

The *spiritus rector* and the Artistic Inventor

Maier's and Merian's images for the *Atalanta fugiens*

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Sources and structure

The invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century was a major impetus for the development of alchemical literature since a wider audience could be reached. At the same time, new possibilities for illustrating alchemical texts arose thanks to the development of new graphic techniques. The use of copperplate and etching replaced simple and artistically insignificant woodcuts and took book illustration to a whole new level. In the late 16th century and during the first decades of the following century, we therefore encounter the most valuable manifestations of alchemical iconography in printed books, both in terms of their symbolic richness and artistic sophistication.¹

It was primarily thanks to two important publishers, Johann Theodor De Bry² in Oppenheim and Lucas Jennis³ in Frankfurt am Main, who contributed to this apogee of alchemical book illustration.⁴ One of the most valuable gems of this production was the emblematic book *Atalanta fugiens*,⁵ published by Johann Theodor De Bry in Oppenheim in

1 Obrist 1982; Obrist 2003; Lennep 1985; Klossowski de Rola 1988; Hartlaub 1991; Gabriele 1997; Abraham 1998; Völlnagel 2004; Völlnagel 2012; Forshaw 2020b; Rampling 2022.

2 Benzing 1967, pp. 2952-2978.

3 Lucas Jennis was the stepson of Johann Israel De Bry, brother of Johann Theodore, with whom he trained as an engraver. Trenczak 1965, pp. 324-337.

4 Wagner 2021/23.

5 The full title of the work is *Atalanta fugiens, hoc est, Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica, Accommodata partim oculis & intellectui, figuris cupro incisis, adjectisque sententiis, Epigrammatis & notis, partim auribus & recreationi animi plus minus 50 Fugis Musicalibus trium Vocum, quarum duae ad unam simplicem melodiam distichis canendis peraptam, correspondeant, non absq[ue] singulari jucunditate videnda, legenda, meditanda, intelligenda, dijudicanda, canenda & audienda: Authore Michaelae Majero Imperial[is] Consistorii Comite, Med[ic]inae D[oc]tore Eql[ui]te ex[empto] & c.* German translation

two editions in 1617 and 1618.⁶ This work was written by the physician Michael Maier (1569-1622),⁷ who devoted most of his life to searching for and producing an alchemical ›universal medicine‹, while the exquisite illustrations were designed and engraved by Matthäus Merian the Elder (1593-1650).⁸ The book contains fifty emblems, each of which consists of a *lemma* (title or motto), a *pictura* (image) and a *scriptio* (often an epigram).⁹ For the titles of his emblems Maier selected Latin quotations mainly from medieval alchemical treatises, especially from the anthology *Artis auriferae, quam chemiam vocant antiquissimi authores* (1572). He wrote an epigram based on each title-quotation, to which he added a two-page commentary. In these commentaries, he demonstrated a rich knowledge of alchemy, mythology, medicine, history, astronomy or geography, yet all symbolically related to the alchemical theme of the emblem. Maier supplemented his poems with fifty fugues, forty of which he took from a collection of short, three-part vocal pieces, or ›waies‹, published by the English composer John Farmer in his *Divers & Sundry Waies* (1591).¹⁰ Their notations, accompanied by a German translation of the title and epigram, form a visual counterpart to the emblems in the book.

The concept of the book as a compilation of fifty quotations in the form of emblems methodically follows the medieval tradition of florilegia and writings comparing the views of important alchemical authors. A typical example of such a florilegium is the treatise *Rosarium philosophorum*,¹¹ from which Maier also drew extensively. In this type of alchemical literature, the aim was not to select identical statements from different treatises, but to collect often obscure statements and to suggest their

1709, see Hofmeier 2007a. English translation Godwin 1989, and *Furnace and Fugue* 2020 (from this edition I take the English quotations with some modifications).

6 The second edition differs from the first only in the addition of Maier's portrait on p. 11, first used in Maier 1617c.

7 Among the basic works on the life of Michael Maier we can mention: Figala/Neumann 1990, pp. 34-50; Figala/Neumann 1994, pp. 121-147; Figala/Neumann 1995, pp. 651-664; Neumann 1993, pp. 307-326; Leibenguth 2002; Tilton 2003; Hausenblasová/Purš 2016, pp. 335-365.

8 Wüthrich 2007. From the books published by Johann Theodor De Bry, Merian illustrated Maier 1617b and Maier 1618b. The etchings in Maier's prints published by Jennis are probably by Balthasar Schwan (died c. 1624). ▶ Konrad, p. 309-312.

9 It is a three-part structure of humanist emblems which could have had different variations and deviations. The third part, the *scriptio*, varied greatly in scope, from a simple sentence to a poem of varying length. See Heckscher/Wirth 1959; Henkel/Schöne 2013, p. XII; Beck 2016, p. 137; Daly 2014, p. 28. In our text, we will refer to the three parts of the emblem as title, image and epigram.

10 Ludwig 2020.

11 Its first printed edition is part of the second volume of the collection *De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum* compiled by Cyriacus Jacob (1550).

connection by comparing them. It was therefore a specifically alchemical conception of concordance.¹²

Although the *Atalanta fugiens* is the work of an experienced author who had been working on a ›universal medicine‹ for fifteen years at the time of publication, the basic principle of collecting statements by alchemical authorities takes this work back to the early years of Maier's study of alchemy at the beginning of 17th century. Maier was then staying with a wealthy patron on a study tour to the Baltic where he had an extensive alchemical library at his disposal. While studying there, he soon realized that an extraordinary effort was required to understand alchemy. He therefore approached the task with all the erudition that his university studies had given him, comparing different views on the theoretical aim of the art, on the philosophical substance, and on the procedure and course of laboratory work.¹³ The *Atalanta fugiens* can thus be seen as Maier's presentation of the ideas and arguments that helped him to penetrate this opaque and intricately structured subject. The reader is invited to reconstruct the relationships between the emblems through his or her own interpretive efforts, and thus find the key to their meaning.

However, the *Atalanta fugiens* should not be understood as a theoretical manual on alchemy,¹⁴ and certainly not as a mystical manifestation of ›spiritual alchemy‹.¹⁵ This view was widespread in the older literature on Maier. During the last decades, though, it has become clear from newly discovered sources on his life,¹⁶ that his research and aspirations were not only theoretical but also practical.¹⁷ Maier was a physician who had kept a

12 Telle 1980a, p. 73.

13 *Mox, ut moris mihi fuerat in reliquis disciplinaru[m] generibus, quicquid legi in chemicis, in ordinem seum methodum redigere praesumpsi; à vocabulis factò initio; in quâ significatione hîc aut alibi posita fuerint; deinde ad res perveniendo. ... Nam, ne de diversis authoribus dicam, unus idemq[ue] author ... nec secum in rebus ac verbis convenire mihi videbatur.* (Immediately, I also began to compare everything I had read in chemistry books methodically, as was my habit in other sciences. I started off by comparing the meaning of individual words used in different places and then I moved on to the subject itself. ... I had the feeling that one and the same author ... did neither agree in substance or words with other authors, nor with himself.) Maier 1609, pp. Aiiijv-[Aiiijr]. See also Leibenguth 2002, p. 37; Tilton 2003, p. 64.

14 »The multiple levels of exegesis (chymical, physical, arithmetical, musical, geometrical, and astronomical) suggested by Maier in his discussion of Emblem I avoid any suggestion that *Atalanta fugiens* or its mytho-chymical content should be construed as a ›spiritual work.‹ Forshaw 2020a.

15 Yates 1972, pp. 81-90.

16 See note 7.

17 As he says in the dedication of the last book published during his lifetime, a considerable part of his life was *spent and wasted* not only in the study of mathematics and the investigation of all that Heaven and Earth contain, but also in the practice of medicine

reserved distance to the ›hermetic science‹ in his youth. After having completed his medical studies, however, he became personally acquainted with the effect of an alchemical ›universal medicine‹ that quickly cured a seriously ill and incurable patient. After this experience, Maier devoted his life to producing it.¹⁸ Because of alchemy's bad reputation at the time, he consistently called himself a *philosopher and physician*¹⁹ and referred to his field of research as *chymia* or *chemia*.²⁰ His search for a ›universal medicine‹, however, followed the same path that led to the *lapis philosophorum* and that the main protagonists of medieval alchemy had set out in their writings.²¹

The *Atalanta fugiens* was greatly influenced by another of Maier's works published three years earlier. It was his *Arcana arcanissima, hoc est hieroglyphica aegypto-graeca vulgo necdum cognita* (1614)²² that made Maier famous as one of the most important protagonists of alchemical interpretation of ancient mythologies. This was a line of alchemical research that became prominent in the 16th century in the context of the general return of humanist culture ›ad fontes‹ whose antecedents already date back to

by investigating the universal hermetic philosophy, on which he expended *an incredible amount of labor, experimentation, error and repetition, trouble and expense*. Maier 1622, pp. [A3v]-A4r; Leibenguth 2002, pp. 124-125.

