Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s Composite Portraits and the Alchemical Universe of the Early Modern Habsburg Court (1546-1612)

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Abstract

At the Renaissance noble court, particularly in the principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, alchemical pursuits were wildly popular and encouraged. By the reign of Rudolf II in the late sixteenth century, Prague had become synonymous with the study of alchemy, as the emperor, renowned for his interest in natural magic, welcomed numerous influential alchemists from across Europe to his imperial residence and private laboratory. Given the prevalence of alchemical activities and the ubiquity of the occult at the Habsburg court, it seems plausible that the art growing out of this context would have been shaped by this unique intellectual climate.

In 1562, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a previously little-known designer of windows and frescoes from Milan, was summoned across the Alps by Ferdinand I to fulfil the role of court portraitist in Vienna. Over the span of a quarter-century, Arcimboldo continued to serve faithfully the Habsburg family, working in various capacities for Maximilian II and later for his successor, Rudolf II, in Prague. As Arcimboldo developed artistically at the Habsburg court, he gained tremendous recognition for his composite portraits, artworks for which he is most well-known today. Through a focused investigation of his *Four Seasons*, *Four Elements*, and *Vertumnus*, a portrait of Rudolf II under the guise of the god of seasons and transformation, an attempt will be made to reveal the alchemical undercurrents present in Arcimboldo’s work. This is not to say that Arcimboldo’s puzzle portraits reference specific alchemical treatises, or that the artist participated actively in alchemical experiments. Rather, in their transformative configuration and subject matter, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits reflect the very ethos of alchemical philosophy and spirituality that so permeated the early modern Habsburg court, an intellectual environment to which he belonged and contributed for a considerable span of time.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

If Arcimboldo’s composite portraits seem amusing to a modern audience, it is because they exist far removed from their original context of creation. In an attempt to better historicize the artist’s oeuvre, modern scholarship has strayed from the once common tendency of characterizing Arcimboldo as the father of surrealism and his puzzle portraits as mere curiosities. Art historians, most notably Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, have made concerted efforts to situate the composite portraits more firmly within Habsburg court culture, the very milieu in which they initially arose.¹

Growing out of this approach, Arcimboldo’s works have, for example, been considered within the framework of sixteenth-century literature. Mindful of their evocative nature, the puzzle portraits have been compared to similarly communicative early modern literary forms. For instance, as images that substitute human features with parallel objects, such as a human ear with a seashell, Arcimboldo’s compositions have been described as visualisations of the kind of fantastical metaphor typical of sixteenth-century Petrarchan poems.²

¹ Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 7. In a retreat from ahistorical discussions of the composite portraits, the paintings have also been considered in light of earlier and contemporaneous art forms. For example, the bizarre nature of Arcimboldo’s composite portraits has been attributed to the possible influence of Roman grotesques (Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 103). Furthermore, in their unique configuration, they have also been compared to Indian Mughal miniatures of fantastic animals. Similar to the composite portraits, the Mughal paintings feature intertwined human and animal elements that form an overall seamless whole, such as an elephant. The connection between the Mughal miniatures and Arcimboldo’s composite heads requires further research. In the absence of compelling evidence, it nevertheless seems plausible that the artist might have encountered Indian composite figures in the imperial *Kunstkammer* and could have derived from them inspiration for his own work [Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe: A Century of Wonder*, 3 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2:77; Francesco Porizio, *L’universo illusorio di Arcimboldo* (Milan: Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, 1987), 14-16].

If attempts have been made to reconcile Arcimboldo’s paintings with the literature that would have been known to the humanist circles assembled at the Habsburg court, others have, in a similar vein, established links between the composite portraits and early modern natural history. The investigation of natural specimens of all varieties was fervently encouraged by the Habsburg emperor, Maximillian II, and his successor, Rudolf II. Indeed, a number of physician-botanists who enjoyed the support of the learned Habsburg rulers made considerable contributions to the field of natural history during the late sixteenth century. It is partially through these intellectual endeavours that the central European court gained the status of a late humanist one *par excellence*. The faithful rendering of a variety of naturalia in Arcimboldo’s composite subjects has been cited as evidence for the artist’s informed participation in natural history at the Habsburg court. If extant documents suggest that Arcimboldo offered his skills as an illustrator to botanists seeking to record the appearance of natural life in great detail, some have been tempted to argue that such collaborative relationships actively shaped the artist’s independent projects.

Although Arcimboldo’s paintings have been connected in convincing ways to developments in natural history, their relation to other prominent fields of study, such as alchemy, has not always been readily acknowledged. For instance, Kaufmann has asserted that the association between Arcimboldo’s work and Rudolf II’s alleged reputation as a melancholic eccentric is an “irresistible source of misinterpretation”. Indeed, according to him, the connection made by Hans Holzer between Arcimboldo’s *Vertumnus*, a composite

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3 Some of the contributions to the field of natural history made by the court’s humanist scholars will be mentioned with greater specificity in Chapter 2.
6 Kaufmann, *Imperial Allegories*, 275
portrait of Rudolf II, and the latter’s demonstrable delight in the alchemical arts is not only misguided, but also symptomatic of prevailing romantic misconceptions of the emperor. And yet, at the Renaissance noble court, particularly in the principalities of the Holy Roman Empire, alchemical pursuits were wildly popular and encouraged. Under the reign of Rudolf II, the imperial city of Prague had become synonymous with the study of alchemy, as the emperor, renowned for his interests in the occult, welcomed numerous influential alchemists from across Europe to his palace and private laboratory.

Recognizing that “the nexus between alchemy and art at Rudolf’s court has not [yet] been adequately examined”, Sally Metzler puts forward a response to this clear gap in the literature. In her article, “Artists, Alchemists and Mannerists in Courtly Prague”, the author acknowledges the presence of hermeticism as “a pervasive intellectual and spiritual force during the flowering of the Prague Mannerists” in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Bearing in mind the centrality of occultism in Rudolfine Prague, Metzler explores the various ways in which Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, along with the works of other court artists, such as those by Bartholomäus Spranger, evoke alchemy visually. Arcimboldo’s puzzle portraits do not form the sole focus of the article, but are employed instead to bolster a larger analysis of Mannerism at the Habsburg court. Using Metzler’s

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7 Concerning Arcimboldo’s Vertumnus, Holzer writes: “Giuseppe Arcimboldo created a portrait of the Emperor in which Rudolf is shown in the disguise of the Etruscan agricultural deity Vertumnus. Very few people would have understood the allusion, but Rudolf was a learned man…and he was aware of the fact that Vertumnus was the brother of Hermes Trismegistus, the patron of alchemy” [Hans Holzer, The Alchemist; The Secret Magical Life of Rudolf von Habsburg (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1974), 42].
article as a starting point, the thesis will contribute a more elaborate investigation of how
alchemical principles surface in Arcimboldo’s composite paintings, while also exploring the
nature of alchemy as it was patronized and practiced under the Habsburg crown during
Arcimboldo’s significant stay at court.

The re-examination of authors, works, and ideas in terms of the history of alchemy has
become widespread over the last decade. No longer considered as a mere impediment to the
development of a proper scientific method, alchemy, and the broader interest in the occult
that characterized most of the early modern period, have come to be regarded as crucial
precursors to the ‘Scientific Revolution’.11 Though the modern tendency is to distinguish the
magical from the scientific, as Stanton Linden makes clear, “alchemy was at the heart of the
thought and method of… [the] pioneers of modern science”.12 As a result of its newfound
prominence, the so-called “golden art” has been readily incorporated into significant
interdisciplinary enterprises and has propelled new scholarship in areas, such as: literature,
religious studies, philosophy, history, and the history of medicine.

The arguments presented in this thesis coincide with the growing recognition of alchemy
as a fruitful avenue for scholarly investigation, particularly of the art historical kind. Upon
considering Arcimboldo’s famous composite portraits, specifically those produced for Holy
Roman Emperors Maximillian II and Rudolf II, it becomes clear that both the practical and
the spiritual aspects of alchemy surface in meaningful ways in his work. This is not to say,
however, that Arcimboldo’s paintings reference specific alchemical treatises, nor that the

12 Stanton J. Linden, “Introduction,” in The Alchemy Reader; From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac
artist assumed the role of an aspiring adept by conducting his own experiments. Rather, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, in their unusual subject matter and transformative configuration, reflect the very ethos of alchemical doctrine and spirituality that was so prevalent at court.

Chapter one of the thesis will establish both the practical and spiritual tenets that drove all alchemical activity in the late sixteenth century. Whilst considering the philosophical underpinnings of the “golden art”, the humanist revival of the Hermetic corpus and the Neoplatonic texts in the Renaissance will be foregrounded. The microcosm/macrocosp worldview expressed in these works had a significant influence on the spiritual landscape of alchemy, as it not only suggested that nature concealed the secrets of an omnipotent creator, but also that the achievement of alchemical transformation held the possibility for universal spiritual renewal. If the Hermetic and Neoplatonic conceptions of the cosmos formed the spiritual dimension of alchemy, then the complex evolution of element theory across numerous geographically and temporally dispersed civilizations validated its practical aims. Part of the first chapter will be devoted to the foundational element theory of Plato, which established the four elements as the cornerstone of all existence and suggested that transformation pervaded the universe. From Ancient Greece, the focus will shift to the Medieval Arab world to outline the revised element theory of Jābir ibn Hayyān, as well as the Arab preservation and transmission of alchemical knowledge to Medieval Western society. The chapter will culminate with a discussion of Paracelsus’s reconceptualization of medical treatment in light of man’s position as microcosm of the universe, as well as the supposed healing power of the Philosopher’s stone.
The development of alchemical theories and spiritual beliefs summarized in the first chapter will preface the exploration of alchemy as it was practiced both within the Holy Roman Empire and at the Habsburg court. In chapter two, attention will be paid to how Maximilian II and later, Rudolf II, patronized the study of the occult arts fervently and on a considerable scale. Although Maximilian did not actively promote alchemy per se, he, nevertheless, exhibited a discernable penchant for the occult. The reign of Rudolf II, however, marked an unprecedented “golden age” for alchemy, as its basic philosophies shone through virtually every undertaking at the court in Prague. Approaching the early seventeenth century, Rudolfine Prague had established itself as a beacon for occult pursuits, while the Habsburg crown became synonymous with alchemical achievement across Europe.

If the second chapter aims to capture the nature of intellectual life at the Habsburg court, the final section situates Arcimboldo and his composite portraits, namely: the Four Seasons, the Four Elements, and Vertumnus, within this highly-learned and mystical environment. As paintings produced for the House of Habsburg, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits venerate the pomp and glory of his patrons not only through the inclusion of loaded imperial symbolism, but also through allusions to alchemy. By the late sixteenth century, the attainment of the elusive Philosopher’s stone was an enviable accomplishment, as it held the potential for economic prosperity and, most importantly, for a symbolic mastery over the universe. Therefore, the final chapter will explore how Arcimboldo’s paintings evoke the alchemical visually. In so doing, attention will also be paid to the connotations of power associated with the “golden art” and thereby to the composite portraits. The discussion will conclude by placing Arcimboldo’s paintings into a continuum with the similarly metamorphic items housed in the imperial Kunstkammer. By emphasizing the ubiquity of
metamorphosis at the royal court, the thesis will attempt to answer the larger question of why
the notion of transformation carried such importance for the Habsburg rulers, particularly for
Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II.
Chapter 2

The Ancient and Medieval Foundations of Early Modern Alchemy: Philosophies, Theories and Worldviews

From a modern perspective, the figure of the alchemist tends to evoke notions of fraudulence, greed and farcical magic. However, far from a fringe pseudoscientist whose sole intention was to deceive the foolish and the gullible, the alchemist of early modern Europe was, as Tara Nummendal explains, “a very real purveyor of practical techniques, inventions, and cures” who “entered into contracts to make precious metals, advised on mining projects, and experimented with chemical medicines”.\(^\text{13}\) As such, alchemists occupied leading positions in princely laboratories, mining towns and city centres across sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, especially throughout the Holy Roman Empire. Indeed, though alchemical concepts had evolved across earlier civilizations, namely among the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and the Medieval Arabs, early modern practitioners of this art enjoyed an unprecedented status. This chapter will demonstrate that the newfound centrality of the Renaissance alchemist can be linked to the recovery and revival of ancient texts, most relevantly the Platonic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic works.\(^\text{14}\) In this significant body of literature, early modern alchemists found the spiritual and philosophical doctrines to validate their pursuits, while their influential patrons derived from it a motive for encouraging the study of natural magic. The following will attempt to define early modern alchemy through the lens of the abovementioned sources, establishing not

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\(^{13}\) Tara E. Nummendal, *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.

only its tangible aims, but also the broader mystical cosmology espoused by its practitioners and affluent supporters.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{2.1 Defining Early Modern Alchemies}

To provide an overarching definition for early modern alchemy would be an oversimplification and perhaps even inappropriate, as there was no consensus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about what alchemical practices and beliefs entailed.\textsuperscript{16} Alchemy was central to a number of sister fields, including metallurgy, natural philosophy and medicine, and alchemists might have pursued this art for any number of reasons, such as: the attainment of wealth, the prolongation of human life, intellectual curiosity, and or spiritual enlightenment.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, it may be useful to consider alchemy as heterogeneous rather than singular and to acknowledge the existence of “alchemies” in the early modern period.\textsuperscript{18}

Bearing its complexity in mind, it is nevertheless possible to speak of alchemy as occupying both a “technical-operative” and a “theoretical-mystical” realm.\textsuperscript{19} In the case of the former, alchemy was considered central to an increasingly commercialised society and was

\textsuperscript{15} The term “cosmology” is a loaded one. For the purpose of this discussion, the word is employed broadly to designate the order and functioning of the universe.

\textsuperscript{16} Nummendal, \textit{Alchemy and Authority}, 14.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid; Sally Metzler, “Artists, Alchemists and Mannerists in Courtly Prague,” in \textit{Art & Alchemy}, ed. Jacob Wamberg (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 129.

\textsuperscript{18} Stanton J. Linden, \textit{Darke Hierogliphicks; Alchemy in English Literature from Chaucer to the Restoration} (Lexington, KT: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 11.

\textsuperscript{19} Matilde Battistini, \textit{Astrology, Magic and Alchemy in Art} (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2007), 252. According to Linden, though it may be convenient to discuss alchemy in terms of two distinct categories (spiritual and practical), both dimensions were often explored simultaneously in the work of a single author (Linden, \textit{Darke Hierogliphicks}, 10). Further, according to Nummendal, though both dimensions of alchemy were not mutually exclusive (an alchemist could practice his/her art for both material and spiritual reasons), many alchemists remained critical of market-oriented practitioners, as they were usually linked to fraud and the vice of greed [Tara E. Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy and Commercial Exchange in the Holy Roman Empire,” in \textit{Merchants & Marvels; Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe}, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 212].
valued for its alleged potential to generate wealth (i.e. gold) through chemical means.\textsuperscript{20} As Pamela Smith underscores, one of the most alluring aspects of alchemy in the early modern period was its promise of “a moveable wealth that did not depend on land or the fruits of the land”.\textsuperscript{21} By offering the possibility to not only supplement traditional sources of prosperity, but also to produce greater wealth than was yielded from land cultivation alone, alchemy was lauded as a viable remedy for the social and economic ills plaguing early modern Europe.

The principle tenet that underlay all alchemical pursuit was the belief in the transmutation of base metals into silver and gold through chemical means.\textsuperscript{22} Deriving their theoretical basis from early element theory, which will be explored shortly, early modern alchemists justified this view through the understanding that all metals underwent a natural “ripening” process beneath the surface of the earth, during which base metals would metamorphose over a lengthy period into increasingly perfected forms, culminating with gold, the ultimate noble state.\textsuperscript{23} Accompanying this theory was the belief that all metals consisted of varying proportions of the same two philosophical substances, sulphur and mercury, and that the purification of these two ingredients would yield the transmutation of one metal into another.\textsuperscript{24} Consequently, the

\begin{flushright}
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\item Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy,” 201.
\item Smith, “Alchemy as Language,” 1.
\item Two of the earliest articulations of this belief can be found in Plato’s \textit{Timaeus} and Aristotle’s \textit{Meteorology}, as will be discussed in section 1.2 of this chapter.
\item Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy,” 107. Ancient thinkers maintained that all metals shared a common nature (they were reflective, could be moulded and cast, etc.). In light of this, it was theorized that all metals were composed of the same ingredients, but of varying proportions [Lawrence M. Principe and Lloyd DeWitt, \textit{Transmutations: Alchemy in Art; Selected Works from the Eddleman and Fisher Collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation} (Philadelphia, PA: Chemical Heritage Foundation, 2002), 3]. The sulphur-mercury theory can be traced back to the Medieval Arab alchemists, as will be explained in section 1.3 of this chapter.
\end{enumerate}
\end{flushright}
chemical generation of gold was perceived as both justified and possible, and that it was for the alchemist to devise the correct method to simulate and expedite natural metamorphosis.

In order to change base metals into gold, the production of a liquid or powder—referred to interchangeably as the tincture, the elixir, or the Philosopher’s stone—was crucial.\textsuperscript{25} Though the centrality of its role in performing chemical purification was unanimously agreed upon, the physicality and potency of the Philosopher’s stone were not. Indeed, the elixir ranged from a solid poppy or ruby-colored substance, to a transparent and glass-like material that remained nevertheless malleable.\textsuperscript{26} In terms of its transformative capabilities, some maintained that the elixir was powerful enough to transmute one-hundred-times its weight in mercury into gold, while others estimated its multiplying potency to be anywhere between one thousand, or one million.

