

# THE ALCHEMICAL ROOM

By Tommy Westlund



Regardless of which kind of alchemy is being practised, the alchemist needs to utilise one or several alchemical rooms or laboratories. These can be of both inner and outer nature, depending on the type and focus of the work. The image above, which we will use as the archetypal alchemical room, is from Heinrich Khunrath's (1560-1605) collection *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (The Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom), first published in 1595 and illustrated by Hans Vredeman de Vries.<sup>1</sup> As will be shown here, this drawing beautifully summarises alchemy's many branches, and is also highly practical.

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<sup>1</sup> It is available in high resolution at [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Amphitheatrum\\_sapientiae\\_aeternae\\_-\\_Alchemist%27s\\_Laboratory.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Amphitheatrum_sapientiae_aeternae_-_Alchemist%27s_Laboratory.jpg)

The image, called *The First Stage of the Great Work*, or *The Alchemist's Laboratory*, is roughly divided into three areas; the oratory to the left, the laboratory to the right, and the musical and working table as well as the bed in the middle. To exemplify the nature of the work, a closer description and interpretation of the room and its contents will follow. The ensuing description of how such a room can be created follows the so called inner or spiritual alchemical path, but its use encompasses also other paths.

### The Oratory

To the left, we see the alchemist in a praying position in front of a green prayer tent, his oratory. Alchemists have always emphasised the importance of prayer, and that it must precede and be part of the practical work, regardless of how that is being expressed.<sup>2</sup> The colour indicates a relation with the Emerald Tablet of Hermes, but also that the alchemical Opus is about greening nature. On its top we read: *FELIX CUI, יהיה, A CONSILIS – Happy is the person who has God as counsel.* Beneath we read: *אל דכמה – Wisdom of God.* To the left of the entrance we read: *HOC HOC AGENTIBVS NOBIS, ADERIT IPSE DEUS – When we attend strictly to our Work, God himself will aid us.* Thus, all work should take place on the basis of a divine contact, both because it is only God who can fully unlock the alchemical mysteries, and also as a constant reminder that the alchemist shouldn't be led by a simple gold desire of the ego or lower self. Thus is alchemy defined as the *Royal path*, which since the beginning of time has been imparted to adepts who have opened themselves unto the Wisdom of God, to investigate the mysteries of Nature and Creation.

On the tablet which hangs from the ceiling of the oratory we read: *NE LOQUA RIS DE DEOABSQ. LV.MINE – Do not speak about God without the Light.* In front of it hangs a lamp, as an outer symbol of this Divine Light which shall illumine the work of the alchemist. Two books are spread open on the table; the one on the left with an encircled pentagram (on the left page) and an encircled triangle within a quadrant (on the right page). The pentagram is both a symbol for the microcosm, the small world, and the man made divine, and is associated with the planet Venus as well as with geometry. The triangle is a symbol for the divine trinity and the three alchemical substances. The quadrant alludes to the four elements, in which the three principles act. The book on the right side is the Holy Scripture, spread open on psalm 145. This is an acrostic psalm, where each verse (145:1-13b) begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Thus is alluded that the whole creation process is possible through alchemy.<sup>3</sup> Beneath the table are an hourglass and a skull under the inscription: *DISCE BENE MORI – Learn to die well.* This alludes both to the way of Nature, the principle of dissolution, and that even though alchemy promises eternal life, this nonetheless implies death of various forms.<sup>4</sup>

On the table to the bottom left side stand an incense holder and a seashell. Incense billows forth and fills up the room, and as a sacrifice the incense carries forth the alchemist's prayers unto the throne of God. The seashell both alludes to a possible stoup (it can't be seen whether it is filled with water or not), and to the receptive ability of hearing the voice of God. Another allusion is to the alchemical hermaphrodite, since many gastropods and scallops are hermaphrodites. Further,

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<sup>2</sup> This is often expressed with the phrase *ora et labora*, pray and work. These two aspects of the alchemical opus are symbolised by the left and right sides of the room.

<sup>3</sup> According to Kabbalistic lore, which has influenced and been influenced by alchemy, the 22 Hebrew letters are the foundation of Creation; the instruments through which God created everything that is.

