

News Release – January 2009



Book of Secrets

Alchemy and the European Imagination, 1500-2000

An Exhibition at Yale University's Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library
January 20 – April 18, 2009

Lead into gold, the elixir of life, the philosopher's stone: these are the promises of alchemical literature, from the earliest authors through J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (2000). This exhibition charts the extraordinary presence alchemy has had in European popular culture from its period of greatest strength in the 16th and 17th centuries through the present.

Looking first at the discussion of alchemy in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and other medieval works, the exhibition traces the influence these early texts had on the popular perception of alchemy from the sixteenth century. In the wake of Luther's reforms of the Catholic Church and with the advent of expensive and demoralizing wars of religion, alchemy acquired a new significance in European culture. Its supporters touted alchemy's promises of gold or spiritual purification. Its critics mocked the greed, hypocrisy, and confusion of alchemy's authors and readers. Print and the vernacular helped spread an awareness of alchemy to every corner of European popular culture.

continued



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Alchemy was also chemistry, and alchemical authors grappled with questions of what matter was and how it changed. Illustrations show alchemists at work in early laboratories, detailing the equipment and procedures used in early modern science. Manuscripts like the Ripley scroll, the centerpiece of the exhibition, show Europe at a moment, in the late sixteenth century, when the Aristotelian understanding of the four elements was beginning to change and to coexist with other explanations, like that of the contemporary medical author, Paracelsus.

By the nineteenth century, alchemy was viewed as the disreputable stepchild of modern chemistry. Ironically, it was as a lost knowledge and occult art that alchemy underwent its modern revival, when it was adopted by late nineteenth-century promoters of the occult such

as A.E. Waite, one of the members of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Carl Gustav Jung, the Swiss psychologist and disciple of Freud, based his influential psychological theory of the collective unconscious on early modern alchemical imagery. One of Jung's most enthusiastic supporters was Mary Conover Mellon, whose collection of alchemical manuscripts was continued by her husband, Paul Mellon, and given to Yale University in 1965. Drawing on Yale's alchemical holdings, from the 1742 Library through the Paul and Mary Mellon Collection of Alchemy and the Occult, *Book of Secrets* reveals the continuing fascination of alchemical literature, from the medieval period through the present.



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