The recipe for producing the Philosopher’s stone was just as elusive as its materiality and mutational capabilities. One of the salient features of alchemical discourse was its obscure language, consisting of abstract allegories, riddles and analogies, along with the use of idiosyncratic symbols to convey meaning.\textsuperscript{27} Characteristic of the “theoretical-mystical” aspect of alchemy, the use of an inaccessible language in alchemical texts was deliberate, and was symptomatic of the widely-held belief that such knowledge was bestowed by God upon a select few.\textsuperscript{28}

Alchemy, as a field dedicated to the mastery of natural metamorphosis and the perfecting of nature, was, perhaps above all, a deeply pious endeavour. Likened to a spiritual quest for

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy,” 207.
\item Henry Carrington Bolton, \textit{The Follies of Science at the Court of Rudolf II 1576-1612} (Milwaukee: Pharmaceutical Review Publishing, 1904), 67.
\item Linden, \textit{Alchemy Reader}, 19.
\item Smith, “Alchemy as Language,” 3.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
divine enlightenment, the trying process of producing the Philosopher’s stone required that the alchemist achieve a degree of control over the universal essence that animated all of God’s creation.\textsuperscript{29} By exercising a divine mastery over nature, it was believed that the earthly realm could be cleansed of the Biblical taints of Adam and be restored to its uncorrupted pre-Fall state.\textsuperscript{30} If the aims of alchemy carried religious undertones, then the successful practitioner had to be comparably spiritual. Michael Sendivogius (1566-1636), an alchemist who briefly served Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, described the ideal philosopher as someone who: “as Nature her selfe is, true, plaine, patient, constant, and [who] is chiefest of all, religious, [and] fearing God”.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, an alchemist’s failure to successfully transmute impure metals into gold signified not only an improper method, but simultaneously the inadequately enlightened state of his or her soul.\textsuperscript{32}

In the frontispiece of Heinrich Khunrath’s \textit{Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae}, or \textit{Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom} (1602), the model union of the practical and spiritual dimensions of alchemy is expressed visually in what has been described as the “symbolic landscape of the occultist” [Fig. 1].\textsuperscript{33} Produced in Rudolfine Prague, a context in which alchemical interests peaked, by an honours graduate of Basel Medical School, Khunrath’s \textit{Amphitheatre} featured 365 spiritual meditations (one exercise for every day of the year), which

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{29} Battistini, \textit{Astrology, Magic}, 304; Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy,” 201.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Principe and DeWitt, \textit{Transmutations}, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Michael Sendivogius, \textit{A New Light of Alchymie: Taken Out of the Fountain of Nature, and Manuall Experience; To Which is Added a Treatise of Sulphur...} (1604), trans. J.F. M.D. (London, UK: Richard Cotes, 1650), 5.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Peter Dear, \textit{Revolutionizing the Sciences; European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500-1700} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 27.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Smith, “Alchemy as Language,” 5. Khunrath’s \textit{Amphitheatre} was completed in 1602, but is best-known in its 1609 version.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
were based on Biblical verses and were accompanied by obscure commentary by the author.\textsuperscript{34} In addition to over twenty pages of text, the \textit{Amphitheatre} included four engraved circular images, with the frontispiece, \textit{Oratory-Laboratory}, being the most recognizable and celebrated of the series.\textsuperscript{35} In this work, a cluttered hall intended for both worship and alchemical experimentation is represented. On the right of the room, beneath a portico, the realm of applied chemistry is depicted, consisting of furnaces, charcoal, tongs, and a variety of flasks. The words “reason” and “experience” appear at the base of the laboratory’s supporting columns, while the phrase “that which is wisely tried will succeed sometime”, adorns the structure’s entablature.\textsuperscript{36} Collectively, the tools and inscriptions designate a space in which production of the Philosopher’s stone, the preparation of chemical medicines, and the transmutation of metals into gold are performed.\textsuperscript{37} Such is a place in which reason predominates and the alchemical knowledge transmitted through ancient sources is both carefully studied and enacted.

Meanwhile, the left of the room is occupied by a pavilion, with its curtains spread apart to reveal the kneeling alchemist. With his back facing the viewer, the adept is situated before an altar on which an open Bible and two diagrams for meditation stand. Further confirming the religious nature of the scene is the inscription on a plaque hanging above the table, which

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\textsuperscript{34} Adam McLean, “Introduction,” in \textit{The Amphitheatre Engravings of Heinrich Khunrath}, ed. Adam McLean (Edinburgh, Scotland: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1981), 1. For more information on Khunrath’s life, his affiliations with other practitioners of the occult, like John Dee, and descriptions of the three accompanying engravings in Khunrath’s series, see McLean, \textit{Amphitheatre}, 1-95.
\textsuperscript{36} The English translations have been made by Patricia Tahil and are featured as a textual accompaniment in Adam McLean, ed., \textit{The Amphitheatre Engravings of Heinrich Khunrath} (Edinburgh, Scotland: Magnum Opus Hermetic Sourceworks, 1981), 40.
\textsuperscript{37} Forshaw, “Alchemy in the Amphitheatre,” 201.
\end{flushright}
counsels: “Do not talk of God without light”. A neighboring table to the left of the adept supports burning incenses meant to facilitate his meditation. The words: “The prayer rises like smoke, a sacrifice agreeable to God”, ascend in a cloud of smoke, which conveys the centrality of inner purification through prayer to proper alchemical practice. The spirituality of alchemy is further emphasized through the inscription that runs across the ceiling’s exposed beam, which advises, “Without Divine inspiration, nobody is ever great”. On the same beam, a seven branched light fixture is anchored, perhaps making literal the spiritual enlightenment that is achieved through religious worship.

Finally, in the middle of the room, another table emerges to the foreground prominently to symbolize how the early modern alchemist might relate to both the religious and practical aspects of their art. The central table supports a number of musical instruments, while its tablecloth bares the phrase: “Sacred Music causes flight to sadness and to the Evil Spirits, because the Spirit of Jehova sings happily in a heart filled with Holy Joy”. Khunrath seems to suggest how secular objects, specifically musical instruments, possess the potential to prime the soul for proper alchemical practice. The central composition conveys how the use of music for spiritual ends may be a viable, and perhaps more playful, strategy for success in alchemy. However, the adept must not abandon prayer and study altogether in favor of music alone. Indeed, the scale on the far end of the table conveys that alchemical achievement hinges on maintaining a balance between one’s intellectual, spiritual, and leisurely pursuits. Taken as a

40 Ibid.
whole, Khunrath’s engraving-portrays a prototypical space for alchemical practice, in which all aspects of early modern alchemy harmonize.

2.2 Ancient Element Theory and Worldviews

Though alchemy was primarily a spiritual pursuit steeped in the esoteric, much of the early modern alchemist’s practice was grounded in the application of ancient principles about the nature of the universe. Misleadingly referred to as the “medieval science”, alchemy finds its roots in ancient civilizations that extend back thousands of years.\footnote{Linden, \textit{Darke Hierogliphicks}, 11-12.} Given its long-spanning history, scholars have struggled to determine the transmission of alchemy and to chart its early development with certainty. Nevertheless, many hold the view that alchemical practices first emerged in the Middle East, likely in Ancient Mesopotamia, and soon spread to Egypt, Greece and the Orient. Among the contributions made by these ancient civilizations, the philosophical beliefs put forward by the Greeks pertaining to the origins and nature of the world were instrumental to the evolution of the so-called “golden art”. Although Plato and Aristotle did not address alchemy directly in their work, their discussions of prime matter, the cyclical mutability of the elements, and the subterranean formation of metals established enduring principles that continued to influence alchemical theory well into the early modern period.\footnote{Linden, \textit{Alchemy Reader}, 3.}

Typically associated with Aristotle, though articulated by preceding writers like Plato and Empedocles, the conception of the four elements as the basis of all earthly existence provided the framework and justification for alchemical transmutation.\footnote{Linden, \textit{Darke Hierogliphicks}, 17.} So influential were the Aristotelian elements that they not only informed the alchemist’s understanding of the composition of matter, but they lay the basis for the physician’s interpretation of disease.
(through the related four Galenic humors), and the physicist’s explanation of natural motion. According to Aristotle’s *Meteorology*, the four elements, comprising earth, water, air, and fire, were associated with their respective principles, dry, wet, cold, and hot, and each element “c[ame]- to -be from one another, and each of them exist[ed] potentially in each”. Further, the constant transformation that characterized all sublunar matter was accounted for by the changing composition of the four elements in a universal *prima materia*. Aristotle posited that the creation of metals, or “all things mined”, resulted from “the imprisonment of the vaporous exhalations in the earth”, which, when exposed to the earth’s dry heat, metamorphose gradually into metals, such as iron and copper. As the compressed and congealed state of evaporation beneath the earth’s surface, all metals, except for gold, were susceptible to the transformative power of fire, thus explaining the centrality of the furnace in alchemical laboratories as a means for removing the dross from base metals.

Though Aristotle espoused the idea of the interconvertibility of the elements, perhaps the most influential articulation of this principal came from Plato’s earlier account in the *Timaeus*. Acknowledging that unceasing transformation pervaded the lived world, Plato explained this

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45 Debus, *Man and Nature*, 23. The concept of the four humors, as derived from the Greeks and sustained by the Romans, Medieval Arabs and Renaissance Europeans, maintained that the human body was filled with four basic humors (blood, phlegm, and black and yellow bile), which exist in perfect proportion in a healthy individual. All diseases allegedly resulted from an excess or deficit of one of the four humors. The humors would wax and wane in the body depending on the person’s diet and activity. This medical theory was closely related to the Aristotelian elements, as earth was believed to exist predominately in black bile, fire in yellow bile, water in phlegm, and all four elements in blood.


48 Aristotle, *Meteorology*, 607-08. In Book 4 of the *Meteorology*, Aristotle further explains the transformation of natural substances by categorizing heat (fire) and cold (air) as the active elements and dry (earth) and wet (water) as passive. As such, fire and air acted upon earth and water by, “moistening, drying, hardening, and softening them” (Aristotle, *Meteorology*, 608).


reality in terms of the cyclical mutability of the four elements. Beginning with water, he outlined that,

By condensation…[water] becomes stone and earth, and this same element, when melted and dispersed, passes into vapor and air. Air again, when inflamed, becomes fire, and, again, fire, when condensed and extinguished, passes once more into the form of air, and once more, air, when collected and condensed, produces cloud and mist—and from these, when still more compressed, comes flowing water, and from water comes earth and stone once more.\(^{51}\)

It was maintained that these changes impressed themselves upon a fixed universal essence, comparable to Aristotle’s *prima materia*, but personified by Plato as “the mother and receptacle of [the] created and visible”, who “always receives all things”, yet “never departs at all from her own nature”.\(^{52}\)

The perpetual interconvertibility of the elements articulated by Plato and Aristotle is summarized poignantly in a diagram of the four elements, which was featured in Petrus Bonus’s *Pretiosa margarita novella (New Pearl of Great Price)* [Fig. 2].\(^{53}\) Though Bonus assembled his anthology of early alchemical texts in 1330, his work was only printed in Venice in 1546. The illustration in question, which was rendered by an unidentified artist, is not original to Bonus’s text, but is instead a later addition included by the publisher, Janus Lacinus Therapus, upon printing.\(^{54}\) In the diagram, the four elements are depicted in symbolic form and are each placed at the extremities of two intersecting axes. Fire (hot and dry), occupying the top of the vertical axis, is portrayed as an angel and is diametrically opposed to Water (cold and humid), which is

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\(^{52}\) Plato, *Timaeus*, 1177-78.

\(^{53}\) Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 17.

represented as a demonic dragon. Meanwhile, along the horizontal axis, Air (hot and humid), is embodied as a bird, and opposes Earth (cold and dry), which takes the form of a four-legged mammal. Through such a configuration, each element’s distinct properties are emphasized, while their unceasing mutability is conveyed through the lines that join each symbol to the other. The opposition of an angel with a demonic creature on the vertical axis and the overall cruciform configuration of the diagram carry recognizable religious meanings that not only emphasize the divine origins of the four elements, but also locate alchemy, an earthly undertaking, in proximity to godly creation. Indeed, a number of chemical vessels at the base of the diagram imply the potential of alchemy to faithfully emulate natural elemental transformation.

If the Platonic conception of the cyclical transformation of the elements suggested that the world was alive with spirit, the Neoplatonic writers of the third century made this principle a defining aspect of their cosmology. Neoplatonism is a modern term used to identify a branch of Platonic thought inaugurated in Egypt by Plotinus (204-70 C.E.) and his teacher, Ammonius Saccas (185-250 C.E.). Much of the sustained influence of the Neoplatonic school is owed to St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.), who not only forthrightly acknowledged the similarities between Christian doctrine and Platonic ideas, but made important attempts to emphasize their overlap. Coinciding with his Christian ideals, St. Augustine readily adopted the Neoplatonic conceptions

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55 The use of an angel to represent the element of fire may be inspired by the Book of Genesis. In Genesis 19, God’s will manifests itself through fire, which falls from the Heavens as a form of punishment inflicted on the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19: 24-25). Further, the Biblical story of creation in Genesis 1 seems to have informed the symbolic depiction of the elements, as God is said to have created birds to occupy the air, an array of monsters to inhabit the sea, and a variety of animals to live on the land (Genesis 1: 21-24).


of the immaterial and eternal nature of the human soul, the everlasting presence of universal forms in the mind of God, and the possibility to apprehend such ideas through human intellect.\textsuperscript{58}

Neoplatonic thought did not so much undermine or challenge Aristotelian philosophy as it questioned its overall adequacy to account for all earthly matter and natural phenomena.\textsuperscript{59} If Aristotle perceived matter as perfect and animate and the world as imperfect and subject to decay, the Neoplatonists tweaked this view by arguing that the earthly realm was alive with a universal spirit.\textsuperscript{60} This theory coincided with the account of creation articulated by Plato in the \textit{Timaeus}. In this text, the philosopher argued: “when [God] was framing the universe, [he] put intelligence in soul, and soul in body”, surmising that “the world came into being—a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence by the providence of God”.\textsuperscript{61} In other words, the Neoplatonists, faithful to the Platonic worldview, emphasized that all earthly matter was inextricably bound to the world of spirit, and that nature, therefore, offered a crucial entry point to uncovering the secrets of the divine.\textsuperscript{62}

If a universal soul permeated all earthly life, it followed that the world, in its overwhelming variety, nevertheless formed a harmonized and cohesive whole. The principle of the macrocosm/microcosm, derived from earlier Greek philosophical traditions, was foundational to this perceived reality.\textsuperscript{63} According to this cosmology, which continued to shape

\textsuperscript{58} Kristeller, \textit{Renaissance Thought}, 52, 55.  
\textsuperscript{59} Harris, “Brief Description,” 4.  
\textsuperscript{60} Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 110.  
\textsuperscript{61} Plato, \textit{Timaeus}, 1163.  
\textsuperscript{62} Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 41.  
\textsuperscript{63} Wallis, \textit{Neo-Platonism}, 50. The concept of the macrocosm/microcosm is not unique to the Neoplatonic school, but can be traced back to the work of Aristotle and Ptolemy, as well as to the Platonic and Pythagorean traditions.
European conceptions of the world throughout the sixteenth century, the universe represented the macrocosm and was governed by a unifying One. The Earth, forming the centre of the cosmos and conceived in the likeness of heaven, represented the microcosm of the universe, while man was understood as the entity in which both the physical and metaphysical worlds converged. Given that man was believed to be created in the image of the celestial sphere and was, therefore, intimately connected to the macrocosm, he occupied a privileged role. Specifically, early modern alchemists, and indeed all natural philosophers, were advantageously positioned to unlock the divine secrets of the world through the focussed investigation of nature, including its minerals, rocks, and plants.

The conception of the microcosmic man found greater substantiation in the Hermetic writings, another highly influential body of literature for the Renaissance revival of the occult. The Hermetic corpus was revered in early modern learned circles because of its perceived ancient Egyptian origins. This expansive body of literature, pertaining to astrology and alchemy, as well as to the secret virtues of plants and stones, and the magic derived from this knowledge, was long believed to have been composed by a wise ancient Egyptian philosopher, lawgiver and

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64 The survival of Neoplatonic worldviews into the early modern period is largely owed to Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who aimed to make more accessible through Latin translation the original texts belonging to the Platonic school, including not only the work of Plato, but also those by Plotinus, Proclus, Hermes Trismegistus, Porphyrius, and Jamblichus. Ficino aimed to organize this expansive body of knowledge into a cohesive system and to situate the ideas expressed in these texts in concord with Christian religious beliefs. On Ficino’s contributions to Western culture, Erwin Panofsky remarks, “never before had an attempt been made to fuse Christian theology, fully developed as it was, with great pagan philosophy, without impairing the individuality and completeness of either” [Erwin Panofsky, Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 130-31].


66 Pistorius, Plotinus Neoplatonism, 2.

king by the name of Hermes Trismegistus.\textsuperscript{68} However, as Isaac Casaubon demonstrated in 1614, the Hermetic texts likely were not written by a single, great primordial seer, but instead represent the work of a multitude of anonymous Greek authors from the second and third centuries C.E.\textsuperscript{69} Nevertheless, given its supposed primeval origin, Renaissance intellectual circles, including the fifteenth-century Medici court, embraced the Hermetic corpus as the pinnacle of ancient knowledge and considered it a window into the golden age of occultism. Upon the discovery of a nearly complete copy of the \textit{Corpus Hermeticum} in 1460, Cosimo de’Medici requested that Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) undertake the immediate translation of the work from its original Greek into Latin, and give it precedence over the translations of Plato’s \textit{Symposium} and \textit{Republic}.\textsuperscript{70} Ficino’s translation of the Hermetic texts, which was completed in three months, contributed greatly to the burgeoning Renaissance interest in natural magic, astrology and alchemy, bringing to the attention of learned men the occult arts that had not yet been the subject of serious consideration or study.\textsuperscript{71} Indeed, as Frances Yates makes clear, the translation of the Hermetic texts had undergone sixteen separate editions by the end of the sixteenth century. In light of this, Yates notes that “the bibliography of the editions, translations, collections, [and] commentaries on the Hermetic writings in the sixteenth century is long and complicated, testifying to the profound and enthusiastic interest aroused by Hermes Trismegistus throughout the Renaissance” (Yates, \textit{Giordano Bruno}, 17).
Hermetic texts “open[ed] a flood-gate through which an astonishing revival of magic poured all over Europe”.

The *Corpus Hermetica* had a tremendous effect on the practice and overall conception of alchemy in the early modern period, transforming it from a primarily metallurgical craft to an occult hermetic art. Perhaps the most significant Hermetic text for the early modern alchemist was the *Emerald Table of Hermes*, a cryptic work that was purported to reveal the secrets for preparing the Philosopher’s stone. The Hermetic worldview is best encapsulated by the oft-quoted axiom of the *Emerald Table*: “that which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above”. Analogous to the Platonic and Neoplatonic schools of thought, the Hermetic universe adhered to a macrocosmic/microcosmic relationship, in which the celestial and earthly dimensions resembled one another and all of creation was subject to the power of a single divine presence. This pervasive spiritual force was discussed in *The Divine Pymander*, the Hermetic account of creation, as being God, “the workman of all things, [who] when he worketh… useth Nature” and “maketh all things good like himself”. The Hermetic articulation of God’s omnipresence in creation only further reinforced the link between the heavenly and terrestrial realms. The attainment of divine knowledge and power was

73 Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 14.
74 Linden, *Alchemy Reader*, 11.
75 The English translation Hermes Trismegistus’s *The Emerald Table (Tabula Smaragdina)* referred to here was undertaken by Robert Steele and Dorothea Waley Singer and was based on the twelfth-century Latin translation of an Arabic version. The English translation was originally published in 1928 in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 21. It is featured fully in: Linden, *Alchemy Reader*, 28.
76 Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 20.
deemed an achievable feat through the study of nature. Natural philosophers were advised that: “if...you do not make yourself equal to God, you cannot apprehend God; for like is known by like...Think that for you too nothing is impossible; deem that you too are immortal, and that you are able to grasp all things in your thought”. The alchemist, operating within this system, was positioned to be capable of knowing all things, while his laboratory represented a microcosmic space in which nature’s most obscure secrets would be revealed. Within a Hermetic framework, alchemical activity was an empowering practice that offered the potential to enact divine abilities. As Yates elucidates further, “man [was] a little world reflecting the great world of the cosmos, [and] through his intellect... [he could] raise himself above the seven heavens”. Thus, the production of the elusive elixir in the Renaissance meant not only understanding the secret workings of the universe, but also symbolized the alchemist’s godlike mastery over it.