- 18 Maier began his work on the production of this medicine at Easter 1604 and over the next year and a half he produced a *true universal medicine of a vivid yellow colour* which he used to *cure many diseases*. It was not, however, a universal medicine in its perfect form, for the fourth and final stage of its production could not be completed during the next two years. According to a letter to August of Anhalt-Plötzkau dated 10 August 1610, the reason for the failure was that Maier lacked *true fire*. Also, the enormous expense forced him to interrupt his work. Maier produced this medicine repeatedly during his lifetime, but his constant existential and health problems, which culminated with the beginning of the Thirty Years' War, continually hampered him in this endeavour. His remedy was probably essentially the same as the *aurum potabile* of the London physician Francis Anthony, with whom he became acquainted during his stay in England from 1611 to 1616, and in whose defence he wrote the *Apologia veritatis illucescentis, pro auro potabili* (1616). Maier 1609, pp. Cr-Cv; Figala/Neumann 1995, p. 657; Lenke/Roudet/Tilton 2014, pp. 5-9.
- 19 *Alchymista neque sum, neque esse desydere, at philosophus Medicus*. Letter to August of Anhalt-Plötzkau, dated 10 August 1610. Quoted by Neumann 1993, p. 309, note 6. Let us add that alchemists traditionally referred to themselves as philosophers since the Middle Ages.
- 20 This term was to be formed by purging the original Greek term of the Arabic prefix ›al-‹. See Duval 1593, pp. 3-4. Yet, the terms ›chymia‹ and ›alchemy‹ were used synonymously until the 17th century (Halleux 1979, p. 47). The use of the term ›chymia‹ for early modern alchemy proposed by Lawrence Principe and William Newman is now widely accepted. See Newman/Principe 1998, pp. 32-65. Since we are dealing with the issue of alchemical iconography as a phenomenon continuously covering the period from the 14th to the 18th century in our text, we will continue to use the terms ›alchemy‹ and ›alchemical‹.
- 21 Karpenko 2018, pp. 85-96.
- 22 Matton 1982; Matton 1987, pp. 211-216; Harzer 2002, pp. 319-332.

medieval alchemical literature.²³ It was part of a more widely shared belief that the myths of Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquity concealed natural philosophy in encrypted form.²⁴

The *Arcana arcanissima* surpassed all that had been produced in this field up to that time in erudition and scope. On this publication, Maier built in the *Atalanta fugiens*. He conceived his book of emblems on the basis of an alchemical interpretation of the myth of Atalanta and Hippomenes,²⁵ which he took from the work of Giovanni Bracesco, one of his predecessors in the field of what became known as mythoalchemy.²⁶ According to Bracesco, *Atalanta is our very living and very light water, which is coagulated and firmed by sulphurs*.²⁷ The story is introduced by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, X, 560-705, and Maier, in the introductory stand-alone poem of his work, interprets it in accordance with Bracesco as the interaction of the two basic alchemical principles of the metals, Mercury and Sulphur.²⁸ The former, represented by Atalanta, is volatile and must be fixed by the latter which is personified by Hippomenes. The two figures compete in a race in which Hippomenes outruns Atalanta by successively throwing before her three golden apples which he had been given by the goddess Venus.²⁹ By winning the race, Hippomenes takes Atalanta as his wife, and when embracing in the temple of Cybele, *overwhelmed with love*, the goddess transforms them into a pair of red lions.³⁰ This, according to Maier, is an allusion to the result of the alchemical work, a philosophical stone and a universal medicine.

The threefold structure of Mercury, Sulphur and the golden apple, which provides the connection between these two principles, runs through the whole of Maier's book. It corresponds to the threefold structure of the emblems (title, image and epigram), the threefold structure of the fugues

23 Telle 1980b, pp. 135-154; Kahn 2017a, pp. 165-178; Forshaw 2020a.

24 Seznec 1972, pp. 219-256; Wels 2010, p. 190; Forshaw 2020a.

25 Maier 1614, pp. 86-87.

26 Giovanni Bracesca da Lorci wrote two treatises: *Il legno della vita* (1542) and *La esposizione di Geber* (1544). In 1548, they were published in Latin. Matton 1995, p. 77. In the *Arcana arcanissima*, Maier adopts some of his interpretations but at the same time criticizes them in the preface as insufficiently systematic. Maier 1614, p. [A2v].

27 *Atalantos, hoc est, aqua nostra velocissima, & levissima, cum sulphuribus & coagulatur & firmatur*, Manget, 1702, Bd. 1, p. 567 N° 94.

28 These principles are not equal to the modern elements Hg and S and share only some similar characteristics. Ganzenmüller 1938, pp. 139-144; Newman 1998, pp. 288-290.

29 Maier differs from Ovid's text by identifying the apples from Venus's sacred garden with the apples from the garden of the Hesperides, as this fits his interpretation. In the *Arcana arcanissima* Maier interprets them as the fruits of the solar, mineral tree, which are the result of Herculean labours, i.e. alchemical labours. Maier 1614, pp. 81-84.

30 Maier 1618a, p. [2].

and the threefold way in which the book is to be studied, namely by *seeing and hearing, as also the understanding itself*.³¹ As for the themes of each emblem, only seven are mythological, 42 themes were taken from medieval alchemical treatises and one comes from the Old Testament.³² The mythoalchemical themes are mainly dealt with in Maier's commentaries on the emblems, where he, for example, mentions the Golden Fleece seven times.³³ Therefore, they can be described as a manifestation of his ›applied‹ mythoalchemy.

The cornerstone of the *Atalanta fugiens* were epigrams. It should be emphasized that Maier considered poetry to be the oldest and most basic form of textual transmission of alchemical knowledge.³⁴ According to him, the scholar must therefore be familiar not only with rhetoric and ancient languages but also with poetry, which was supposedly created only to express chymical allegories and images.³⁵ Maier abundantly applied this conviction in practice for he wrote poetry all his life.³⁶ The little book *Hymnosophia, seu meditatio laudis divinae* stands at the beginning of his literary output. It is a collection of forty hymns praising God and the Holy Trinity for the gift of a ›mystical‹ or universal medicine, which was also a divine gift. The author printed this small volume in Prague in 1609, doubtlessly to be presented to Emperor Rudolf II, along with his treatise *De medicina regia et vera heroica, Coelidonia*, which contains his own *curriculum vitae* and an account of his experiences in seeking and using the ›universal medicine‹.³⁷

Maier was probably already working on musical poems similar to the ones he later wrote for the *Atalanta fugiens* during his stay in Prague from 1608 to 1610.³⁸ It was probably at the same time that he developed the idea of creating a ›multimedia‹ emblematic book. The list of Maier's works that accompanied the manuscript treatise he sent to Moritz of Hessen-Kassel in April 1611, from whom he had sought support after

31 Idem, pp. 8-9.

32 Jong 1969 analyzed the sources in her seminal work.

33 One cannot agree with Friedmann Harzer's view that there are no important mythoalchemical themes in the *Atalanta fugiens*, since Maier is said to have deliberately avoided those myths that occur regularly in the context of alchemy. See Harzer 2002, p. 324.

34 Wels 2010, p. 192.

35 Maier 1617b, p. 15; Beck 1991, pp. 82-83.

36 During his medical studies at the University of Padua from 1595 to 1596, he was awarded with the title *poeta laureatus*. Maier 1609, p. Aijv; Leibenguth 2002, p. 32.

37 Both books are preserved in The Royal Library in Copenhagen in a single copy, shelf mark 12-159, 4°. See Figala/Neumann 1994, pp. 121-147; Figala/Neumann 1995, pp. 651-664; Neumann 1993, pp. 307-326; Leibenguth 2002, pp. 24-64; Tilton 2003, pp. 38-68; Hausenblasová/Purš 2016, pp. 335-365.

38 About Maier's stay in Prague: Hausenblasová/Purš 2016, pp. 335-365.

having left Prague, seems to indicate this. Among other things, the title of the following work is mentioned in this document: *Hermetis Melica; opus musicum cum germanicis et latinis textibus chemicis; tam intellectu quam sensibus accomodatum 4. et 3. vocibus absolutum*.³⁹ Likewise, the *Atalanta fugiens* contains musicalized Latin verses accompanied by their German translations, and on its title page we find a similar formulation: *Emblemata nova de secretis naturae chymica accommodata partim oculis & intellectu ... partim auribus & recreationis*.⁴⁰

Maier's hymns from Prague were the forerunners of his *Cantilenaes intellectuales de phoenice redivivo* (1622),⁴¹ written in the penultimate year of his life, which celebrate the phoenix as a ›philosophical fire‹ and graduate to soaring praise of the ›divine mysteries‹ and a sincere confession of Maier's faith. These poems were written to be sung, which was related to the author's belief that the mathematically describable, harmonic and musical laws of the cosmos could be applied to the operations of practical chymistry.⁴² Although the medieval conception of music's preeminence as a reflection of cosmic harmony⁴³ was replaced by the dominance of the visual arts, especially painting, during the Renaissance, Maier went against this current with his high appreciation of music. His belief in a union of poetry and music was deeply rooted in the Pythagorean concept of universal harmony.

Maier's encounter with Merian

If poetry and music accompanied Maier's work from its beginnings, it was only thanks to his collaboration with Matthäus Merian the Elder for the emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens* that allowed the visual symbolism to develop fully in some of his books. With these illustrations, alchemical iconography reached its apex in the 17th century.⁴⁴ According to Lucas Heinrich Wüthrich, Merian presents the obscure alchemical doctrine in

39 Universitätsbibliothek Kassel. Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, 2° Ms. chem. 11, 1, f. 64v, quoted by Leibenguth 2002, p. 47, note 119. One of these poems (*Ex Odâ Hermetidis Melicae*) is printed after the preface to the reader in Maier 1609, p. [***v].

40 Maier 1618a, title page.

41 Leibenguth 2002.

42 Idem, p. 83.

43 The Pythagorean conception of music as a reflection of the harmony of the celestial spheres and the fixed part of the *septem artes liberales* was transmitted to the Western Middle Ages by the philosopher Boethius (ca. 480-524). See Hammerstein 1990, p. 20 and passim.

44 Praz 1964, p. 15.

brilliantly simple and clear images to the reader, which makes it likely that he was familiar with the ›arcane science‹.⁴⁵

The question in how far Merian was acquainted with alchemy is difficult to answer. While we know that he became interested in unorthodox religious and philosophical currents during the later part of his life,⁴⁶ we are not informed about his interests at the time of the creation of the etchings for the *Atalanta fugiens* when he was only 24 years old. He was probably rather devoted to his artistic training and the development of his extraordinary talent than to reading lengthy alchemical treatises.⁴⁷ However, he could also have accessed alchemy through the ›back door‹, namely the art of etching itself, as Corinna Gannon has shown convincingly.⁴⁸ Last but not least, Merian's artistic imagination clearly shows that an intuitive grasp and understanding of alchemical themes must have been pre-arranged in his mind, which is not entirely unusual for an artist. According to Maier, before beginning laboratory work, one must imagine everything, which corresponds to the artist's ability to create an internal image and then capture it with pencil, pen, stylus or brush:

*For you will be disappointed if, prepared and ripe, you do not spend a whole year and even longer in meditating on the material already known in the miraculous agreement of the authors and nature, and over all the partial works fix in you the true idea without expense and labour.*⁴⁹

Merian's first work to prove his skill as illustrator of alchemical literature was his etching for the title page of *Examen fucorum pseudo-chymicorum detectorum* (1617) (**Fig. 1**), a polemical and satirical depiction which documents Maier's conception of learned chymistry and his fierce dislike of the impostors who were responsible for its bad reputation at the time. In this essay, Maier presents, analyzes, and exposes a total of 56 fraudulent practices.⁵⁰

45 Wüthrich 1993b, p. 9; Wüthrich 1972, pp. 84–89.

46 Wüthrich 1993b, pp. 13–15; Wagner 2021/23.

47 In this respect, Merian certainly could not meet the requirements that Maier himself required from an adept's education. See note 56.

