

### Three Alchemical Miniatures from *Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* [The Book of the Holy Trinity]

[text not visible], manuscript on parchment  
Southern Germany or Austria, c. 1450-1475

Three full-page miniatures with gilt borders, originally from the same manuscript, slightly rubbed, otherwise in good condition. Mounted on wood, in gilt frames, brief descriptions pasted on the verso of the frames, cut from a catalogue, stamps and seals, witnesses of earlier provenance. Dimensions, framed: 142 x 112 mm., miniatures, c. 119 x 86 mm.

These are three very attractive alchemical miniatures, of a quality that suggests they were once part of an unusually deluxe alchemical manuscript, still unidentified. They are of interest for their iconography, and as evidence of the existence of a deluxe manuscript of *Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, the first alchemical text in German, illustrated by fully-painted miniatures, rather than colored line drawings.

#### PROVENANCE

1. Three miniatures from the same manuscript; since they are now mounted on wood, any script on the verso is inaccessible, but might be recoverable. A fourth miniature from this manuscript is now National Museum of Sweden, B 1587 (reproduced in Nordenfalk, 1979, cat. 32, pp. 116-117; and figs. 238-239, images of two of the miniatures described here, then listed as owner unknown).

Given the iconography of these miniatures and their relationship to other manuscripts of the text, one can conclude with a very high degree of certainty that they were originally from a manuscript of *Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (Obrist, 1982, pp. 271-275), probably from Southern Germany, or possibly Austria in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Nordenfalk suggested an origin in Southern Germany around the middle of the fifteenth century (Nordenfalk, 1979, cat. 32); Obrist, 1982, p. 272, suggested the second half of the fifteenth century, based on a comparison with Munich, BSB, cgm. 598, which can be dated after 1467 (cf. for example figs. 45 and 47 from the Munich manuscript in Hartlaub, 1991); some stylistic similarities may also be pointed out to Granada, Biblioteca Universitaria, C 67, the illuminated *Tacuinum sanitatis* from Regensburg around 1445 (especially the form of the tree and the background of the miniature, reproduced in Mutherich and Dachs 1987, cat. 98, taf. 167).

2. Offered for sale in the twentieth century in Munich, Robert Wölflle, Buch- und Kunstantiquariat, his label pasted on the back of all three miniatures.
3. Offered by an English or American dealer; clippings from a catalogue in English pasted on back of each miniature; (in purple ink, partially visible, round stamp from "Dolanes Françaises"; other dealers annotations visible in ink and pencil, and small paper stamp).
4. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books; Bibliotheca Philosophia Hermetica MS 177, respectively no. 423, 424, and 425 (noted on the verso in ink).

## ILLUMINATION

1. An Ouroboros (a dragon eating his tail) sits on top of the foliage of a tree, and encircles a red and gold double eagle, surrounded by eight rays emanating from a star, filled with red and white, on top of the ouroboros. Extending from this star, which is probably Mercury, are two horizontal rays, terminating in the sun and the moon. Four of the additional rays that extend from the central star end with stars; two rays descend into the water below the tree.

The dragon is depicted in a rather bright green, with bright blue water, some gold used for shading on the dragon, and black on the eagle; possibly partially over-painted, since the background is rather muddy; rectangular gold border around the miniature with pointillé detailing, with some flaking.

This scene is also found in Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS germ. 1, f. 9v (Obrist, p. 274, no. 14), Leiden, Universiteits Bibliotheek, Codex Vossianus Chym. F. 29 (see [http://herve.delboy.perso.sfr.fr/de\\_alchimia\\_f94a.jpg](http://herve.delboy.perso.sfr.fr/de_alchimia_f94a.jpg)), and Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 188 Blankenburg (reproduced in Obrist, 1982, pl. 31, and in Junker, 1986, abb. 28; Butzmann, 1966, pp. 184-186; Ott, 1986- , no. 2.1.8).

This iconography was also re-used in Reusner, 1582, p. 255 (described, Alchemy website, *Pandora*, Emblem 15, [http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s\\_pandor.html](http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s_pandor.html)).

2. The Ouroboros (dragon eating its tail) is depicted on its back within a circular space; a plant, (probably a rose), is partially wrapped around the dragon and grows out of the circle with three flowers; the largest central flower depicted in shades of brown, rimmed in bright orange-red, as is the smaller bloom on the left, the flower on the right is now darkened, possibly originally silver. The image is enclosed in a narrow oval shape, shaded in blue around the edges and white in the center, on a beige-pink ground with floral scrolls, all bordered in a rectangular gold frame (now slightly flaking).

This image is also found in Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS germ. 1, f. 10 (Obrist, 1982, p. 274, no. 15), and in a late copy, c. 1550 now in Basle, Universitätsbibliothek, MS LIV 1 (Lennep, 1984, fig. 58); it is not found in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 188 Blankenburg, group two of *Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (see Obrist, 1982, pp. 269-271).

Re-used later in Reusner, 1582, p. 257 (described, Alchemy website, *Pandora*, Emblem 16, [http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s\\_pandor.html](http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s_pandor.html)); see also <http://www.alchemywebsite.com/emblems/embl046.html> (wood engraving, some similarities).

3. A flask or retort finishing in a gold crown containing an Ouroboros (dragon eating its tail), on top of which sits two birds (an eagle and a crow?), both in shades of gray and black, on a white ground; the flask is bordered in red and black (tarnished silver?) with three silver and three red eagles respectively, with the moon on the left and the sun on the right, all on a blue ground with delicate white floral scrolls, and a rectangular gold frame (very slight flaking), and two rows of pointillé dots.