2.3 Medieval Arabs and Alchemical Theory and Transmission

If the ancient thinkers discussed thus far established the vital theoretical foundations for early modern alchemy, then the Medieval Arabs made important contributions to the practical dimension of this art. The most lasting developments in alchemy made by Arabian scholars occurred between the seventh and tenth centuries, a period during which Islamic political and military might was at its strongest. As a result of their conquest of notable Greek intellectual centres, most significantly Alexandria in 624 C.E., the Arab world acquired a vast body of Greek

79 Debus, Chemical Philosophy, 1:33.
80 Yates, Giordano Bruno, 51.
81 Linden, Darke Hierogliphicks, 14-15.
philosophical and scientific knowledge, which would springboard their own advances in alchemical learning.

The revised element theory put forward by Jābir ibn Hayyān in the eighth century was perhaps the most influential and enduring contribution to alchemy made by the Islamic world. Jābir, who was influenced by the Ancient Greek system of the four elements and their properties, devised his sulphur-mercury theory, in which he suggested that metals were produced below the earth’s surface through the union of two key principles, namely sulphur and mercury. These generative ingredients were not the common chemical elements, as their names might imply, but rather abstract theoretical notions. The alchemical marriage of mercury and sulphur, following Aristotelian logic, was defined by Jābir as the joining of opposites, since the former possessed the qualities of coldness, moistness, and femininity, while the latter was characterised as hot, dry and masculine. Further, sulphur was associated with the combustive quality of fire and mercury with the fusibility of metals. According to this system, the purity of a metal was contingent upon the kind of interaction occurring between these two principles upon its formation underground. Specifically, impure mixtures of mercury and sulphur would categorically yield baser metals, such as tin and iron, while a perfectly proportioned union of the two parent principles would produce the noble metals, silver and gold. Coinciding with his theory on the creation of metals, Jābir also explained the origins of the Philosopher’s stone in terms of the joining of mercury and sulphur of the utmost purity. The refinement of all base metals through alchemy was, therefore, deemed possible, as the elixir was envisaged as even purer in constitution than gold.

82 It should be noted that the majority of the texts once attributed to Jābir are now considered to be the product of an entire intellectual school rather than of a single writer (Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 15).
83 Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 15-16.
It is mainly due to the efforts made by Arab scholars, through their preservation and translation of Greek texts, that alchemical concepts were transmitted to the West in the Middle Ages. Robert of Ketton’s translation of the *Book of Morienus, or Liber de compositione alchimiae*, from its original Arabic into Latin is considered one of the first texts on alchemy to become known to Europeans. Ketton, who is best-known for contributing to the first Latin translation of the *Koran*, completed his translation of the *Book of Morienus* in 1144. Scholars can situate with confidence Ketton’s Latinized publication on alchemy as one of the earliest of its kind, as the translator concluded his treatise by stating, “I have translated this Book because, what alchemy is, and what its composition is, almost no one in our Latin world knows, finished February the 11th anno 1144”.

The *Book of Morienus*, which reads more like a narrative than a scientific treatise, is only one example of the many subsequently Latinized works on alchemy originating from the vibrant Islamic tradition. Indeed, western scholars eagerly digested, reworked and elaborated upon the alchemical notions expressed in the newly-translated works of Avicenna, Geber and Rhazes, to name but a few.

One Western thinker who was taken by alchemy during the Middle Ages was Albertus Magnus (circa 1200-1280), a revered German philosopher and theologian, whose writings paralleled in authority those of the ancients, even during his own lifetime. Albertus, who

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pursued a wide range of interests, made contributions to many fields during his illustrious career, such as psychology, metaphysics, meteorology, mineralogy, and zoology. Following his reception into the Dominican order in 1223, Albertus spent much of his adult life as a lector in Cologne. It is in this city that the German thinker published most of his work, nearly five hundred distinct titles, of which the majority pertained to philosophical, theological, and scientific themes. Perhaps the most significant contribution made by Albertus was the paraphrasing and commentary on the complete Aristotelian corpus, which not only expanded Aristotelian knowledge, but also made it more accessible. Although the German scholar devoted much of his time and attention to Aristotelian philosophy, and is credited with the Christian reception of Aristotle in Medieval Europe, Albertus actually espoused a worldview that was instead deeply embedded in Neoplatonism. Growing out of his Neoplatonic beliefs, Albertus considered alchemy as the art that best imitated nature and, therefore, maintained that it was worthy of close consideration. Upon inquiring into the properties and origins of metals, he relied on the Latin translations of some of the most authoritative writings on alchemy from the Medieval Arab world, including those by Hermes, Calisthenes, Democritus and Avicenna. Albertus was especially intrigued by the writings of the latter, citing his tract, On the Soul in the Art of Alchemy (De anima in arte alchemiae), and the so-called “Letter of Avicenna to King Hasen”, in which the Arabic philosopher put forward his innovative sulphur-mercury theory. Albertus found Avicenna’s theory on the genesis of metallic substances compelling and

89 Resnick, “Albert the Great,” 4-5.  
92 Kibre, “Albertus Magnus,” 188.
contrasted it with the preceding Aristotelian account, which explained the formation of metals as the subterranean combination of fatty moisture and earthy tincture. Coupled with his extensive observations from mining districts, Albertus studied this important textual corpus to determine the validity of the alchemical promise of metallic metamorphosis. Informed by his investigations, the medieval scholar concluded, “I have examined many alchemical books, and I have found them lacking in [evidence] and proof”.93 He also remarked that writers on alchemy merely relied on “authorities” and obscured “their meaning in metaphorical language, which has never been the custom in philosophy”.94 Despite the absence of concrete proof in earlier alchemical texts, Albertus never outright denied the possibility of alchemical transmutation.95 Indeed, later Renaissance natural philosophers, whose investigations were shaped by Albertus’s discourses on alchemy, nevertheless continued to be consumed by the quest for the Philosopher’s stone.

2.4 Element Theory Reinterpreted: Paracelsus, Medicine, and Alchemy in Sixteenth-Century Europe

Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, more often referred to as Paracelsus (1493-1541), was an independent-thinking German physician and natural philosopher who had a lifelong investment in alchemical medicine. Raised in the small town of Einsiedlen as the son of a physician, Paracelsus dabbled from a young age in chemistry and medicine, and garnered throughout his life an acute knowledge of metals and miners’ diseases, as witnessed at the Fugger mines.96 A physician by profession, Paracelsus, who was also well-versed in the Hermetic and Neoplatonic literature, openly subscribed to a macrocosmic/microcosmic

93 Magnus, Book Minerals, 172.
94 Magnus, Book Minerals, 172.
96 Debus, Chemical Philosophy, 1:46.
conception of the universe, and applied it to his approach for treating disease.\textsuperscript{97} Indeed, in the wake of the outbreak of new maladies, most alarmingly Syphilis, Paracelsus maintained that a novel approach to medical treatment was both appropriate and necessary.\textsuperscript{98} Thus, the German physician broke with the Aristotelian and Galenic models in favor of a new medicine based in a chemical understanding of the universe.\textsuperscript{99} Paracelsus’s radical reconceptualization of disease is evidence of the lasting impact of the discussed ancient sources, and of an intensified interest in alchemical transformation that colored the sixteenth century.

The traditional Galenic conception of human health hinged on maintaining an internal balance between the four bodily humors; namely, blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile.\textsuperscript{100} In contrast, the Paracelsian model, which was heavily influenced by the macrocosm/microcosm worldview, argued that disease was caused by external factors introduced to the body through transmitting agents such as food, drink, or air. Disease could, therefore, be eradicated by identifying its macrocosmic source and by isolating the microcosmic analogy in man, a strategy for treatment that stemmed from the belief of “like cures like”.\textsuperscript{101} As Allen Debus explains, “disease was no longer considered an imbalance of fluids”, as the Galenic conception of human ailments suggested, but “was local in nature and directly related to bodily malfunctions which were essentially chemical in nature”.\textsuperscript{102}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 116.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Dear, \textit{Revolutionizing}, 50.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Dear, \textit{Revolutionizing}, 50; Debus, \textit{Man and Nature}, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Debus, \textit{Chemistry, Alchemy}, 188.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Debus, \textit{Chemical Philosophy}, 1:59.
\end{itemize}
The Paracelsian system relied on alchemy as a means for producing medicinal cures. Through distillation and the transformative power of fire, the followers of Paracelsus sought to uncover the “quintessence”, or pure virtue, of natural substances, in order to preserve and prolong human life. Put differently, for the physician-alchemist, the ultimate stage of the alchemical process was the production of the Philosopher’s stone, defined by Paracelsus as, “a most excellent matter, wherewith all Minerall and Humane bodies are tinged and are changed into a better and more noble essence and into the highest perfection and purity”. However, before this transformative substance could be produced, several preceding chemical changes had to take place.

Paracelsus’s so-called “degrees of transmutation” included, first, calcination, followed by sublimation, solution, putrefaction, distillation, coagulation, and culminating finally with tincture. The potential for mutation in natural substances was rationalized by Paracelsus through an alternative element theory. Though he outright denounced the four Galenic humours, Paracelsus never rejected the related four Aristotelian elements, but rather supplemented them with his own three principles. Building upon the Medieval Arab generative principles of sulphur (flammability) and mercury (fusibility), Paracelsus added salt (fixity).

103 Debus, Chemistry, Alchemy, 186.
104 Debus, Chemical Philosophy, 1:21.
105 Paracelsus’s discussion of the chemical production of the Philosopher’s stone was featured in his treatise, Of the Nature of Things, which first appeared in print around 1570, three decades following his death. The English translation of his text is taken from Michael Sendivogius, A New Light of Alchymie: Taken Out of the Fountain of Nature, and Manuall Experience; To Which is Added a Treatise of Sulphur… Also Nine Books of the Nature of Things, Written by Paracelsus, trans. J.F. M.D. (London, UK: Richard Cotes, 1650), 69.
107 For a detailed explanation of what each chemical stage entailed, see: Sendivogius, New Light …Nine Books Nature of Things, 62-70.
108 Dear, Revolutionizing, 51.
109 Debus, Chemical Philosophy, 1:57.
sulphur, and salt, were considered in the Paracelsian model as the basic components of all creation. Because Paracelsus was ambiguous and never made clear the link of his symbolic *tri prima* to the widely-accepted Aristotelian elements, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scholars were in a position to adopt and apply the element theory they deemed most suitable.  

Consequently, natural philosophers of the early modern period either borrowed ideas from ancient philosophers to bolster their conceptions of natural transformation, or departed from classical ideas in favor of an alternative reconceptualization of nature.

### 2.5 Conclusion

Frances Yates, in her influential book, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, remarked that “the great forward movements of the Renaissance all derive[d] their vigour, their emotional impulse, from looking backwards…Man’s history was not an evolution from primitive animal origins through ever growing complexity and progress…[rather] progress was [the] revival, rebirth, [or] renaissance of antiquity”. In an attempt to establish the multifarious aims, beliefs and practices of early modern alchemy, this chapter has, in some ways, mirrored the backward-looking ethos that so defined the Renaissance. The complexity of alchemy can only be fully grasped by considering the rich development of element theory, beginning with Plato and Aristotle, and culminating with Paracelsus, as well the Neoplatonic and Hermetic worldviews that so informed the early modern sense of self. By outlining the manifold dimensions of early

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111 Through the efforts of the alchemist and nobleman, Bavor Rodovský mladší Hustiřan (1526-1592), the work of Paracelsus was translated for the first time into Czech in 1573, thereby making more accessible his teachings to the people of Bohemia (Nummendal, *Alchemy and Authority*, 22-23). Paracelsian beliefs were especially prevalent at Rudolf II’s court. Oswald Croll, Michael Maier, Heinrich Khunrath, and Robert Fludd were among the emperor’s entourage of physicians who not only engaged in Paracelsian alchemy, but published prolifically on this matter [Penelope Gouk, “Natural Philosophy and Natural Magic,” in *Rudolf II and Prague; The Court and the City*, eds. Fučíková, et al. (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 233].

modern alchemy, it is also hoped that a suitable preface has been provided for discussing its appeal to preeminent patrons, such as the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II, and his successor, Rudolf II.
Chapter 3
Alchemy in the Holy Roman Empire and at the Late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-
Century Habsburg Courts

Under the reign of Leopold I (1658-1705), Wenceslas Seiler, the famed alchemist and Augustinian monk, achieved the transmutation of a large silver medallion into gold.¹ The alchemical medallion measured over twelve inches in diameter and was produced on the feast day of Saint Leopold in 1677. On the face of the medallion, Seiler cast the portrait busts of the forty-one Habsburg emperors to have ruled throughout history, beginning with Pharamend, the legendary early king of the Franks, and culminating with Leopold I, featured prominently at the center of the composition [Fig.3].²

As evidence of successful alchemical practice occurring under the crown, Seiler’s commemorative medallion not only carries meanings regarding Habsburg longevity and legacy, but simultaneously locates alchemy at the core of such weighty discourses. The synonymy of Habsburg pre-eminence with alchemy was not, however, only established in the late seventeenth century. Rather, the connection between the House of Habsburg and the alchemical arts was an historic one that was forged by Leopold’s predecessors, Maximilian II (reigned 1564-76) and his

² The opposite side of the medallion features a Latin inscription documenting the date of the alchemical transformation, the name of the alchemist, and a series of remarks that extolled the Holy Roman Emperor, Leopold I. The Latin inscription is as follows: Sacratissimo, Potentissimo et invictissimo, Romanorum imperatori, Leopoldo I. Arcanorum naturæ scrutatori curiosmo, Genuinum hoc veræ ac perfectæ, Metamorphoseos metallicæ specimen pro exiguó anniversarii diei nominalis mnemosyno cum omnigenæ prosperitatis voto humillima veneratione offert et dicat, Joannes Wenzeslaus de Reinburg numini majestatique eius devotissimu anno Christi MDCLXXVII. die festo S. Leopoldi ognomine pii olim marchionis Austriæ nunc autem patroni augustissimæ Domus austriacæ, Benignissimi.
successor Rudolf II (reigned 1576-1612). Through the intellectual pursuits of the aforementioned, particularly those of Emperor Rudolf II, by the late sixteenth century, central Europe had become the most influential and vibrant hub for occultist studies of its time. The following will aim to characterize the nature of alchemical practice occurring in the Habsburg territories at large, and at the imperial court in particular, as well as the unique intellectual climate that allowed for alchemy to flourish in late sixteenth-century Prague in an unprecedented way.

3.1 Alchemy in the late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Holy Roman Empire

There is a remarkable number of extant proposals, contracts, supply orders, and laboratory reports connected with alchemists’ activities across the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Holy Roman Empire. These documents, in addition to countless early modern vernacular alchemical texts that feature didactic indexes and explanatory comments, attest to a population’s widespread engagement in alchemy. Though success in alchemy continued to be understood as reserved for a select few, the so-called “golden art” nevertheless roused the interest of all echelons of society, from princes and pastors to minor craftspeople, both male and female.

With the noted rise in aspiring alchemical adepts came the need to establish suitable spaces of practice. In the cities, courts and cloisters of central Europe, those with considerable means erected buildings designated specifically for their needs, while individuals of a more humble background improvised and converted kitchens, churches, work spaces, and apothecary

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shops into makeshift alchemical labs. Depending on a practitioner’s socio-economic status, alchemical laboratories varied accordingly in sophistication. An alchemist’s workspace could be equipped with up to one hundred different ceramic vessels for testing metals in fire, various balances to measure ingredients, and a range of chemical substances, including: over one hundred pounds of antimony for separating silver and gold, approximately two hundred pounds of white and yellow arsenic, prized for its ability to “whiten” copper, as well as lead, salts, borax, vitriol, and lapis haematitis (iron oxide). Moreover, though these items could vary in quantity and quality, a standard apparatus belonging to every alchemical laboratory would have been the fireplace or portable furnace, as fire was crucial for purification and for understanding the composition of base metals.

The most elaborate of laboratories to emerge in central Europe during the early modern period were those established by princely patrons. For instance, the affluent sixteenth-century dukes of Saxony, Bavaria, Bohemia, Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel and Württemberg each supported alchemical experiments on a considerable scale, at times overseeing the division of labor among their many alchemists and actively participating in their own experiments. However, few princely patrons were as consumed by the alchemical promise as were the Holy Roman Emperors, Maximilian II and Rudolf II.

3.2 The Intellectual Landscape of Maximillian II’s Viennese Court

5 Nummendal, Alchemy and Authority, 121.
6 Nummendal, Alchemy and Authority, 125.
7 Nummendal, Alchemy and Authority, 124; Debus, Chemical Philosophy, 1:80.
In discourses pertaining to the Habsburg involvement in early modern alchemy, Maximilian’s presence is typically overshadowed by the eccentric behavior of his successor, Rudolf II. Indeed, the latter largely established the Habsburg court as an unparalleled intellectual centre for the study of the occult. This is not to say, however, that investigations into natural magic were non-existent at the Viennese court during Maximillian’s reign—rather, it was quite the opposite. The Viennese court of the mid-sixteenth century is considered a “late Humanist” one, as both the revival of classical studies and the engagement in all forms of scientific inquiry were encouraged.9 The Habsburg court under Maximillian earned the reputation of a highly learned environment, with an entourage whose interests ranged from the rediscovery of classical thought to the new observation and comparative study of nature.10 It is unsurprising then that Justus Lipsius’s (1547-1606) critical volume on Tacitus, published in 1574, was not only dedicated to Maximillian, but included laudatory comments about the remarkable intellectualism of his court, observing that: “this unique Viennese court of yours has more learned men than any other kingdom”.11

Maximillian’s court boasted a number of faithful servants who were noteworthy for their advances in metallurgy, alchemy, philology, and the emperor’s favoured field of study, botany. For instance, under Maximillians’s patronage, the Sienese physician, Pierandrea Matthioli (1500/01-1577), cultivated a number of exotic plants on the imperial grounds and published a

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11 Lipsius’s remarks about Maximillian’s court culture are taken from: Schütz, “Art and Culture,” 75. The original quote is from Book I of Justus Lipsius’s Epistolae from 1574.
revised version of the *Commentarii materia medica* in 1563, his commentary on the late antique herbal of Dioscorides. Matthioli’s advances in the classification of natural specimens and their medicinal properties complemented the efforts of his peers at court, such as Carolus Clusius (1526-1609) and Paul Fabritius (1529-1589), both of whom embarked on the first ventures into the Austrian Alps to study its particular plant life.