48 Gannon 2021a; ► Gannon, p. 263–270.

49 *Nam frustraberis, nisi integrum annum & eo amplius in meditationibus de materia iam nota, in authorum & naturae consensu mirifico, omnibus[ue] operationum partibus, maturus & expeditus consumpseris, ad ideam veram ammo tuo prius, abs[ue] impensis & laboribus, fixeris.* Maier 1609, p. [(***v)].

50 The description of these fraudulent practices was taken, with a few additions and extensions, from Heinrich Khunrath's *Trewhertzige Warnungs-Vermanung eines getrewen Liebhabers der Warheit* (1597). See Beck 1991; Karpenko 2015, pp. 98–101.



If we compare this etching with the illustrations on the title pages of the two educational poems Maier published at the time without collaborating with Merian, we see a significant difference in their conception. In the *Lusus serius* (1616),⁵¹ the assembled representatives of animals, plants and minerals, presided over by a human, elect Mercury as their king. In the *Jocus severus* (1617),⁵² the assembly of birds judges an owl which is initially supposed to be condemned for its crimes. Yet, the phoenix, who presides over the trial, finally declares the owl their queen. The title pages of both books merely depict the animals in a row without any indication of their relationships to each other; only the presiding judge is placed in the center. Merian's illustration for the *Examen fucorum* is of considerably more informative value, since it reveals the basic position Maier takes in the treatise, as well as some of its nuances. In the introduction, he emphasizes that the impostors are beautifully and sumptuously dressed and boast of rings, necklaces as well as gold and silver objects. Their laboratories are said to be equipped with all kinds of instruments and a large number of

Fig. 1
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
title page for: Michael Maier.,
*Examen fucorum pseudo-
dymicorum detectorum*,
Frankfurt a.M. 1617.
Paris, Bibliothèques d'Université Paris Cité.

51 Leibenguth 2002, pp. 493-495; Tilton 2003, p. 132.

52 Leibenguth 2002, p. 511; Tilton 2003, pp. 131-132.

artistically crafted furnaces.⁵³ Merian portrayed them as a bevy of fashionably dressed characters who clamor for attention. Behind them is a beehive with a swarm of drones in allusion to the ambiguity of the book's title.⁵⁴ The true chymist is depicted as their opposite, preferring a modest life of seclusion, plain clothes and a simple furnace.

In the book, Maier describes the true artist not only as a simple follower of Nature, but also as a scholar who must have extensive knowledge in many fields.⁵⁵ Merian marks this important aspect with the modest, yet eloquent symbol of an owl sitting on a large brick furnace. This attribute of the goddess of wisdom, Pallas Athena, refers to the necessity of nightly vigil in study and work and to the solitude of the noble spirit,⁵⁶ the opposite of the impostors' attitude. In the depiction, this is also contrasted by the dark interior of the laboratory, which the chymist defends with his pincers as his *privatissimum*, and the sunlit interior as the ›operating space‹ of the impostors.

Here, Merian created his type of ›chymical artist‹, whose appearance is both realistic and fantastic, and which subsequently became a characteristic of his iconography, also in the *Atalanta fugiens*. He translated Maier's instructions into a compact form of high artistic quality. From the diachronic description of the attributes mentioned in the text, he thus created a unique and synchronous artistic artifact. Maier undoubtedly realized how much he could develop the visual accompaniment of his works thanks to Merian, thus creating works with a richer narrative value. And this opened the way for the creation of the ›Emblembuch‹ *Atalanta fugiens*.

53 Maier 1617b, p. 11; Beck 1991, p. 74.

54 The term *examen* in the title of the work means ›test‹ or ›examination‹ but also ›swarm of insects‹, especially in the sense of a new beehive. *Fucus* is then both ›false ornament‹, ›pretence‹ or ›deception‹, but may also stand for ›bee drone‹. The title of the book can therefore be translated in two ways: *Investigations of the exposed pseudo-chymical impostors [made] for the love of the lovers of truth*, or *Swarm of pseudo-chymical drones*.

55 A true *Artifex chymicus* must have, in addition to knowledge of docimastic and mineralogy, a perfect knowledge of grammar, rhetoric and logic. These are necessary for the proper understanding and interpretation of treatises whose scientific language is Latin and whose oldest form is poetry. He must also have a command of the other disciplines of the *septem artes liberales*, such as geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, physics, and above all medicine, since from these disciplines almost all authors adopt their expressions and allegorical paraphrases. See Beck 1991, pp. 81–92.

56 In *Jocus severus* Maier says of the owl, he finds it fitting to live in sweet solitude as its strength lies in the contemplation of its noble spirit. The animal is called *Noctua* because it lives in the darkness, like those working at night. Maier 1617a, passim.

Cooperation and inspiration

The creation of the *Atalanta fugiens* was influenced by the fact that Maier, according to his own words, wrote several treatises in haste while in Frankfurt am Main between 1616 and 1617. At that time, he was ill and short of funds. In a letter to the town physician Johann Hartmann Beyer (1563-1625), dated 28 October 1617, he recounted his difficult life situation, writing that a year earlier, after his return from England, he had been stricken with a severe and prolonged illness, *quartana*,⁵⁷ which had been plaguing him for a year. Although he had originally intended to go to Prague⁵⁸ and even though he had no more than one or two books at hand, nor any scholarly friend from whom he could have borrowed a few books, he returned to his studies. So, ill and bedridden for most of the time, he wrote commentaries *relating to chymia*, some of which were already in print while he was preparing others *for the next market*. He was rather motivated to publish these books by the hope of a slight profit than by the conviction that they were mature works. In his haste, he wrote *six or seven chymical treatises* with a *hot pen*,⁵⁹ hoping to obtain the funds for his projected journey.⁶⁰

Considering the time schedule in which Maier's books were published between 1616 and 1618, it is certain that the *Atalanta fugiens* was part of these *six or seven chymical treatises*.⁶¹ Its dedication is dated August 1617 in Frankfurt. Maier's 'hot pen' becomes evident especially in the commentaries on the emblems, which indeed appear disjointed on first reading, and

57 Malarial fever, recurring every fourth day. According to the contemporary conception, the frequency of its manifestations corresponded to the circulation of the elements in the human body, thus manifesting itself on a day dominated by fire.

58 He had already announced this plan in September 1616 in the *Epistola dedicatoria* of his book *Lusus serius*. Maier 1616b, p. 5.

59 Frankfurt am Main, UB, MS Ff. J. H. Beyer A. Nr. 161, p. 207v: *Interea ad studia mihi recursus, etiamsi vix unum aut alterum penes me librum habuerim, nec amicum ullum ex literatis, a quo mutuo auctores paucos acciperem. Atque sic aeger plerumque haerens lecto nonnulla commentatus sum, ad chymiam spectantia (quorum quaedam praelo subiecta sunt, quaedam subiicienda ab aliis reservantur ad proximas nundinas) lucello, quod inde evenit, magis incitatus, quam maturitate et emendatione ipsorum opusculorum: Tractatus itaque chymicos 6 vel 7 calente calamo deproperavi, sperans me hac via, tantum lucraturum, quo in locum praeifixum commode transmearum.* Quoted by Leibenguth 2002, pp. 466-468. Cf. Tilton 2003, pp. 131-132; Wagner 2021; ▶ Wagner, p. 33-66.

60 As Maier later complained in his letter of 14 January 1622 to Gebhardt Johann von Alvensleben (1576-1631), from whom he sought patronage, he lost money on the publication of his *Emblemata* because he was paid 21 Batzen per sheet by the distributor, but the cost of printing one sheet was 25 Batzen (1 Reichsthaler was equal to 23 Batzen). Lenke/Roudet/Tilton 2014, pp. 18, 30-31.

61 Tilton 2003, pp. 131-132.

their connection with the epigrams is very variable. Maier either comments on only part of the idea expressed by the emblem or he is more or less distant from its theme. He demonstrates his medical knowledge, but also does not hesitate to tell various bizarre or miraculous stories. Sometimes, however, he just piles up quotations or somewhat tediously calculates similarities of mythological or symbolic themes.⁶² Compared to the *Arcana arcanissima*, his interpretation is therefore unsystematic, even within the framework of contemporary conventions. Let us add, however, that this does not detract from the book's appeal, for it demonstrates Maier's ability to find analogies in an extremely wide range of subject areas.

While Maier was bedridden in Frankfurt for most of 1617, Merian was staying in Oppenheim (until 1618), and occasionally went to Frankfurt to see the printers who worked for De Bry and Jennis.⁶³ He could have met Maier on that occasion. Let us assume that the etchings for the *Atlantia fugiens* were based on the titles and epigrams which Maier handed to Merian personally and which he had already completed together with the fugues. Certainly, Maier also gave him instructions for the title page, and it is likely that Merian received some additional requests for the illustrations, especially for those cases which differ from the title and epigram. However, it is questionable whether Maier had the opportunity to inspect Merian's drafts and possibly correct them, or whether he was only able to see the finished prints.

Maier's instructions were not necessarily only textual, as he sometimes supplemented his manuscripts with drawings. We find one of them in the manuscript of a treatise he sent to Moritz of Hessen-Kassel after 29 April 1611.⁶⁴ In the drawing, Maier illustrates the eighteen steps of the ladder ascending the ›philosophical castle‹ located on the summit of the mountain (Fig. 2). The drawing has a didactic character: the figure on the left represents an ›eager man‹ trying to reach the castle the wrong way without using a ladder. If Maier had provided Merian with similar sketches to capture the main motifs, it would have been logical for

62 »Die *Discursus* dienen weniger einer Erklärung der Embleme als deren Auslegung, wobei ›Auslegung‹ so zu verstehen ist, dass zuweilen mehrere Deutungsmöglichkeiten des Emblems gegeben werden, zuweilen aber auch das Emblem nur den Ausgangspunkt für eine Reihe von lose miteinander verbundenen Reflexionen angibt.« Wels 2010, p. 151.

