Alchemy on the Amstel:
on Hermetic medicine
The exhibition was made possible through loans from the collections of Museum Boerhaave, Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), Hester Albach and Cis van Heertum

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Cover: The *Triumph-Wagen Antimonii* as represented by Burghard de Groot, see no. 45
Alchemy on the Amstel on Hermetic medicine

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Heinrich Khunrath, *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae*, 1609; engraving of the ‘Oratorium-Laboratorium’

BPH Collection
Alchemy on the Amstel. On Hermetic medicine: a title which indicates that the present exhibition mainly deals with the ‘business of alchemy’ in Amsterdam – in the seventeenth century, to be precise. Yet it was another city, namely Leiden, which played a role of major importance with respect to the alchemical practices pursued in the laboratories in the city on the Amstel. The University of Leiden was the first university in the Dutch Republic to establish a laboratory to complement the already existing anatomical theatre and the botanical garden. This laboratorium chimicum came into existence partly due to the efforts of the Leiden professor of medicine Franciscus de le Boë Sylvius. Sylvius of course also trained students from Amsterdam, one of whom, and not the least among equals, then continued to practise iatrochemistry, or Hermetic medicine, in his own city. That student was Theodor Kercrking, who forms one of the foci of the exhibition.

Leiden plays an important role in another respect as well. The exhibition in the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica is running in conjunction with Leyden’s luxuriance, Green Discoveries in the Golden Age, an exhibition on show in Museum Boerhaave in Leiden until 5 May 2013. Leyden’s luxuriance also devotes attention to medicinal plants that came to Europe from the New World to enrich the pharmacopoeia. In addition, the University Library Leiden presents an exhibition until 31 December 2012 under the title Bibliotheca Pharmacia, highlighting the history of pharmacy on the basis of a collection donated to the University Library by a twentieth-century apothecary, Jaap van de Sande. The exhibitions in Leiden and in Amsterdam complement each other, and it is our hope that visitors to any of these three exhibitions may be inspired to visit the other two. Alchemy on the Amstel, the exhibition now showing in the BPH until 17 May 2013, dwells on an aspect of alchemy which is related to the two Leiden exhibitions: alchemy in the service of medicine, as already advocated by the famous medical reformer Paracelsus.
This exhibition has been enriched by loans from private and institutional collections. It is therefore my pleasure to conclude by thanking the lenders: Hester Albach, Cis van Heertum, Museum Boerhaave and the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency, and in particular the curators of the Leiden exhibitions, Esther van Gelder (Museum Boerhaave) and Kasper van Ommen (University Library Leiden).

Esther Oosterwijk-Ritman
Director and Librarian
Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica
Portrait of Theodor Kerckring by Jürgen Ovens, ca. 1660

Kunsthalle Collection, Hamburg
Introduction

Alchemy on the Amstel: on Hermetic medicine

Around 1660 Theodor Kerckring, a twenty-two year old student of medicine in Leiden under the chymical physician Franciscus De le Boë Sylvius, had his portrait painted by Jürgen Ovens, a pupil of Rembrandt who between 1657 and 1663 had settled for the second time in the Dutch Republic, where Jan Amos Comenius amongst others sat for him.¹ The richly dressed medical student is portrayed in an interior full of allusions to the world of science and scholarship: in the background we see a celestial globe by Jodocus Hondius,² on the table a couple of bound books, a quill in an inkpot serving as a paper weight for a scroll of parchment which Kerckring emphatically appears to be pointing at. The words on the scroll are taken from the preface of Seneca’s Quaestiones naturales, Book 1: ‘Nisi ad haec admitterer non fuerat operaee pretium nasci’: if I were not allowed to occupy myself with this, what good would it be to have been born?, seems to be a motto that appealed to Kerckring.