The investigations of botanical life undertaken by court botanists carried a religious undercurrent that was similar to the philosophy that propelled alchemical experiments. Specifically, stemming from an enduring medieval belief system, both alchemists and botanists maintained that nature bore the marks of an omnipotent creator. Thomas Tymme, an English Paracelsian, expressed the connection between God and nature poignantly in 1605 when he wrote, “[there] are so many sundry natures and creatures in the world, [there] are so many interpreters to teach us, that God is the efficient cause of them, and that he is manifested in

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12 Matthioli published the first version of the *Commentarii materia medica* in Venice in 1554 and put forward a revised version of the work soon after in 1558. The version from 1563 was published in Prague while he was in service of the Habsburg court (the Italian physician had been at the imperial court as of 1554 under Ferdinand I). Matthioli’s *Commentarii* from 1563 included, among other revisions, much larger plant illustrations than in previous editions. Overall, Matthioli’s book, in all of its editions, was an authoritative source throughout the early modern period and underwent various translations (Italian, German and Latin). As Sachiko Kusukawa explains, “Matthioli boasted that he had sold thirty-two thousand copies of his commentary, and indeed its frequent republication must have had the effect of flooding the market and making his book so ubiquitous that it became a work one could readily refer to.” [Sachiko Kusukawa, *Picturing the Book of Nature; Image, Text, and Argument in Sixteenth-Century Human Anatomy and Medical Botany* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 168-70].

13 Evans, “Imperial Court,” 40. Such strides in the field of botany found expression in Maximillian’s many gardens, which were significant for their variety and size. For example, from fruit-bearing trees alone, Maximillian’s harvests included: three kinds of cherries (French, red, black), apricots, figs, blue damscènes, two kinds of pears, three types of plums, and four varieties of peaches (Schütz “Art and Culture,” 77). Further, the many animals of varying degrees of exoticism that lived on the palace grounds complemented the variety of botanical life in Maximillian’s gardens. Such animals included: leopards, camels, a tiger, an ostrich, bears and beavers (Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 155).
them”. Thus, the study of all aspects of the natural world, including its vegetation (botany) and metals (alchemy), meant the simultaneous apprehension of divine knowledge.

While studies in natural history were predominant at Maximillian’s court, developments were also made in numerous other fields, as court humanists were known to pursue a wide range of interests at once. Although it is admittedly difficult to reconstruct the entire scope of a single scholar’s contributions at court, it is likely that, in addition to botany, the emperor encouraged the study of mysticism, as evidenced by his relationship with the famed English occultist, John Dee (1527-1608/09).

John Dee travelled across Europe throughout his lifetime and wrote prolifically on his attempts to access the divine archetypal knowledge of Adam through meditation and his supposed communications with angels. By the second half of the sixteenth century, he had secured for himself a favorable reputation as a revered scientist, astrologist and sorcerer. His perceived magical abilities enthralled even the most powerful of European rulers, most notably Queen Elizabeth I, who, by 1580, had appointed Dee as her informal adviser and astrologer. If

15 Evans, “Imperial Court,” 40. According to the influential macrocosmic/microcosmic system of correspondences, the study of nature, including its minerals, vegetation, animals and human life, was ultimately connected to the larger cosmos. Thus, in the sixteenth century, the divides between scientific fields were undefined and fluid, unlike in a modern context [R.J.W. Evans, Rudolf II and his World; A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973), 245]. We know, for example, that Tadeáš Hájek contributed to mathematical, botanical and medical discourses throughout his time serving the Habsburg court [Nicolette Mout, “The Court of Rudolf II and Humanist Culture,” in Rudolf II and Prague; The Court and the City, eds. Eliška Fučíková, et al. (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 221].
17 Gerald Suster, ed., John Dee; Essential Readings (Berkley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2003), 30. Queen Elizabeth I placed so much confidence in Dee, that she sought his astrological guidance prior to choosing her coronation date (January 1559) (Fenton, Diaries John Dee, vii). John Dee recorded his
Dee could consider Queen Elizabeth among his most dedicated supporters, he also established ties with notable Habsburg emperors. The English mystic not only dedicated his most celebrated work, the *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564), to Emperor Maximillian II, but presented it to him in Bressel (Bratislava) upon its completion in the autumn of 1564.\(^{18}\) We can assume that both the author and his work were well-received by Maximillian, as Dee continued to maintain contact with the House of Habsburg even after the emperor’s demise. In fact, Dee recounts in his diaries the nature of his relationship with Maximillian’s successor, Rudolph II, and records his numerous meetings with the emperor and his court ambassadors regarding astrology, horoscopes, Hermetic philosophy, and the mysteries of spirituality.\(^{19}\) We know that Rudolf was also familiar with the *Monas Hieroglyphica*, as he thanked Dee for his commendable book, but regretted that “it was too hard for his...capacity”.\(^{20}\)

Mirroring Rudolf’s inability to grasp the concepts in Dee’s text, modern scholars, such as Frances Yates, have expressed the opinion that the author’s esoteric work “leaves the reader thoroughly bewildered”, as it is too far removed from its original context.\(^{21}\) Nevertheless, the


\(^{19}\) Bolton, *Follies of Science*, 32-33. For further insight into John Dee’s relationship with Rudolf II and the Habsburg entourage from the perspective of the English occultist, see: Fenton, *Diaries John Dee*, 138-158.

\(^{20}\) Fenton, *Diaries John Dee*, 142. It should be noted that Dee eventually fell out of favor at the Habsburg court and was recognized as both a nuisance and a fraud. Under the strict orders of Rudolf II, the English mystic, his family, and his entire circle were forced to leave Prague and were banished from the kingdoms, dukedoms, and lands of the Holy Roman Empire (Fenton, *Diaries John Dee*, 196).

*Monas Hierogliphica*, which is presented as a series of theorems and diagrams, features interesting alchemical, astrological and geometric meanings. The overarching principle put forward by the author is that of the *Monas*, a universal geometric symbol devised to encompass all earthly and celestial existence, thereby condensing “All in One” [Fig.4]. By not only studying this loaded glyph, but also meditating upon it deeply, the author maintained that the symbol would eventually be internalised and would impress itself upon an individual’s psyche. Dee considered the *Monas* as mediatory in nature and, therefore, capable of engendering the spiritual regeneration so sought after by philosophers of the occult. Dee’s text conveyed knowledge of considerable import for alchemists at the time, as the ultimate goal of the true adept was not merely the purification of base metals, but the greater transformation of the inner self as well.

If Emperor Maximillian’s interest in the occult can be read through his relationships with thinkers such as Dee, his spiritual leanings and philosophical worldviews materialize in Wenzel Jamnitzer’s mechanical fountain. Although the fountain was commissioned by the emperor, it was only completed in 1578 (following Maximillian’s demise), when it was subsequently delivered to Rudolf’s imperial court in Prague instead. Though most of its parts, composed of silver and other metals, were melted down in 1747 to finance other Habsburg endeavors, we know of the fountain’s existence and general appearance through a description composed by a

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student from Altdorf in 1640. Jamnitzer’s feat of engineering, which was configured in the shape of the imperial hoop crown measuring approximately five feet in width and ten feet in height, carried meanings of Habsburg dynastic pre-eminence and also reflected Maximillian’s interests in uncovering the great mysteries of the universe. The fountain consisted of four columns and arches that were adorned with a number of references to the contemporary state and its hierarchic structures, while its lower register was inhabited by allegorical depictions of philosophical notions. With the aim of exploring Maximillian’s predilection for the occult, the bottom half of Jamnitzer’s fountain is of particular interest.

At the supportive base of the fountain, Jamnitzer included the four seasons, as personified by the gilt-bronze figures of Flora (spring), Ceres (summer), Bacchus (fall), and Vulcan (winter) [Fig.5]. Located above the four seasons and dispersed throughout the body of the fountain, the goldsmith depicted the four elements in a rich iconographical program. Cibele (earth) was situated alongside the four major European rivers: the Danube, the Rhine, the Tiber, and the Elbe, and Neptune (water) was fittingly placed amid a variety of aquatic animals. Meanwhile, Mercury (air) shared the same space as the four winds and the four angels, and finally, fire was

25 We also know of the fountain’s existence from the remaining gilt-bronze statues of the four seasons, which once formed the supporting base of the fountain. Due to their material composition, Jamnitzer’s four seasons were not suitable to be melted down and can be seen today in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum as part of the Kunstkammer, a collection of Habsburg treasures assembled from the Middle Ages to the Baroque period [Sabine Haag and Franz Kirchweger, eds., The Kunstkammer; Treasures of the Habsburgs (Vienna: GRASL Fairprint, 2012), 144].

26 Specifically, the fountain’s arches bore a series of references to the “dignitaries of the realm”. For example, the seven elector princes were represented in the fountain through their respective coats-of-arms. Next, the overall hierarchy of the Empire was depicted. In the first row, Jamnitzer included references to the four dukes, followed by the four musgraves, the four burgraves, the four landgraves, four counts, four knights, four cities, four villages, and finally four peasants in the lowest tier. The inclusion of the seasons and elements at the fountain’s base suggested a broader cosmic unity among the earthly and celestial realms (Alfons, “Museum as Image,” 81).

portrayed closest to Jupiter. Jupiter was featured prominently and presided over the entire structure, enthroned upon an eagle, a symbol of the House of Habsburg.\textsuperscript{28}

Taken as a whole, Jamnitzer’s decorative elements make up an artistic program rife with cosmic meanings meant to legitimize Habsburg authority.\textsuperscript{29} The depicted seasons and elements, the very basis of all earthly change and existence, are configured under the dominion of Jupiter and the Habsburg eagle.\textsuperscript{30} Organized in this way, all of existence seems to fall under the harmonizing command of the seemingly almighty Habsburg ruler. Besides celebrating the Habsburg dynasty as a powerful and noble one, the harmonious configuration of Jamnitzer’s earthly and celestial compositional elements also alludes to the macrocosm/microcosm worldview, which emphasizes an underlying cosmological unity. The fountain’s decorative

\textsuperscript{28} The iconography in Jamnitzer’s fountain finds a parallel in the imagery adorning Benvenuto Cellini’s famous \textit{Saliera} (1540-43) [Fig. 6]. Although Cardinal Ippolito d’Este, the original patron of the piece, rejected the artist’s design as unfeasible, Cellini found a receptive patron in King Francis I of France. From Francis I’s collection, the \textit{Saliera} came into the possession of the House of Habsburg in 1570, when King Charles IX gifted it to Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol. The \textit{Saliera} features two reclining gold figures, the male Neptune (water) and the female Tellus (earth), who preside over Cellini’s design. Accompanying Neptune is a small ship meant to house salt, the white gold of the sea, while a temple meant to hold pepper, the black gold of the earth, is fittingly placed alongside Tellus. Like Jamnitzer’s fountain, Cellini’s work is riddled with cosmic meanings, as allegorical depictions of the four winds, the four times of day, and various land and aquatic creatures decorate its surface. The surviving figures of the four seasons that once comprised Jamnitzer’s fountain and Cellini’s salt shaker are presently exhibited in the \textit{Kunstkammer} wing of Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum [Sabine Haag and Franz Kirchweger, eds., \textit{Treasures of the Habsburgs: The Kunstkammer at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna} (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 124, 130.

\textsuperscript{29} Alfons, “Museum as Image,” 72.

\textsuperscript{30} The conflation between Jupiter and the Holy Roman Emperor in Jamnitzer’s fountain was not anomalous, but was characteristic of early modern Habsburg iconography. For instance, Jupiter was featured as the focal point of the decorative program that occupied the walls of the \textit{Salette}, the connective space between Rudolf II’s private quarters and his encyclopaedic \textit{Kunstkammer}. Similar to Jamnitzer’s composition, the ceiling and walls of this transitional room were adorned with personifications of the twelve months and elements, while Jupiter was positioned to preside over the entire scene. As a central component of Rudolf’s personal iconography, the imperial eagle of Jupiter, featured prominently in the room, would have signified the emperor’s dominion over not only his microcosmic collection, but over the universe at large [Andrea S. Bubenik, “Art, Astrology, and Astronomy at the Imperial Court of Rudolf II (1576-1612)” (master’s thesis, Queen’s University, 2000), 68-9].
program is a compelling testament to Maximillian’s belief in the interconnectedness of the universe. Such a philosophy not only shaped Jamnitzer’s compositional choices, but would have pervaded all intellectual endeavors at Maximillian II’s court.

### 3.3 “The New Hermes Trismegistus”: Rudolf II, Alchemy, and the Prague Court

Though we can only infer that Maximillian espoused views that were central to alchemical practice, Rudolf II’s engagement and interest in the “medieval art” is undeniable. By securing the title of Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf simultaneously inherited the vibrant Neoplatonic court established under his father, including its exceptionally talented thinkers, such as the abovementioned Carolus Clusius and Pierandrea Matthioli. It is this ever-growing intellectual circle that spurred the eventual transformation of Rudolf’s court into a late humanist one par excellence. Hugh Trevor-Roper remarks that the Rudolfine period, spanning from Rudolf’s ascension to the throne in 1576 to his tumultuous deposition in 1612, was “an age in itself… [with] its own philosophy, its own inner springs”. Indeed, under the rule of Rudolf II, the Habsburg court became an unsurpassed centre for the study of the natural world, particularly from a mystical perspective, as its artists and scientists alike were encouraged to transcend the idiosyncrasies of the lived world through their undertakings and to apprehend a universal and unwavering oneness. If natural magic shaped numerous pursuits at Maximillian’s court, it shone through virtually every aspect of the Rudolfine court with an unprecedented vitality.

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31 Mout, “Court of Rudolf II,” 221.
33 Peter Marshall, *Theatre of the World; Alchemy, Astrology and Magic in Renaissance Prague* (London, UK: Harvill Secker, 2006), 75. The magical occult pervaded virtually every intellectual aspect of the early modern Habsburg court, including pursuits in astrology. For further insight into how astrological tenets, such as those espoused by Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler, materialize in the work of Habsburg court...
The intellectual particularities of the Rudolfine court are due in part to its very location. As early as 1577, arrangements were being made for the official transfer of the royal court from Vienna to Prague. By 1583, Rudolf had taken up permanent residence in the repurposed Hradčany citadel and had brought along with him all imperial administrative bodies and his impressive circle of scholars. Prague, with its well-established culture of religious diversity and the advanced Humanist studies, proved to be an ideal location for the court, as such an environment complemented the emperor’s Neoplatonic worldview and interests in natural magic. In a period of considerable religious turmoil, with militant Calvinists entering the empire from the west and unwavering Counter-Reformation Jesuits penetrating from the south, Rudolf’s Prague was remarkable for its steadfast religious indifference. Though recognized officially as Catholic, the House of Habsburg of the late sixteenth century adopted an ambiguous stance towards religion. Consequently, natural philosophers, alchemists, astronomers and charlatans of all sorts gathered in Prague, as their intellectual pursuits were not only incompatible with the dominant religious dogma of their native lands, but made them susceptible to accusations of devilry or ex-communication. Notable individuals, such as the astronomers

artists, including those by Bartholomäus Spranger for Rudolf II, see: Andrea S. Bubenik, “Art, Astrology, and Astronomy at the Imperial Court of Rudolf II (1576-1612)” (master’s thesis, Queen’s University, 2000).
35 Mout, “Court of Rudolf II,” 222.
36 Trevor-Roper, Princes and Artists, 98.
37 Szönyi, “Scientific and Magical,” 223. For detailed information on Rudolf’s tolerant stance regarding religion and the nature of the many religious factions dispersed throughout his empire, see: Szönyi, “Scientific and Magical,” 223-230; Ivana Čornejová, “The Religious Situation in Rudolfine Prague,” in Rudolf II and Prague; The Court and the City, eds. Eliška Fučíková, et al. (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 310-322. Moreover, it should be noted that even though Rudolf’s ambiguous position on religion was celebrated during his early reign, it contributed to his gradual downfall, as his peers eventually viewed him as ineffective ruler.
38 Trevor-Roper, Princes and Artists, 100.
Tycho Brahé (Danish) and Johannes Keppler (German), the natural philosophers John Dee (English) and Giordano Bruno (Italian), the alchemists Michael Sendivogius (Polish) and Oswold Croll (Saxon), and many other likeminded intellectuals, perceived Prague as a refuge from the threat of Catholic persecution and made the imperial city their home at one point or another. Once settled in Prague, they found a receptive patron and colleague in the Holy Roman Emperor.\(^3^9\) As one late sixteenth-century Venetian writer observed: the emperor “delight[ed] in hearing secrets about things both natural and artificial”, and “whoever [was] able to deal in such matters [would] always find the ear of the Emperor ready”, irrespective of their religious convictions.\(^4^0\) Consequently, throughout the late sixteenth century, Rudolf’s court developed into one consisting of multicultural, multinational, and poly-confessional individuals, who possessed a diverse range of abilities. It is this harmonious heterogeneity that made the court at Prague an incomparable environment for the unfettered exchange of unorthodox ideas.

