions of the participants in this event.



Michał Sędziwój, *Cosmopolite ou Nouvelle Lumière Chymique, Divisée en douse Traitez. Avec un Dialogue du Mercure, de l'Alchymiste, & de la Nature. Reveuz & fidèlement corrigez sur les plus anciens Exemplaires*, Paris 1669

Michał Sędziwój is Poland's most famous alchemist, yet a person shrouded in mystery. His biography is still full of ambiguities. In many editions of his treatises, his name does not even appear. For example, in this book published in Paris he is referred to only as 'Cosmopolitan'. *New Chemical Light. The Conversation of Mercurius, Alchemist and Nature* is a unique work in that it combines alchemical considerations with a satire on 'blowers', i.e. amateurs and impostors attempting transmutations.



Rosarium Philosophorum: Secunda Pars Alchimiae De Lapido Philosophico [...], Frankfurt 1550

The Rosary of the Philosophers is one of the most popular alchemical treatises published in Europe, particularly because of its unique visual poetry metaphorically pointing the way to the philosopher's stone. The substances needed for the process are represented here by the king and queen who, through a chemical marriage, form a union of opposites: the hermaphrodite. In this illustration, the two-headed figure symbolises the creation of silver: she has a lunar sickle under her feet and a lunar tree growing beside her.



*Chymiae Aurifodina Incomparabilis: Quam recludit
Prælude Prosimetricum Magicarum noctium
sortes Sibyllinæ [...], Leiden 1696*

The page of the book is a typical example of an intricate pictorial rebus through which the initiated reader was to arrive at the essence of transmutation. Mercury pictured against the sun is an allusion to mercury being a key ingredient in the alchemical process, symbolised by the fountain. Landscapes can refer to the four elements. Such an illustration is called emblematic because its inseparable element is the text, in this case beginning with the words: *Ways and Fields / Elysium / Follow the green, you will reach the golden dew / The greatest mysteries of the mortal mind are with me.*



*Dyas Chymica Tripartita: Das ist: Sechs Herrliche
Teutsche Philosophische Tractätlein [...], Frankfurt
am Main 1625*

Published by Lucas Jennis, the collection of six alchemical treatises additionally contains several stand-alone pictorial puzzles. One of these is a depiction of the interior of a workshop combined with a metaphorical representation of the alchemical process. In the flask, geometric symbols of elements and substances are mixed with crowned serpents and a dragon. Also from this book comes the *Hermetic Garden of Delights*, that is emblem-seals containing quotations from 160 alchemical texts, reproductions of which are presented at the entrance to the exhibition.



Occulta Philosophia von den verborgenen philosophischen Geheimnissen der heimlichen Goldblumen, und lapidis philosophorum [...], Frankfurt am Main 1613

The Secret Philosophy is a compilation of several alchemical writings. The book opens with an anonymous passage in the form of a didactic dialogue between an experienced alchemist (*Senior*) and an apprentice (*Adolphus*). It is they who are illustrated on the title page, surrounded by symbols of the elements and substances used in alchemy. Subsequent chapters in the collection include the famous *Emerald Tablet*, said to have been authored by the mythical sage Hermes Trismegistos, or a treatise attributed to the legendary Benedictine monk of Erfurt, Basilus Valentinus.



Heinrich Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae Solivs Veræ [...]*, Hamburg 1602

The Amphitheatre of the Only True Eternal Wisdom is one of the most popular alchemical books of modern Europe. The treatise was deliberately written in a hermetic, strained language, and its mysteriousness and ambiguity has fascinated successive generations. The illustration by Hans Vredeman de Vries presents the basic philosophical tenets of *The Amphitheatre*: the alchemist should combine work in the laboratory with spiritual work: fervent prayer to the Creator. The copperplate also reflects the impressive density of themes and symbols used in Knurath's work.



