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THE SYMBOLIC USE OF COLOUR IN ALCHEMICAL

ILLUSTRATION

by

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Alchemy, or the art of transformation, has always been a difficult and problematic area of study due to it's early beginnings in antiquity and it's obscure texts and illustrations.

In this thesis, I would like to discuss the symbolic use of colour by the medieval alchemists. Firstly by examining the origins of alchemy, which began in the ancient Sumerian and Accadian cultures and secondly, by examining the basic concepts which informed the work.

The essence of alchemy was essentially esoteric and a parallel thought system which existed independently in the orient, inevitably leads to an exploration of Jungian ideas of a universal consciousness.

This esoteric dimension is fundamental to an understanding of the alchemists use of terms such as light and darkness and of the importance of colour symbolism in their illustrations. In exploring these esoteric ideas, I will endeavour to show how the various colour stages related to different states of consciousness.

To exemplify this, I will quote from original treatises and use original manuscript material appropriately.

The link between art and alchemy has recently found renewed interest. In the past decade, this link has been the subject of several magazine and periodical essays. This is possibly the result of direct alchemical influences reflected in the work of many contemporary artists. In my conclusion therefore, I make a brief reference to some artists whose work embodies an aspect of alchemy.



## **CHAPTER 1**

### **ALCHEMY – IT'S ORIGINS IN ANCIENT CULTURES**





Colour is probably the most obvious external characteristic of natural objects. When looking at the ancient Sumerian and Accadian nomenclature of gold, it is striking that of the several terms, no less than ten have a direct connection to colour.

Fig. 1. Though the actual significance of the different terms elude us today it is clear the colour of natural and refined gold was important.

The tradition of craftsmanship in metallurgy an art that was practiced from the earliest times, was saturated with philosophy. This is especially true of Egypt, where metallurgy as the source of riches for the royalty, was a closely guarded secret retained only for specialist craftsmen.

In the Hellenistic period, metallurgy was also tinted with the philosophic theories of the Greeks. The element and atom ideas of the nature philosophers and of Plato and Aristotle.

Therefore, gold was appreciated aesthetically as well as for its monetary value. The colour of ancient Egyptian gold ranged from bright yellow, dull yellow, grey brick to dark purple to plum colour and a rose pink.

All except the last were arrived at by chance and due to admixtures of silver, copper, iron and oxidised layers of these base metals. In some cases, the red and purple staining was caused by organic matter.

The rose colour however, was achieved through a heat-resisting translucent coat of iron-oxide formed by dipping the object in a solution of an iron salt and then heating it. Such objects date back to many centuries before the oldest written recipes for tinting metals.



# The Accadian nomenclature of gold

	Accadian	Sumerian	Notes
1	hurāṣu	GUŠKIN (KÜ.GI)	"the yellow", gold
2	hurāṣu ruššu	GUŠKIN-ĤUŠ.A	red gold
3	hurāṣu arku	GUŠKIN-SIG	yellow gold arku is the yellow-green of young shoots (Gr. chloros)
4	hurāṣu šadi		mountain gold
5		GUŠKIN.ŠAR.DA	alloyed gold
6	ṣarirû	AN.TA.ŠUR.RA	"the ruddy", red gold from root ṣ r r
7	pašallu		gold leaf compare Syr. p'šâlâ
8	šaššu		"the sun-metal" compare Syr. šamša = sun
9	zûzu		mint-gold compare Syr. zûz = coin
10	ṣaidu		refined red gold from root ṣwd = shine red
11	misû		washed gold from root msh
12	anaku		(lit. "tin") gold coin compare Engl. "tin" = slang for money
13	dalbu, daiâlu		"the circulator" from root djl = walk to and fro
14	zalhu	(Subaraean) "the ruddy"	compare Syr. z lihê = patina
15	sâmu	"the red"	often combined with 2
16	sakîru	reef gold	compare Syr. s'Kar = rubrum facit (red-making)



Accadian texts also exist which mention the staining of stones by cooking them in solutions or chemicals. These intentional stainings and use of coloured native metals or artificial alloys were important for use in in-lay works and art objects. Fig. 2

It may have been that this application of colour had an inner meaning, as the early connection of colour with the gods and stars points that way.

In the earliest alchemical texts colour must have had both a practical and a spiritual meaning. For the colour not only indicated the appearance but also the inner nature of the metals. For example, a Fifteenth Century manuscript in Latin gives a list of the planets and the associated metals. This list would probably have been based on much older texts written approximately 3,000 B.C.

#### Nomina Planetarium

Sol	id est	Aurum
Lumina	id est	Argentum
Mars	id est	Ferrum
Mercurius	id est	Argentum Vivum
Iubiter	id est	Stagnum
Venus	id est	Cuprum
Saturn	id est	Plumbum
Almissadir	id est	Sal Armoniacum
Alkibrith	id est	Sulphur Vivum
Arcenicus	id est	Auri Pigmentum

(London BM Cxv 91<sup>v</sup> 15549f.)





**OBJECT IN RED GOLD OPENWORK SHOWING THE KING'S  
TRIUMPHAL RETURN WITH PRISONERS**

**TUTENKAHAM**

**LIFE AND DEATH OF A PHARAOH**

**(p68 Descroches – Noblescourt)**











The earliest alchemical texts show that the practice of colouring and dyeing were amongst the starting points of the art. While the Leyden Papyrus and the Stockholm Papyrus draw on the collections of recipes and the traditional methods of the artisans, the alchemists interest lay elsewhere. However, The connection between the colouring of metals and colour symbolism in their art remains. This is due to the numerous references made to the occult virtues of metals and stars and the making of gold. The transmutation of these metals was achieved in a process which had four different stages: Melanosis, leukosis, xanthosis and iosis.

Although alchemy at a later stage laid less importance on these terms, the sequence of colours remained fairly intact.

In the "Alchemia" usually ascribed to Albert Magnus, he discusses the four spirits of metals responsible for dyeing and colouring. (Although alchemical gold is credited with permanent colour that will endure forever in the fire). Aristotle, often quoted in alchemical texts refers to the properties of the four elements:

Heat and dryness - fire

Heat and humidity - air

Cold and dryness - earth

Cold and humidity - water

(De Rola, 1973, p17)

Guillaume Postels "De Universitate" claims that the four colours seen in the process of combustion are really those of the four elements. Black standing for earth, red for water, blue for air and white for fire. (Jung, 1953, p23)



Albert Poisson in his work "Theorie et Symboles des Alchimistes" concluded this study of the four elements with the following table which connects the prima materia with the principles of the art and the four elements.

	Sulphur	Earth (Visible solid state)
Prima Materia	Fixed Principle	Fire (Occult subtle state)
Single and Indestructible	Salt	Quintessence State
	Mercury	comparable to the ether of the physicists
	Volatile Principle	Water (Visible liquid State)
	Air	(Occult Gaseous State)

(De Rola, 1973, p19)

It was generally believed in ancient times that minerals, stones and metals grew in the earth. In fact down to the seventeenth century, there were traces of stories which told of depleted mineral deposits grown again to their original size in the depths of the earth if left for a long enough time. The metal was thought to have been born from the womb of the earth, the Great Mother.

It should be mentioned that the texts of the ancient medical and technical professions were guarded with secrets, which were only to be divulged to the initiated. It is interesting to speculate whether the sexual and other symbolism employed to denote secret terms or names of ingredients, (such as the Rebus and cuneiform signs which represented similar sounds), emerged as a result of a need to veil the texts in allegorical terminology or as a result of religious beliefs.

However, in their texts, the metallurgists spoke of 'male' and 'female' when referring to harder or softer modifications of certain minerals.



So the concept of male and female also entered alchemical theory to denote opposite pairs of qualities for example; hot/cold wet/dry, active/passive body/soul, in order to explain the affinity of chemicals.

Chinese alchemy which arose independently and simultaneously with Greek alchemy, had already speculated on the dualities of Yin and Yang. Yang, the male active fiery principle and Yin the negative dark earth principle. Early ritual also correlated the four seasons, points of the compass, elements, colours and tastes.

To summarise therefore, it is possible to see how certain concepts which are fundamental to alchemical thought such as the relationship between the visible and the invisible, above and below, spirit and matter, planets and metals, date back to antiquity.





**CHAPTER 11**  
**THE ESSENCE OF THE WORK/DEFYING LINEAR LOGIC**



Having looked at the origins of alchemy and colour association, it is interesting to explore some of those ideas further in order to understand the mystical side or essence of the work.

When the Leyden Papyrus and the Stockholm Papyrus were discovered in a grave at Thebes in Egypt, they were found together with a handbook on magic and a list of connecting metals, planets, stars and gods. The actual recipes however, for the tinting of metals shows to be unrealistic. It appears that the owner had collected those extracts of the original recipes which describes the actual colouring. It seemed he believed that where a colour change existed, it reflected a real change in the nature and structure of matter.

Terms such as dyeing were used when making reference to the transmutation of silver and super-dyeing with regard to the making of gold. Consequently, later alchemists experimented with various reactions and colouring in order to understand something of what constitutes the transmutation of matter or chemical reactions.

Their interests did not lie primarily in the transmutation of base metals into gold but in a desire to understand the laws of the macrocosm and microcosm, the structure of matter and the spiritual realm.