<sup>4</sup> Compare this also with, for example, the Egyptian mysteries, where the initiate learned how to die while still in this life, and thus knew how the soul could traverse the regions of death and so enter into the presence of the eternal Gods.

the form is interesting, since it resembles the golden thread and forms the circular processes of alchemy as well as its double or polarising forces.<sup>5</sup>

### The Laboratory

The laboratory is on the right side of the room, where two pillars carry up an architrave, upon which stands alchemical bottles. Beneath is the alchemical oven or *athanor*. This athanor is designated for works according to the *dry path*<sup>6</sup>, where the three alchemical principles are forced into separation through a process of calcination, fusion, sublimation, conjunction, and dry distillation of the prepared matter. On the banner above we read: *NEC TEMERE, NEC TIMIDE* – *Neither heedlessly nor timidly*. This should always be the alchemist's guiding word, and points out the importance of proper preparation, honest courage and serenity, and that the work concerns ones whole being. Neither too much nor too low fire, which of course relates to both inner and outer heat. On the architrave we read the exhortation: *SAPIENTER RETENTATVM, SVCCEDET ALIQVANDO* – *That which is wisely retained will at length succeed*. Certain operations need to be carried out during a long period of time, and the alchemist must then resist any temptation to interfere with the work, like opening the vessel, adding things, raising the fire etc. Inner and outer time is here of uttermost importance, and the inward processes that occur during that time. Alchemical operations may further need to be repeated several times before the sought result can be achieved. This can depend on the specific operation, that it requires a certain given amount of recurrence, but also that an inner condition or comprehension needs to be realised by the alchemist before the result can be manifested outside, in which case the quantity of recurrences depend on the alchemist.

The bottles on the top row contain earth salt, heaven's dew (*ros deli*), azoth (sophic mercury) and a sulphur solution. The second row contains bottles with potash (potassium carbonate), raw matter (*hyle*), dragon's blood, potable gold, vinegar and mercury. All these are used in laboratory alchemy to dissolve, separate, purify and recombine chemical preparations, but they also have inner equivalences in the alchemist's own being.

The two pillars that lift up the architrave are inscribed with the words *RATIO* (reason) and *EXPERIENTIA* (experience). They thus constitute the foundation upon which the alchemical Opus rests, and resembles the pillars of Severity and Wisdom. Behind the pillar of reason we see a cooling device with water. This points out the importance of being able to cool down ones reason, so that not only mental castles will be created. The reasoning mind is important but cannot be universally prevailing, just as intellectual study of alchemy makes no one an alchemist. A pair of bellows and tongs, to be used in the athanor, stands and lies next to the pillars, and show that a good balance between reason and experience shall govern the work. A bucket with coal is placed in front of the pillar of experience, and alludes to the necessity of studying both classical alchemical works as well as nature, as fuel for the Opus.

Just to the right of the musical table stands a distillation still which separates the spirit (*spiritus* – mercury in the retort) from the soul (*anima* – the sulphur high up in the still) and the body (the salt which is remaining on the bottom). Next to it, and combined with it, is a smaller athanor for elixirs and the wet path<sup>7</sup>, with the inscription *FESTINA LENTE* – *Hasten slowly*. Apart from being a general alchemical axiom, it alludes that the elixir must be able to be heated by the fire

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<sup>5</sup> Seashells are further often associated with pilgrims and pilgrimage (and Saint James the Great). The depicted shell, however, is not a scallop shell, wherefore this association is uncertain.

<sup>6</sup> In the dry path, the subtle principles are transferred from medium to medium through fusion, and it is therefore considered to be much shorter and more dangerous, not to mention warmer, than the wet path.

<sup>7</sup> The wet path produces a separation of the three principles through fermentation and exaltation, where a *menstruum* extracts the subtle principles. It is considered to be longer and safer than the dry path.

during one or several philosophical months<sup>8</sup>, which requires a gentle but steady fire. In the transparent vessel to the right of the athanor (with the inscription *Maturandum – To mature*), we see several bottles and retorts which are maturing, probably on a bed of sand<sup>9</sup>.

### The Mediator

In the middle, linking together the oratory with the laboratory, we see a table with musical instruments (violin, lute, bell, etc.), writing materials, and a scale. This alludes to the three levels of music; the divine harmony, the music of the spheres, and the mundane music. Beneath the table is a storage of bottles, retorts, and a mortar. On the further end of the table is a chair, where the alchemist can rest, read, write and contemplate. The inscription on the tablecloth reads: *MUSICA SANCTA tristia spirituum mali morum fuga givili spiritvs 777' totu ter psallit, ni cordi gaudio pio perfuso – Sacred Music, defence against sorrow and bad thoughts, because the spirit of God sings with threefold joy in the heart and imbues it with pious affection*. Music, both as art and in its more divine aspect, thus has the ability to protect the alchemist from darkened thoughts and emotions during the hours of the symbolical night, when the mind starts to question whether the dawn ever will arise. This state of melancholy is described in multiple ways by both alchemists and mystics, and is symbolised in the Bible when Jesus spent forty days in the desert, tempted by the Devil. From a psychological perspective, it concerns meeting and integrating ones shadow, in either the dark night of the mind or of the soul.

An even important fact is the *vibrations* of music, which stands in relation with the alchemical art of transmuting or changing. When a thing is caused to change its vibration, it can move on to or transcend into a new condition. And the same applies to man, who through vibration can not only change thoughts and emotions, but also gain mystical and transcendent experiences. In every day language, this is often described as charisma and people's ability to change the atmosphere in a room just by their appearance.