Hieronymus Brunschwig, *Das Büch zü Distilieren die züsamē gethonen ding, Composita genant [...]*, Strassburg 1522

The title of this volume can be translated as 'A book for distilling and combining substances, revised and corrected version, written for people to preserve long life and a healthy body'. A large part of it is devoted to the separation of the fifth element which is the quintessence (*quinta essentia*) of all things. Since ancient times, the existence of a fifth element, the all-pervading substance, the building block of the heavenly bodies, has been believed. In alchemical texts, it was identified with the philosopher's stone.

Room II:

Bartolomé Estéban Murillo (1617-1682) was born in Seville. He came from a poor family and became an orphan at the age of 10. With the support of his uncle, he began to study painting. The motif of poor street children constantly recurred in his early work. Just as often, the artist painted religious scenes, and when he began to complete large commissions for the Catholic Church, his career took off. The images of Our Lady Immaculate painted by him were among the most copied in the world for centuries. Murillo's paintings are characterised by warm colours, soft modelling and lyrical depictions of figures. He was one of the most prominent representatives of religious painting who incorporated details from everyday life into his art.



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
Children Eating Grapes and a Melon
ca. 1650, oil on canvas, private collection

The painting depicts poor children living on the streets of Seville in the 17th century. Drinking water was hardly available at the time, so the boys quench their thirst with fruit. The painter draws attention to the excluded: homeless children, orphaned by the plague epidemic of 1649. At the same time, the juicy fruit and the pleasure of the meal evoke positive associations with abundance, fertility and summer. The Spanish painter Murillo was a master of pictorial geometry: the seemingly simple scene is an example of a harmonious composition based on the mathematical principle of the golden division.



Unknown draughtsman from the Netherlandish school
Chronos and Putto: Personification of Time
1st quarter 17th century, pen and ink on paper

The series of drawn allegorical representations opens with a personification of time. An old man with a long beard and a scythe is looking towards a stone on which a plant is climbing - even hard rock is not immune to change and slowly crumbles when exposed to the elements. The scales in the hand of the putto standing behind Chronos remind us of the justice of flowing time, the inevitability of which affects each of us.



Unknown draughtsman from the Netherlandish school

Allegory of Summer: Demeter

1st quarter 17th century, pen and ink on paper

A woman sitting on a sheaf of grain with a sickle and a horn of plenty in her hands was surely meant to symbolise summer, the harvest and the fertility of the earth. The presence of a second figure may suggest that the drawing contains an allusion to the mythological goddesses through whom nature is reborn and becomes the nurturing mother of all humans. Ceres-Demeter would then be the central figure, a mother who turns with care towards her daughter Proserpina-Kora, who is following her.



Unknown draughtsman from the Netherlandish school

Allegory of Autumn: Dionysus

1st quarter 17th century, pen and ink on paper

Grapes become the primary attribute of Dionysus in the allegory of autumn: the barrel on which the half-naked god sits is an unmistakable allusion to the traditional production of wine at this time of year. A roguish grin and half-closed eyes suggest a dedication to pleasure and taking full advantage of the autumn harvest.



Johannes I Sadeler after Dirck Barendsz

Allegory of Winter

copperplate

The composition focuses on an anecdotal representation of the season: an elderly bearded man warms his frozen feet by the fire. Behind him, winter supplies can be seen: full barrels and giant wheels of cheese. A sleeping dog and a cat can be spotted on the floor. In the background, two figures are skating. The old man portrayed as a personification of winter can at the same time be seen as an allegory for the final stage of human life.



Egidius Sadeler after Peter Stevens

The Twelve Months: January

1607, copperplate with etching

January is described as a cold and windy time, which is best guarded against by gathering firewood. In the foreground, men are shown working at felling trees. To the left, people can be seen playing on the ice - some of them wearing ice skates. Behind them, a group of women make their way to the church. The first of them is holding a bundle in her hands - perhaps a new-born baby.



Egidius Sadeler after Peter Stevens

The Twelve Months: February

1607, copperplate with etching

The depiction of February focuses on the carnival and the pleasures that accompany it. Masked figures, musicians and dancers can be found among the amused crowd. In contrast, the sad figures in the foreground can be interpreted as the excluded who have no opportunity to take part in the fun, or even those who have little life left. One of the old men leans against a barrel in a gesture of melancholy, which symbolises winter and death. The other is accompanied by a morsel - a reference to the thread of life.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens

The Twelve Months: March

1607, copperplate with etching

March is a time of preparation for spring. The inscription highlights work in the vineyard, planting annuals or fertilising the soil. The overcast sky suggests the capricious weather of March, while at the same time the birds present, returning from warm countries, herald warmer days. The vineyard depicted in the foreground probably belongs to the inhabitants of the palace visible on the right side of the composition.