63 Wüthrich 1993b, p. 9.

64 *Scala arcis philosophicae gradibus octodecim distincta, de quibus ordine sequenti pagina, de tribus vero inferioribus hoc tractatu agitur*. Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, 2° Ms. chem. 11 [1, fol. 47r-64v, in: *Moritz, Hessen-Kassel et al. Sammlung Alchemischer, Medizinischer Und Technischer Consilien an Landgraf Moritz – Alchemische Rezepte*. [1601/1625] 1st quarter of the 17th c., mainly Kassel.



Fig. 2
Michael Maier, *Scala arcis philosophicæ gradibus octodecim distincta, de quibus ordine sequenti pagina, de tribus vero inferioribus hoc tractatu agitur*, 1st quarter 17th c.
Kassel, Landesbibliothek und Murhardsche Bibliothek der Stadt Kassel, 2^o Ms. chem. II [1, fol. 47r.

the artist to add landscape backgrounds.⁶⁵ The question is whether the choice of the landscape was always at Merian's discretion, or whether some landscape backgrounds, such as those with ancient ruins, were decided by Maier.⁶⁶

Merian approached Maier's texts and instructions with great discipline and restraint, creating not variations but pictorial parallels to the main themes of the epigrams. Although he respected the division of roles between the inventor of the concept and its artistic elaborator, he approached the task very creatively, and his ability to synthesize the given motifs contributed to the creation of a new and distinctive type of depiction in which the alchemical and aesthetic aspects were mutually reinforcing. Merian's fidelity to Maier's texts and instructions resulted from the close semantic relationships between title, image, and epigram, as will be shown below. This did not prevent Merian from using other artists' prints as models which he adapted to his use.

As has already been pointed out, Merian borrowed models from Antonio Tempesta's *Metamorphoseon sive transformationum Ovidianarum libri quindecim* (1606).⁶⁷ Etching no. 96 (Fig. 3) was used for emblem 38, with Adonis replaced by Mercury (Fig. 4).⁶⁸ Similarly, Tempesta's etching no. 98 with the inscription *Apri dente Adonis interimitur* is used with necessary changes for emblem 41 to which we shall return.⁶⁹

Tempesta's etching no. 97 with Hippomenes triumphing over Atalanta with the help of Venus may have served as a model for the title page of the *Atalanta fugiens* where Merian incorporated the pictorial motif into the overall composition.⁷⁰ Some elements of the depiction were also taken from other works, such as the motif of Jupiter giving birth to Pallas Athena from his head in emblem 23⁷¹ which was taken from the 4th emblem

65 Wüthrich identified the village of Berg (today a part of Stuttgart) on the etching for emblem 36 of the *Atalanta fugiens*, a combination of motifs from Basel and Frankfurt on emblem 7, the Frankfurt Cathedral on emblem 28, Oppenheim on emblem 19 and probably Strasbourg on emblem 12. Wüthrich 1964, p. 13.

66 ▶ Hofmeier, p. 91-122.

67 The full title is *Metamorphoseon sive transformationum Ovidianarum libri Quindecim aeneis formis ab Antonio Tempesta florentino incisi, et in pictorum, antiquitatisque studiosorum gratiam nunc primum exquisitissimis sumptibus a Petro de Iode Antverpiano in Lucem editi*, 1606.

68 Maier 1618a, p. 161. Cf. Schömann 2021. See Dekker 2010, p. 25; Veldman 2001, p. 78.

69 Dekker 2010, p. 25, 28 The author also cites Tempesta's etching 136, *Circe concubitus detestatur Picus* as a model for the figure of Natura in emblem 42, and finds various partial models for emblem 49 in several other Tempesta etchings. I do not find both of these identifications as convincing as those for emblems 38 and 41.

70 Dekker 2010, p. 26.

71 Maier 1618a, p. 101.



Fig. 3
Antonio Tempesta, *No. 96*,
in: *Metamorphoseon sive*
transformationum Ovidianarum
libri quindecim, Antwerp 1606.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Fig. 4
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 38, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.
► p. 109, Fig. 10.

with the motto *Juppiter Palladem parit* from the book *Mikrokosmos – Parvus mundus* (1579).⁷²

In some cases, the motifs adopted by Merian may have had a more complex history and may have migrated between engravers more than once. This is the case for two designs that Merian took from the work of the imperial engraver Aegidius Sadeler II (c. 1570-1629),⁷³ published under the title *Theatrum morum. Artliche gesprach der thier mit wahren historien den menschen zur lehr* (Prague 1608),⁷⁴ just at the time when Maier arrived in Prague. Sadeler himself took them from etchings by the Flemish painter, printmaker and engraver Mark Gheeraerts (1516/19-c. 1590) published in the collection Aesop's fables, *Esbatement moral des animaux* (1578).

Since the copying of the engravings led to mirror reversals, we can rightly assume that Merian's model was Sadeler and not the original engravings by Gheeraerts. The fable of the peasant and the serpent (Fig. 5) probably became the model for emblem 8 (Fig. 6),⁷⁵ while the the fable of the elephant and the dragon was taken over without change or additions into the chapter *De monte saturni* of Maier's *Viatorium, hoc est de montibus planetarum septem seu metallorum*, also illustrated by Merian⁷⁶ and published by Johann Theodor De Bry in Oppenheim in 1618.⁷⁷

The conception of the Maier's emblems

There seems to be a pre-arranged harmony in the collaboration between Maier and Merian, as the iconography for the *Atalanta fugiens* appears in a perfectly crystallized form, even though it was preceded by only one jointly created work.⁷⁸ This reflects both Merian's ability to visually unify disparate subjects and the specific nature of the emblems themselves, which required him to interpret the titles and epigrams faithfully, one might even say ›literally‹.

The form of the emblems corresponds to the principles that became established in this genre after the publication of the founding work *Emblematum liber* (1531) by the Milanese lawyer Andrea Alciato (1492-1550).⁷⁹ As we

72 It is a set of 74 emblems engraved and published by Gérard de Jode with Latin verses by Laurentius Haechtanus (Laurens van Haecht Goidtsenhoven).

73 Limouze 1990.

74 Cf. Smith 2005, pp. 161-185; Dobalová 2006, pp. 207-220; ► p. 127, Fig. 2.

75 Maier 1618a, p. 41.

76 Maier 1618b, p. 54.

77 ► p. 135, Fig. 9.

78 See above, title page of Maier's *Examen fucorum* (1617), Fig. 1.

79 Heckscher/Wirth 1959. Henkel/Schöne 2013, pp. X-XI. Manning 2002, pp. 38-56.



Fig. 5
Aegidius Sadeler II, *The peasant and the serpent*, in:
Ebd., *Theatrum morum*,
Prague 1608, p. 224.
Coburg, Landesbibliothek, Sign. W III 10/15.

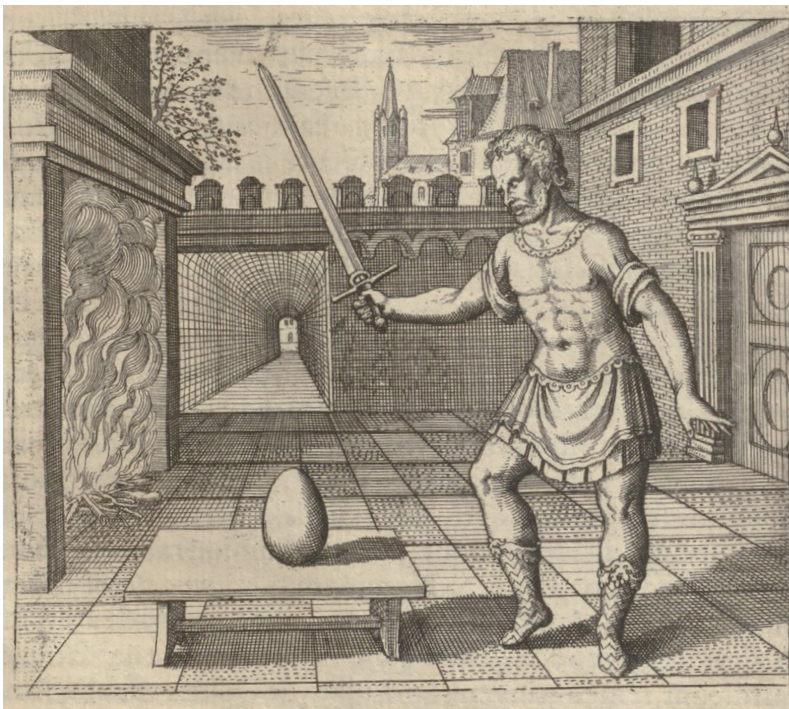


Fig. 6
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 8, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.
► p. 230, Fig. 9.

will show below, they differed from other emblematic productions in the structure of the relationships between the components and in the way they were created, reflecting what Maier expected of emblems and how they were intended to lead the reader to an understanding of the ›mystery of nature‹.

Whatever their subject matter, emblems always carried a hidden meaning, the uncovering of which required, in addition to a solid humanistic education, a penchant for puzzles and the ability to find connections between seemingly unrelated things.⁸⁰ An important stimulus for their creation was the humanist interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs and their interpretation, brought about by Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*, first published in Venice in 1505.⁸¹

All ancient and medieval symbolism was interpreted in a similar way due to the interest in hieroglyphs, which continued the tradition of the exegesis of the world and nature as *a book written by the finger of God* (Hugo of St. Victor) and the four ways of interpreting the Bible. Joannes Sambucus, in the preface to his *Emblemata* (1564), expressed this emblematic principle of revealing hidden messages as follows: ... *the subjects have to be well chosen, pregnant with meaning, and may exercise the mind no less than those obscure and extraordinary symbols of the Egyptians and the Pythagoreans.*⁸² The emblems were intended to be didactic,⁸³ offering lessons that could use an extremely wide range of themes for their visual presentation. Their ambition was to speak a symbolic and accessible language at the same time.⁸⁴

I assume that Maier's book is one of those exceptional *Emblembücher* for which the author himself communicated with the artist.⁸⁵ This is crucial for assessing whether it was indeed Maier's intention that the illustrations for his book's emblems should mirror the text as closely as possible, that in the vast majority of cases they should be a ›tautological‹ artistic copy or a ›doubling‹ of the title, of the entire or a part of the epigram.⁸⁶ Elements and

80 Daly 2014, p. 128.

81 Visser 2005, p. 220. Henkel/Schöne 2013, pp. X-XI.

82 Sambucus, *Emblemata* fol. A2v0. Quoted by Visser 2005, p. 221.

83 One of the founders of emblem studies characterized them as »simple allegorical designs accompanied by an explanatory motto and destined to teach in an intuitive form a moral truth.« Praz 1964, pp. 14-15.