This image is not found in Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS germ. 1 (Obrist, 1982, p. 273-4), but it is found, with some variations, in Leiden, Bib. Univ., Voss. Chym. F. 29, f. 73v (Obrist, 1982, p. 275), in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 188 Blankenburg, f. 144, (reproduced in Obrist, 1982, pl. 32, and in Junker, 1986, abb. 30;

Butzmann, 1966, pp. 184-186; Ott, 1986- , no. 2.1.8), and in manuscripts of the *Aurora consurgens*, in this case as part of a more elaborate image with a figure of a man (Obrist, 1982, pl. 64, and cf. plates 90, 91; and online from Glasgow University Library, MS Ferguson 6, <http://www.alchemywebsite.com/auror-6.html>).

Used later by Reusner, 1582, p. 245 (shield on the right) (described (described, Alchemy website, *Pandora*, Emblem 11, [http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s\\_pandor.html](http://www.alchemywebsite.com/s_pandor.html)).

The fourth image from this manuscript, now Stockholm, National Museum of Sweden, B 1587 (reproduced in Nordenfalk, 1979, cat. 32, pp. 116-117; Obrist, 1982, pl. 92), depicts a crowned female figure holding in her right hand the sun, and in her left a small dragon; her feet are placed in two square basins connected by a pipe, with two large wings emerging from behind the basins. This iconography, as Nordenfalk observed is also found in Manchester, John Rylands Library, German MS 1, f. 10v (Obrist, 1982, p. 274, no. 16).

The illustrations of Ulmannus's *Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, can be divided into three groups; the miniatures described here, and the miniature now in Stockholm, are included in the third group, together with the Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS germ. 1, Basle, Bibl. Univ., MS L IV 1, and Leiden, Bibl. Univ. Voss. Chym. F. 29 (Obrist, 1982, pp. 271-275; Boeren, 1975, p. 83).

*Das Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit* (The Book of the Holy Trinity), the earliest alchemical work in German, belongs in the tradition of alchemical texts such as those by Johannes Rupescissa and Pseudo-Arnaldus of Villanova, that were influenced by the eschatological ideas of the Spiritual Franciscans, although in this case alchemy is seen as a means to help establish the reign of a last emperor. Its author, generally identified as a Franciscan by the name of Ulmannus, was present at the Council of Constance in 1416-1417, where he presented some version of the text to the Emperor Sigismund; in 1419 the completed text was dedicated to Frederick I (1370-1440), elector of Brandenburg. Obrist has summarized it as a text that is "interminable, monotonous, and full of repetition," virtually without any coherent structure. The Trinity and the Passion of Christ are used as allegories for alchemy, and the text also included practical alchemical recipes.

There is no modern critical edition of the text, nor a complete survey of all the extant manuscripts, but it survives in at least twenty-four manuscripts and fragments, dating from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries (see Telle, 2004, Buntz, 1971, listed sixteen complete manuscripts and eight fragments; cf. "Handschriftcensus," Online resources, an incomplete list but with three manuscripts not listed in other sources), many of which are illustrated with pictorial motifs relating to political views, theological doctrines, and the alchemical transformation of metals (Obrist, 1982, mentioning a dozen twelve illustrated copies, and Ott, 1986- , pp. 29-43, describing nine illustrated copies, three of which are full color, and the remainder pen-and-ink).

A second, expanded version of the text was prepared in 1433 in Cadolzburg, Bavaria for Frederick's son John, Margrave of Brandenburg (1406-1464), known as John the Alchemist. This manuscript is now lost, but this recension is preserved in Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August Bibliothek, cod. 188 Blankenburg, dated 1471 (edited in Junker, 1986); its expanded cycle of illustrations (classified by Obrist and Buntz as group two), include two of the subjects found in the miniatures described here (numbers one and three). The third group of manuscripts, evidence of an even more extensive cycle of illustrations, is represented by the manuscript, now lost, that included the miniatures described here (and the Stockholm leaf), as well as

Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS germ. 1 from the first half of the fifteenth century (not the complete text, but based on it, with inscriptions and explanations), and the later copies in Basle and Leiden, mentioned above.

The subjects of the three miniatures (and the fourth miniature, now in Stockholm) are also found in a work published in Basel 1582, *Pandora, Das ist die Edleste Gab Gottes ...* (Pandora, That Is, the Noblest Gift of God ...), reprinted in 1588, and in Johann Michael Faust, 1706 (see Online Resources, below), by a physician, Hieronymus Reusner, writing as a Franciscan friar with the pseudonym "Epimetheus" (the brother of Prometheus, who accepted Pandora as a gift from Zeus). The sequence of eighteen woodcuts in the latter part of the book—one of the first alchemical image series published—makes it unique, and are said to encode an actual sequence of chemical processes. Miniature 1, see Reusner, 1582, p. 255; miniature 2, Reusner, 1582, p. 257; miniature 3, Reusner, 1582, p. 245 (Reusner's image contains more elements; cf. the shield on the right); Stockholm miniature, Reusner, 1582, p. 259.

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

The Ritman Library (Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica)  
<http://www.ritmanlibrary.com/collection/collection-profile/>

Das Digitale Repertorium "Geschichtsquellen des deutschen Mittelalters: "Buch der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit,"  
[http://www.geschichtsquellen.de/repOpus\\_00723.html](http://www.geschichtsquellen.de/repOpus_00723.html)

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