Analogies can be made with other esoteric philosophies which developed independently in the orient. The alchemical work can be compared to the super powers (siddhis) sometimes allegedly obtained by the great yogis which are not an end product in themselves (as they take effect merely on the earth or physical plane) but as important by-products of a higher spiritual attainment.

The oldest of the Chinese alchemists, Wei-Po-Yang, who lived about 140 A.D. said: "He who properly cultivates his innate nature will see the yellow light shine forth as it should" (Yellow light as synonymous with gold) -( Lu-Ch'iang Wiu & T. L. Davis, 1932, p262.)



In Adam McLean's "The Spiritual Science of Alchemy", he talks about man as a being of the three worlds, (I will refer to the significance of three or trinity in another chapter.) and all that works upon mankind has it's reflection and being in these three worlds.

Man has vehicles in these three worlds, the body, soul and spirit. In a similar manner, alchemy has it's reflection, its body, soul and spirit in the three worlds.

(McLean, 1978, p6)

He says on the idea of physical alchemy:

The alchemist musing over his crucibles and retorts saw the working of the four elements, earth, water, air, fire, express themselves in the material world, for example when he brought fire to the substances in his crucibles, he saw how the airy vapours are separated from the earthy matter, the subtle flying from the gross.

(McLean, 1978, p8)

On soul alchemy:

the alchemy of the soul can only be approached in the drawing away from the physical worlds and the worlds of the senses. The soul alchemists laboratory lay in his own inner world, experienced in a quiet meditation. The alchemist in the silence of his meditations gave himself up to an absorption of his soul in the symbols and picture images that are as we have seen, an essential part of the alchemical tradition. (McLean 1978 p9).

Also on spiritual alchemy :

only those who had achieved the purification of the soul, outlined above through some alchemy ,could ascend to this work of the spirit. The work was an inspirational contemplation of the cosmos. The alchemist contemplated the mysteries of time, of space, of cosmic evolution. Central in these contemplations lay the hermetic maxim





'that which is above is  
as that which is below,  
that which is below is as  
that which is above'

and over the years of these contemplations, there dawned within the spiritual alchemist a consciousness of the unity of his being with the Divine, he came to a deep realisation of God within him, the spiritual Ego.

(McLean, 1978, p10)

References to light and darkness as analogies to perception or illumination in a spiritual sense can be seen in several treatises of well know alchemists.

In the three treatises or philalethes from the Hermetic Museum, he speaks about the first stage of the work:

The time during which this blackness is developed is very long and so is the time during which it disappears..... For it is only for one moment that the blackness neither increases or decreases. For things find rest only in that which is in the end of our substance. The advent of blackness is like the coming of the night, which is preceded by a long twilight, when the last ray of light has faded away, the blackness of night has come, only for our work is more tedious and the change is therefore still less perceptible.

On the second stage:

But when the process of resurrection begins the hues are more numerous and splendid because the body is now beginning to be glorified and has become pure and spiritual.

(Philalethes/Hermetic Museum 1989 p207)





According to Jung, a Chinese alchemist, Hui Ming Ching, discusses a similar concept:

The meeting between the narrowly delimited but intensely clear individual consciousness and the vast expanse of the collective unconsciousness is dangerous because the unconscious has a decidedly disintegrating effect on consciousness.

Every separate thought takes shape and becomes visible in colour and form. The shapes formed by the spirit-fire are only empty colours and forms. The light of human nature shines back on the primordial the true

(Jung, 1967, p315)

It is interesting to make an analogy with Yoga philosophy and the excerpts from the Former treatises. In "*Glimpses into the Psychology of Yoga*" by Tamwi Iqbal, Kisher discusses the interaction of spirit and matter:

when spirit and matter come together and spirit begins to affect matter. The result of the action of spirit upon matter is to evolve gradually and slowly vehicles through which it can express itself on different planes. The result of the action of matter upon spirit is to develop the mind and its faculties at different levels and unfold the infinite potentialities which are present in a latent form in consciousness.....

The reversion of mind to consciousness does not however take place in one single step. Although the different levels of the mind are illuminated by the same source of light, namely the consciousness of the Purusha (Spirit), it does not mean that the underlying consciousness which provides the background of mental phenomena on each plane is the same .....



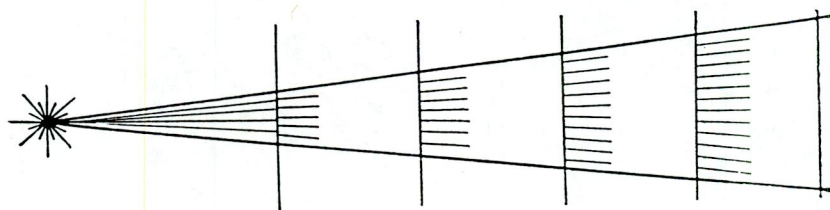
It will be seen from the diagram following that each compartment is illuminated not by the original source of illumination but by the light coming from the next compartment which is nearer to the source of light.

The light as it emerges into different compartments is not the same but is homogeneous and integrated. It does not include the whole of the spectrum of differentiated consciousness but it is adequate for bringing out from objects of the particular plane those colours which are present in it in an integrated condition.

Fig 3. (Kisher, 1973, p248-255)

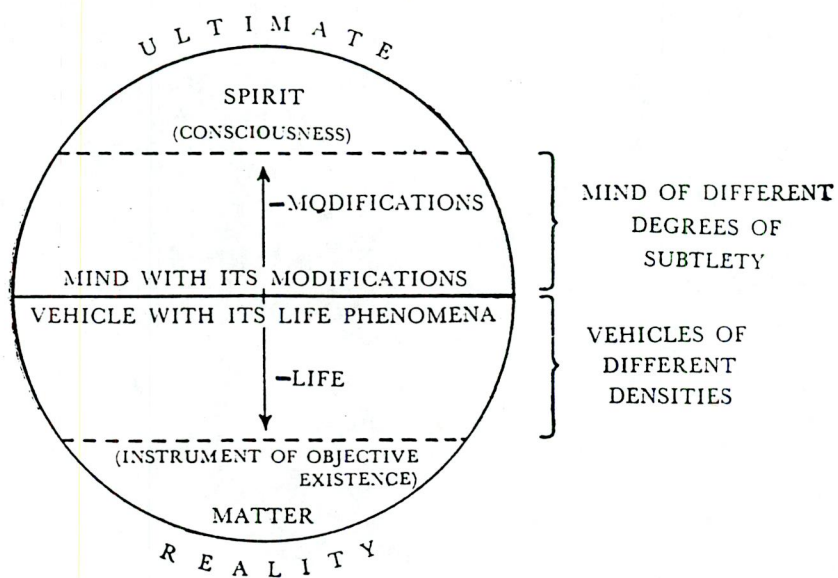
To summarise therefore, it is evident from the preceding chapter that alchemy, in its essence, was concerned not only with exploring ideas on the nature of matter and spirit but also with the psyche. Terms such as light/darkness and colour, entered alchemical vocabulary as analogies to perception and consciousness.





Source of Light  
(Consciousness of Purusha)

Successive compartments illuminated by the Light  
(Different levels of the mind)



INTERACTION OF SPIRIT AND MATTER



**CHAPTER III**

**PART I**

**AN OUTLINE OF THE ACTUAL WORK IN CONJUNCTION  
WITH THE COLOUR STAGES**





In order to explore the pictorial language of alchemical illustration, we first have to realise that any definite interpretation is almost impossible. For various reasons the alchemists deliberately made both the text and imagery obscure.

However, the fact that these alchemists employed a form of puzzle in their work points to a definite defiance of linear logic, as we understand it today. Certainly in the light of the mystical ideas discussed in the preceding chapters, only through dependence on inspired intuition, could the puzzle be solved. Therefore, trying to reduce the work to any single symbolic interpretation would prove useless, as well as attempting to reduce alchemy to any single thought system.

All the ancient cultures from Arabic to Greek to Chinese and Indian have contributed to what was ultimately alchemy in the Middle Ages.

As the question of interpretation is such a thorny subject, it is important to look at the different stages of the physical work in order to make any sense of the images presented.

In the "*Great Work*", the first element to acquire is the 'Prima Materia' which is generally affirmed to be Mercurius "the father of all metals", or the "*Primeval Chaos*" which was the subject to be worked on. (Jung, 1958, p132). In order to procure the Prima Materia "one had to journey to the mine and take possession of the raw subject" (De Rola, 1973, p10)

In alchemical literature, the "Prima Materia" is known to have an imperfect body, a constant soul, a penetrating tincture and a clear transparent mercury, volatile and mobile. It is supposed to contain within it the gold of the philosophers and the mercury of the wise.

Mercurius, known as the "Ultima Materia", is the goal of his own transformation, as well as being the "Prima Materia" of the lowly beginning. He is also known as the "Lapis" or the highest goal. Mercurius is also the process which lies between. Another interpretation sees carbon as the substance of the physical alchemist which brings the inorganic into an organic state.



Modern chemistry places great importance on "carbon skeletons" chains or rings of carbon atoms, to which are attached various inorganic atoms, oxygen, sulphur, nitrogen, hydrogen etc. The true nature of the substance carbon is to bear life into the realm of physical matter. (McLean 1978 p53).