84 Seznec 1972, p. 102.

85 As Daly points out, images of emblems were often created independently since the authors of emblematic literature rarely contributed to the creation of images. This was the case in the first edition of Alciato's emblematic work to which the woodcuts of Jörg Breu the Elder were added by its publisher Heinrich Steyner. Even later, the role of printers as commissioners of images was very important. Daly 2014, pp. 88-90.

86 This has already been noted by Rosamunde Neugebauer: »...das Motivrepertoire [wird] oft mit ›wörtlich genommenen‹ bildlich umgesetzten Metaphern des alchemistischen Textes kühn kombiniert (Remetaphorisierung).« Neugebauer 1993a, p. 296.

motifs, which would not come from either the epigrams or the interpretations, appear in the images only in exceptional cases. This repetitive relationship between text and image coincides with what Maier says in the preface:

... that therefore we might have these three objects of the more spiritual senses, namely seeing and hearing, as also the understanding itself,⁸⁷ as it were in one view and embrace, and insinuate all at once into men's minds for the better understanding thereof, behold we have joined the Optic together with Music, and sense with the understanding, that is, things rare to be seen and heard of with Chymical emblems, which are peculiar to this Science.⁸⁸

We might even say that Maier's epigrams are themselves ›emblematic‹, for they speak not only through poetic devices such as metaphors and similes, but also to a large extent through visual images.⁸⁹ This aspect is of course closely related to the tradition of alchemical symbolism itself,⁹⁰ which on the one hand used linguistic means and created ›cover names‹ (Decknamen), various puns and assonances, and on the other hand often worked with images, for example describing visions and dreams. In this sense, alchemy's symbolism was very concrete, even ›objective‹.

In his preface, Maier also stresses the special communicative value of his emblems:

... for all other arts, if they represent emblems of manners, or other things, than of the secrets of nature, this seems different from their scope and end, they being willing and requisite to be understood by all men; Chymia not so, which as a chaste virgin ought to be seen through a veil, and as Diana, not without a garment of various colors, for reasons elsewhere expressed.⁹¹

87 Lat. *tria itaque sensuum magis spiritualium, nempe visus et auditus, nec non intellectus ipsius*. Reason is counted among the senses here because if it rises to the appropriate spiritual level, it is able to perceive or glimpse divine mysteries and inspirations directly. The means of this ascent is, in Maier's rendering, for example, the contemplation of artistic expressions.

88 Maier here uses the term ›emblem‹ in a broader sense – he means alchemical allegories and symbols in general. This is consistent with the fact that the term ›emblem‹ has often been used as a general term for a representation.

89 Cf. Daly 1970, pp. 382–383.

90 Obrist 2003, p. 134.

91 Maier 1618a, pp. 8–9. Maier's rational approach here is only to emphasize that alchemical procedures must first be thoroughly thought out before proceeding to being implemented in the laboratory. Cf. note 49.

The humanist and ›chymical‹ emblems differed in the way their message was encoded and how it was to be interpreted and understood. The moral or educational content of the humanist emblem could be ›decoded‹ into a logically or rationally expressible idea enriched with the symbolic connotations of its emblematic presentation. The emblem suggested »some useful advice that might be applicable to one's everyday life. This advice was rendered memorable, because it could be summed up in a corresponding image.«⁹²

In contrast to this unambiguous progression from hidden to overt meaning, the ›chymical‹ emblems had a different communicative function, as they presented a labyrinth of often deliberately confusing meanings in which the reader could get lost as well as oriented. Rather than conveying unambiguous instruction or even ›information‹, it was an adaptation of the reader's perception and thinking to a very different mode of expression and hermeneutics. A metaphor is often ›explained‹ by another, even less intelligible metaphor, a symbol by another symbol.

This mode of explication, typical of alchemical literature, is elaborated by Maier in his commentary on emblem 11. The complexity of alchemical allegories and symbols is due to the extremely loose relationship between signifier and signified, which arises, as Maier so succinctly puts it, when *the same words are used for different things and different words for the same thing*.⁹³ As György E. Szönyi adds, it is this methodological principle that gives alchemical texts their multilayered character. Thus, several completely unrelated symbolic systems may coexist in the *Atalanta fugiens*, which, moreover, may consist of antagonistic and mutually hostile elements.⁹⁴ However, hidden in this incongruence is a very specific logic, governed by the principle of analogy and the constantly changing point of view according to its changing context. This point of view is often shifting from the general to the specific and vice versa.

In Maier's conception, the title, image and epigram – artistically expressed in the word, picture and music – were supposed to convey the same idea or the same alchemical symbol in a threefold sensory way. This was also supported by Maier's theoretical thinking and his conception of sense perception and intellect, as defined not only in the preface to the *Atalanta fugiens* but also as elaborated in chapter six of the *Septimana philosophica* (1620).⁹⁵

92 Manning 2002, p. 48.

93 Maier 1618a, p. 54.

94 Szönyi 2003, pp. 301–325.

95 The full title of the work is *Septimana philosophica qua aenigmata aureola de omni genere a Salomone Israelitarum sapientissimo rege, et Arabiae regina Saba, nec non Hyramo, Tyri principe, sibi invicem in modum colloquii proponuntur et enodantur*.

According to Maier, the cognitive act by which the immaterial refined *species intelligibilis*, whose vehicle is the *spiritus animalis*,⁹⁶ arrive at the intellect consists of the following steps: The basis of the cognitive act is sensory perception, which receives images produced by all bodily and non-bodily objects and impulses. These images are transmitted to the brain through the *spiritus animalis*, which is formed from the blood in the left ventricle of the heart, further tempered in the brain, and whose nature is akin to the element of fire. In the brain these images are refined, from special images (*imagines particulares*) they are transformed into general images (*imagines universales*) and are processed by the passive and then by the active intellect (*intellectus patiens, & deinde agens*). They are then dealt with by the rational soul (*anima rationalis*), which is even more subtle and spiritual than these general images.⁹⁷ The gross things ascend to subtlety and spiritual sublimity. It is a gradual sublimation, a purification of sensory perceptions and a transformation into mental images through a physiological process. These are then contemplated and transformed into ideas in the mind as the most sublime part of man.⁹⁸ According to Erik Leibenguth, whose interpretation we are following here, music plays an important mediating role in this model of cognition because it is supposed to influence the whole of human cognitive forces.⁹⁹

We can therefore say that in Maier's emblems it was necessary for images and epigrams to correspond, since the role of images was to accelerate the sensory-cognitive process just as the role of music – or singing – was to help words in their sublimated and sublimating output to the intellect. In this context, Maier's resistance to Paracelsus's notion of the imagination, according to which images are born through the imagination in the mind, is well understood, whereas for Maier *nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses* was valid.¹⁰⁰

This principle is also succinctly expressed in the opening poem of the *Atalanta fugiens*:

*These emblems are offered to your hearing and sight, and reason can then follow as we explain these mysteries. / I have presented them as a lure to your senses, so that they may attract reason and it may discover what is valuable in them.*¹⁰¹

96 Maier understood this *spiritus* in the Aristotelian sense, as an animating force, another expression of which was the innate warmth. Wels 2017, p. 46.

97 Maier 1620, pp. 210-212. Leibenguth 2002, p. 90-91.

98 Maier 1620, p. 211. Cf. Wels 2010, pp. 156-157.

99 Leibenguth 2002, p. 91.

100 ... *nihil est in intellectu, quod non prius fuit in sensu*. Maier 1620, p. 207; Maier 1618a, p. 9. It is the famous metaphor of tabula rasa by Aristotle (*De anima*, III,4-5), Wels 2010, p. 156.

101 Maier 1618a, p. [2].

Maier's philosophical foundations were Aristotelian with some aspects of Neo-Platonism,¹⁰² but even more important for understanding them is that they express a complete continuity between matter (or body) and spirit. The latter is crucial to his ›chymical philosophy‹ as it mirrors the unity and interdependence of the spiritual and material aspects of alchemy, as well as the indivisibility of its theory and practice.

Merian's iconographic synthesis

Alchemical iconography was established in the 14th century. Technical drawings of laboratory equipment were the oldest and most frequent type of image; less numerous were geometric compositions, including various tables or diagrams. Figurative allegorical and symbolic compositions were the rarest, yet the most original form. This part of alchemical iconography adopted and reinterpreted a wide range of motifs that were only loosely related to the natural sciences. These included profane and sacred motifs, from agricultural and medical themes to motifs of Christian iconography and, from the 16th century onwards, mythological themes. A specific theme was the so-called ›revived vessel‹, i.e. a glass phial, in which alchemical matter was depicted in various stages of transformation in a symbolic form.¹⁰³ The principles of this visual way of transmitting alchemical knowledge were transposed into iconography from the imagery of alchemical texts.¹⁰⁴

The emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens* followed the earlier patterns of alchemical picture poems,¹⁰⁵ which can be described with some exaggeration as emblems *avant la lettre*. These predecessors included, for example, the German poem *Sol et Luna* with 21 images, which is part of the already mentioned florilegium *Rosarium philosophorum*,¹⁰⁶ or the treatise *Splendor solis*, the earliest version of which dates from 1531/32.¹⁰⁷ Like the poem

102 Leibenguth 2002, p. 90.

103 Laube 2014, pp. 73-86.

104 »The development of alchemical image-making cannot be separated from this textual tradition. Medieval alchemical images are often closely related to texts and frequently evoke the same metaphors and analogies as those encountered in alchemical writings, including works produced at other times and in other languages.« Rampling 2022, pp. 160-161.