Rudolfine Prague was considered an “unusually protected space within which conventional doctrinal, political and intellectual boundaries could be ignored”.\(^4^1\) As such, the imperial city and court provided the ideal environment for the development of alchemy. By the late sixteenth century, Prague had grown into a bastion for established and aspiring alchemists alike, to the extent that a specific part of the city grew into the designated living quarters for all practitioners of the occult arts.\(^4^2\) The narrow street neighboring St. George’s Church, fittingly dubbed “Gold Alley”, was where alchemists of varying degrees of credibility and success, such

\(^{4^0}\) Evans, *Rudolf II World*, 196.
\(^{4^1}\) Gouk, “Natural Philosophy,” 235.
as Daniel Prandtner, Doctor Leonhard Vychperger von Erbach, and Christopher von Hirschberg, called home. In addition to private residences, Gold Alley was dotted with a number of artistic workshops operated by gold- and silversmiths, gem cutters, wood-carvers, painters and sculptors, all of whom benefitted from the active market of the Rudolfine court.\textsuperscript{43}

The emergence of Prague’s Gold Alley is but one by-product of the emperor’s well-known passion for alchemy. Nicknamed the “Hermes Trismegistus of the Holy Roman Empire”, Rudolf dedicated much of his time, attention and money to the discovery of the Philosopher’s stone.\textsuperscript{44} Although success in alchemy entailed great material gains, which might have appealed to the heavily-indebted House of Habsburg, Rudolf II’s preoccupation with the so-called golden art was driven primarily by its profound spiritual undercurrent.\textsuperscript{45} Alchemy carried intriguing metaphysical meanings, as alchemical transformation not only demonstrated the existence of a universal harmonizing force, but also enabled the adept to harness this power in order to transform the world at large.\textsuperscript{46} Put differently, the process of purifying metals in an alchemical laboratory suggested simultaneously the potential to usher in the redemption of all humankind. The universe, once subjected to the transformative power of the alchemical elixir, was envisaged as a “Golden Age”, in which harmony would pervade all components of the cosmos, and the once lost archetypal knowledge of Adam would at last be recovered. The notion of cosmological unity that was so essential to alchemical practice would have resonated with Rudolf, who ruled

\textsuperscript{43} In continuum with his predecessors, Rudolf was an avid collector of both natural and artificial objects. The development of his legendary \textit{Kunstkammer} and the nature of some of its contents will be discussed further in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{44} Antonovich, \textit{L’art à la cour de Rodolphe}, 1.
\textsuperscript{45} Pamela Smith, “Alchemy as Language”, 4, 12; Mout, “Court of Rudolf II,” 222. For information regarding the practical uses for alchemy in central Europe, particularly for generating greater profits in mining, see: Nummendal, “Practical Alchemy,” 210-11.
\textsuperscript{46} Smith, \textit{Business of Alchemy}, 198.
over an empire fractured by religious difference and the looming threat of Turkish invasion. The alchemical promise of realizing a divine mastery over the universe was, therefore, a comforting one, as it suggested the possibility, however symbolic, to regulate complicated forces that were otherwise beyond control.47

It is, therefore, unsurprising that Rudolf patronized and practiced alchemy fervently. An assured way of earning not only the emperor’s esteem, but also the honorary titles and riches that came with it, was to have a reputed record of achievement in alchemy.48 The promise of fame and fortune drew as many charlatans to Prague as it did more serious practitioners of the occult. Michael Sendivogius was among those of a revered reputation in alchemical circles who sought the trust and patronage of Rudolf II. Though much of the Polish adept’s life remains shrouded in uncertainty, Sendivogius is known to have performed a successful alchemical transmutation in 1604 alongside Rudolf II in his private chambers.49

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47 Astrology was also popular at Rudolf’s court as a way of forecasting one’s fate and for determining a course of action. However, as Frances Yates explains, alchemy “differ[ed] profoundly from astrology which [was] not necessarily magic at all but a mathematical science based on the belief that human destiny [was] irrevocably governed by the stars” (Yates, Giordano Bruno, 60). If within an astrological framework the fate of an individual was merely subject to the stars, alchemy signified a mastery over the universe and, therefore, the ability to actively determine one’s trajectory in life. Herein lay the great appeal of the “golden art” to early modern rulers, such as Rudolf II.


49 Following his successful transmutation for Rudolf II, Sendivogius managed to secure employment as an alchemist at other princely courts in Bohemia, only to experience waves of alchemical triumph and wretched poverty up until his demise in 1636/46 (Linden, Darke Hierogliphicks, 134). Though Sendivogius’s metallic metamorphosis at Rudolf’s court is recorded as an authentic one, many other supposed alchemical adepts relied heavily on deceptive tactics to secure employment. Such ploys included the use of a double-bottomed crucible with a false bottom made primarily of wax. When exposed to fire, the wax bottom would melt and reveal the gold-fillings that were concealed by the alchemist between the two bases. Others used hollow rods that were filled with gold powder and capped with wax on the ends. When the rods were used to stir molten substances, the wax would melt and the gold would be released. For further descriptions of the various kinds of ruses used by fraudulent alchemists, see: Bolton, Follies of Science, 28-29.
The nineteenth-century painting, *Rudolf II in the Laboratory of His Alchemist* (1881), by Wenzel von Brozik, is not only a testament to Rudolf’s lasting reputation as a great patron of alchemy, but also portrays how an alchemist in late sixteenth-century Prague might have appealed to the emperor for his favor and support [Fig.7]. Brozik situates the alchemist, who is believed to be Sendivogius, in a ramshackle residence. The adept stands hunched with his back to a furnace as he engages the emperor with his gaze. Seemingly moments away from performing an alchemical demonstration, he holds a pair of tongs and an unidentified substance in his hand. Meanwhile, Rudolf discerns him from his chair, as his entourage of learned men gather around him, either to speak to one another or to consider carefully the situation at hand in silence. In an instance such as this, during which an alchemist’s abilities were the subject of a powerful patron’s intense scrutiny, failure to successfully impart the procedure for producing the Philosopher’s stone could have easily resulted in an alchemist’s fall from grace and even imprisonment.50

Though Rudolf primarily patronized alchemical projects, this is not to say that he did not try his own hand at transmutation. With the aid and council of the Bohemian Baron, William von Rosenberg, a fellow supporter of the occult arts, Rudolf assembled his own capable team of alchemists.51 For instance, Tadeáš Hájek, a physician and astronomer who also pursued alchemical interests at Rudolf’s court, was eventually entrusted with the evaluation of all other alchemists who desired to work for the Holy Roman Emperor. At the height of Rudolf’s engagement in alchemy, the emperor could count nearly two hundred faithful practitioners in his

50 Linden, *Darke Hierogliphicks*, 133.
service. This group of imperial alchemists performed their experiments on the imperial grounds in Rudolf’s private laboratory, which he established in the basement of the Belvedere villa.52

It is in this space that Rudolf attempted to perform his own alchemical transformations. We know of Rudolf’s active participation in alchemy partly through the diary entries of his close friend and confidante, Father Damiano of Venice.53 Damiano, who was supposedly in the emperor’s presence during his first effort at alchemical transmutation, recorded the event in a 1588 entry, which reads:

On the night of All Hallows His Majesty attempted to project a large piece of lead into gold. I was privileged to witness His Majesty’s work, which proceeded in a most professional manner. His Majesty, dressed in the long cloak of the adept…proceeded to manipulate the huge bellows when the metal was properly prepared. His Majesty then applied with the help of long tongs the “red powder” he had obtained from Master Scoto and it appeared that [he] was well pleased with the result.54

The lack of evidence in historical records regarding Father Damiano’s presence at the Habsburg court renders his intriguing account of Rudolf’s participation in alchemical experimentation dubious at best. Nevertheless, that Rudolf assembled an impressive entourage of alchemists and had his own laboratory constructed on the palace grounds is telling of his intense interest in the occult arts. As Hans Holzer remarks, Rudolf “was considered the greatest champion the Royal Art had in Europe, and purveyors of magic who had done well in various parts of the world wanted to join [him] in Prague in order to do even better”.55

52 Holzer, The Alchemist, 55; Kaufmann, School of Prague, 15.
54 Father Damiano’s memoirs are translated in full by Holzer and are interspersed throughout his book. The passage regarding Rudolf’s alchemical experiment is taken from: Holzer, The Alchemist, 56.
55 Holzer, The Alchemist, 56.
Though Rudolf’s active engagement in domains beyond the realm of princely duties earned him a favourable reputation among other likeminded intellectuals, his passions proved to be his eventual downfall.⁵⁶ As a “prince-practitioner” who seemed to give precedence to his magical pastimes over matters of the state, Rudolf was lambasted in 1609 by a Tuscan ambassador, who commented: “For he himself tried alchemical experiments…which is against the decorum of a prince. He has transferred his seat from the imperial throne to the workshop stool”.⁵⁷ Indeed, leading up to his eventual removal from the throne, Rudolf was scathingly criticized by many for his perceived neglect of pressing social and political issues, matters that, if left unaddressed, threatened the empire’s very existence.

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⁵⁶ Paula Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” in *Rudolf II and Prague; The Court and the City*, eds. Fučíková, et al. (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 216.
⁵⁷ The remarks made by the Tuscan ambassador in 1609 are taken from: Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting,” 216. The passage in question was first published in: Daniel Eremita, *Iter Germanicum* (Lille, 1609), 304-06.
3.4 Conclusion

Occult beliefs formed the basis of many intellectual activities that occurred under the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Habsburg crown. The study of nature was widespread at Maximillian’s erudite court and was driven by the same Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophies that informed alchemical theory and practice. If the spirit of alchemy circulated in scholarly circles at the Viennese court, then every facet of alchemy, including its religious, philosophical and practical dimensions, flourished in Rudolfine Prague. As a period considered to be the “golden age” of alchemy, the notable resurgence of this ancient art in the late sixteenth century was largely enabled by the unique culture of early modern Prague and by Rudolf II’s enthusiasm for all matters of the occult. Bearing in mind the emphasis placed on alchemical philosophies and practices at the Habsburg court during this period, it is difficult to imagine that Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a long-serving and esteemed artist of the House of Habsburg, would not have been shaped by the ubiquitous ethos of alchemy. It is tempting to think that Arcimboldo’s famous composite portraits, which he produced for both Maximillian II and Rudolf II, two prolific patrons and practitioners of natural magic, represented more than the whimsical and the bizarre. Specifically, in addition to being imaginative constructs, the composite portraits might also reflect the philosophical worldviews that framed all scholarly investigations at court, especially the alchemical kind.

Chapter 4

The Alchemical Universe and Arcimboldo’s Composite Portraits

The interpretation of Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s composite portraits as fanciful constructs is one rooted in the artist’s own lifetime. For instance, Arcimboldo’s close friend and collaborator, Gregorio Comanini, referred to one of his paintings as a *scherzo* (joke), while Paolo Morigia used the word *bizzarrie* (oddities) to designate the artist’s inventive portraits.\(^1\) However, such terms were not used by Arcimboldo’s contemporaries dismissively, but rather as a way of commending him for his display of wit and intellect.\(^2\) Arcimboldo gained a favorable reputation throughout late-sixteenth-century Europe for his ability to not only represent nature faithfully, but to configure cleverly such elements to invoke the otherworldly. Though early modern understandings of the composite portraits emphasized Arcimboldo’s ability for skillful artistic imitation and innovation, subsequent discussions of these works have tended to overlook their intellectual seriousness in favor of exploring their wondrous quality exclusively. For instance, Charles Sterling described one of the artist’s paintings as a *scherzo* suitable for a curiosity cabinet, where it would find a natural home amidst comparable items, such as a grotesque fetus.\(^3\)

Upon considering the ways in which the artist’s work has been perceived, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann has remarked that “much of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century reception of

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Arcimboldo has related him to modernist painting, especially in tendencies toward fantasy and surrealism”. 4

To read the composite portraits merely as fantastical is to remove them from their historical context of production and reception. By focusing on the playful nature of Arcimboldo’s paintings alone, the highly-learned environment in which they were produced is altogether ignored. Arcimboldo served the House of Habsburg for over a quarter-century and occupied an esteemed position in the scholarly circles established there. The artist’s composite portraits, which were prized by his patrons, Maximillian II and Rudolf II, are deeply woven into the intellectual fabric of the Habsburg court, where: “the painter’s vision and the poet’s insight overlapped with the experiments of the scientist and the speculations of the philosopher”. 5 As inherently transformative images, which appear to vacillate between a cohesive human form and an amalgamation of disparate parts, the puzzle portraits not only represent the ideologies of imperial power, but reflect also the spirit of alchemy as it was understood and practiced under Habsburg patronage and throughout early modern Germany.

4.1 Arcimboldo as Artist-Intellect at the Habsburg Court

In 1562, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a previously marginal fresco and window designer, was summoned from his native Milan to the Viennese court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand I. 6 At the age of thirty-five, he was offered protection, hospitality and a salary by the emperor in

4 Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 7. As Pontus Hulten makes clear, Arcimboldo’s presence in the history of art was largely ignored up until the beginning of the twentieth century (Hulten, “Different Interpretations,” 32). By the time that Arcimboldo was rediscovered by scholars, his oeuvre was typically discussed anachronistically. For an overview of the history of reception of the composite portraits as mere precursors to the surrealist art movement, see: Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 1-14.

5 Evans, Rudolf and World, 255.

6 Evans, “Imperial Court,” 35.
exchange for his services as court portraitist, or Contrafetter, as he was officially titled. Serving in this capacity, he would have been expected to capture in his paintings not only the physical likeness of his preeminent sitters, but also their political ideals and beliefs. Presently, there are no extant portraits from Ferdinand’s reign to have been attributed to the artist. However, through his later composite portraits for Maximillian II and Rudolf II, it seems as though Arcimboldo radically redefined the role of a traditional court portraitist. In his puzzle portraits, the Milanese artist sacrificed realistic physical resemblance, a convention of portraiture, in favor of a complex iconographical program to convey political and esoteric meanings. Following Maximillian II’s ascension to the throne in 1564, the Holy Roman Emperor inherited his father’s intellectual entourage and chose to keep Arcimboldo, among others, in his service. If Arcimboldo was well-liked under Ferdinand, he became an indispensable member of the court under the two subsequent Habsburg emperors. Indeed, the artist flourished both artistically and intellectually at Maximillian’s Viennese court and later in Rudolfine Prague, as he earned the respect of his royal patrons and notable colleagues.

On New Year’s Day 1569, Arcimboldo presented Maximillian II with what are believed to be his first composite portraits, the Four Seasons and the Four Elements. The puzzle portraits so pleased the emperor that Arcimboldo was thereafter entrusted with a number of tasks that went beyond the realm of responsibilities of a typical court artist. According to Gian Paolo Lomazzo, an artist, writer and close friend to Arcimboldo, the latter “came to enjoy much esteem

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8 Kaufmann, School of Prague, 66-7.
9 These meanings will be explored at length in the second half of the chapter.
10 Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 56. The mentioned composite paintings will be discussed in greater detail in the second half of the chapter.
with...emperor [Maximillian II], that His Majesty deferred to the artist’s judgment on all...adapting his own taste to Arcimboldo’s...Since [he] was truly exceptional in making inventions".  

Arcimboldo’s role as the primary organizer of elaborate court festivities affirms his valued position at court.  

For instance, in 1570, he orchestrated a tournament in Prague to honor the marriage of Maximillian’s daughter, Elizabeth, to King Charles XI of France. Only two years later, Arcimboldo was also entrusted with overseeing the festivities held during Rudolf II’s coronation as King of Hungary. 

When the Habsburg seat of power officially moved to Prague in 1583, so too did the revered Milanese artist. Arcimboldo continued to be invested in diverse activities and projects under Rudolf’s reign. For instance, he dabbled in the making of musical instruments, designed costumes for court celebrations, devised waterworks, decorated organ panels, and even invented a system of musical notation based on colors.  

The emperor also relied on the versatile artist to acquire artworks by German masters deemed worthy of a place in his expansive art collection.  

Coupled with the efforts of other members of the court, such as Giulio Licino, who was...
responsible for expanding Rudolf’s holdings of Italian artworks, the emperor’s collection
developed at an exponential rate. Arcimboldo was also directly involved in establishing the
imperial menagerie, as he was sent to Germany in 1582 with the task of finding, in addition to
precious art objects, both exotic birds and animals from the New World.¹⁵ In 1612, nearing the
end of Rudolf’s life, a Venetian diplomat estimated that the emperor possessed almost three
thousand paintings alone, a remarkable number owed partly to the acquisitions made by
Arcimboldo on his patron’s behalf.¹⁶

Like his fellow artists, nearly forty in total, who benefitted from Rudolf’s patronage,
Arcimboldo probably divided his time between the Habsburg court and a private studio in one of
the city’s burgher houses.¹⁷ Extant documents suggest that he resided in Vienna and then in
Prague for the majority of his adult life, only returning to Milan temporarily between 1566 and
1568.¹⁸ With the exception of this short interval of time, Arcimboldo remained in central Europe
as a productive member of the court, forging strong, and at times collaborative, relationships
with his colleagues and imperial patrons alike. Only with Rudolf’s reluctant permission in 1583
did Arcimboldo finally retire to Milan, where he remained until his demise a decade later.¹⁹
However, even nearing the end of his life, the artist continued to create artworks for the Holy

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¹⁵ Marshall, *Theatre of World*, 64.

¹⁶ Arcimboldo’s distinguished status as an artist-intellect was not anomalous, but coincided with the
favorable attitude towards all late sixteenth-century painters working in Rudolfine Prague, either at court
or beyond. Indeed, all painters operating in this context took on an unprecedented status with the issue of
the 1595 ‘Letter of Majesty’, which freed them from the guild system. Consequently, such individuals
were understood to belong to a “brotherhood”, while their art practice was no longer likened to craft, but
was considered an intellectual undertaking. Though the decree was officially enacted towards the end of
Arcimboldo’s employment under the House of Habsburg, the ‘Letter of the Majesty’ can be considered as
the culmination of a long-spanning perception of painters in the imperial city as humanists (Kaufmann,
*School of Prague*, 42-43).

¹⁷ Antonovich, *L’art Rodolphe II*, 1; Pešek, “Prague Between,” 263.


Roman Emperor, specifically his last two composite portraits, *Flora* (1589) and *Vertumnus* (1590) [Figs. 8-9].

Arcimboldo’s life-long dedication to the Habsburg court was recognized officially by Rudolf II in 1592, when he conferred on the artist the prestigious title of Count Palatine (of the Lateran). Such an honor, which could only be granted by the emperor, was incredibly rare, as only two other artists besides Arcimboldo, namely Sodoma and Titian, were ennobled in this way during the sixteenth century. That the Milanese artist was recognized in such a significant manner is indicative of his status as not only a respected artist, but as a capable intellectual.

If Arcimboldo was a valuable asset to the both Maximillian II and Rudolf II, he was equally esteemed among their entourage of humanist scholars. Over the course of his considerable stay at the Habsburg court, both in Vienna and then in Prague, Arcimboldo had the opportunity to interact with a myriad of preeminent physicians, natural historians, botanists, and alchemists. Indeed, it is likely that the artist made the acquaintance of many learned individuals, such as: Pierandrea Matthioli, Paul Fabritius, Rembert Dodoens, Johannes Crato, Oswald Croll, Anselm Boethiius de Boodt, Michael Maier, John Dee, and Tadeáš Hájek. Collaboration was widespread among Rudolf’s entourage and scholars were known to contribute to a number of disciplines at once. For instance, though all physicians by profession, Hájek and Fabritius were also astronomers, Croll studied the occult sciences, Maier contributed to alchemical discourses, and De Boodt composed the first elaborate study of gemstones.

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20 Arcimboldo’s *Vertumnus* will form the central focus of section 3.2 of the chapter.
Arcimboldo too partook in the collaborative exchange and development of knowledge. In 1583, Franciscus De Paduanis wrote a letter to Ulisse Aldrovandi in Bologna, a leader in the field of natural history, mentioning how he had obtained many detailed depictions of birds and quadrupeds by the hand of Giuseppe Arcimboldo. De Paduanis also reveals that he had relied on the latter to depict a sample of the rare Persian lily before its imminent decay. These records of correspondence, in addition to a plethora of watercolor studies of plants and animals recently attributed to Arcimboldo, are indicative of the artist’s active engagement in scholarly pursuits at court. For sixteenth-century natural historians, who were concerned with recording and disseminating their investigations of natural life, the services provided by a skilled artist were crucial. In the absence of a living or preserved plant specimen, depictions of nature, such as Arcimboldo’s watercolors, would have been especially useful supplements for individuals seeking to better understand the natural world in all its variety.