In this case, McLean sees carbon as being the philosophers stone, as it allows matter to rise above the physical realm and become the body for the etheric process.

Therefore having procured the "Prima Materia", it is then pulverised in a mortar made of agate (or another equally hard substance) mixed with the secret fire and moistened with "Aqua Vitae" (seven times distilled water ). Several references are made to this special water. In a Seventeenth Century alchemical text written in old Irish Script. It talks about the importance of this "Aqua Vitae" fig 4. MS1337 Trinity College 1698 p417, p418. Mercurius is also referred to as "this special water, the water that does not make the hands wet". (Hoghelande 1659 p161] The resulting 'compost' is then enclosed in a hermetically sealed vessel or philosophic egg, which is then placed in the Athanor, the furnace of the philosophers.

This egg is then kept at a constant temperature for long periods of time, during which the two principles within the prima materia, one solar hot and male, known as sulphur, the other lunar cold and female, known as mercury, interact. This death or separation is followed by a long process of decay which lasts until all is purified and the opposites dissolve into the liquid nigredo.

The nigredo phase ends with the appearance on the surface of a starry aspect. So having procured the liquid volatile mercury, it is then placed in a more intense fire which yields to the dry. While this process is happening a great number of beautiful colours appear corresponding to a stage known as the *Peacock's Tail*. The end of the second work comes with the appearance of the whiteness or albedo. In the three treatises of Philalethes, it recounts the stages of the work in conjunction with the stages of colour appearance.





*[Faint handwritten notes at the bottom of the page, possibly bleed-through from the reverse side.]*

[illegible]







There are four principal colours, the first of which is blackness, and it is of all colours, the most tardy in making it's appearance. But as soon as the highest degree of intense blackness has been reached (there being no idle intervals in our work) that colour begins little by little to yield to another.

The time during which this blackness is developed is very long and so is the time during which it disappears. But it is only for one moment that the blackness neither increases nor decreases. For things find rest only in that what is in the end of their being. But blackness is not the need of our substance.

The advent of the blackness is like the coming of the night which is preceded by a long twilight when the last ray of light has faded away, the blackness of night has come, only our work is more tedious and the change is therefore still less perceptible.

The colour which appears must be an intense black. My answer is that the tincture which is extracted is as a matter of fact, not black but a dazzling white; and that the blackness is produced gradually, through the action of the water on the body, out of which it draws the soul (the tincture) thus giving the body up to decomposition. It is this putrifaction (the result of the natural action of the sulphur and mercury), which imparts to the tincture its black colour; in itself the tincture is brilliantly white.

"The king doffs his glorious robes and gives them to Saturn, who clothes Him in a garment of black silk, which he retains for forty days..."



In the course of this change from white to black, the substance naturally passes through a variety of intermediate colours, but these colours (being more or less accidental) are not invariably the same and depend very much on the original proportion in which the two substances combine. In the second state, during which the substance changes from black to white, it is already far purer. The colours are more lucid and more to be depended upon. In the two phases, there are intermediate colours, but in the first they are more dingy and obscure than in the second, and very much less numerous.

In the progress of the substance from blackness to whiteness (i.e. the second phase of our magistry) the most beautiful colours are seen in a variety such as eclipses the glory of the rainbow. Before the perfect blackness is reached there are also some transitional colours such as black, azure and yellow and the meanings of these colours is that your substance is not completely decayed.

While the body is dying, the colours are seen until black night shrouds the whole horizon in pitchy gloom. But when the process of resurrection begins (in the second phase) the hues are more numerous and splendid, because the body is now beginning to be glorified and has become pure and spiritual.

But in what order do the colours of which one speaks appear ? To this question no definite answer can be given because in this first phase, there is so much uncertainty and variation. But the colours will be the clearer and more distinct the purer your water of life is. The four principle colours (White, Black, White, Red) always following the same order. But the order of the intermediate colours cannot be so certainly determined and you ought to be content if within the first forty days you get the black colour"

(Philalethes 1989 from a brief guide to the celestial Ruby. 1989 p207-209).



CHAPTER III

PART II

ALCHEMICAL ILLUSTRATION  
ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLS AND COLOUR SYMBOLISM





## THE ANDROGYNE

Having discussed the different stages of the work I would like to look at some examples of illustrations which are typical of alchemical texts in the middle ages.

The androgyne (or Rebis – which means literally two things) is the symbol of the divine Hermaphrodite. The symbol refers to the union or conjunction of opposites found in both Eastern and Western philosophical thought alike, and often symbolised by eroticism. This symbol often stands for the prima materia during the first stage in the philosophic egg. The blue eagles refer to the successive volatilizations or sublimations which take place during the process. (Jung, 1953, p417).

In this illustration, the rising eagle which lifts the androgyne implies the volatilizations of the fixed and the dead eagles beneath it, the fixation of the volatile. Ascending and descending birds (usually eagles) in these illustrations refer to the precipitation of the vapours.

Interpreting this illustration in the broader context of the work, the Hermaphrodite could symbolise the dual antagonistic and complimentary forces within the Psyche. According to Jung, the eagle symbolises the spirit ascending and descending, in other words, the conflict between good and evil during this stage. The colour blue (pertaining to the sky above and the sea below) symbolises the feminine nature or anima (blue, the traditional colour of the virgin's celestial cloak.) which points to the potential favourable completion of the first stage – where consciousness can soar into cosmic heights and also descend deep into the heart of nature. Fig 5.

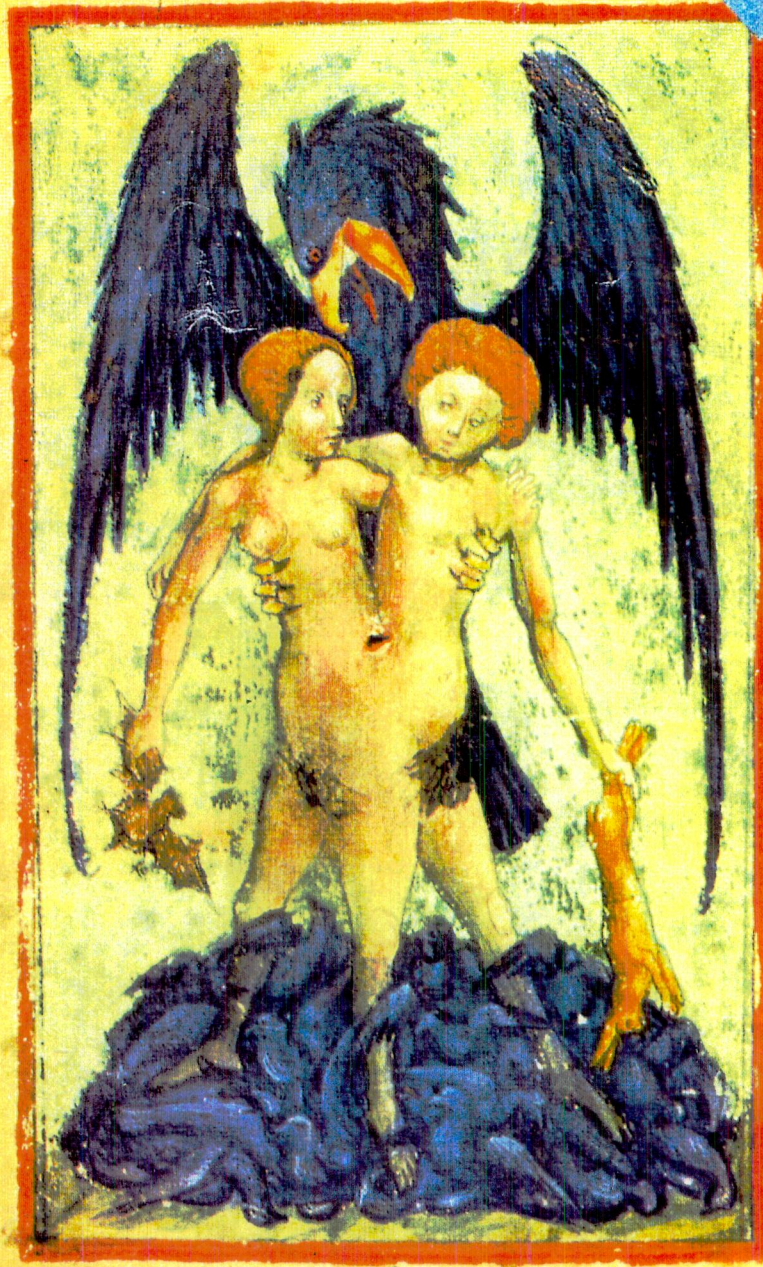


**ANDROGYNE ILLUSTRATION:**  
**AURORA CONSURGENS LATE FOURTEENTH CENTURY**  
**ZENTRALBIBLIOTHEK ZURICH.**  
**COD. RHENOVACENSIS 172 ENDPAPERS**  
**DE ROLA p4**





Hec est obscura sapientium reru figurar



Et sic est obscura sapientium reru figurar

in qua profunde sunt quidam termini. Que sunt culpe sua de peccatis multos







## THE OUROBOROS

The Ouroboros i.e. the dragon or serpent which devours it's own tail, is a symbol of the eternal cyclic nature of the universe.