105 Nummedal 2020.

106 Cf. note. 11.

107 Völlnagel 2004. Telle 2006, pp. 421-448. Skinner u.a. 2019.

Sol et Luna, it survives in a number of copies and variants and was first published in print at the end of the 16th century.¹⁰⁸

The closest precursor and probably the model for the emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens* was Lambspring's¹⁰⁹ German picture poem *Tractatus de lapide philosophorum*, whose origins date back to the 15th century and whose oldest surviving manuscript dates from the second half of the 16th century.¹¹⁰ Maier knew the work well, valued it highly,¹¹¹ and some of Lambspring's emblems overlap with those of the *Atalanta fugiens*.¹¹² In the *Symbola aureae mensae*, Maier briefly describes Lambspring's emblems with animal symbolism and explains their common basis. This explanation can thus also be applied to the emblems of the *Atalanta fugiens*:

*It is obvious to everyone what is meant by these pairs [of animals], one coming from the East and the other from the West. The two birds are two eagles sent from Delphi by Jupiter to circle the globe in opposite directions. The matter is explained by the author of the Consilium Coniugii seu de Massa Solis et Lunae, who states the following from Aristotle's letter to Alexander: In this art there are two chief stones of a marvellous nature, white and red. The white one appears at sunset on the surface of the waters, then hides until midnight, and then dives into the depths. The red behaves in exactly the opposite way, for it begins to emerge above the waters from sunrise until noon, and then descends into the depths.*¹¹³

108 *Aureum vellus, oder, Guldin Schatz und Kunstammer. Tractatus III* (1598-1599). In this edition, however, the *Splendor solis* is accompanied by artistically inferior woodcuts that grossly oversimplify the rich iconography of the illuminations, thus severely limiting their inspirational value. It is very likely that Maier was familiar with some of the manuscript copies of the treatise.

109 For name variants see Buntz 1968, p. 89; Telle 1985, Col. 524-530; Horchler 2005, p. 182.

110 Horchler, 2005, p. 182. The following four Lambspring manuscripts contain illustrations: Wien, ÖNB, Cod. 10102, 2nd half of the 16th century; Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Cod. 16752, 1578-1588, fol. 51r-67r; Salzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. M I 92, 1607, and Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Ms P 2177. The depictions in these manuscripts differ only in some details and artistic treatment. ▶ Zotov p. 219-233; ▶ Lehnert, p. 199-218.

111 Maier 1617c, p. 272.

112 Compare, for example, the fight between the dog and the wolf in emblem 47 with the same motif in Lambspring's fifth image; the motif of two birds in a nest in emblem 7 with Lambspring's seventh image, the two lions in emblem 16 with the fourth image, or the ouroboros in emblem 14 with the sixth image.

113 *Quid vero intelligatur per haec duo, quorum vnum ex oriente, alterum ex occidente prouenit, cuique per se patet: Duae aues enim sunt duae aquilae à Ioue ex Delphis emissae ad circumuolandum contrario motu terrarum orbem: Cuius rei declarationem autor consilij coniug[is] solis & lunae ex Aristotelis Epistola adducit hoc modo: Quod huius artis duo sunt lapides principales, albus et rubeus mirabiles naturae: Albus in occasu solis incipit apparere super facies aquarum abscondens se usque ad mediam noctem et postea vergit in profundum:*

The first edition of Lamspring's poem with illustrations is contained in the alchemical collection *Dyas chymica tripartita, das ist, sechs herzliche deutsche philosophische Tractätlein* (1625), compiled by Johannes Rhenanus;¹¹⁴ it was illustrated by Merian.¹¹⁵

In his illustrations for the *Atalanta fugiens*, Merian expressed their meaning through the acting figure. In his conception, the figure performs a completely illustrative and comprehensible action that has a wide range of symbolic connotations. Indeed, what is depicted means more than what is represented. No mysterious objects or scenes appear in the illustrations, nor is there any alchemical equipment or the aforementioned and widespread motif of the ›revived vessel‹ to be seen.

This focus on the acting figure stems not only from Merian's mastery of drawing the human body, but also from the nature of Maier's epigrams, most of which lend themselves to representation through personification. Only in a few illustrations, the human figure is replaced by creatures from the alchemical bestiary¹¹⁶ and supplemented by some architectural elements, rarely by craft or domestic tools. Only in one case it is replaced by a cosmological depiction.¹¹⁷

Personification has always been an essential part of alchemical iconography. Human figures very often symbolized and represented alchemical principles, metals or minerals, as well as various laboratory processes, through the activities they performed – from acts of love and piety, through various works and crafts, to drastic and bizarre activities (e.g. executions and torture).¹¹⁸ In addition to the personifications of the planets, we often encounter figures of a king and a queen, who symbolize the sun and the moon, gold and silver, as well as the principles of Mercury and Sulphur. These characters had various attributes and the contrast between nudity and clothing also played an important role, in which the alchemical symbolism reflected the basic laboratory procedure *Solve et coagula* (dissolve and coagulate).

Rubeus vero ex opposito operatur, quia incipit ascendere super aquas in ortu solis usque ad meridiem et postea descendit in profundum. Maier 1617c, p. 272. Maier quotes this from the *Consilium conjugii seu de massa solis et lunae* in his commentary on emblem 47 with the theme of the dog and wolf fight. Maier 1618a, p. 198

114 Lehnert/Wagner 2021. Wels 2021, pp. 67–102. Lamspring's poem was printed simultaneously in a collection of alchemical treatises, *Musaeum hermeticum*, published the same year by the same publisher. For an enlarged edition see *Musaeum hermeticum reformatum et amplificatum, aureus tractatus de philosophorum lapide* (1677).

115 Of the manuscripts of Lamspring's poem mentioned in note 110, Cod. M I 92 is the closest to Merian's etching.

116 Emblems 7, 14, 16, 29, 37, 43, 47.

117 Emblem 45.

118 For example, in the treatises *Aurora consurgens* or *Buch der Heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*. Cf. Obrist 1982.



Fig. 7
 Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 2, in: Michael
 Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
 Oppenheim 1618.
 Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.

The dissolved substance was symbolized by the naked figure, the solid substance by the clothed figure. This contrast could also refer to the opposition of the material and the spiritual.¹¹⁹

As Lawrence Principe points out, the personification of substances allowed alchemists to view them as playing certain roles in the flasks and crucibles under their gaze.¹²⁰ Principe compares this dramatic effect not only to contemporary theatrical performances but above all cites the iconography of the *Atalanta fugiens* as an example. This is not a question of the influence of theatrical iconography on Merian's work,¹²¹ nor of the influence of the theater on alchemical literature as such, but a

119 This had a more general validity, we encounter it in Renaissance art, for example in Titian's painting *Love Heavenly and Earthly* in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, where this opposition is depicted by the Neo-Platonic opposition of Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos. Cf. Panofsky 1967, p. 225.

120 Principe 2017, pp. 233-234.

121 As Didier Kahn has convincingly demonstrated, the term ›theatrum‹ is often used in alchemical literature to refer to texts or collections of texts. It is a rhetorical expression that does not refer to the theatrical elements in these texts. Alchemical theatrical works appear only rarely. Kahn 1988, pp. 5-61; Kahn 2017b, pp. 356-363.

consequence of a fact generally applicable to allegories, whose characteristic feature is their theatrical nature based on personification.¹²²

Let us demonstrate the manner of Merian's ›literal‹ artistic interpretation of Maier's texts in three examples that differ in the degree of projection of the epigram into the illustration. The first example, which is by far the most common in the *Atalanta fugiens*, is an exact artistic copy of the title, of the entire epigram or of parts of it. We typically see it in emblem 2 (Fig. 7), whose epigram reads as follows:

*A courteous Wolf to Romulus displayed / Her milky duggs, to Jove a Goat, tis said: / Nor is it strange to assert our mother Earth / Gave suck to the tender Philosophic birth; / If beasts so small Heroes so great could breed, / How great will he be, whom the earth doth feed?*¹²³

The first two verses are depicted ›literally‹, only in the case of the she-wolf Merian added Remus to Romulus. Also, in the depiction of the personification of the Earth, the artist has chosen a procedure that precisely objectifies the idea of the ›nursing mother Earth‹. This medieval idea has significant antecedents in the descriptions and depictions of *Terra* as the heir of the Greek goddess *Gaia* and the Roman *Tellus*,¹²⁴ whose traditions were also transferred to the ›Goddess of Nature‹ as can be traced in the works of authors such as Bernardus Silvestris and his followers.¹²⁵ The motif of ›nursing‹ in the sense of spiritual nourishment was also associated with the personification of Wisdom, which may have had a pedagogical as well as a theological significance.¹²⁶

It is certain that in the case of this and other epigrams, Merian needed no further instruction to visualize them. However, this is not the case with the aforementioned emblem 41 (Fig. 8), for which Merian used Tempesta's etching no. 98 with the inscription *Adonis is killed by the boar's teeth* (Fig. 9) as a model. Here, too, Merian has adapted the image exactly to the text of the epigram and commentary. Venus is not riding in a chariot

122 Kahn 2017b, p. 369.

123 Maier 1618a, p. 17. Merian undoubtedly based his work on German versions of Maier's epigrams, which is well illustrated by an iconographic detail on emblem 43. The Latin epigram speaks of a raven that can fly without wings (*Corvus qui pennis absque volare solet*), while the German epigram says that it flies even though its wings have been cut off (*So fleugt / ob wol ihm seyn die Flugel geschmidten ab*), which is accurately depicted on the etching. Cf. *Idem*. 1618a, pp. 180-181.

124 Dronke 1980, pp. 20-28.

125 Wirth 1967, Col. 997-1104; Modersohn 1997, pp. 23-69.

126 This motif also occurs in the *Aurora consurgens* manuscript from the early 15th century, where the personified Wisdom breastfeeds two adepts. Obrist 1982, pp. 185-186.



Fig. 8
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 41, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.



Fig. 9
Antonio Tempesta, *No. 98*,
in: *Metamorphoseon sive
transformationum Ovidianarum
libri quindecim*, Antwerp 1606.
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

but running through a rose bush scratching her legs. In addition, however, Merian has depicted a figure that probably refers to Mars, even though this planetary god (and alchemical symbol) is neither mentioned in Maier's epigram nor in his commentary nor in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹²⁷ In his commentary on the emblem, Maier merely says that *Adonis is killed by the boar, i.e. by the sharp vinegar (acetum acerrimum) and dissolving water that gripped him with its cruel and deadly teeth*.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, he connects this animal with the god of war in his *Arcana arcanissima*, where he states that it was a fierce boar possessing the strength of Mars.¹²⁹ I believe that Merian was instructed directly by Maier regarding this detail, as I find it unlikely that he would have added it to the depiction himself.

