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**GETTY RESEARCH INSTITUTE PRESENTS
THE ART OF ALCHEMY**

The exhibition draws on art and rare books from the Getty Research Institute and Getty Museum to explore the curious blend of science and spirituality known as alchemy

The Art of Alchemy
On view at the Getty Research Institute
October 11, 2016 through February 12, 2017

LOS ANGELES – Long shrouded in secrecy, alchemy was once considered the highest of arts. Straddling art, science, and natural philosophy, alchemy has proven key to both the materiality and creative expression embedded in artistic output, from ancient sculpture and the decorative arts to medieval illumination, and masterpieces in paint, print, and a panoply of media from the European Renaissance to the present day.

Drawing primarily from the collections of the Getty Research Institute as well as the J. Paul Getty Museum, the exhibition *The Art of Alchemy* examines the impact of alchemy around the world on artistic practice and its expression in visual culture from antiquity to the present.

"Alchemy is a fascinating subject that cuts across continents and epochs," said Thomas W. Gaehtgens, director of the Getty Research Institute.

"It is because the Getty Research Institute collections are so diverse and intricately connected that we are able to deeply investigate and present this often misunderstood subject. This exhibition reflects the human ambition to explore and understand the wonders, the



Allegory of Distillation, Claudio de Domenico Celentano di Valle Nove (Neapolitan, active ca. 1606), Watercolor in Claudio de Domenico Celentano di Valle Nove, [Book of Alchemical Formulas] (Naples, 1606), p. 6



Mercury, "The Hypocritical Planet", Istanbul, Watercolor in Zakariya ibn Muhammad al-Qazwini, "Kitāb al-ʿajāʾib wa'l-gharāʾib" (Book of Wonders and Oddities), 1553, pp. 29–30, Gift of Lawrence J. Schoenberg, The Getty Research Institute

materiality, and the laws of nature since the earliest times. Imagination, curiosity, scholarship, enchantment, science, philosophy, and chemistry amalgamate in the artistic processes of Alchemy."

On view at the Getty Research Institute from October 11, 2016, through February 12, 2017, *The Art of Alchemy* features more than 100 objects, including manuscripts and rare books, prints, sculpture, and other works of art dating from the 3rd century BCE to the 20th century and coming from across Europe and Asia. The exhibition was organized in partnership with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, where it will be on view in 2017, and is curated by David Brafman, associate curator of rare books with assistance from Rhiannon Knol.

The Art of Alchemy approaches the subject from a global perspective, tracing how alchemy historically bonded art, science, and natural philosophy in visual cultures throughout the world. From its origins in Classical and Eurasian antiquity to the advances made

and spread throughout the Islamic world and the 'silk' routes of Central Asia, material and intellectual exchange across cultures reached mediaeval Europe, and catalyzed alchemy's 'golden age' from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. The persistence of its spirit is still present in artistic expression and technocratic trends of the modern day, and the historical echoes of this chemical obsession with artificial reproduction also resound throughout more modern technologies of art, from chromolithography in the Industrial Age to the media that now claim artistic boasting rights as the ultimate chemical mirrors of nature: photography and the liquid crystal displays of the digital world.

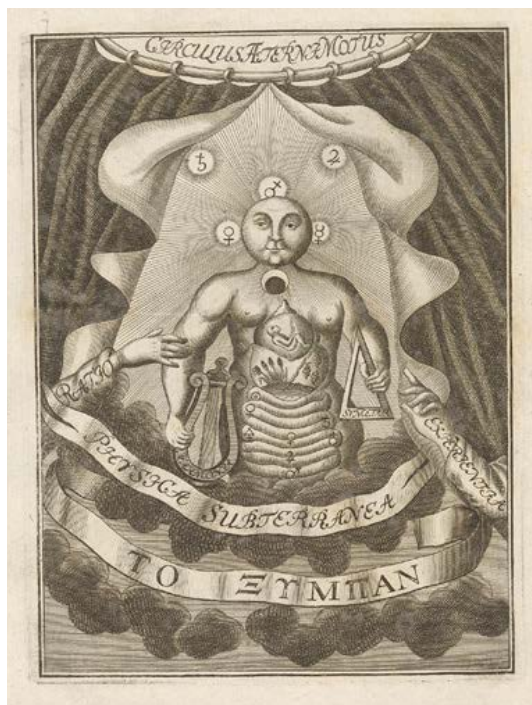
"Alchemy was a science tinged with spirituality and infused with a spritz of artistic spirit. Most people think of alchemy as a fringe subject when really it was a mainstream technology and worldview that influenced artistic practice and expression throughout the world," said David Brafman, curator of the exhibition. "Alchemy may well have been the most important human invention after that of the wheel and the mastery of fire. Certainly it was a direct consequence of the latter."