Together with the circle, it forms the basic mandala of alchemy. Mercurius, as the Dragon/Serpent devours himself and dies. He rises again in the form of the Lapis. He is also the play of colours in the process and the division into the four elements. He is the Hermaphrodite that was in the beginning that splits into the classical brother/sister duality, and is reunited again at the end in the radiant form of the light of the stone. "He is metallic yet liquid, matter, yet spirit, cold yet fiery, a unity symbol of all opposites" (Jung, 1958, p295).

The colours in this illustration are red and green. Green symbolises the beginning of the work or the matter in it's raw state and red symbolises the goal of the work. Fig 6



**OUROBOROUS:**  
**SYNOSIUS DATE UNCERTAIN**  
**BIBLIOTHEQUE NATIONALE PARIS**  
**MSS GREC. 2327 f.297**  
**DE ROLA p1**





**Τ**ΟΥΤΟ ΕΣΤΙΝ ΤΟ ΜΥΣΤΗ  
 ΤΟΥΤΟ ΕΣΤΙΝ  
 ΜΥΣΤΗ ΤΗΣ  
 ΑΥΤΟΥ

ΡΙΟΝ ΟΥΡΑ ΒΟΡΟΣ ΔΡΑΚΟΝ  
 Η ΛΑΪΩΣΕΣ ΤΩΝ ΣΩ  
 ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑΣ

**Τ**Α ΔΕ  
 ΑΥΤ  
**Τ**Ο ΔΕ  
 ΤΕ  
**Ο**ΙΔΕ



ΤΕΧΝΗΣ  
 ΤΟΥ  
 Η ΤΕ  
 ΤΟΥ  
 ΜΑΤ  
**Τ**Α ΔΕ  
 ΕΣΤΙΝ ΑΥΤΟΥ

ΟΙΔΕ ΤΟΝ ΝΟΝ ΕΧΕΙΝ ΟΦΙΣΤΑΤΕ

**Δ**ΡΑΚΟΝ ΤΙΣ ΠΑΡΑΝΤΑΦΥΛΑΤΗ ΤΟΥ ΜΑΤ ΤΟΥΝΤΗ  
 ΤΟΥ ΧΕΡΟΣ ΜΕΛΕΝΟΝ ΠΡΑΤΟΥ ΘΥΣΕΙ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΔΕ ΡΜΑ  
 ΤΟ ΣΟΤ, ΑΥΛΑΦΗ ΤΑ ΣΑΡΚΑ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΕΥΣΤΑΤΟ ΣΕΙΤ,  
 ΠΡΟΤΟ ΣΟΜΟΝ ΤΟΥ ΜΑΤ ΠΟΙΣΟΤ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΡΑΚΟΝ  
 ΑΥΤΟΥ ΑΦΙΘΗ ΑΥΤΟΥ ΣΕΙΤ ΕΛΑΤΟ ΖΑΤΟΥ ΜΕΛΕΝΟΝ ΧΡΕ  
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## THE BIRD OF HERMES

The following illustration shows the figure of a man/eagle feeding himself with his own feathers. The eagle often symbolises mercurius in alchemical texts "the bird of Hermes is my name, eating my wings to make me tame." This symbol is similar to the preceding Ouroboros image, i.e. as depicting the cyclical nature of the first stage.

From a colour symbolical view, it suggests the three or trinity. Gold symbolising the goal or end stage or God the Father. Red, the colour which points to a favourable completion of the work or Christ and Green the Matter in its raw state or the Holy Ghost.

In other words, the three-fold process which holds the body, soul and spirit of the transforming substance together, in imperishable union. Fig. 7.





**"THE BIRD OF HERMES IS MY NAME ,  
EATING MY WINGS TO MAKE ME TAME"**

**VERSION OF RIPLEY SERONIE BY JAMES STANDYSH  
SIXTEENTH CENTURY BM LONDON ADD 32621 (DETAIL)  
(DE ROLA p65)**





# HER IS THE LAST OF THE RED STON

That the power that sheweth light  
 and cleareth to him in manifest  
 the names & shine so bright  
 in all places that see that he bee  
 for he is father of all things  
 maintainer of life to every creature  
 and causeth nature for to grow  
 in man in more a plant so bare  
 for he is fader to every place  
 to bringe aboute his own roots  
 take and heede unto this lore  
 I say unto the lewde & clerke  
 and homogene is his name  
 he and shaple with his hande  
 and in creation is his name  
 you shall verily understande  
 howe I shall here sayne  
 for to teach the redde stone  
 O woe little shall thou wonne  
 take and heede what I saye

There is nowe created in many places  
 the redde stone that be so bright  
 and they be nature to his race  
 the redde stone of all light  
 that sheweth unto full man a name  
 so full hath for to shew  
 and but then take the redde stone  
 the phetia not stone so have  
 therefore counsell see thou begonne  
 knowe it well what it bee  
 and that is thine make it thine  
 for then it shall well like thee  
 Nowe understande what I sayne  
 and take and heede the to  
 the worke else shall not be done  
 and turne the to make it well  
 so't have pace in this lore  
 many a man frowne it lath  
 some behind and some before  
 as philosophers they have



In the Sea withouten lee  
 standes the bird of Phoenix  
 Eatinge his winges so variable  
 to make him selfe there full stable  
 When all his feathers be gone  
 he standen there full as my stone

Here is nowe bothe white and redde  
 and all the stone to quarten the dede  
 and all and some without fable  
 bothe hard and reshe & malleable  
 Understande nowe aright  
 and thinke thou god for this sight

The bird of Phoenix is my name

Eatinge my winges to make me better

RED SEAE THE RE





## RED AND GREEN

Red - the colour which symbolises the goal of the work relates to the living substance within human beings - blood, symbolising the living quality of the colour.

Red is the essential, characteristically warm colour. Kandinsky, in "*Art and the Spiritual*" says of red:

In this burning, glowing character which is principally within itself and very little directed toward the external, we find so to speak, a kind of masculine maturity.

(Kandinsky, p186)

To the alchemist, red also symbolises the masculine active principle. It also represents Christ (the Pelican who sheds his own blood to feed it's young). If red is the gleam of the living then green is the lifeless image of the living.

Goethe says of green:

It is a condition of absolute balance, of stillness and of rest. The combination of the diametrically opposed yellow and blue in perfect balance"

(Mayer, 1961, p25)

The alchemists used green to symbolise the prima materia in its raw state before the successive volatilizations took place. The alchemists also saw in green, the potential for transformation, using the allegory of the green colour of copper, to symbolise the raw before it was transformed in the work. As red symbolised the Christ then green symbolised the Holy Spirit. Kandinsky says that "absolute green is the most peaceful colour there is"

(Kandinsky, p182)





## THE GREEN LION

The Green Lion in this illustration from the *Rosarium* appears to be disgorging the sun and red blood. The green lion denotes matter in its primordial state. The sun is a classic symbol of the unity and divinity of the self, while the blood of the green lion, in alchemical language, is the hermetic mercury. Again, we see the three colours, green, red and gold symbolising the trinity. Fig. 8



*THE GREEN LION*

*ROSARIUM PHILOSOPHORUM SIXTEENTH CENTURY*

*STADTBIBLIOTHEK VADIANA ST. GALEN*

*MS - 394 A f97*

*DE ROLA p20*









## PUTREFICATIO

Here we see the putrefication stage depicted (fig. 9) in a similar fashion to fig 10. and fig 11. The conjunction of opposites takes place, represented either figuratively by king/queen, male/female, sun/moon, gold/silver, round/square, volatile/solid etc.

The antithetical nature of the prima materia is an almost universal idea. It is possible to find the same concept in other ancient cultures e.g. Yin/Yang, the Chinese or Taoist dualities. The Greek Zeus-Fire, Hera-Air. The Norwegian, monad-masculine, Syad-feminine.

The black colour in the vessel corresponds to the nigredo phase where the matter putrefies in a black mass for a period of approximately forty days and nights. The colours black, white and gold, represent the alchemical work as a whole.

In Fig 10 and Fig 11 the winged couple represent the volatile substance undergoing the various sublimations until it becomes fixed.



*PUTREFICATIO*

*PRETIOSSIMUM DONUM DEI [PER] GEORGIUM*  
*ANRUCT SEVENTEENTH CENTURY BIBLIOTHEQUE DE L'ARSENAL*  
*PARIS MS 975 f14*  
*DE ROLA p38*





E

PVTREFACTIO

IV.