Arcimboldo’s participation in natural history suggests that his interests encompassed more than the purely artistic and that his contributions to court culture were meaningful and sophisticated. Bearing in mind his acquired knowledge of natural history, it seems plausible that Arcimboldo would have also been aware of alchemy. Although there is no evidence to suggest

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23 Franciscus De Paduanis, a native of Friuli, resided in Prague from 1583 until his death in 1589. During this period, he served as one of many physicians of the Habsburg court and was also actively involved in the fields of natural history and astrology (Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 122-23).

24 Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 123.

25 For further examples of how artists collaborated with scientists at the Habsburg court, see: Kaufmann, School of Prague, 53. Seemingly all of Arcimboldo’s nature studies were produced during his stay in central Europe. His earliest watercolor study is dated 1562, the very year he arrived in Germany, while the latest ones were produced around 1585. The watercolors include depictions of a wide range of plant and animal life, such as: common weeds, cherry blossoms, wild orchids, tulips, antlers, hooves, moose, stags, and malformed tusks, which were all set against a nondescript white background. Given their sheer variety and quantity, it seems unlikely that the watercolors were intended only as preparatory drawings for the composite portraits. Rather, they suggest that Arcimboldo was actively engaged in the study of the natural world and that he was a productive member of humanist circles at court (Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 115-147). See [Fig. 18] for an example of Arcimboldo’s watercolor studies.
that the artist participated in alchemy, Arcimboldo would have been familiar with its most basic philosophical underpinnings, as the alchemical arts not only captured the attention of many of his learned colleagues, but also flourished in a remarkable way at court through their collective efforts to produce the Philosopher’s stone.

4.2 Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* as Symbols of Dynastic Power

The earliest surviving paintings produced by Arcimboldo under the patronage of the House of Habsburg are the *Four Seasons* [Figs. 10-13] and the *Four Elements* [Figs. 14-17].

Specific works, namely *Summer* and *Winter*, have been given the definite date of 1563, as the year appears woven on the shoulder of Summer’s garment and is written on the reverse side of Winter’s canvas. Among the portraits constituting the *Four Elements*, Arcimboldo’s *Fire* can be dated with a similar degree of certainty, as the year 1566 is also found inscribed on the back of the work.

According to Kaufmann, the accompanying paintings, *Water* and *Earth*, were also completed in the same year. The eight composite portraits were presented together to Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian II on New Year’s Day 1569, which suggests that *Spring*, *Autumn*, and *Air*, works to which a precise date has not yet been assigned, were probably created at approximately the same time as the others comprising their respective series.

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27 The handwriting on the back of the composite portraits is consistent with sixteenth-century script and appears to be by the hand of the same individual. It seems likely that the dates were written soon after the completion of the works (Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 54).
28 There are a number of issues with the attribution of Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, including those constituting the *Four Seasons* and the *Four Elements*. Firstly, the surviving version of *Air* corresponds to period descriptions of the work by the likes of Lomazzo and Fonteo. However, due to its support and dimensions, which differ from the other works forming the series, it has been suggested that this version of *Air* may be a copy of Arcimboldo’s original work, perhaps intended as a gift for another royal court, possibly in Saxony, Liechtenstein, or Spain. Similarly, some have argued that *Earth* may be instead a seventeenth-century copy of Arcimboldo’s work, though Kaufmann maintains that it is indeed the original work that was presented to Maximillian II, as it coincides with Fonteo’s poems and its dimensions are similar to the other *Seasons*. Finally, Arcimboldo’s original depiction of *Autumn* has been lost, though the
The paintings belonging to Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* are deeply paradoxical. Though scholars refer to them as portraits, they do not overtly seek to capture the physical likeness of an individual, as the traditional parameters of the genre suggest. Further, although they are celebrated as representations of nature, through their unusual configuration, the paintings approach the unnatural, or the altogether supernatural, instead. As loaded metaphorical images executed with painstaking detail, Arcimboldo’s puzzle portraits at once promote the pleasure of looking, while also conveying weighty and sophisticated meanings. These paintings are, therefore, complicated images that resist any straightforward reading. Part of their complexity is owed to the lively intellectualism that colored the Habsburg court throughout the late sixteenth century. If, as Otto Benesch asserts, “the creative mind at a given historical moment thinks in certain forms that are the same in arts and sciences”, then any discussion of Arcimboldo’s oeuvre must also consider the parallel culture of scientific inquiry that pervaded the early modern Habsburg court.29

Through clever configuration, Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* at once convey the vastness of the natural world as, at the same time, they represent an underlying cosmological harmony. The interconnectedness of the universe was a defining tenet of the Hermetic and Neoplatonic philosophies, which validated all learned activity, including the study of alchemy, at the Habsburg court. Arcimboldo’s use of a human framework to order the variety

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contemporaneous copies made of it do survive, including one by Arcimboldo from 1573. This version, currently housed in the Louvre, was produced on the order of Maximillian II as a gift for the Elector of Saxony, along with the accompanying alternative depictions of *Summer*, *Winter*, and *Spring*. Given that these versions of the *Four Seasons* mirror those produced for Maximillian II, with the exception of minor variations, we can assume that the surviving portrayal of *Autumn* resembles closely the now lost painting produced for Maximillian. This later painting is featured as [Fig. 13] for reference (Kaufmann, *School of Prague*, 166-68).

of nature is meaningful. Coinciding with Hermetic and Neoplatonic cosmologies, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits evoke man’s elevated position as the microcosm of the universe. The microcosmic nature of man is summarized by Oswald Croll (1563-1609) in his opus magnum, *Basilica Chymica* (1608). Croll, a German professor of medicine who also served Rudolf II, remarked that man is: “the most perfect creature in all his properties; because all things of the whole Universe meet in him as in the Centre, and the Anatomy of him in his Nature is the Anatomy of the whole world”.\(^{30}\) Croll’s contemporary, Peter Severinus (1542-1602), who was one of the most notable followers of Paracelsus, also perceived man as the site at which the universe, in all of its vastness and variety, converged. In his treatise, *Idea medicinae philosophicae* (1660), Severinus envisages man as having within him rivers, seas, mountains and valleys in a manner that paralleled the greater world in which he lived.\(^{31}\)

In Arcimboldo’s composite heads, the perception of man as microcosm is made literal, as a variety of natural and artificial items closely associated with the subject join to form a seamless human configuration. Mirroring the damaging effects of frost, his portrayal of winter is comprised of an amalgamation of visibly decaying leaves, branches, bark, and roots, as well as two ripened lemons extended perpendicularly from the neck in reference to the crops that thrive in Italy during this period. In contrast to the bleakness of *Winter*, the hair, facial features, and garments of *Spring* are comprised of a colorful array of botanical life in diverse stages of blossom, while Arcimboldo’s portrayal of *Summer* references the season’s bountiful harvests of

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\(^{30}\) The English translation of the quote from Oswald Croll’s 1608 text, *Basilica Chymica*, is taken from: H. Pinnell, trans., *Philosophy Reformed & Improved in Four Tractates...Dee Mysteries of Nature by...Crollius...* (London: M.S. Lodowick Llloyd, 1657), 23-24.

\(^{31}\) Debus, *Chemistry, Alchemy*, 239. Although the relation of man to the greater and lesser worlds is a running theme throughout Severinus’s *Idea*, it is explored with the greatest detail in the third chapter of the treatise, “Universalis totius medicinae adumbration”.
fruits and vegetables through the inclusion of items, such as: wheat, corn, berries, pears, garlic, and artichokes. Finally, as with Summer, Arcimboldo’s Autumn presents a human profile that consists of various autumnal crops, including: wine grapes, mushrooms, and apples. The same strategy of allegory is employed in his series of the Four Elements. Once again adhering to an overall anthropomorphic contour, Fire is composed of flames, candles, matches, and armaments, Earth of a number of land-dwelling creatures, Air of a variety of birds, and finally Water of various aquatic life.

The strategy of correspondences between season-object and man-universe employed by Arcimboldo is reminiscent of the medieval tradition of the labours of the months. For medieval society, the cycles of the natural world, most notably the changing of the seasons and the movement of the stars, were important markers of the passage of time. The twelve labours of the months was a visual tradition that grew out of the preoccupation with the cyclicality of the universe. The labors were based on the recognizable activities of everyday medieval life and usually involved the interactions between man and nature that were dictated by the time of year. For example, just as Arcimboldo uses clusters of grapes, a harvest specific to autumn, as a symbol for the season, the month of September was typically represented in the Middle Ages by a figure treading grapes in a wooden half barrel. Collectively, the twelve labors conveyed man’s place in the cycle of life and provided greater insight into the place of both God and man in such a temporal structure. Thus, much like with Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, which employ an overall human framework, the aim was to explore the relation of the microcosmic man to the greater macrocosm [Colum Hourihane, ed., Time in the Medieval World: Occupations of the Months and Signs of the Zodiac in the Index of Christian Art (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), xlviii-lviii].

Although the documentary depiction of varied natural life is a salient feature of both the Four Seasons and the Four Elements, in the case of Water, in particular, the number and diversity of fish, reptiles, invertebrates, amphibians, and mammals present in the work is noteworthy. Indeed, scholars have identified forty distinct species of aquatic animals in this painting alone and have, therefore, suggested that the artist probably created Water in collaboration with either one or multiple natural historians. (Kaufmann, “Allegories Meaning,” 96-7). The composite portraits also demonstrate the artist’s familiarity with the tradition of natural history illustration. According to an inventory compiled in 1607/11, Rudolf’s Kunstkammer housed a dozen books that consisted of either painted or drawn representations of botanical and animal life by the likes of Hans Hoffman, Jacopo Ligozzi, Hans Bol, and Daniel Fröschel. Among such albums, Joris Hoefnagel’s Four Elements, compiled primarily throughout the late sixteenth century, stands as perhaps the most important document of its kind, as it offers insight into the early practices of collecting and observing nature. The album is divided into four separate sections, namely Ignis (fire), Terra (earth), Aqua (water), and Aier (air), and features drawings of natural life, totaling one hundred seventy, that are noteworthy for their marriage of scientific verisimilitude with the ornamental. Hoefnagel’s preoccupation with the decorative is exhibited, for example, in his depictions of aquatic animals. Rather than rendering such creatures individually and against a
Arcimboldo’s composite paintings make allusions to Habsburg pre-eminence through communicative symbolism. For instance, of the works belonging to the *Four Seasons*, *Winter* can be read as an allegorical depiction of Holy Roman Emperor Maximillian II. In this painting, Arcimboldo clothes Winter in a cloak that is embroidered with a number of upright and inverted ‘M’ motifs, which are reminiscent both of an imperial crown and of the first initial of Maximillian’s name. Such compositional signifiers connect the Holy Roman Emperor to the season that marked the beginning of the calendar year, or *caput Anni*, for the founders of the Roman Empire. Taking the shape of a human head, Arcimboldo’s depiction of Winter literalizes the notion of *caput Anni* and not only evokes Maximillian’s authority as the head of the Holy Roman Empire, but also his symbolic mastery over the seasons.

If Arcimboldo’s depiction of Winter suggests the omnipotence of the emperor, so too do his paintings of the *Four Elements*. For example, in *Water*, pearls are suspended from the ear and circled around the neck of the composite subject. The pearl jewelry might have communicated the notion of great estate to an early modern audience, while an inconspicuous crown, formed by the rays of a Cidaroid, sits atop Water’s head and confirms any potential royal connotations. Similarly, Arcimboldo’s depiction of Earth makes explicit references to the House of Habsburg neutral background, as was customary of natural history illustration, Hoefnagel clusters his subject matter and situates them in their natural habitat, in this case water. Hoefnagel’s attention to composition results in an overall decorative pattern that privileges color, texture and detail. As such, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits exist in continuum with Hoefnagel’s illustrations of natural life, as they too exhibit a clear interest in striking surface detail and agreeable cohesion among otherwise unrelated natural elements [Marjorie Lee Hendrix, “Joris Hoefnagel and the *Four Elements*: A Study in Sixteenth-Century Nature Painting” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1984), 132-164].

34 Kaufmann, *School of Prague*, 165.
36 Kaufmann, *School of Prague*, 68.
through the inclusion of sheep and lion skins, which symbolize the Golden Fleece and allude to
the family’s mythical descent from Hercules. Furthermore, suspended from the ornate necklace
worn by Fire is not only the Golden Fleece, but also a medallion adorned with the imperial
double eagle. The Habsburg fire iron, another symbolic device of the royal family’s knightly
order of the Golden Fleece, makes an appearance as the ear of Fire, while the gun barrels,
cannons, wicks, and embers that constitute the rest of the body make clear allusions to warfare
and Habsburg military prowess.

The reading of Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* as visual metaphors for
Habsburg pre-eminence is substantiated by Giovanni Baptista Fonteo’s three hundred line Latin
poem “The Paintings of the Four Seasons and the Four Elements by the Imperial Painter
Giuseppe Arcimboldo”, which was composed in 1568. Over the span of Arcimboldo’s career
at the Habsburg court, he collaborated closely with Fonteo to organize court festivities and
consequently forged a strong relationship with the humanist. For this reason, it seems plausible
that the artist might have enlisted Fonteo to compose a poem to accompany his *Four Seasons* and
*Four Elements* upon their presentation to the Holy Roman Emperor. Functioning as a guide for
deciphering the composite portraits, Fonteo’s poem outlines the identity of each composite
subject, their visual content, and their relation to broader meanings of Habsburg power. In so
doing, the poet ensured that the rich constellation of imperial references in Arcimboldo’s

41 Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 276. There exists also a revised version of the poem, which features extended commentary by Fonteo. The 308- line poem can be found at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna as Codex 10206.
42 Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 278.
paintings would not go unappreciated. Indeed, if the composite portraits imply the emperor’s far-reaching influence through evocative symbolism, then Fonteo makes this notion explicit in his poem, when he extolls, “O excellent one, saviour on whom rests the world! Beneath your yoke bow down events and seasons… not only because you rule the world, but that of this world you also rule the Elements”.

If all matter is composed of the elements, then to exercise a command over them meant, by extension, a mastery over the universe at large, including the passage of time and the changing of seasons. By placing the seasons and the elements under Emperor Maximillian’s dominion, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits venerate Habsburg authority and longevity. Coinciding with a Neoplatonic and Hermetic understanding of the universe, the portraits suggest that, just as the emperor rules over the world of state and its body politic (the microcosm), so too does he preside over the perpetual cycles and basic constituents of the universe (the macrocosm). Further laudatory meanings are conveyed through Arcimboldo’s cohesive configuration of otherwise disparate elements. By condensing the manifold into a unified whole, the artist gives form to the intangible harmonizing force that pervades the universe, likening it through communicative symbolism to the beneficial Habsburg rule. In this way, the Holy Roman Emperor’s power expands to encompass divine abilities. From an early modern perspective, if the four elements will form all earthly life into perpetuity and the seasons will continue to change invariably, then the House of Habsburg will likewise rule with permanence.

44 Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 286.
45 Kaufmann, School of Prague, 67-68.
4.3 Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* as Alchemical Imagery

The glorification of the Habsburg dynasty is but one dimension of Arcimboldo’s sophisticated constructs. Though they feature clear symbols of Habsburg supremacy, in their overall configuration, the composite portraits are, perhaps first and foremost, transformative images. Roland Barthes, in his essay, “Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriquier”, articulates the process by which the viewer apprehends Arcimboldo’s paintings. Barthes explains that the composite portraits at once reveal and conceal their meaning, as “the eye is diverted from the total meaning by the meaning of the detail”. Arcimboldo’s portraits capture the process of metamorphosis through their inherent instability, as the images oscillate fluidly between human form and a combination of disparate parts, depending on our level of perception. As the otherwise separate realms of human and object collapse into one another, the artist renders in paint the fleeting moment at which metamorphosis occurs; that is, the instance when a human face becomes a cluster of fruit and vice versa. For the alchemist, the moment of transmutation was paramount, as it involved the discovery of the elusive elixir and represented an opening gateway towards the reformation of all humankind. As images that convey the essence of natural transformation, the composite portraits are comparable to a transmuted metal in an alchemical lab. If Arcimboldo could simulate natural transformation on a fixed two dimensional surface, so too could the alchemist through proper chemical processes.

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46 In this article, Barthes is primarily concerned with exploring the presence of linguistic structures in Arcimboldo’s composite heads. For the author, the paintings are compelling because they mimic the devices of language. Barthes notes that, “[Arcimboldo’s] paintings have a linguistic basis, his imagination is, strictly speaking, poetic: it does not create signs, it combines them, permutes them, deflects them—precisely what a practitioner of language does” (Barthes, “Arcimboldo, or Magician,” 131).

47 Barthes, “Arcimboldo, or Magician,” 137.
Not only do Arcimboldo’s puzzle portraits invoke the alchemical through their transformative appearance, but their very subject matter too carries significance for the early modern alchemist. The four elements were the cornerstone of alchemy, which, at its most rudimentary level, could be defined as the conversion of one element into another. The *raison d’être* of the alchemist was to produce a fifth element, or quintessence, which was understood as the intangible and incorruptible force that propelled all physical transformation in the universe. With the aim of imitating natural metamorphosis in the confines of a laboratory, the alchemist needed to harness nature’s ubiquitous transformative power, a force that was evidenced by the changing of the seasons and the interactions among the four elements. Only by mastering this omnipresent force could the adept hope to purify not only base metals, but the inner self as well. Therefore, as an attempt to render visual the essence that animates the seasons and the elements, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits for Maximillian II allude to alchemy in its most basic structure and aims.

In their human configuration, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits also reflect the anthropomorphic parallels drawn to discuss alchemical processes. The *Four Seasons* and the *Four Elements* were not intended as two distinct series, but were understood as an interrelated body of work. Echoing the harmony that pervades each portrait’s constituent parts, Arcimboldo’s paintings also relate to one another, whereby a given element is paired with its corresponding season to form an agreeable accord. The union of the seasons with the elements was dictated by the enduring ancient logic of “like is linked with like”. In accordance with their

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50 Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 288.
shared intrinsic properties, *Summer* and *Fire* were matched because they are both hot and dry; *Winter* was bound to *Water*, as they share the properties of cold and wet; *Autumn* was united with *Earth*, seeing as the two are cold and dry, and *Spring* was partnered with *Air*, as both are hot and wet. Depicted in profile, Arcimboldo’s composite heads were probably meant to be displayed facing their corresponding partner. Indeed, *Winter, Air, Summer, and Autumn* face the right, while their respective counterparts, *Water, Spring, Fire, and Earth*, all face the opposite direction. As a union of the seasons with the elements, each pair also seems to be comprised of one female and one male subject. The assignment of a sex to the composite portraits, as Kaufmann argues, is consistent with their grammatical genders in either Latin or Italian. Further, certain visual details included by Arcimboldo indicate a clear differentiation of gender. This is especially true of the corresponding portraits, *Winter* and *Water*. In the case of the former, the depiction of moss and wayward roots around the mouth and jawline suggest facial hair, a marker of masculinity, while the latter is adorned with a pearl necklace and earrings, which is evocative of femininity. Fonteo, upon considering the gendering of the composite portraits, fittingly characterized the union of the Seasons with the Elements as a happy marriage and likened it to the negotiation of politics through strategic Habsburg weddings.