On emblem 44, whose content is related to the emblem with the death of Adonis according to Maier,¹³⁰ we find a similar example of the addition of a pictorial motif (Fig. 10). This is not described in the text of the epigram or in the commentary, but only hinted at in one word in the title of the emblem: *Typhon kills Osiris by deceit*. It is noteworthy that Typhon's ruse became the dominant element of the depiction. According to Plutarch's account of Isis and Osiris,¹³¹ Typhon held a banquet at which he tricked Osiris into lying down in a chest. Then, he and his accomplices hammered Osiris into the chest and threw it into the river.

Isis discovered it at the palace of the king of Byblos and took it back to Egypt where she hid it. Typhon found Osiris's body, dismembered it and threw it into the sea. Isis subsequently reassembled its parts. Only this final part of the mythological story is commented on by Maier, both in the *Atalanta fugiens* and more fully in the *Arcana arcanissima*.¹³²

Merian demonstrates an extraordinary ability to embody and concretize abstract and imaginary themes. Already the opening emblem of the *Atalanta fugiens* contains an impressive personification of the wind Boreas by which Maier created a pendant to the aforementioned emblem 2 with the figure of nursing mother Earth. This ability becomes even more evident in emblem 21 illustrating the squaring of the circle (Fig. 11).¹³³

127 Mars as the culprit of Adonis's death is mentioned, for example, in the commentary on Virgil's *Eclogue* 10.18 by Maurus Servius Honoratus: [*Adonidem*] *Mars in aprum transfiguratus occidit*. See Hagen/Thilo 1881.

128 In his commentary on emblem 44, he calls it *that which is added* to the basic two components of the stone, namely Mercury and Sulphur, and equates it with Typhon and Python.

129 *Adonim ... ab apro furioso Martis vim habente interimitur*. Maier 1614, p. 194.

130 Maier 1618a, p. 174.

131 Babbitt 1936, Vol. V, chap. 12-18 (351C-358E).

132 Maier 1614, pp. 3-16.

133 Maier 1618a, p. 77.

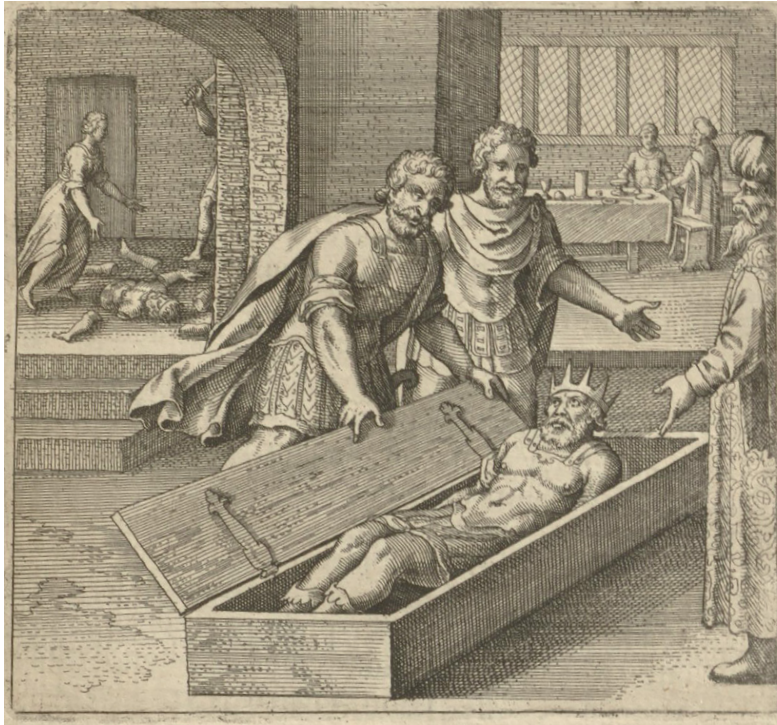


Fig. 10
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 44, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.

Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.

► p. 117, Fig. 15.

► p. 224, Fig. 3.

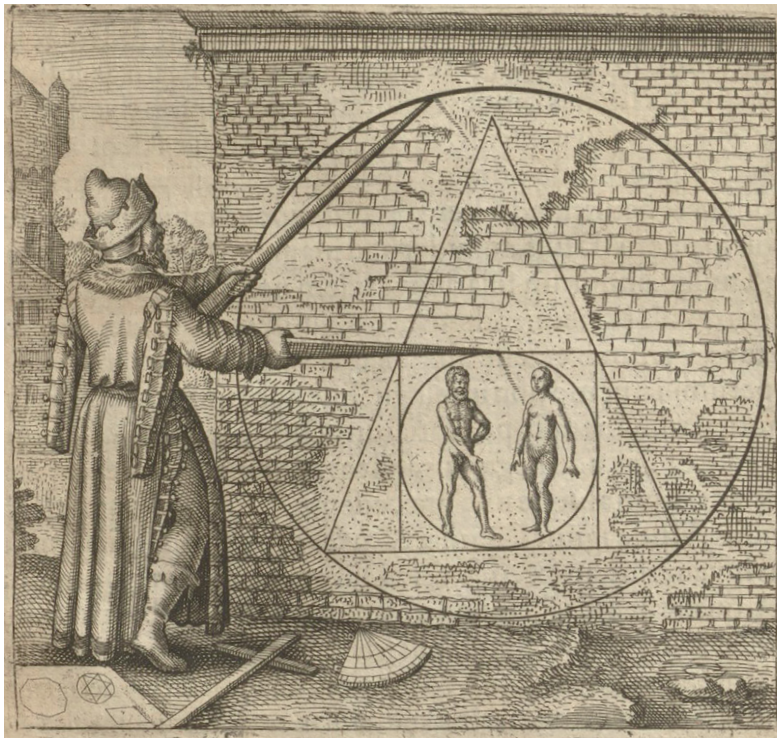


Fig. 11
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 21, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.

Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.

The instruction *Make for the man and the woman a circle, of that a quadrangle, of this a triangle, of the same a circle, and you will have the Philosophers' Stone* was already depicted in earlier alchemical literature by means of a geometrical diagram, but Merian translated it from the abstract two dimensions into a three-dimensional world, as Michael Gaudio puts it:

»Merian's picture insists upon representation [of these ideas] as an embodied act, one that in this case is performed by a philosopher-artist on a ›canvas‹ of crumbling plaster and brick the ostentatious materiality of which competes with the theoretical interest of the emblem's geometrical forms.«¹³⁴

In a similarly simple, yet evocative manner, Merian expressed the idea of four different fires in emblem 17 (Fig. 12) by means of four overlapping fireballs. The lowest floats above the water and the three upper ones in the air. Donna Bilak pointed out the remarkable analogy of this shape with multiple sublimation apparatuses and interpreted other elements from the *Atalanta's* emblems as references to laboratory equipment.¹³⁵

A more difficult task for Merian was emblem 18 (Fig. 13). Here, he depicted an artist trying to turn an ingot into gold by placing it in the fire. A bowl filled with coins stands on a large log in front of him. Within the *Atalanta fugiens*, this is an exceptional example of an emblem that draws attention to a fraudulent practice.¹³⁶ This is suggested by both the awkward gesture of the artist's left hand and the ironic depiction of the dog absent-mindedly scratching its ear.¹³⁷ Within the *Atalanta fugiens*, this is an unusual depiction of a ›genre-motif which underlines the overall meaning of the emblem.¹³⁸ Also striking is the view of the large Gothic church in the background which may have been meant as a sacred contrast¹³⁹ to the profane, alchemical, activity of the ›souffleur‹ in the foreground.¹⁴⁰

Merian's custom to make the acting figure in the foreground the bearer of a symbolic message also becomes evident in the depiction of the executor

¹³⁴ Gaudio 2020.

¹³⁵ Bilak 2022, pp. 83-87.

¹³⁶ The second example is emblem 27.

¹³⁷ The dog had its irreplaceable place in alchemical symbolism as a symbol of Sulphur, as in emblem 47. The dog depicted here, however, does not have these symbolic connotations. Abrahams 1998, p. 58.

¹³⁸ Emblem 22 shows a cat, which probably also has a complementary character only.

¹³⁹ Apart from the chapel on emblem 12, it is the only church building depicted.

¹⁴⁰ It is possible that the Phrygian cap on the head of the acting character even has an ironic meaning in this context.

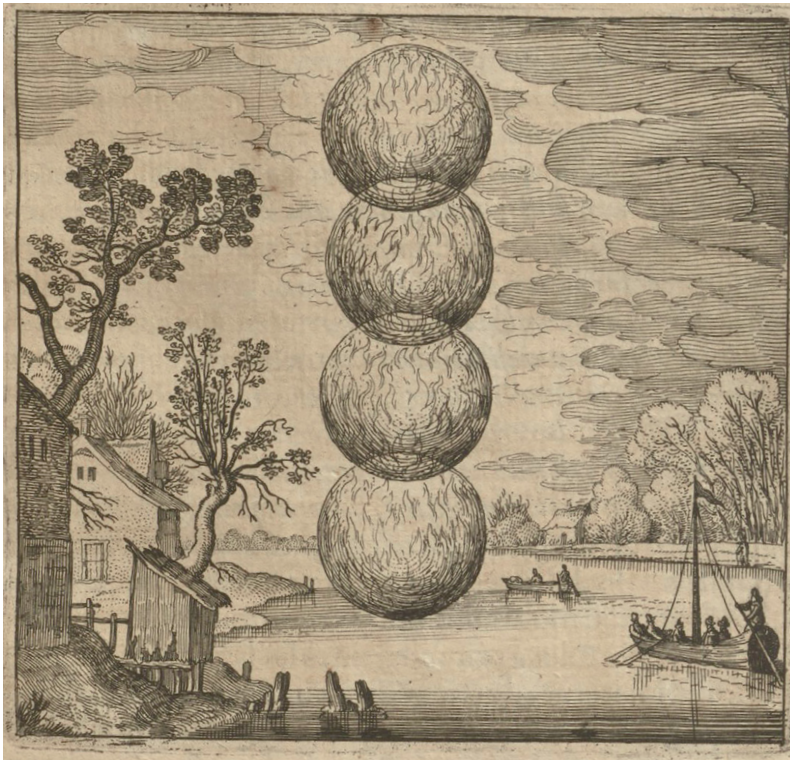


Fig. 12
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 17, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.