**CONJUNCTIO**

**ARNOLD OF VILLANOVA ROSARIUM PHILOSORIOUM**

**SIXTEENTH CENTURY STADBIBLIOTHEK VADIANA ST. GALLEN**

**MS 394 A F 34,64**

**DE ROLA PP41, 42**

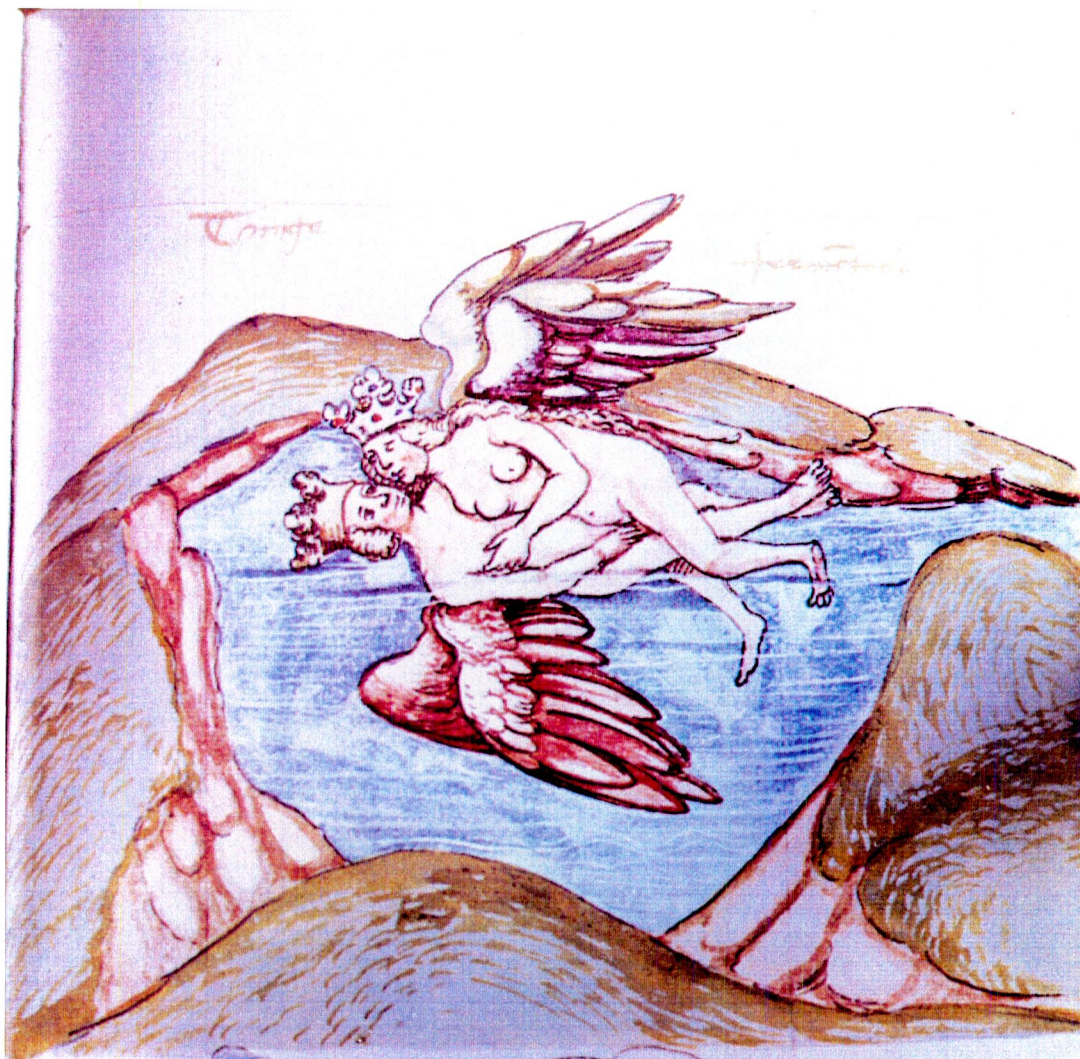












Das war solt aber künftigen  
das wir gemeine pfer vorsetzen



## YELLOW

Yellow is the direct antithesis of blue. Rudolf Steiner says:

In the life of the soul, yellow is equivalent to the sun-like radiance of the spirit brightening and strengthening the inner life. (Mayer, 1961, p28)

Goethe says:

Yellow in it's greatest purity always has the note of brightness and cleanness and possesses a serenely cheerful gentle charming quality. (Mayer, 1961, p29)

In alchemical terms, it usually denotes the solar quality and the soul aspect of the three bodies i.e. body, soul and spirit.

## BLACK

To the Alchemist, black symbolises the body or earth element, it also appears in some illustrations to coincide with the blackening or nigredo initial stage of the process.

Kandinsky says of black:

..that it has an inner sense of nothingness bereft of possibilities. A dead nothingness as if the sun had become extinct, an eternal silence without future, without hope.

(Kandinsky, p 185 1912)

## WHITE:

White represents the lunar principle or the spirit in matter. Steiner says that white or light represents the soul image of the spirit. White also affects our Psyche like a great silence, which for us is absolute. It is a silence that is not dead but full of possibilities . (Kandinsky p 185)

White in alchemical terms represents the feminine principle (lunar) which probably has it's own source in early creation myths. It also relates to the albedo or whitening stage of the work where the soul released at death is reunited with the dead body to bring about it's resurrection i.e. the appearance of the colours.







## THE EMPRESS

This illustration has an image of the empress as it's central figure. It is clothed in the alchemical black, white and gold, the colours which allude to the resume of the work, personified through it's female principle, the mercury of the philosophers.

The triple serpents are the emblems of dominion over the three realms. The Pelican feeding it's young with it's own blood. This image often appears as an allegory of the crucifixion.

The green lion reappears in the background to the main figure and the sun motif also reappears, this time in the form of fruit on a tree. The tree or tree of life, is a common symbol in alchemcial illustration. In this case it represents the stages in the transformation process while the sun stands for the fruits of the labour. Fig. 12



**EMPRESS**

**HERE IS BORN THE EMPRESS OF ALL HONOUR  
ROSARIUM PHILOSOPHORUM SIXTEENTH CENTURY  
STADTBIBLIOTHEK VADIANA ST. GALLEN**

**MS 394 A F92.**

**DE ROLA P20**



*Principio de la vida*





## **CHAPTER IV**

### **SYMBOLIC MEANING OF COLOUR**



When the ancient alchemists claimed to have witnessed the various colour changes, we are not sure as to whether they perceived them in the outward or inner sense. Interpreting all the evidence so far, points to an inward experience. Given that the true point of the exercise of alchemy was that of inner or spiritual development.

Human beings perceive colour directly, both inwardly and outwardly, therefore, one might presume that colour or colour experience, formed that precious bridge, or gateway between the visible and invisible worlds.

The real nature of matter was unknown to the alchemist. It is possible to speculate as to whether the association with the "Secretive Art" arose as a result of medieval alchemists explorations into the secrets of matter and spirit. Any knowledge that did exist was known only through vague hints. Therefore in seeking to explore it, the alchemist projected the unconscious into the darkness of matter in order to illuminate it. As C. Jung puts it:

In order to explain the mystery of matter, he projected yet another mystery, his own unknown psychic background into what was to be explained. This procedure was not of course intentional, it was an involuntary occurrence".

(Jung, 1958, pp244,245)

Jung also goes on to talk about the "mental attitude of the opus" that "an active imagination is one of the things that sets the process in motion" (Jung 1958 p27).

In Thomas Norton's "*Ordinal of Alchemy*" (1477) it is possible to see the generous colour imagery employed in the text.





Now after clerneys of colours in  
 extremyte  
 of meen colours a litie shew will we  
 rubye colours is of thyne fume succendid  
 in a clere bodye, which also is amendid  
 when that bodye, regnyth plenty of  
 lyght.  
 For more or less thereof makith more or  
 las bryght.  
 As the ammtyste followith, the rubie in  
 dignyte,  
 in las clernys and in more obscuryte;  
 and a calcidonye in slymye substance  
 followith the berille with greens of  
 variance.

(Reidy Ed. T. Norton, 1975, f64<sup>v</sup>)

The above extract makes several references to colours and semi-precious stones and metals. He saw colours in the natural world as attached to objects, however, he also talks about colour associated to the invisible world.

"of elements ye must the propre colours lerne, wherebi of colours ye may better discerne". (Reidy Ed T. Norton 1975 42<sup>v</sup>). Rudolf Steiner talks about the coloured astral element, that transcendent element in living forms which is always only lightly attached to substance. It passes through or over the substance but has no fixed abode there; the red of the rose, the green of the plants, the colour of our skins, all change in a subtle way, day by day. (Steiner 1971 p13).

So there is an effort to locate the soul-substance of colour. Goethe's theory of colour, based on remnants of Aristotle's theories, thought colour, both in the outer world and in the inner life of the soul, arose through the mingling of darkness and light.

Colour according to this teaching is not merely split-up components of light but it is an active mingling of the forces of darkness and light.

Darkness in this case is not, as modern physics see it, a mere absence of light but in itself an actuality. Light and darkness meet and interact and from their interaction colour arises.