The exhibition is presented in three parts: "Alchemical Creation," "Alchemy and Creativity," and "Alchemical Culture."

Alchemical Creation explores alchemy's origins in Greco-Egyptian antiquity, illustrated by ancient artifacts reflecting alchemical theories and techniques, including a second-century mummy portrait painted with red lead, an early example of synthetic pigments with both medicinal and artistic applications. This union of Greek and Egyptian thought flourished in the ancient city of Alexandria, producing the legendary sage Hermes Trismegistos, whose fabled *Corpus Hermeticum* provided the philosophical blueprint of alchemical theory. At the same time, the flow of materials and technologies between the ancient Mediterranean, Middle East, India, and China along the Silk Routes of Eurasia spread these ideas widely, inspiring dazzling glass imitations of precious stones and gems, as well as scientific developments in the use of mysterious metals like mercury to create synthetic gold—or at least, its appearance—through gilding techniques.

This section also explores alchemical ideas about the nature of creation itself, which was the secret alchemists worked to unlock in order to harness the powers of nature for their own imaginative ends. Renaissance books depict the act of divine creation as analogous to that of a draftsman or an artist, linking the creativity of the artist (or alchemist) with that of the prime mover and igniting centuries of debate over the scope and legitimacy of the art of alchemy.

The section **Alchemy and Creativity** illustrates how practical alchemy and its larger scientific and spiritual concerns crucially influenced both artistic practice and expression. The centerpiece of this section is the twenty-foot long Ripley Scroll, a cryptic, hand-painted 18th-century manuscript scroll named for a Catholic clergyman and poet George Ripley. This unusual art object is filled with fantastical allegorical symbolism depicting the operations of alchemy and the creation of the fabled "philosophers' stone."



The Body as Alchemical Laboratory, Engraving in Joachim Becher, *Physica subterranea* (Leipzig, 1738), frontispiece, The Getty Research Institute



The Ripley Scroll, England, ca. 1700
Watercolor, The Getty Research
Institute

Alchemical techniques for the synthetic production of color became an industrial mainstay for artistic applications in medieval and renaissance Europe, the most important of which was mercury sulfide: vermilion red—often referred to by alchemical texts as the philosophers' stone itself. While alchemists experimented with the production not only of all the colors of the rainbow, but also effects in glassmaking, inks, dyes, oil paints, ceramic glazes, and metallurgical techniques, their laboratory pursuits in turn inspired psychedelic symbolic imagery for the expression of science through art. Images such as the hermaphrodite, or the "Chemical Wedding," were used to depict chemical bonding—a metaphor which appears in both European and Chinese art—while various other chemical actions and substances were depicted as dragons, lions, birds, and even tiny humans within laboratory vessels. Their vaunting ambitions of playing God increasingly inspired alchemists to create and commission elaborate works of art encompassing their understanding of the entire universe through an alchemical lens, from the operations of the heavens to the anatomy of the human form.