On the ceiling balk we read: *SINE AFFLATU DIVINO, NEMO VNQUAM VIR MAGNUS – Without Divine Inspiration, there is no man who is great*. This inspiration is directly related to the aforementioned vibrations, and it is thus only when these come from the Divine that man can truly transcend and become great. A lamp in the form of a heptagram with seven flames hangs down from the balk, which both alludes to the seven classical planets and the seven major operations of alchemy. A small bowl of light hangs from the lamp, showing that all planets and operations are permeated by the force of unity.

Furthest away in the picture, we see an open door and a bedroom behind. The inscription on the arch above, *DORMIENS VIGILA – Awake while sleeping* – clearly states what should ever be focus of the alchemist. This is because the opus continues all the time and many revelations will occur in the dreams, if the alchemist has a wake consciousness. In a larger perspective this also alludes to the ever present conscious that never dies, constant weaving and dancing through the dream of life. This is sometimes described as the third condition of being, existing between the states of sleep and awake, and imperfectly termed as *rapture*. It is from this condition that the fine arts seek to express and mirror the beauty of Eternity, in which presence the alchemist works.

### Summary

After this survey on Khunrath's alchemical room, we can gain notions of all the elements which are present in, and constitute, the work of the alchemist. Dividing up the composition into three main areas also show how these relate to the three alchemical principles. The left side, the

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<sup>8</sup> A philosophical month normally corresponds to 40 days.

<sup>9</sup> Sand beds are often used in alchemical work because of its capacity to hold an even heat during a long period time.

oratory, relates to the Divine Spirit and is thus associated with alchemical mercury ☿. It is the vital life-force<sup>10</sup> which exists in the air we breathe, the subtle feminine power, wherefore it is on the left or passive side on the drawing. The right side, the laboratory, has to do with consciousness and the soul, and is associated with alchemical sulphur ♁. It is the inner fire<sup>11</sup>, the subtle masculine power and the true will, and expresses character and colour. Since it is active, it is being illustrated on the right, active, side of the drawing. The middle part of the room, as well as the whole round form of the composition, is associated with alchemical salt ⊖. It is the matrix or body wherein sulphur and mercury acts (and initially lies hidden), and is thus mediator, compound, fixity, tenacity and focus.

Seen as an overall picture, the whole illustration constitutes the alchemical salt principle which contains everything that the alchemist initially seeks and needs in his opus, wherefore we also comprehend Khunrath's title more fully, *The First Stage of the Great Work*. With this understanding, we can now seek to use this practically and show how an inner alchemical room can be created and utilised.

### **The Alchemical Opus**

Alchemy, regardless of type, is partly about learning how to see beyond the surface, penetrating the illusory shell of separation which the mundane eye and mind interpret as reality, and partly about causing changes or transmutations in the various levels of existence. The alchemist seeks to learn and understand the secrets of man and nature, and how these correspond with the Divine; how everything consists of forces that collaborate and obstruct each other on several planes. These hidden forces are separated and liberated through alchemical processes so that they, through transmutations, can be purified and brought back into a higher level of perfection or wholeness. In the outer, this can result as tinctures<sup>12</sup>, transmuted metals and the much famed *Philosophical Stone*. In the inner, mystical visions, self knowledge, energy work, Divine presence and *the Stone of the Wise* can be experienced and achieved. However, such a simple division becomes erroneous since it presupposes an opposition or separation between the outer and inner, something which the alchemist early on learns does not exist. By bringing something about on an outer plane, a similar effect happens on the inner plane, and vice versa. The one aspect presupposes the other aspect but is also its result. The inner and outer thus become as thesis and antithesis, which through the transmutation experience produces a synthesis where a higher form of perfection and wholeness is reached.

A dependable method to learn how to see beyond the surface is by actively working with imagination and visualisation. Without getting lost in technical descriptions, it concerns the ability to create inner images, forms and connections with ones mind, which gradually have the ability to take on a more permanent condition in the sub-consciousness of the alchemist. As is well-known, many psychology schools utilise imagination to make contact possible between the pre-rational and transrational parts of the psyche, and in extension to crystallise the Higher Self.

Based upon this survey of the alchemical room, and how the room as a whole constitutes the salt principle, it should be very obvious why the alchemist can utilise such a room to initiate and experience alchemical processes through contemplation and meditation. And although it is beyond the scope of this article, it can be worth mentioning that the alchemist concretely seeks to create a real body of salt, which extension can lead to the golden solar body. By creating and regularly working with the room, the zealous student will no doubt be able to unlock several of the mysteries concerning these bodies.

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<sup>10</sup> Also termed alchemical eagle, chi, prana, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with the secret fire, which double aspects relate to philosophical salt.