As Goethe puts it:

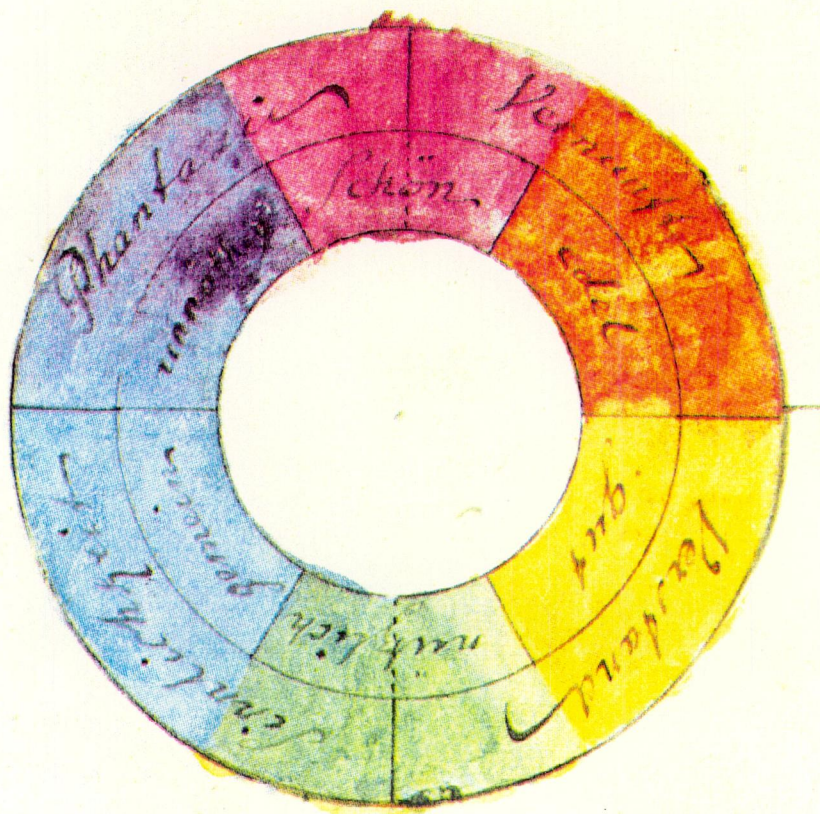
colours are the deeds and sufferings of the light". What it suffers from is darkness. Hence the sunrise colours driving away darkness and the colours of sunsets when the darkness draws near. Therefore colour is the visible element in which the invisible makes itself evident. (Mayer, p20, 1961.) Fig. 13

*Diagram of the powers of the Soul - Goethe*

*(p 189, Matthaui)*











Gladys Mayer says: "*in colour and the human soul.*"

Throughout the whole of the physical worlds the same thing is true. Spirit radiant in matter takes colour as it's most subtle and intimate manifestation.

(Mayer, 1961, p9)

She goes on to discuss colour as a manifestation of the astral plane:

There is a further realm of consciousness where the soul derives it's urgent will to create a world of beauty, which to our awakened vision is a living colour world. Here colour is the substance and in the qualities of colour, the moral life reveals itself.

Because of this realm called 'astral' is less near to normal consciousness than the picture imaginations, greater efforts are needed to reach it in waking consciousness. The astral world can also be reached through meditation and through constantly repeated exercises

(Mayer, 1961, p24).

Therefore, it is possible to speculate that this experience of colour on a psychic level is what alchemists have been referring to all along. This inward experience of colour is possibly what motivated the alchemists in their quest for 'illumination'. Their actual experience of the various colours proved that they were on the right track and provided the ultimate signal or sign of a favourable completion of the work.

In Alice Bailey's "*A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*", she speaks of colours as being spiritual numerals:

Colours and sound are all spiritual numerals, nor is that all for odours, metals and planets are equally spiritual numerals. Each planet (or spiritual plane) has relation to a metal and a colour. These again are in correlation with corresponding odours and sound.



The sphere of aura that surrounds every human being has one very important 'fold' or layer which invariably becomes the colour of the metal and planet to which that particular individual has most affinity, and it is on this layer that the magnetic part of odours and all sound vibrations impinges.

(Bailey, 1925, p925, p448) Fig. 14

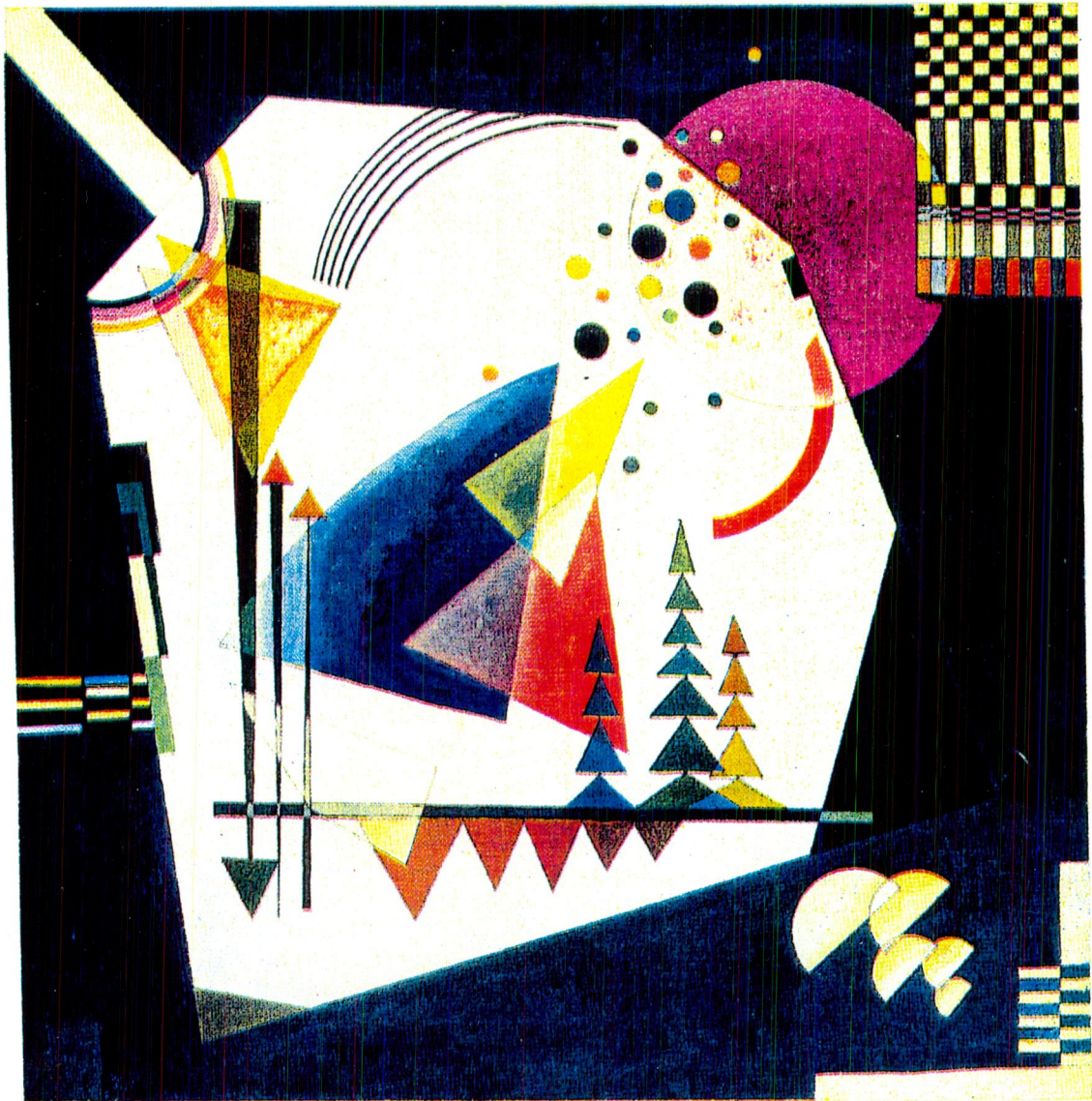
*Three Sounds 1926 (23 3/8 X 23 3/8)*

*New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Collection*

*p 109 Kandinsky, the Language of the Eye by Paul Overy*









It is interesting to note in the preceding excerpt, the connection once again between colours, metals and planets, especially when we compare it with the ancient pappri found in Egypt mentioned in Chapter One.

A Thirteenth Century manuscript, (discussing the planets and certain comets and stars and how they effect this planet), gives a list of "comets or stars with tails and their various significance according to how they appear".

Ptolemy says:

that stars with tails ....Tentecules, perticia, miles, dominus, ascone, matuta se, aurora..... from silver, rose with black.....that just resemble stars. They all signify wars, and terrors and great events in the world and one can foretell the future even from their colour and from their nature of the sign in which they first appear and it can be know when the evil will occur if they appear in the East it will be soon, if in the West it will be later.

It goes on to list the various comets their colour aspect and the ensuing horrors they foretell.

#### De Nigria

The one that is called "Black" is outside the ..... Staturni and is of a colour more blue than black and when it appear it signifies many mortalities and executions.

#### De Argento

Silva, although rare, is extremely beautiful like pure silver and for as long as it can be seen and when it appears it signifies years of plenty on the earth where it is and it is best if it appears at the exit of the aquatic sign.





### De Rosa

The one that is called "Rose" is rounder and had a face like a man and its colour is like the colour of silver mixed with gold and when it appears it signifies the death of kings and rich men and changes worldly affairs and better things come ...

(Ms. 399 F1591V160V Trinity College Dublin) Fig 15.

In a Twelfth Century manuscript, the phases of sun and moon are depicted in silver, gold and lapis lazuli. Fig. 16,17. The relation of colour to planets, stars and metals as well as to an inner experience is quite pervasive and significant. The evidence of such a relation pre-dates history and points to a sphere of imaginative creation which seeks a universal harmony or a harmony between the macrocosm (universe) and the microcosm (man).

Colour is the link which unites these two opposites or to make an alchemical analogy the experience of colour is the manifestation of the transformation in the process. The alchemists in their use of colour imagery, were aware of its importance. Their utilisation of colour coupled with illustrations produced a rich visual imagery which, not only illustrates their texts, but endeavours to express their inner experience of different states of consciousness, and ultimately provide us with that essential link to a universal harmony.