Egidius Sadeler after Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: April
1607, copperplate engraving with etching
reproduction

According to the inscription on the engraving, April is the month when mother earth 'is a tender goddess who opens her womb and paints the new year with flowers'. Interestingly, one looks in vain for flowers in this representation. In the foreground are the wealthy residents of the palace, relaxing on the spacious terrace. In the background, the palace garden and the people working in it can be seen. The sun is shining through the clouds, but the Latin inscription emphasises the life-giving role of the moon: "Phoebe, there is no life without you, sister".



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: May
1607, copperplate with etching

May was also seen as the month of love in the 17th century. In the work, we see a merry feast and couples in love. At the same time, a Latin inscription warns the girls against a treacherous lover, who is favoured by the seductive Venus and the cunning Hermes, the patron of thieves.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: June
1607, copperplate with etching

In June, the sheep shearing was considered the most important work. Flocks of these animals fill most of the work, from the foreground to the steep slopes on the left and the distant meadows in the background. Other animals, such as a milking cow, can also be seen in the graphic. The inscription highlights the onset of hot days, during which it is best to seek shade and water.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: July
1607, copperplate with etching

The inscription beneath the engraving draws attention to the origin of the Latin name of the month 'Julius' from the name of the Roman emperor Julius Caesar. July is described as a time when heat like fire burns the meadows and fields. In this work of art, people can be seen working at the haymaking.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: August
1607, copperplate with etching

A print illustrating the August harvest is accompanied by a metaphorical description of the fertile mother earth, who feeds mortals and allows nature to rise. Here it is identified with Proserpina, who is the queen of the underworld on the one hand and the goddess responsible for the constant rebirth of vegetation on the other. The reference to Sicily ('Trinacria') that appears in the inscription is a reminder of the place where the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto is supposed to have taken place.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: September
1607, copperplate with etching

September is harvest time in orchards. The inscription poetically celebrates the beauty of the fruit trees with branches bending with abundance, full of swollen apples that are so heavy they barely hold on to their stalks. Grazing goats and ploughing in the fields complete the picture of the approaching autumn.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: October
1607, copperplate with etching

The grape picking entirely dominates the illustration of the month of October, both textually and pictorially. The depiction allows us to trace the various stages of work in the vineyard in the 17th century, from harvesting, through transporting and crushing the fruit and pouring the finished pulp into barrels.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens
The Twelve Months: November
1607, copperplate with etching

November is depicted as a time of mushroom picking and the hogs' search for truffles. The inscription can be interpreted as praise of the villagers, who, after a whole year of work, can enjoy the harvest and fat livestock. At the same time, a symbol of the fragility of our existence appears in the foreground: the personification of time with the thread of human life. Then, the empty basket right next to the child taking care of its basic physiological need can be read as a life that has begun and will one day be fulfilled.



Egidius Sadeler by Peter Stevens

The Twelve Months: December

1607, copperplate with etching

The inscription and engraving for December describe the same activity traditionally performed in this month: pig slaughter. In the foreground, one can see, among other things, the severed head of an animal in a wooden tub, the dropping of blood into bowls, and children playing at inflating pig bladders. The bubbles created from parts of animal carcasses are a reference to the transience of life. The landscape in the background is a display of the artist's skill, who has managed to depict a myriad of buildings in a few centimetres in a realistic manner.

Exhibition "Metamorphoses and Transmutations"

Organiser: Princes Lubomirski Museum, Ossoliński National Institute

Curators: Emilia Kłoda and M. Rafał Makarewicz

Co-financed by the KGHM Foundation



National
Ossolinski
Institute



Museum
of the
Lubomirski
Princes
Ossolineum