<sup>12</sup> For body, soul, and/or spirit.

### **Creating the alchemical room**

The ability of the psyche to willingly create and hold on to inner images is sharply increased when being physically, mentally and emotionally relaxed. Thus, some kind of relaxation exercise should initiate the work, with calm and steady breathing cycles. A study of Khunrath's illustration can then follow, where both the wholeness and certain details should be memorised. Thereafter, to symbolically step down into the subconscious, a downward going stair with ten steps can be visualised, which leads to an old wooden door. Try to see the stairs as clear as possible with your inner eye, and when you are ready, step down one step and notice the change in your whole being. Seek to activate all inner senses. Walk down slowly, step by step, and be constantly aware of any sensations of a physical, intellectual, emotional or spiritual quality, without identifying with them. When you have reached the bottom, observe the mighty door which is inscribed with alchemical symbols, and seek to feel its power. Visualise a golden key hanging next to the door, grab it, unlock and open the door. A rather long dark narrow hall is behind, illuminated by torch lights. Enter and close the door behind you. At the end of the hall you will see the alchemical room, and its clarity increases as you walk closer, until you are standing in it.

To create a permanent form, seek to make the room as clear as possible. Walk toward the different sections, put on incense, sit down in prayer, play the instruments, feel the heat from the athanor, etc. Contemplate upon the admonitions and advices of the inscriptions, and try to comprehend their relevance from both a micro- and macrocosmic perspective. What can be done and experienced is only limited by one's imagination. The room becomes real when you allow it to be real, by regularly being and working in it. Other archetypal forms can then also be invited and manifested, according to your needs and the nature of the work. You should strive to make it as natural to be there as with any room in your mundane house. This is reinforced by linking together the inner and outer world; if you sit down to meditate, then also enter into your inner alchemical room and sit down for meditation there as well. When you go to bed, enter the inner room and lay down also on your inner bed. If you do not yet operate any kind of laboratory alchemy, notice that you can do that every time you make food. With one eye, be in your kitchen and cook, and with the other, be in front of your athanor and experience the inner processes of cooking. After having performed your work, you exit the inner room in the same way you entered it, according to your own needs. Initially, it is recommended to always exit the inner room, but as experience and knowledge increase, longer experiments can be performed.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar way, you can see the whole room in its salt principle as corresponding with your being, that which gives focus and constitute the matrix of existence, and that everything you experience occurs within this room. The right and left sides of the room then relates to the right and left side of your being, the active and passive part, the laboratory and the oratory. The middle, the mediator, is like a pillar right through you, connecting above with below. Such a perspective can make it easier to experience how various occurrences relate to the alchemical principles, how the life force, consciousness and matrix flow through the ever present inner and outer interactions of existence.

Both these procedures have the advantage, apart from the possibility of personal insights on the condition of existence, that the alchemical body of salt becomes stronger. Regular practises can thus transcend the wake and sleep of ordinary life into the before mentioned state of rapture. The whole of existence becomes inspired and animated, and the illusory separation between spirit and matter, inner and outer, above and below can be transcended, and existence transmuted through

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<sup>13</sup> It is quite easy to imagine moments and occasions when it is far from optimal to be in the inner room to a lesser or greater extent, when all focus is needed on the mundane plane.

the inner fire of love. The Great Work has then reached its beginning, and the mysteries of alchemy have started to be revealed.

### **To experience the three alchemical principles**

Enter into the alchemical room. Allow the instruments to play the divine music of the spheres, and sit down on the pillar in the oratory. Experience the levels of your body; your physical body which sits or lies down, your inner subtle body that sits in the oratory, and the body which forms the alchemical room. Contemplate on how you utilise your body, how much you listen to or ignore its needs, to what extent it is the temple of your spirit. Experience the weight of your body, its ability to focus, and how the body in a bigger perspective is the matrix of life. Know that all this has to do with the alchemical salt principle.

Then focus upon our consciousness, how it is separated from your body but yet is what experiences the various levels of the body. Experience the experiencer. In what way does your consciousness express itself in the various aspects of life? Which colours are being shown in different situations, how does your consciousness change character depending on inner and outer circumstances? To what extent do you express your true will? Know that all this has to do with the alchemical sulphur principle.

Then turn your awareness towards the vital life force which penetrates the whole of your being. Breathe deeply and allow the spirit to fill you. Through spirit you are connected with everything, and within yourself it is expressed as your Higher or True Self. To what extent do you open yourself up to this contact with your essence? How is it expressed in your life? Rest in pure awareness, and allow it, alchemical mercury, to fully penetrate your whole being.

Finally, meditate on the relation between these three principles; how the body is the mask of the soul, and how the soul is the body of the spirit.

*HOC HOC AGENTIBVS NOBIS, ADERIT IPSE DEUS.*

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