

Signs, Symbols Secrets: London's Science Museum sheds light on alchemy

By Karen Dabrowska



Excerpts from
Beinecke's
Mellon MS 41

A 19th century bronze statue of an alchemist clutching a sample of gold welcomes visitors to London's Science Museum Signs, Symbols Secrets: an illustrated guide to alchemy exhibition.

It's a spooky display with old books, withered by time, under dim lights. They are open on pages with black drawings of the planets, mysterious rituals, mythological figures and astrological and astronomical diagrams.

Alchemy refers to a set of practices found in ancient Greece, Egypt and China, which became particularly influential in Christian, Islamic and Hindu traditions during the Middle Ages. The practitioners of alchemy, known as alchemists, taught that earthly substances

were controlled by supernatural powers, and attempted to create new metallic and natural compounds by mixing existing elements together. They often did so in order to try and create valuable substances such as gold or silver, but also attempted to develop medicines.

The British Museum's exhibition focuses on transformation of earthly substances but alchemy can also refer to a spiritual transformation of the human being to an enlightened state.

Cate Watson with the scroll



Horapollo
Headless



The Ripley scroll is the star attraction of the exhibition which also features 20 historical books and two illustrated manuscripts from the Science Museum's Library and Archives collections including *Rosarium Philosophorum* ('The Rosegarden of the

Philosophers') one of the most widely-studied texts of European alchemy.

The exhibition had an auspicious start. An 18th century scroll was discovered by Cate Watson, an assistant at the library when she was checking the museum's

catalogues. She found a listing for an "alchemical" scroll, which has since been confirmed by Jennifer Rampling from Cambridge University as a Ripley scroll. This is the 23rd Ripley scroll to be discovered -- all of which are named after a 15th Century English alchemist called George Ripley. The scrolls are believed to

be 18th Century copies and variations of a lost, 15th Century original. There are currently 22 Ripley scrolls - this new find takes the total number of scrolls to 23. The 20ft long scroll features an intricate series of hand painted images which are thought to symbolise the various stages of the creation of the philosophers'



Lions and dragons on the scroll



stone – an alchemical substance said to be capable of turning base metals such as lead into gold or silver – the basis of Western alchemy. The legendary stone was also said to help people achieve long extended lives and even immortality.

Stephanie Millard, Exhibition Project Leader said: “We are delighted to have made this extraordinary discovery and to be able to showcase the Ripley scroll to the public for the very first time. The Ripley scrolls are extremely rare and hold vital clues to the development of alchemy – and therefore modern chemistry.”

The exhibition is very thoughtfully put together, offering an important historical background to the surrounding science museum. Its focus is very definitely on explaining the meaning behind specific alchemic images, rather than displaying the elaborate illustrations as fascinating artworks in themselves. This is to be expected from a museum of science that is seeking to illuminate a practice that contributed to the development of modern science. The exhibition has revealed a world of rich images that still hold significance for us today. It closes in April 2013.