In Quaestiones naturales, a work of natural science, Seneca recommends the study of the cosmos and its mysteries – this makes the celestial globe an apt attribute. Immediately preceding the quotation which can be read on the scroll, Seneca offers a brief explanation of that part of philosophy which is concerned with divine matters, and which is therefore not confined to the visible world, but is aware that there is something more elevated and more beautiful, which is concealed from our sight by nature.³ Whether Kerckring also want-

¹ Reproduction of Kerckring’s portrait by permission of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, which acquired the painting in 1862.

² I am grateful to Diederick Wildeman, nautical collection curator, Scheepvaartmuseum Amsterdam, who identified the globe as one most probably manufactured by Hondius (first state 1613; second state 1640). See also: Peter van der Krogt, Globi Neerlandici: The production of globes in the Low Countries. Utrecht 1993.

ed to allude to the preceding passage in Seneca, which he would then assume to be familiar to the spectator, or whether the quotation, in combination with an object like the celestial globe, primarily points to the spirit of inquiry animating the young student, is as yet unknown. What is certain is that he attended the Latin school of Franciscus van den Enden in the second half of the 1650s and also that by his own admission Van den Enden, who was to become his father-in-law, imbued in him a passion for alchemy. In 1659 he went to Leiden to study medicine under De le Boë Sylvius, which makes it likely that he was encouraged to turn to iatrochemical medicine under his inspiring guidance. Andreas Frisius, a friend of Kerckring who also published his works, at any rate claimed that Kerckring’s reputation as a chymical physician was already firmly established in Amsterdam around 1663:

Who cannot but marvel to see you … so suddenly admitted to the inner sanctuary of medicine, equalling not only the senior practitioners of that art, but also managing to bring about such miraculous things that nobody can understand on which medical Parnassus you were slumbering before rising to become first among physicians. The people worship you; men of standing revere you, princes try to engage the twenty-five-year old because they see, understand and are told that you, not by some happy coincidence, but by a firm and profound method, have managed to perform miracles of medicine far above the ordinary.

Which ‘firm and profound method’ and which ‘miracles of medicine’ are here referred to? According to the annotated edition Kerckring published in 1671 of the *Currus triumphalis antimonii*, a

4 Hester Albach is preparing a biography of Theodor Kerckring, to be published by Athenaeum publishers, Amsterdam.


panegyric on antimony allegedly written by a fourteenth-century monk called Basilius Valentinus, he applied iatrochemical methods. This means that he prepared medicines in the laboratory for internal and external use, and on the basis of antimony. His reputation must have travelled far beyond Amsterdam, because at one point he recounts the story of a patient who came to see him for a second opinion after a famous surgeon from Oirschot had told her the only remedy left was a mastectomy. Kerckring had managed to cure her of her desperate affliction within a few months thanks to an antimony balsem. Although he does not mention the surgeon by name, his contemporary readers must have known the surgeon referred to was the renowned Arnold Fey jr. Where famous surgeons only had desperate remedies in store, the chymical physician could indeed perform miracles!

Kerckring plays an important role in the exhibition because he is exemplary of the practice of iatrochemistry in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Chymical physicians were followers of Paracelsus, the sixteenth-century medical reformer who advocated the use of alchemy for medical purposes. Paracelsus was given many epithets by friends and foes alike, amongst which ‘Trismegistus Germanus’, the German Hermes Trismegistus. He is certainly to be associated with the Hermetic and neo-platonic worldview in which the microcosmos and the macrocosmos are intrinsically related, as shown in the beautiful engraving by Matthaeus Merian, which illustrates the text of the Tabula smaragdina (‘that which is above, is like that which is below’). Paracelsus also told his colleagues that they should not blindly rely on medical authorities but instead should seek to fathom the forces active in nature and in the cosmos – to heal mankind but also to learn about God’s creation.