51 The supposed relationship between Arcimboldo’s *Seasons* and *Elements* based on their shared intrinsic properties is derived from Fonteo’s writings, specifically: Codex 10152, fol. 6r ff, and Codex 10206, fol. 53v. ff from the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. For a Latin transcription of these documents, see: Kaufmann, *Mastery of Nature*, 197-205.

52 Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 50. For example, upon considering the pairing of *Winter* with *Water* in terms of grammatical gender, we notice that the feminine, *aqua*, corresponds to the masculine, *inverno* (Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 50).

53 This idea is expressed by Fonteo in a marginal note that he makes in his poem on the composite portraits. The text is from fol. 57v of Codex 10206 at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 289). Dynastic marriages were the central means through which the Habsburg monarchy negotiated political ties in the late sixteenth century. In addition to the marriage between Archduke Charles and the Duke of Bavaria’s daughter, Maximillan also married two of his
The correspondence between the *Four Seasons* and the *Four Elements* is also reminiscent of the anthropomorphic metaphors used to describe alchemical metamorphosis. Natural transformation, specifically its imitation through alchemy, was discussed within a metaphorical framework of marriage, sex, gestation and birth. Analogous to the composite portraits, the alchemical principles of sulphur and mercury were envisaged as sexually differentiated. The combination of the fixed sulphur (male) with the volatile mercury (female) was likened by alchemists to the act of coitus, which would ultimately produce “offspring”, or other metals. The conflation of alchemical processes with human sex is an historical one, as it was first articulated by the Ancient Egyptian alchemists, Zosimos of Panopolis and Olympiodorus. The sexualisation of alchemy persisted from ancient times into the early modern period and even informed the perception and design of specific laboratory tools. For instance, as the space in which the Philosopher’s stone materialises, the alchemist’s athanor, a complex three-tier oven with openings for distillation and combustion, took an ovoidal shape meant to emulate that of a womb. For this reason, the athanor was also sometimes referred to as the “cosmic egg”, further emphasising its supposed gestational function. Though the associations of sex and procreation with alchemy are made blatant in period discourses on the topic, such meanings do not surface with comparable overtness in Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements*. Nevertheless, as gendered pairs, each consisting of a seemingly male and female subject, a chemical wedding, in addition to an imperial one, is certainly invoked.

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daughters, Elizabeth and Anna, to Charles the IX of France and Phillip II of Spain respectively (Kaufmann, “Imperial Allegories,” 289).


Upon considering Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements* within the context of court culture, it becomes clear that, in addition to possessing celebratory overtones of imperial power and longevity of rule, the composite portraits, in their subject matter and configuration, capture the spirit of sixteenth-century alchemy. If Arcimboldo was an esteemed collaborator among Maximillian’s learned scholars, it seems likely that the occult ideas exchanged within these circles would have been familiar to the artist and could have potentially surfaced in his work for the emperor.

### 4.4 Arcimboldo’s *Vertumnus* as an Alchemical Tribute to Rudolf II

After nearly a quarter century of service, Arcimboldo was granted permission by Rudolf II to retire to Milan in 1583. However, even upon relocating to his native land, the artist remained in contact with Rudolf and agreed, much to the emperor’s delight, to create two final composite paintings for him. Arcimboldo’s *Flora* (1589) and *Vertumnus* (1590) mark the conclusion of the Milanese artist’s long-spanning and fruitful career at the Habsburg court [Figs. 7-8].

Much of the information about these paintings can be gleaned from a poem composed by Gregorio Comanini, another one of Arcimboldo’s close friends. Like Fonteo’s poem on the *Four Seasons* and the *Four Elements*, Comanini’s text, *Il Figino overo del fine della Pittura* (1591), features poems on *Vertumnus* and *Flora* that were intended as textual accompaniments to the artist’s work.

Comanini’s overarching aim in *Il Figino* was to provide a survey of the theory of aesthetics and the nature of artistic practice in the sixteenth century. Along the way, the literary work supplies valuable insight into the significance of Arcimboldo’s final puzzle portraits, as

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56 With the exceptions of *Flora* and *Vertumnus*, scholars know little else about Arcimboldo’s artistic production for Rudolf II, as most of the extant paintings by the artist date from before Rudolf’s coronation as Holy Roman Emperor (Fučíková, “The ‘Divertissments’ Prague,” 121).

well as their chronology of creation. Though they represent collectively Arcimboldo’s final Habsburg commission, Comanini suggests that Flora was sent to Prague first, followed later by Vertumnus. For this reason, it seems as though the two paintings were not intended as a pair and that their meanings are not necessarily informed one by the other. Vertumnus is, therefore, Arcimboldo’s final homage to Rudolf II, a valued employer and friend, whose unparalleled intellectual court bolstered his artistic and intellectual growth.

Arcimboldo’s final composite portrait for the House of Habsburg represents the ultimate tribute to Rudolf II, as it not only extolls visually the emperor’s pre-eminence, but is also rife with the occult principles that so enthralled him. Indeed, it is well-documented that Rudolf II awaited the arrival of Vertumnus to his court in Prague with particular anticipation. In Arcimboldo’s Four Seasons and Four Elements, Maximillian II is evoked only through symbolic references. For instance, his presence is alluded to through the inclusion of his first initial on Winter’s garment, and through the animals forming Earth, whose antlers, as Comanini observes, encircle the head and mimic the outline of a royal crown. If Arcimboldo’s earlier composite portraits are subtle in their evocation of an imperial subject, in Vertumnus, the preeminent status of the sitter is indubitable. As Comanini reveals in Il Figino, even though the initial impression of the “strange and deformed image” of Vertumnus puts “a laugh on [the] lips”, the painting

58 On the order of completion of Arcimboldo’s final Habsburg commission, Comanini writes: “You will not be able to see Flora, because Arcimboldo has already sent it to the Emperor, for whom it was done; but as for Vertumnus, I’m sure that he will allow you to see it in his rooms” (Gregorio Comanini, The Figino or On the Purpose of Painting (1591), trans. Ann Doyle-Anderson and Giancarlo Maiorino (Toronto, ON: Toronto University Press, 2001), 18.
59 Rudolf II’s eagerness for the completion of Vertumnus is documented in Giovan Paolo Lomazzo’s Idea del tempio della pittura (Idea of the Temple of Painting) from 1590. According to Lomazzo, “Arcimboldo has almost completed another painting, in which Vertumnus [the god] of gardens is depicted, entirely composed of fruit. It is to be sent to His Majesty, whose letters reveal that the work is awaited with much avid expectation” (Lomazzo, Idea of the Temple, 166).
60 Kaufmann, School Prague, 165; Comanini, Il Figino, 25.
actually “hide[s] a kingly image” worthy of serious consideration. The writer goes on to specify the identity of the subject, stating: “Now that I lift the veil / Holy, invincible, supreme, august / And righteous Rudolph, honour of Austria and glory / Of warlike Germany, to whom / The world kneels devotedly”. Although Rudolf’s physicality is abstracted through a seamless amalgamation of natural objects, Arcimboldo’s rendering of the Holy Roman Emperor, nevertheless, preserves the recognizable contours of his actual face, further solidifying Rudolf’s supposed connection with Vertumnus.

Arcimboldo’s compositional choices in Vertumnus seem to be informed by early textual sources. Although Ovid’s well-known account of Vertumnus and Pomona in the Metamorphoses (XIV: 623-771) is a possible source of inspiration for the painting, it seems as though Propertius’s Elegies, specifically the second poem in his fourth book, is a more likely influence. The ancient poem suggests the potential origins for the god’s name, enumerates his attributes, and provides information on the cult of Vertumnus and its relation to Roman history. Many of the fruits and vegetables chosen by Arcimboldo to form Vertumnus mirror the ideas expressed by Propertius in his poem. As the author describes the scope of the god’s powers, he

61 Comanini, Il Figino, 19, 24.
63 At least two additional composite portraits are thought to be depictions of actual members of the Habsburg court. These works include: The Jurist (1566), which is possibly a depiction of the imperial vice-chancellor, and The Librarian (1566?), which may be a copy of Arcimboldo’s lost original depiction of the imperial librarian (Kaufmann, Visual Jokes, 96-97). However, these paintings remain quite abstract when compared to Arcimboldo’s Vertumnus. The composite portrait of Rudolf II is unique because the emperor’s general physical appearance is still discernable.
64 Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “Arcimboldo and Propertius. A Classical Source for Rudolf II as Vertumnus,” Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 48 (1985): 118, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1482307. According to Kaufmann, the elegies of Propertius were originally published in Venice in 1472 and went through many subsequent editions well into the sixteenth century. In addition to being widely-circulated, the work of Propertius would have also been well-known in Rudolfine Prague, as the elegy was the preferred form for contemporary Latin poetry at court (Kaufmann, “Arcimboldo and Propertius,” 119-20).
specifies that, “To [Vertumnus] are given the fruits of the year’s harvest…translucent grapes, grown in a rounded cluster, corn with its milky kernels swelling the ear, great ripening cherries with their sheen of purple, summer’s mulberries, [and] plums at the turn of the year”. The composite painting seems to mirror these words, as golden ears of corn and brilliant clusters of grapes make up Vertumnus’s hair, a mulberry forms his right eye, and cherries appear in his left eye, bottom lip, and hair. As the poem progresses, Propertius lists further crops that fall under the god’s dominion. Adopting the voice of Vertumnus, the author writes: “the very best species in the garden is given to me… [including] cucumbers, striped dark-green; gourds with round bellies; rush-tied cabbages—these are all my own. Even the humblest field flower must be added to the garland-offering set upon my head”. Again, the bulbous gourds described by Propertius are featured prominently in the centre of Vertumnus’s forehead and chest, as curly cabbage leaves occupy part of his mid-torso. Further, in lieu of a garland of flowers to adorn his head, Arcimboldo has instead provided the god of seasons with a baldric of flowers, draped nobly over his shoulder. This deviation from the text is meaningful, as it not only evokes contemporary Habsburg conflict with the Turks, but suggests Rudolf’s ultimate military triumph in the face of such a threat.

Rudolf II’s apotheosis into Vertumnus is one that is pregnant with imperial symbolism. As a final tribute to the House of Habsburg, Arcimboldo distills into a singular work the

67 Kaufmann, “Arcimboldo and Propertius,” 120.
69 The meanings of Rudolf’s military might are cemented in Comanini’s *Il Figino*, where the poet aligns the emperor with Mars, the god of war. Comanini writes: “Look at last at this baldric…Bound with various flowers/ As though woven / Of fine gold/ Which falls from my shoulder/ And crosses my chest; And will you consider me/ A proud and strong follower of proud Mars, who/ Gladly following/ Wears the colours of his leader’s banner” (*Comanini, Il Figino*, 23).

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meanings of lasting dynastic authority prophesied initially in his *Four Seasons* and *Four Elements*. In *Vertumnus*, a plethora of botanical species belonging to diverse periods of the year are featured in simultaneous blossom, evoking the notion of an everlasting spring, as described by Ovid in Book One of the *Metamorphoses*. As an uncorrupted and bountiful period, the Golden Age was one in which “spring was the only season” and mother earth “gave of herself freely, providing all essentials [to man]”. Nature, in its lush and unaltered state, supplied infinite amounts and varieties of vegetation, such as cherries, strawberries, and wheat, without the need for human intervention through farming. However, if the Golden Age, as related by Ovid, was ephemeral, in Arcimboldo’s composite portrait it attains permanence. As Kaufmann has argued, in *Vertumnus*, the harmony and peace that so characterized this once lost era is at last reinstated under the supposedly beneficent rule of Rudolf II.71

As a portrait of the emperor that moves effortlessly between the human and object realms, Rudolf embodies in *Vertumnus* the very essence of transformation, a central aspect of alchemical practice. Through the painting’s dynamic instability, Rudolf seems to occupy a dual identity as both Holy Roman Emperor and overseer of the seasons and the elements. The symbolic interchangeability between the emperor and the god of seasons is a meaningful one, as Vertumnus was also the mythological brother of Hermes, the father of alchemy.72 The intersection between alchemy and Rudolf’s identity, as constructed by Arcimboldo, goes beyond evocative configuration and the considered selection of subject matter. Indeed, the simultaneous

maturation of flowers and crops that comprise the mythological subject also carries important alchemical undercurrents.

For the adept, the observable ripening of fruits through their exposure to the elements was cited as evidence for alchemy’s potential to emulate and expedite natural metamorphosis. As Paracelsus observes in the second book of his text, *Of the Nature of Things*, “it is sufficiently manifest…that all natural things grow and are ripened through heat and moisture, which is sufficiently demonstrated by rain and the heat of the sun”.73 In light of this discernible reality, the German physician resolved, “seeing therefore [that transformation] is by divine ordination naturally possible, who can…not believe that a man is able, through the wise and skillful Art of Alchymy, to make that which is barren, fruitfull, and that which is crude, to ripen, and all things to grow”.74 The association between the blossoming of botanical life and alchemy was also extended to describe alchemical gold, the pinnacle of achievement for the practitioner. Upon describing the procedure for creating the Philosopher’s stone, Paracelsus muses that the adept will finally see, “Gold…[that] rise[s] in the glass and grow[s] after the manner of a tree, having many boughs and leaves”.75

If alchemical processes were both compared to and validated by the ripening of vegetation, some of the supposed powers of the Philosopher’s stone were also intertwined with agriculture. In the history of alchemy in central Europe, Anna Maria Zieglerin (1550-1575) emerges as an interesting example of active female involvement in the “golden art”. Zieglerin, together with her husband, Heinrich Schombach (d. 1575) and the pastor-alchemist, Philipp

75 Ibid.
Sömmering (1540-1575), operated an alchemical lab under the patronage of Duke Julius of Braunschwieg-Wolfenbüttel. The group enjoyed the support of the Duke up until the summer of 1574, when their patron launched criminal proceedings against them for a number of alleged offenses, such as the murder of a courier. The trial concluded with a guilty verdict for all three alchemists, who were subsequently burnt with tongs and brutally quartered alive on February 7, 1575. Leading up to her execution, Zieglerin had dedicated a considerable amount of time to exploring the practical and effective dimensions of alchemy. Her major contribution was her conception of “Lion’s Blood”, an alchemical gold that was purportedly thirteen grades superior to the finest Arabian gold. As Zieglerin articulated in an unpublished booklet from 1573, “Lion’s Blood” could be used “when…in the wintertime one wants to have good, ripe fruit—cherries, grapes, and other fruits”. For Zieglerin, the elixir carried the potency to make more efficient natural change, specifically the ripening of fruits, irrespective of the season. Thus, the perpetual spring captured by Arcimboldo in Vertumnus evokes, in addition to charged dynastic meanings, conceptions of the alchemical elixir.

The synchronized blossoming of nature that forms Vertumnus’s physicality testifies to the attainment of the alchemical tincture, an engrossing feat that captured Rudolf’s interest to the point of obsession. In Arcimboldo’s composite portrait, Rudolf, the so-called Hermes Trismegistus of the Holy Roman Empire, has undergone a process of metamorphosis to literally embody the essence of alchemy. By elevating the emperor to the symbolic rank as overseer of the elements and the seasons, Arcimboldo’s portrait implies Rudolf’s attainment of the

78 Ibid; “Practical Alchemy,” 206.
Philosopher’s stone, the ultimate mark of distinction in alchemy. The fulfillment of the alchemical promise would have brought advantageous repercussions for Rudolf and the empire over which he presided, as the mastery of the alchemical arts meant the simultaneous control over the greater cosmos. In a context of religious conflict and mounting anxiety about a Turkish military invasion, Arcimboldo’s harmonious composition in *Vertumnus* foretells an uplifting alternative reality in which social and political upheavals cease and Rudolf reigns supreme.\(^{79}\)

### 4.5 The Composite Portraits and the Transformative World of the *Kunstkammer*

Arcimboldo’s composite portraits for Emperor Maximillian II and Rudolf II are intimately connected to the period interest in natural metamorphosis, the taste for the strange and the exotic, and the influential macrocosm/microcosmic analogy for the universe. In these ways, the composite portraits overlap with the values and aims that propelled the development of the Habsburg *Kunstkammer*. The intersections between the composite portraits and the imperial cabinet of art and curiosities give reason to explore briefly how Arcimboldo’s paintings can be considered two-dimensional *Kunstkammers* in their own right.

Although the Habsburg *Kunstkammer* was not unique in its conception, as practices of collecting were widespread throughout early modern Europe, it became, by the late sixteenth century, an unparalleled collection of *artificialia* (man-made objects) and *naturalia* (natural

\(^{79}\) As images that laud Habsburg prowess, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, including *Vertumnus*, ultimately construct a fallacious reality. If Rudolf II is remembered as a great humanist monarch, his legacy in stately matters is not nearly as outstanding. For further information regarding the failed military battles against the Ottoman Empire and the territorial losses suffered by the Holy Roman Empire under Rudolf’s reign, see: Robert J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550-1700; An Interpretation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990).
objects) originating from Europe and the far reaches of the globe. The prominent status of the Habsburg Kunstkammer is partially owed to the efforts of Maximillian II, who actively acquired items of an exceptional calibre to further expand his family’s collection of coins and antiquities. “Quanta rariora tanta meliora”, or “the rarer the better”, was his motto when it came to selecting items for his ever-expanding collection. Of the objects sought by the emperor, a predilection was shown for coins, automata of all sorts, including clocks, as well as various preserved natural specimens, such as: fruits, seeds, metals and minerals. Overall, Maximillian’s collection was encyclopaedic in nature and was praised by his contemporaries as prototypical. If Maximillian’s Kunstkammer achieved a notable status in sixteenth-century Europe, it eventually became legendary in its scope and quality under the discerning eye of Rudolf II, who not only inherited his father’s significant collection, but fervently and, at times aggressively, expanded it.