While some of these chemical techniques were the purview of expert alchemists toiling in their labs, some of the techniques were simple and could be duplicated by the average artist, craftsman, or apothecary. By the Renaissance, diaries with scribbled notes and diagrams became commonplace, as did a publishing market for 'secret' recipe books for both art and medicine catering to not just artists but also female heads of household, such as the "Secrets" of the Venetian woman Isabella Cortese, published in 1565. Also on view in the exhibition are the personal notebooks of the artists Hans Hanberg and

Francesco Boccaccino, containing designs for furnaces, laboratory notes, and even a few accidental stains and sings.

The third section of the exhibition, **Alchemical Culture**, explores how the successes achieved by the experimental spirit of alchemy continued to spark creative inspiration from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, while advances in technology continually fed the ambitions of the human imagination. Alchemists' expertise in the management of mines and the other material resources of empire building attracted rulers whose technocratic ambitions were fueled by the discovery of a new world and its bounty of untapped natural resources. Patrons were not motivated simply by the possibility of filling the treasury with gold made to order, however; alchemical efforts also included perfecting the soul, relieving pain and sickness, and even proposing social utopias modeled after the divinely designed intelligent order of the cosmos.

The spirit of alchemy persisted into the Industrial Age, even after its transformation into the field of chemistry. The Bayer pharmaceutical company developed a rainbow of aniline coal tar dyes from petroleum waste, while at the same time working on a new, more effective painkiller—which would eventually be patented as “heroin.” The age of plastics also renewed the alchemical urge to imitate nature, offering the possibilities of imitation horn, ivory, and gemstones for the creation of everything from costume jewelry to life-saving medical devices. The discovery in 1888 of liquid crystals, which now provide the primary canvas of our digital world, inspired the scientific illustrator Ernst Haeckel to write *Kristallseelen* (“Crystal Souls”), on display at the Getty, proposing that this new form of matter—which although not alive, seemed to move and grow in response to stimuli—was a sign of the ultimate unity of all matter, animated by a divine creative spark.

Concurrent with the GRI exhibition, the Getty Museum will present the complementing exhibition *The Alchemy of Color in Medieval Manuscripts*, which looks at how book illuminators drew from alchemy for pigments and inks as well as imitation gold for lavish manuscripts.

The public may find more information www.getty.edu/alchemy.

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The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that includes the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Foundation. The J. Paul Getty Trust and Getty programs serve a varied audience from two locations: the Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Getty Villa in Pacific Palisades.

The Getty Research Institute is an operating program of the J. Paul Getty Trust. It serves education in the broadest sense by increasing knowledge and understanding about art and its history through advanced research. The Research Institute provides intellectual leadership through its research, exhibition, and publication programs and provides service to a wide range of scholars worldwide through residencies, fellowships, online resources, and a Research Library. The Research Library—housed in the 201,000-square-foot Research Institute building designed by Richard Meier—is one of the largest art and architecture libraries in the world. The general library collections (secondary sources) include almost 900,000 volumes of books, periodicals, and auction catalogues encompassing the history of Western art and related fields in the humanities. The Research Library's special collections include rare books, artists' journals, sketchbooks, architectural drawings and models, photographs, and archival materials.

Visiting the Getty Center

The Getty Center is open Tuesday through Friday and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and Saturday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. It is closed Mondays, and January 1, Thanksgiving Day and December 25. The Getty Center is open additional days this holiday season, on Monday December 26th, 2016, and Monday January 2nd, 2017. The Getty Center will close at 5:30 PM on Saturday December 24th and Saturday December 31st, 2016.

Admission to the Getty Center is always free. Parking is \$15 per car, but reduced to \$10 after 3 p.m. No reservation is required for parking or general admission. Reservations are required for event seating and groups of 15 or more. Please call (310) 440-7300 (English or Spanish) for reservations and information. The TTY line for callers who are deaf or hearing impaired is (310) 440-7305. The Getty Center is at 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles, California.

Same-day parking at both Museum locations (Getty Center and Getty Villa) is available for one fee through the Getty's Pay Once, Park Twice program. Visit the Museum Information Desk at the Center or the Villa to obtain a coupon good for same-day complimentary parking at the other site.

Additional information is available at www.getty.edu.

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