Fig. 13
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 18, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.

of laboratory works – i.e. the author of the text.¹⁴¹ This was not an entirely new element within alchemical literature; the alchemist himself had appeared in various passive and active roles in its iconography before, but Merian gave the theme of the ›artist at work‹ (*artifex in opere*) a new form and urgency.¹⁴²

In Maier's case, there was a deeper meaning because he understood the course of his life and its circumstances as an integral part of his chymical quest, to which he felt called and predisposed. This feature of his self-reflexivity is already present in his *De medicina regia*, the first part of which contains the author's *curriculum vitae*.¹⁴³ An important moment is the description of his mother's experience three days before she gave birth to him. While she was resting on the grass in the garden of one of her relatives, a turtledove suddenly perched on her lap. Maier interpreted this as a good omen for his future research¹⁴⁴ and even made this ›augury sign‹ part of his coat of arms.¹⁴⁵ It shows well how, behind the causality of his life, he was constantly looking for symbolic references to its finality, that is, to the successful completion of the Great Work.¹⁴⁶

The ›artist at work‹ is present in the *Atalanta fugiens* in several ways. In some of the emblems he is depicted in a sumptuous suit referring to his nobility.¹⁴⁷ In others, he has a fanciful and archaizing appearance, recalling the mythical history of alchemy – see emblem 4 (**Fig. 14**).¹⁴⁸ His ancient costume can also be identified in the emblems, where he appears as the ›divine craftsman‹ Vulcan as in no. 8 (**Fig. 6**) and 23. To these we can also associate the Herculean figure ›slaying the elements‹ in emblem 19. The *artifex*, however, also appears as a full armored knight (emblem 20), as a simple craftsman, as we have already encountered

141 My colleague Donna Bilak (New York University/Gallatin) approached me with this topic in 2020 and together we presented it at the conference *De re vestiaria. Antiquity and fashion in the Renaissance* (Venice, May 24, 2021).

142 In some cases, alchemists allowed themselves to be depicted in the symbolic iconography of their works, examples include Heinrich Khunrath and Leonhard Thurneysser.

143 Maier 1609.

144 Maier 1609, p. Cv. Tilton 2003, pp. 38-40.

145 In detail on the question of nobilitation and his coat of arms Hausenblasová/Purš 2016, pp. 335-365. Maier himself designed his coat of arms in his application to Rudolf II. The main figure on the shield was a flying eagle connected to a toad by a chain. Cf. depiction (*symbol*) of Avicenna in Maier 1617c, p. 192.

146 While Maier understood his *curriculum vitae* symbolically, we encounter the opposite approach in other authors who symbolically retell the process of labour as their life story. To name but a few examples: the works attributed to Bernhardus Trevisanus and Nicolas Flamel, which Maier knew and counted among his authorities.

147 Maier was ennobled by Emperor Rudolf II in September 1609 in Prague and received the title *comes palatinus*. Hausenblasová/Purš 2016, pp. 335-365.

148 See also emblems 5, 11, 44.



Fig. 14
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 4, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.



Fig. 15
Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 15, in: Michael
Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
Oppenheim 1618.
Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75

Fig. 16
 Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 42, in: Michael
 Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
 Oppenheim 1618.
 Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5-75.



him on the title page of Maier's *Examen fucorum*, see emblems 10 (Fig. 15), 15, and 18 (Fig. 13), as a peasant (emblem 6) or as a coral seeker (emblem 32). Another form is the sage as seen in emblems 21 (Fig. 11) and 42 (Fig. 16). Especially in the latter, the simplicity of his clothing is again meant to symbolize the ›simple path of nature‹ that the alchemist should follow. And we must not forget that the artist also has his female alter ego in emblems 3 and 22.¹⁴⁹

In summary, we can say that Merian was able to express a key idea in an unusually convincing way using quite elementary artistic means, thus focusing the viewer's attention on what is essential. It is not a simplification of the depicted idea, but a condensation into a straightforward and aesthetically impressive image. Thanks to its visual concreteness and ›legibility‹, the viewer can develop a series of analogical ideas and look for interrelationships between the emblems. Older elements of alchemical iconography, such as the king and queen, the personifications of the planets, and the various protagonists of the alchemical bestiary,

¹⁴⁹ These are references to the alchemical symbolism of the ›women's work‹. Cf. Mödersheim 1996, pp. 31-56; Warlick 1998, pp. 25-48.

were dressed with new forms, stripped of their archaic, largely medieval character and adapted into a contemporary early Baroque style that played with fancifully antiquated allusions.

Landscapes are also an unmistakable part of Merian's etchings.¹⁵⁰ According to Michael Gaudio, their use in the emblems of the *Atalanta* and in Merian's subsequent works was a continuation of the naturalistic aesthetics of the panel painting as described by Leon Battista Alberti, »whose grid-based perspectival system accommodated human visual experience to the rectilinear picture, offering direct access to nature through its four-sided ›window‹.«¹⁵¹ As Gaudio goes on to say, Alberti saw the landscape elements of the paintings as a supplement that was intended to have a »restorative effect« on the viewer, while »as a humanist he located the true content of the artwork in its *istoria*, a term that refers to harmonious and persuasive figural compositions that move the beholder in the same way that a well-told history moves a reader.«

Certainly, landscapes were not the most important part of Merian's depictions. However, they created their spatial structure, which is also the ›operating space‹ of the viewer's imagination.¹⁵² Moreover, it can be assumed that landscapes with ancient ruins had a special role. They appear mainly on etchings which show dragons, (emblems 14 and 50) (Figs. 17, 18), lions (emblems 16 and 37), Oedipus (emblem 39), the motif of the spring of Jupiter of Hammon (emblem 40) and the motif of Rhodes (emblem 23).¹⁵³

Not only the aforementioned personifications, but also these real and imaginary exteriors give Merian's scenes a dramatic or scenic effect¹⁵⁴ as they focus attention on the motifs in the foreground and highlight their significance. The meaning of what is depicted may not be immediately

150 Wüthrich 1993b, p. 6. Landscapes play a significant role in the engravings of the second edition of Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* (1609). Let us mention in particular the engraving *Porta Amphitheatri Sapientiae Aeternae*, which with its overall composition could have been an inspiration for Merian and Maier. Cf. Forshaw 2006, pp. 195-220. Purš 2017, pp. 292-294. Schmidt-Biggemann 2014, pp. 41-83.

151 Gaudio 2020.

152 It should be added that Merian also used this artistic principle in his other emblematic works, such as the *Emblematum ethico-politicorum centuria* by Julius Wilhelm Zingref, published by Johann Theodor De Bry in 1619. Neugebauer 1993b, p. 347.

153 This emblem also depicts the statue of Apollo, yet differently from its description in Maier's commentary.

154 For example, the famous engraving from Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* called the *Oratory and Laboratory* had a similar effect. In this case, the spatial structure of the depiction itself, based on a central perspective, was one of the bearers of meaning. Purš 2015b, pp. 50-89. ► Forshaw, p. 237-246.

Fig. 17
 Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 14, in: Michael
 Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
 Oppenheim 1618.
 Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5.75.
 ► p. 114, Fig. 13.



comprehensible, but it is nevertheless a tangible and weighty reality¹⁵⁵ that has its *raison d'être*, as Peter M. Daly describes:

»The picture [of the emblem] is *real*, in the sense that it represents directly and concretely objects, which for the most part are meant to be *visualized*, and *believed in as facts*. This is still true when objects are strangely combined, and when the effect of the combination seems unreal, because objects cannot be found in such combinations in nature or man's world. Be that as it may, the *individual object in the picture* is *real, concrete, visual and believed*. Phantastic creatures, hieroglyphic signs, and the superstitions surrounding certain natural phenomena were accepted as true on the authority of earlier writers.«¹⁵⁶

This insistent persuasiveness of the reality of emblems is reminiscent of what André Breton wrote four hundred years later in his *Manifeste du*

¹⁵⁵ This exacerbated concreteness of depiction was typical of emblems in general. Henkel/Schöne 2013, p. XIV.

¹⁵⁶ Daly 1970, p. 387.



Fig. 18
 Matthäus Merian the Elder,
Emblem 50, in: Michael
 Maier, *Atalanta fugiens*,
 Oppenheim 1618.
 Frankfurt a.M., UB, Sign. 8° P 5,75.
 ▶ p. 115, Fig. 14.

surréalisme: »Ce qu'il y a d'admirable dans le fantastique, c'est qu'il n'y a plus de fantastique: il n'y a que le réel.«¹⁵⁷

Merian further developed his concept of the ›alchemical landscape‹ in his work. This is especially true of the large fold-out graphic sheet he created for Johann Daniel Mylius's *Opus medico-chymicum, Tractatus III seu Basilica philosophica* (1618). In this very intricately structured depiction, the landscape itself becomes part of the symbolizing process, not only in its division into ›day‹ and ›night‹ parts, but directly in its morphology, especially the mountain or hill in the middle of the etching, on which trees symbolizing the various metals grow.¹⁵⁸ This graphic summary of the theory and practice of alchemy represents a pinnacle of book illustration for alchemical literature that has not been surpassed.

¹⁵⁷ Breton 1962, p. 26.

¹⁵⁸ Böhme 2014, pp. 19-21.

Conclusion

The concept of Maier's book as a ›polyphonic‹ combination of poetry, visual art and music is an attempt to capture the microcosm of the Great Work in its totality, to communicate it through all the ways offered by the human senses and the mind itself. Maier sought to create ›visible‹ music and ›audible‹ images in order to convey ideas and harmonies that are fundamentally beyond the grasp of the senses. In his work, he thus presents himself as a truly universal creator whose qualities as poet, emblemist and composer nevertheless have to merge into the ideal of the simple and humble ›son of science‹, whose purpose in life is not the spectacular acquisition of gold and wealth, but the production of a medicine that would benefit human society.