*PHASES OF SUN AND MOON*

*FROM TWELFTH CENTURY MS 402 25<sup>v</sup> - 26<sup>v</sup> 27<sup>v</sup> - 28<sup>v</sup>*

*TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN*

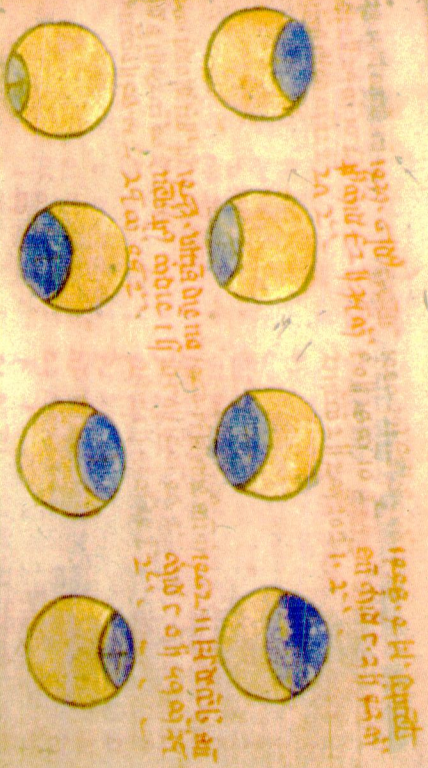












**Tabula quoniam luna et solis et annorum**

Annus	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
1491	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60





## CONCLUSION





To conclude, therefore, it becomes obvious that the concepts which informed alchemy from ancient Sumerian and Egyptian times onward to the Middle Ages, were the product of an entirely different consciousness to that which we experience at present.

It is impossible to attempt a definition of that consciousness given our present view. However, when we examine the ancient concepts which informed alchemy (Chapter I), it is clear that there existed a tenable relationship between human nature and the universe, or what Morris Berman refers to as "participating consciousness" (Berman, 1944, p59).

As a result, it does not seem surprising that the medieval alchemist in his attempts to become golden and make gold, actually believed that the synthesis of the gold was his synthesis as well. This is also true of the intermediate stage of the work, where the colours become manifest. The main concern of the alchemist was the liberation of the light or deity from the darkness of matter.

The alchemist saw himself as the redeemer of matter (Chapter II) and the spirit which manifests itself during the transformation, as the "son of man" or the "son of the philosophers". To this end, the alchemist worked on his own being, which included spiritual exercises, in the belief that the substance that harbours the divine secret is everywhere, including the human body.

The illustrations to their texts often provide an essential insight into the "essence" of the work. Jung often referred to the illustrations as being "maps of the unconscious". (Jung, 1958, p127). Berman saw that:

Mythopoeic artwork of this sort forces us to abandon the simplistic utilitarian interpretation of alchemy and try instead to chart the totally unfamiliar terrain of consciousness that these bizaare images represent"

(Berman, 1944, p67)



Certainly they are "bizaare images". It is interesting to note the connection between alchemical illustration and surrealist art. (Fig 18)

The surrealist endeavours to free mankind through the liberation of the unconscious or dream images, by deliberately making the images conscious. In fact, it was the surrealist movement which was responsible for the re-publication and reprinting of alchemical texts in the Twentieth Century.

As already mentioned in Chapter III Part I, an active imagination sets the process in motion. The imagination or act of imagining was the way in which the alchemist related himself not only to the unconscious, but directly to the very substance which he hoped to transform through the power of imagination.

Colour, together with an active imagination, is the intermediate realm between spirit and matter. The use of colour, symbolically in alchemical illustration, is immensely significant. Several thinkers and philosophers have explored the symbolism of colour as in Chapter III Part II, Aristotle, Norton, Goethe, Steiner and Kandinsky to mention just a few. It is very relevant to the art-making process in general.

Contemporary artists are still exploring various different areas of alchemy. Before concluding, I would like to briefly mention three artists whose works reflect a strong influence and exploration of alchemy in a contemporary context: Sigmar Polke, James Lee Byars and Anselm Kiefer.

In the early eighties, Sigmar Polke embarked upon a series of experiments that have continued to the present and which have been termed "alchemical".

In works like *"Watchtower II"* Fig 19.

He produces paintings with a physical nature that is perceived as mutable. Not only does the guard post in *Watchtower II* come in and out of visibility as the viewer shifts his position slightly in front of the work, but the colour of the painting itself actually changes as conditions of the temperature and humidity around it change. (John Caldwell p12)





**"THE ACCOMMODATION OF DESIRE"**

**1929 DALI**

**(ETHERINGTON SMITH)**









**WATCHTOWER II 1985**

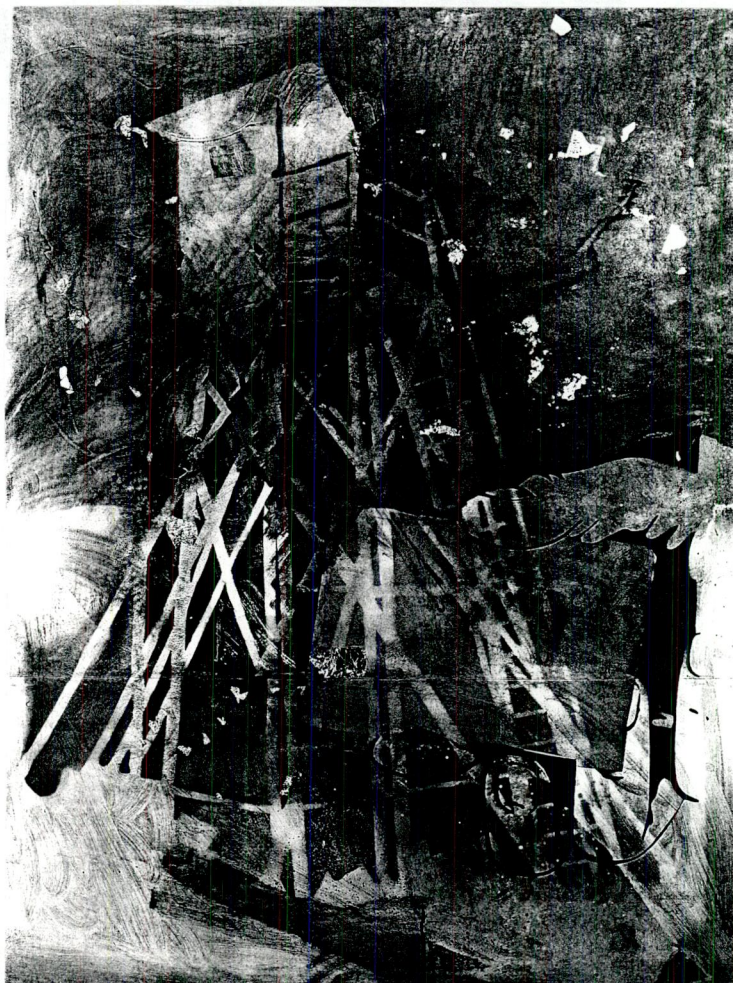
**SIGMAR POLKE**

**SILVER, SILVER NITRATE, IODINE, COBALT II, CHLORIDE  
AND SYNTHETIC RESIN ON CANVAS**

**FRIEZE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE ISSUE 4 1992**











James Lee Byars, who has recently created three three-metre golden spheres in Granada as part of the exhibition "*Plus Ultra*" talks about his work as "live experiences lived in the imagining and lived in the making"

"When he made the necessary intuitive 'leap' he discovers his power to see the real future of an imaginary present"

(From an article on James Lee Byars by K. Power, Frieze No. 8 Jan/Feb 1993, p27) Fig 20.

Another artist whose work makes obvious reference to alchemy in Anselm Kiefer. In the catalogue essay for the "Jason" Exhibition Douglas Hyde Gallery, Dublin, John Hutchinson says that:

By means of Alchemical references  
.....Kiefer tells us that  
transformation must in the end take  
physical form.

(Hutchinson, 1990) Fig. 21,22

The issues or questions which pre-occupy the preceding artists are not dissimilar to those of the alchemists of the Middle Ages. The concept of colour as representing different stages of consciousness, as well as providing the link between spirit and matter, is something which influences art-making from ancient times to the present day.

With the change in human consciousness through the ages, contemporary society leans heavily on the scientific side of the scales of balance. Art is the area where this can be somewhat redressed.

It is interesting then to note those artists whose work embodies alchemical influences, as this is exactly what the alchemists were endeavouring to achieve – a synthesis of art and science which produces a visual art which is still potent and, in the case of alchemy, relatively unknown, centuries later.