Soon after the transfer of the imperial court to Prague in 1583, Rudolf II enlisted the skills of court architects and engineers to build new rooms at Hradčany Castle to accommodate his ever-growing collection. We know of the contents of Rudolf’s collection through an

82 Kirchweger, “Between Art,” 189.
83 Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting,” 208. Located on the first floor at the northern side of the palace, these galleries, referred to as the New Room and the Spanish Room, became the designated space for thousands of the emperor’s paintings, including works by Titian, Veronese, Correggio, and Dürer, along with other vast quantities of sculptures, vases, gems, natural rarities, scientific instruments, coins, and books. Between 1605-06, the construction of the ‘anterior Kunstkammer’ was also completed on the first floor. This additional space consisted of three vaulted rooms intended for the display and storage of further rarities, both natural and artificial. Finally, neighboring the so-called Mathematics Tower was the Kunstkammer itself, in which extensive quantities of fine scientific instruments and a number of
inventory compiled by the imperial antiquarian, Daniel Fröschl, between 1607 and 1611.\textsuperscript{84} Fröschl’s record, although incomplete, comprised a remarkable three thousand entries, beginning with an overview of Rudolf’s collection of natural specimens, followed by a list of his art objects, clocks and scientific instruments. Of the items enumerated in the inventory, natural objects in their unaltered state were especially well-represented. Such items included: whole taxidermic animals, skins, horns, fossils, corals, shells, minerals, seeds, and fruits.\textsuperscript{85} Aside from an encyclopaedic collection of naturalia, Rudolf also amassed an impressive quantity of luxurious art objects made from a diversity of materials. Among the items of artificialia listed by Fröschl were: tapestries, cameos, weapons, exotic featherworks, clocks, medals, coins, and furniture. The Holy Roman Emperor was also regarded as one of the greatest collectors of paintings and drawings, as his Kunstкамmer housed artworks from all major European schools, including the Italian, Flemish, German, and Spanish ones.\textsuperscript{86} For instance, Rudolf avidly collected the work of Raphael, Tintoretto, Correggio, Veronese, Leonardo, and Pieter Breughel the Elder. Further, the drawings and paintings of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) were especially predominant manuscripts and books could be found. The sheer number of spaces devised to accommodate Rudolf’s treasures is indicative of a collection of considerable import.

\textsuperscript{84} For the complete inventory of Rudolf II’s collection, as compiled by Fröschl, see: Rotrand Bauer and Herbert Haupt, “Das Kunstкамmer inventar Kaiser Rudolfs II in Prag; Ein Inventar aus den Jahren,” in Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien 72 (1976): 1-185.

\textsuperscript{85} Franz Kirchweger, “The Treasures of the House of Habsburg and the Kunstкамmer: The History and the Holdings,” in Treasures of the Habsburgs: The Kunstкамmer at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, eds. Sabine Haag and Franz Kirchweger (London, UK: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 27. The naturalia preserved in the Kunstкамmer would have existed in dialogue with the rare plants in Rudolf’s expansive gardens, his aviary of exotic birds, and the imperial zoo, which included at least one lion, a leopard and deer (Kaufmann, School of Prague, 76).

\textsuperscript{86} Bolton, Follies of Science, 57-8.
in the Rudolfine gallery, as the emperor went to great lengths and spared no expense to secure many of the German artist’s works for himself.\textsuperscript{87}

Rudolf’s unparalleled collection, however, is not merely the result of a frenzied engagement in collecting, but is rather a calculated projection of imperial power. Like Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, though on a more elaborate scale, the \textit{Kunstkammer} represented a broad assemblage of objects, including those of a remarkable rarity and exoticism, brought together under a cohesive framework. By virtue of belonging to the imperial collection, the otherwise manifold and chaotic was imbued with a sense of unity and order. The harmonizing effect provided by the structure of the \textit{Kunstkammer} was extended to reflect the owner’s ability to manage and master the world’s most disparate parts.\textsuperscript{88} In its encyclopaedic scope, the \textit{Kunstkammer} stood as a microcosm for the larger universe, as defined by the Hermetic and Neoplatonic schools, and suggested the Holy Roman Emperor’s access to not only the obscurest meanings of the cosmos, but also his mastery over its most occult forces.\textsuperscript{89} Though access to the imperial collection would have been limited to select dignitaries, the meanings of Habsburg pre-eminence that it carried would have been apparent to all those aware of its existence.\textsuperscript{90} As a manifestation of Habsburg ideology of rule, the imperial \textit{Kunstkammer} dovetails with Arcimboldo’s composite portraits, another form of imperial propaganda riddled with weighty cosmic meanings.

\textsuperscript{87} For further information on Rudolf II’s collection of the works of Albrecht Dürer, see: Andrea S. Bubenik, \textit{Reframing Albrecht Dürer; The Appropriation of Art, 1528-1700} (London, UK: Ashgate, 2013), 39-74.
\textsuperscript{89} Marshall, \textit{Theatre of World}, 86.
\textsuperscript{90} Kaufmann, \textit{Mastery of Nature}, 180; Marshall, \textit{Theatre of World}, 60.
Like alchemy and the broader spirit of natural inquiry that characterized Habsburg court culture, the *Kunstkammer* and the nature of some of its contents provide further insight into Arcimboldo’s pictorial inventions. The theme of metamorphosis arises once more upon considering some of the treasures collected by the House of Habsburg in the late sixteenth century. Much as with the composite portraits, a remarkable number of these objects altogether evade easy classification into the distinct categories of either *naturalia* or *artificialia*. Such items typically feature an element of natural origins, like coral, an ostrich egg, or a bezoar stone, that at once remains recognizable, as it appears strange and otherworldly through its incorporation into an overall artistic design.

One example of an item in the imperial collection that transgresses the traditional boundary between artifice and nature is a goblet (Prague, 1611) attributed to Nikolaus Pfaff (Nuremberg 1556? - Prague 1612), an artist favored by Emperor Rudolf II [Fig. 19]. The cup and its stem have been carved from rhinoceros horn, a material imbued with the magical power

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91 Marshall, *Theatre of World*, 77. Rudolf’s great enthusiasm as a collector was shared by other members of the Habsburg family, most notably by his uncle, Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol (1529-95). Following Ferdinand’s demise, Rudolf entered into negotiations to purchase Ambras Castle and the impressive collection amassed therein. For 170,000 florins, the emperor successfully acquired both the castle and the collection, although the objects forming the *Kunst-und-Wunderkammer* alone were estimated to be worth 100,000 florins. For greater information on the contents of the collection at Ambras Castle, as well as their mode of display and eventual dispersal into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see: Kirchweger, “Treasures House of Habsburg,” 20-5.


93 The rhinoceros horn goblet is but one example of the many hybrid oddities collected by the House of Habsburg. For additional examples, see: Kirchweger, “Between Art,” 190-2; Kaufmann, *Visual Jokes*, 196-98.
to repel evil and calamity. Adorning its lid and presiding over the entire design is the face of menacing gilt silver beast to which the sharp horns of an African warthog have been affixed. If Pfaff’s grimacing hybrid monster represents the artistic refashioning of nature, the same can be said of the decoration occupying the surface of the cup. Here the artist demonstrates his skill, as he uses the natural surface of rhinoceros horn to represent the wayward branches of coral. As the intermingled corals twist around the stem and reach a culminating point on the body of the goblet, interspersed human faces emerge gently, suggesting the interconnectedness of all earthly life. Overall, the unusual cup showcases Pfaff’s ability to use nature in a transformative way, as he fashions from it anything he wills and, thereby, affirms his creative genius.

Pfaff’s goblet is but one instance of how the visual and alchemical arts overlapped in meaningful ways during the early modern period, as both the alchemist and the artist strove to achieve the similar end of transformation. In his composite portraits, Arcimboldo borrows recognizable elements from the physical world, but through skillful reconfiguration, produces a composition that surpasses nature. Just as the alchemist improves upon nature by purifying base metals through chemical means, Arcimboldo’s composite portraits affirm their maker’s ability to manipulate the natural world to suit his creative ends. If alchemical gold is the purest state of nature, so too are the composite portraits in their harmonious configuration of the universe’s diverse parts. In the absence of any compelling evidence to suggest that Arcimboldo engaged in alchemy, it is, nevertheless, tempting to view his composite portraits as the alchemical dream realized. In these transformative paintings, the fleeting process of transformation is preserved and fixed into perpetuity on a two-dimensional surface. For Arcimboldo, his studio was his

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laboratory, his paintbrush, his athanor, and his intellectualism his Philosopher’s stone, with which
even the most fantastic of creation was possible.

4.6 Conclusion

Arcimboldo served the House of Habsburg for over a quarter century of his life. During this significant period of time, the artist not only made the acquaintance of numerous prominent humanists, but also established himself as an esteemed equal among them. The duration of Arcimboldo’s stay in central Europe, coupled with the vigorous intellectual climate in which he operated, justify the need to explore his famous composite portraits within the framework of Habsburg court culture. Specifically, the keen interest in the occult arts that characterised the courts of both Maximilian II and Rudolf II provides a fruitful avenue through which to explore aspects of the composite portraits that are otherwise overshadowed by their overtly whimsical nature.

In their subject matter and configuration, Arcimboldo’s *Four Seasons, Four Elements,* and *Vertumnus* reference the defining tenets of alchemy. By discussing these works through the lens of alchemy, the transformative quality of Arcimboldo’s puzzle portraits, perhaps their most salient characteristic, is appropriately foregrounded. Beyond the paintings in question, the notion of metamorphosis pervaded numerous aspects of the late sixteenth-century Habsburg court. The insatiable taste for the metamorphic is evidenced, for example, by the very nature of the items housed in the imperial *Kunstkammer,* many of which resist traditional classification, as they, much like Arcimboldo’s paintings, slip fluidly between the seemingly distinct realms of art and nature.

If the composite portraits elevate Habsburg authority to the level of divinity through the inclusion of imperial symbolism, they also do so through their allusion to alchemical
transmutation. Achievement in alchemy during the early modern period was synonymous with power, as the elixir promised an omnipotent mastery over the most obscure forces of the universe. For this reason, the reference to alchemical processes in the composite portraits would have been a most effective mechanism with which to convey not only Habsburg authority, but also the creative virtuosity of the artist. Indeed, the theme of metamorphosis was significant for several tiers of early modern society, including the toiling alchemist, the ingenious artist, and the powerful ruler. For the alchemist, all experimentation was driven by the hope for transformation, not only of base metals into gold, but of the spiritual self as well. Similarly, like the alchemical adept, Arcimboldo manipulates natural elements in innovative ways to evoke metamorphosis. In his composite portraits, the chemical process is comparable to artful configuration, as the myriad and disjointed components of the natural world are brought together into a perfected and seamless entity. Transformation, for both the artist and the alchemist, was the ultimate exhibition of ability. Finally, for the ruler, such as the late sixteenth-century Holy Roman Emperor, the notion of transformation carried perhaps the greatest promise of all. Presiding over a territory plagued by social and political turmoil, alchemical metamorphosis suggested the possibility for the emperor’s involvement in higher realms of control. If the alchemist sought gold, Rudolf II might have wished for a return to a utopian Golden Age, in which a seemingly irreparable society would transform into one of lasting harmony and infinite prosperity. Thus, by invoking the metamorphic, Arcimboldo’s complex composite portraits are riddled with connotations as varied as the objects of which they are formed.
8. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Flora*, 1589. Oil on panel, 80.4 x 60.6 cm. Private collection.
9. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Vertumnus (Emperor Rudolf II), 1590. Oil on panel, 68 x 56 cm. Skokloster Castle, Skokloster.
18. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Stag with violets, late 16\textsuperscript{th} century. Watercolor. Collection of Manuscripts and Rare Books, Österichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.
19. Nikolaus Pfaff (attributed), Goblet with horns of warthog, Prague, 1611. Horn of white rhinoceros, tusks of African warthog, silver gilt, partly painted. 59.7 x 27.5 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

If the Habsburg court appeared to occupy forevermore the apex of intellectualism in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, its prestigious status was ultimately a fleeting one. Indeed, what seemed like an enduring magical empire unravelled at a dizzying pace following Emperor Rudolf II’s forced abdication in 1611, an event that is considered as a watershed for the subsequent decline of Habsburg intellectual influence.\(^1\) Deemed to be ineffective in the face of social and political issues, Rudolf was pressured by his peers to renounce his title as Holy Roman Emperor, along with the authority that accompanied it.\(^2\) In doing so, he allowed his brother, Matthias, to ascend the throne as King of Bohemia in the spring of 1612. Only nine months following the latter’s coronation, as though unable to bear further humiliation, the marginalized Rudolf II, once the most celebrated patron of the occult arts of his time, died on 20 January 1612.\(^3\)

As an extension of the emperor, Rudolf’s Kunstkammer faced a comparably unfortunate decline. In what would be the last battle of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-48), the Swedish general, Hans Christoff von Königsmarck, led his troops into Prague on the night of 25 July 1648.

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\(^1\) Herbert Haupt, “In the Name of God: Religious Struggles in the Empire, 1555-1648,” in *Rudolf II and Prague; The Court and the City*, eds. Eliška Fućíková, et al. (New York, NY: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 76.

\(^2\) Perhaps the most significant event leading up to Rudolf II’s removal from the throne was the calamitous ‘Fifteen Years War’, which was waged against the Turks between 1591 and 1606. Rudolf’s brother and future successor, Matthias, oversaw the war and led his troops to an eventual victory. However, upon negotiating the terms for peace, the latter made considerable land concessions to the Turks. These territorial losses upset Rudolf deeply and further jeopardized his already faltering reputation as an effective ruler (Antonovich, *L’art à la cour de Rodolphe*, 8).

\(^3\) Haupt, “In Name of God,” 76.
to ransack Hradčany and the Lesser Town.\textsuperscript{4} With their sights set on the treasures comprising the Habsburg \textit{Kunstkammer}, the Swedish army gained control of Hradčany Castle by daybreak, initiating what is regarded as the greatest art coup in Scandinavian history.\textsuperscript{5} Remarking upon the fate of the Rudolfine cabinet of art and curiosities, Jaromír Neuman has described the Swedish invasion as: “the greatest catastrophe that ever overtook any European art collection”.\textsuperscript{6} Neuman’s statement finds substantiation in the well-documented aftermath of the attack, which listed a mere ten paintings that escaped seizure, in addition to a plethora of empty frames, broken sculptures, and damaged tables.\textsuperscript{7} Upon hearing of the successful capture of many of the Habsburg treasures, Queen Christina issued strict orders that these objects be shipped to Sweden to be absorbed into her own collection as the spoils of war.\textsuperscript{8} Consequently, following the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia, the Swedish army retreated to Stockholm in September of 1649 to present their expectant ruler with upwards of five hundred paintings, along with numerous precious art objects and curios, such as coins, medals, clocks, and exotic rarities.\textsuperscript{9}

From their initial capture in the mid-seventeenth century, Rudolf’s treasures passed through the hands of many other notable collectors. Following Queen Christina’s demise in 1689, her collection of paintings, of which a significant portion originated from the Habsburg \textit{Kunstkammer}, was acquired by Don Livio Odescalchi, who thereafter sold it to the Duke of

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Orléans for a slightly reduced price in 1721.\textsuperscript{10} Although the paintings that once formed the Rudolfine gallery continued to be dispersed throughout Europe well into the nineteenth century, it suffices to note that, in a modern context, they currently belong to notable collections across the globe, including those found in Vienna, London, Paris, Antwerp, New York, and Philadelphia.

One such example is Arcimboldo’s \textit{Vertumnus}, which is presently showcased at Stockholm’s Skokloster Castle as one of its main attractions. In its current context of display, Arcimboldo’s depiction of Rudolf II, a once potent symbol of the Holy Roman Emperor’s far-reaching authority, is neutralized to become instead a most ironic testament to his ineptitude as ruler and to the faltering state of the Empire in the early modern period. Indeed, as Evans remarks, the “composed head formed by Arcimboldo in the guise of Vertumnus, god of change, became [from the late seventeenth century onwards] the deposed head of a ruler dispossessed in all his territories”.\textsuperscript{11}

The capture and subsequent fragmentation of Rudolf’s \textit{Kunstkammer} overlapped with the more gradual decline of natural magic as a field of scientific inquiry. Having reached its peak of influence by the end of the sixteenth century, the study of nature from a mystical perspective began to wane in favor of a mathematical approach.\textsuperscript{12} For many intellectuals engaged in the study of nature and of the cosmos, God was no longer envisaged as a quasi-magician, but as an engineer. Coinciding with this shift in perception, the universe was likened to a machine that

\textsuperscript{10} Neuman, \textit{Picture Gallery Prague}, 24.
\textsuperscript{11} Evans, “Imperial Court,” 51.
\textsuperscript{12} Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 41, 141.
necessitated measurement, calculation and analysis in order to be fully grasped.\textsuperscript{13} Consequently, scholarly pursuits with strong occult underpinnings, such as alchemy, became outmoded and widely disregarded by the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, European cabinets of curiosities and the variety of objects housed therein were no longer believed to provide greater insight into the physical world.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, upon considering the move from a mystical conception of the universe to a mechanistic one, it remains important to recognize the centrality of magic as a driving force behind early foundational investigations of nature. As Allen Debus makes clear, although “today we find it easy-and necessary-to separate ‘science’ from occult interests…many then could not”.\textsuperscript{16}

The composite portraits that Arcimboldo produced for Maximillian II and Rudolf II affirm the pervasiveness of magic and the occult in the early modern period. In his transformative configuration of a multitude of natural life, Arcimboldo seems to reference not only the ethos of alchemy, but also the broader mystical beliefs that propelled all intellectual activity at the central European court. Further, by invoking alchemy, a pursuit closely bound to notions of imperial prestige and power, the artist manages to fashion potent and highly-sophisticated symbols of Habsburg pre-eminence. Overall, the composite images are as playful

\textsuperscript{13} Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 47. Although the analogy of a mechanistic universe predates the late sixteenth century, its prominence in the seventeenth century has been attributed to the revival of Archimedean thought. Archimedes (287-212 BCE) was a Greek mathematician whose philosophical beliefs were grounded in the study of numbers and mechanisms. The Archimedean tradition was not steeped in the esoteric, nor was it concerned with uncovering religious significance in perceived universal mathematical harmonies. Rather, according to this thought system, the diverse components of the universe were envisaged as mechanical parts that would fit together to comprise a singular machine. Although known to a small portion of medieval intellectual society in manuscript form, the work of Archimedes become increasingly popularized through Niccolo Tartaglia’s (1499-1557) Latin edition of the Greek thinker’s works, which was printed in 1543 (Kearney, \textit{Science and Change}, 39-48).


\textsuperscript{15} Bubenik, “Art, Astrology, Astronomy,” 83.

\textsuperscript{16} Debus, \textit{Man and Nature}, 2.
as they are political, as scientific as they are magical, and as transformative as they are fixed. As such, they have resisted any singular reading, but instead have prompted numerous and diverse scholarly discourses. If an overarching reading seems inappropriate given their complexity, it is hoped that this thesis has further contributed to the vibrant polyphony of interpretations of Arcimboldo’s evocative puzzle portraits.
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