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7 Carlos Gilly, “Theophrastia Sancta”, p. 173. Less flattering was the ‘forest donkey of Einsiedeln’, after the village where Paracelsus was born, and after his uncouth manners. Paracelsus himself proudly adopted the name ‘Waldesel von Einsiedeln’ in for instance his Buch Paragranum, in which he also challenged his traditionalist medical colleagues: even his shoestrings were more learned than Galen and Avicenna, quoted in Andrew Weeks, Paracelsus, p. 96.
As a iatrochemical physician Kerckring described alchemical operations in his *Commentarius in currum triumphalis* which can probably still be carried out today. Just as the historians of science William Newman and Lawrence Principe fairly recently studied the notebooks of the American alchemist George Starkey and successfully conducted experiments in a laboratory setting, the following recipe by Kerckring might be tried – without perhaps offering the result to unsuspecting patients:

Take pure Glass of Antimony, made as Basilius here teacheth, melt it in a Crucible, and keep it in flux so long until a third part be consumed. Then let it cool, and grind the same to an Impalvable Powder, upon which pour Spirit of Wine highly rectified, until it stand three fingers above the Powder; close the Vessel firmly, and circulate the Matter for three Moneths; then by Distillation abstract the Spirit of Wine, or if it be tinged with Redness (which always will be if you have rightly operated) only pour it off, and keep it apart; for it is an excellent Medicine (tr. Richard Russell, *The Triumphant Chariot of Antimony*, 1678).

There are many such practical directions for the laboratory in Kerckring’s *Commentarius*. But the intention with which according to Kerckring the alchemist must set about his iatrochemical business is tinged with mysticism. He admonishes his colleagues that sincere prayer, or meditation on things divine, ensures the unfolding of:

the mystery of all great things, and shews how available Prayer is for the obtainment of things Spiritual and Eternal, as well as Corporal and perishing goods: and when Prayer is made with a Heart not feigned, but sincere; you will see that there is nothing more fit for the acquiring of what you desire. Let these suffice to be spoken of *Prayer*, which Basilius and all Philosophers with him do not vainly require, as an Introduction to Chymistry (tr. Richard Russell, *The Triumphant Chariot of Antimony*, 1678).
Naturally not every chymical physician was a sincere and selfless person, and Kerckring has therefore ‘no respect to Others, who aim at nothing but Riches, and would make so noble an Art subservient to Avarice, the worst of all Vices’. Nor were chymical physicians only regarded with suspicion or mockery by followers of Galen. The Swiss physician Johannes Fridericus Helvetius, who claimed to have carried out a successful transmutation in 1667, was ridiculed together with his ‘chymical junk’ in the anonymous pamphlet *Elk besiet sig selve*, a contribution to a medical controversy in Amsterdam raging in the years 1677-1678 that was as famous as it was notorious. Another physician, apparently also a practitioner of iatrochemistry, is described in the same pamphlet as someone who ‘was apparently greatly familiar with the ghosts of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa, and can tell you most curious things about De Lemuribus, & spectoris [sic] de clavibus sympathiae, septem metallorum, de signis hycroglyphicis [sic], & cabalistice de annis climacteris’. Paracelsus, Agrippa, Ludwig Lavater’s pamphlet *De spectris, lemuribus et magnis*, which caused Spinoza to cross swords with Hugo van Boxtel, the seven metals of transmutational alchemy, cabalistic pronouncements on the climacteric years and the like – everything is thrown in to produce a humorous concoction. Such mockeries thrilled the people of Amsterdam and the Republic, but all the same the iatrochemical pursuits of physicians like Kerckring and of metallurgists like Goossen van Vreeswyk, a follower also of ‘the divine philosophy of Hermes’, were absolutely sincere, and their work in the laboratories of Amsterdam was carried out for the benefit of mankind.

Cis van Heertum

9 *Elk besiet sig selven*, s.l., s.n., 1678, p. 6, p. 9. The physician who was apparently so intimate with the ghosts of Paracelsus and Henricus Cornelius Agrippa is referred to as ‘Dr van Ieperen’. One Emanuel van Iperen, whose *Dissertatio medica inauguralis, de iliaca passione* came out in 1671, features in another pamphlet contribution to this medical controversy, see Marianne Peereboom, ‘Lijsje Jans haar kous ley aan duygen. Een medische pamflettenstrijd in Amsterdam’, in: *Vingerafdrukken*, pp. 91-105.