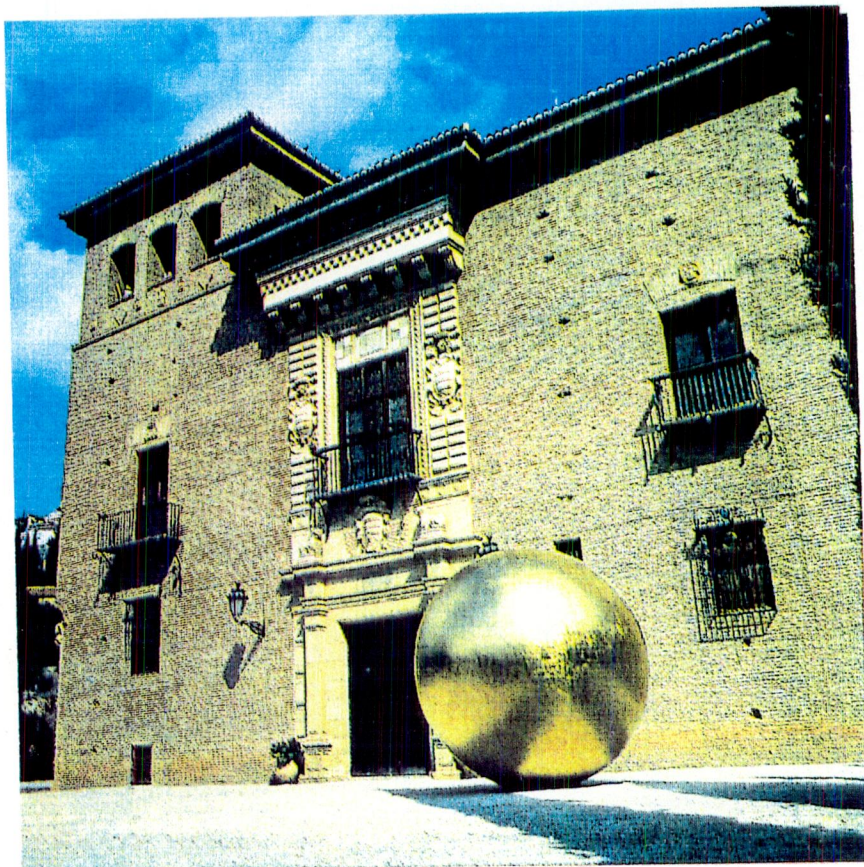
**THE GOLDEN SPHERE**

**JAMES LEE BYARS 1992**

**PALACIO DE LOS CORDORA GRANADA**

**(POWER FROM FRIEZE p24)**







**OUROBOROS 1980-85 (CA. 59 x 83.5 CM)**

**SHELLAC & PHOTO-COLLAGE**

**KOMET 1980-85 (CA. 71 X 35 CM)**

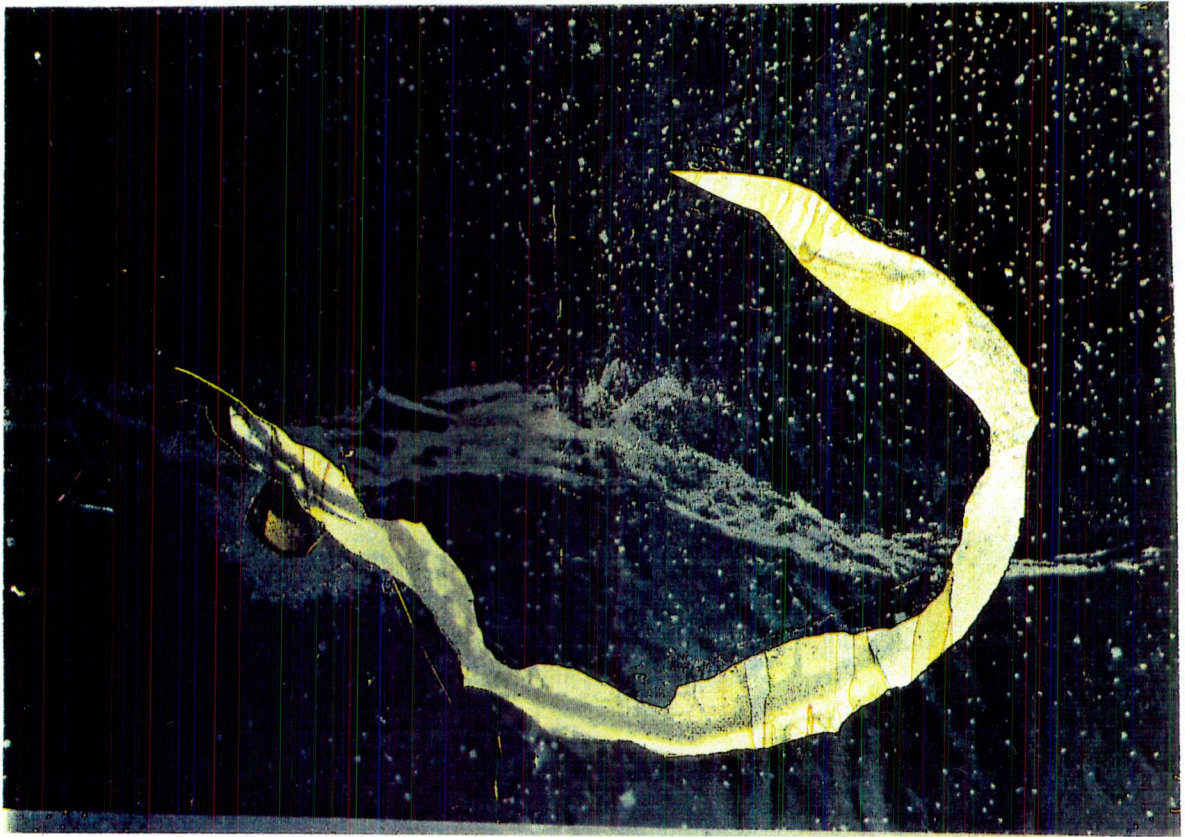
**OIL, ACRYLIC & SHELLAC ON PHOTO-COLLAGE**

**ANSLEM KIEFER**

**GALLERY CATALOGUE PAUL MANENZ, COLOGNE 1986**

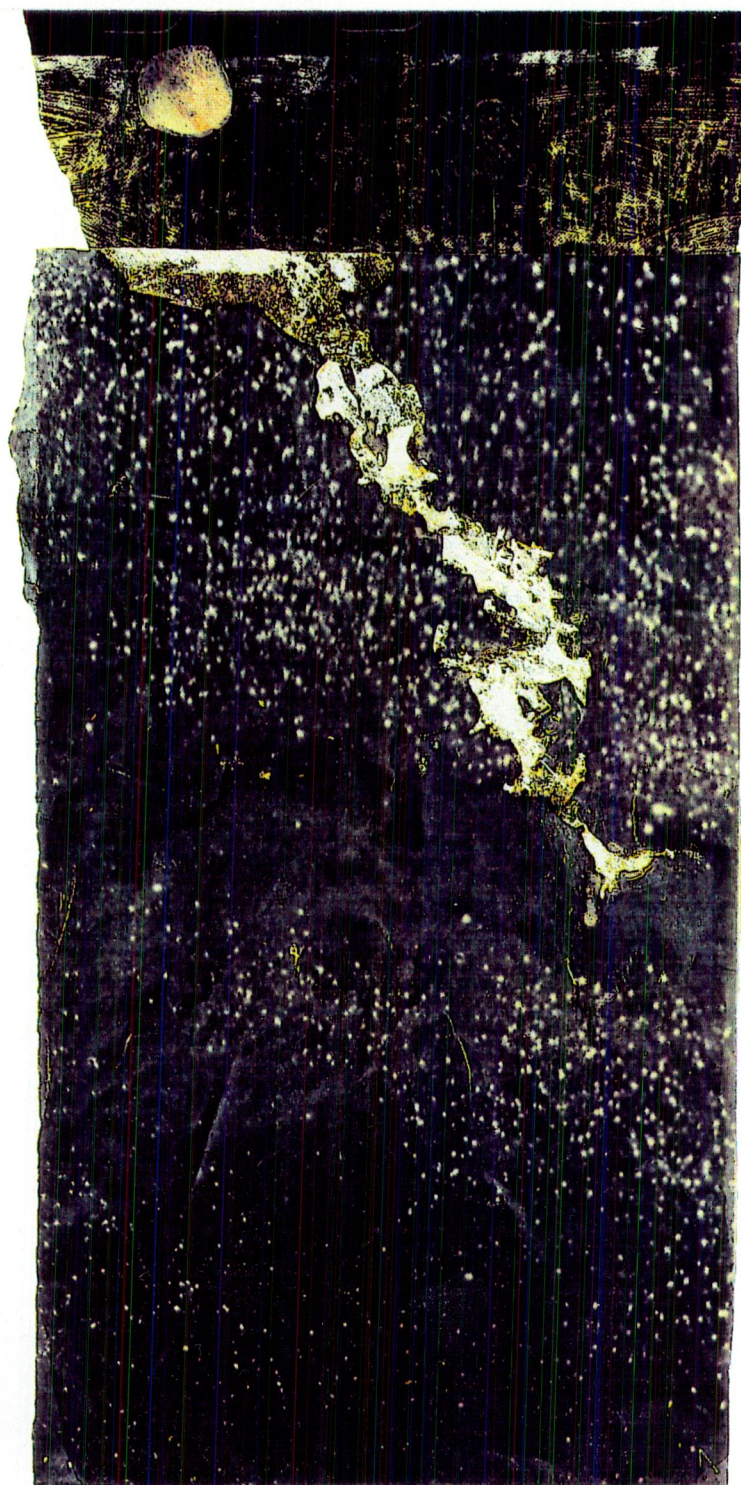
















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