

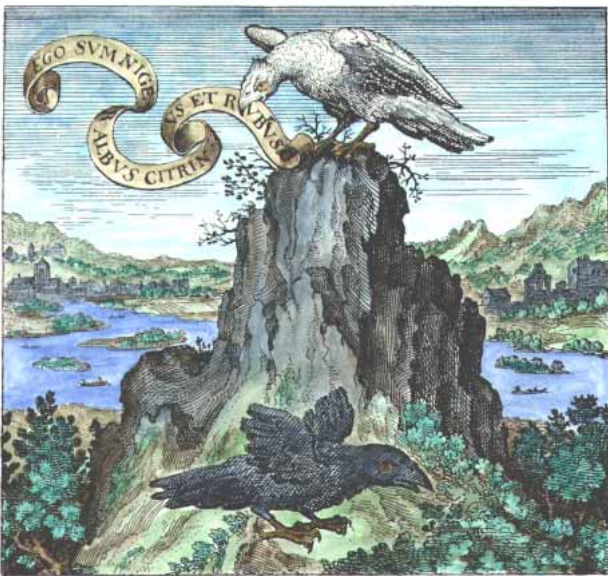


Adam McLean's Study Course on Inner alchemy and alchemical symbolism

Lesson Two : The geometry of alchemical emblems.

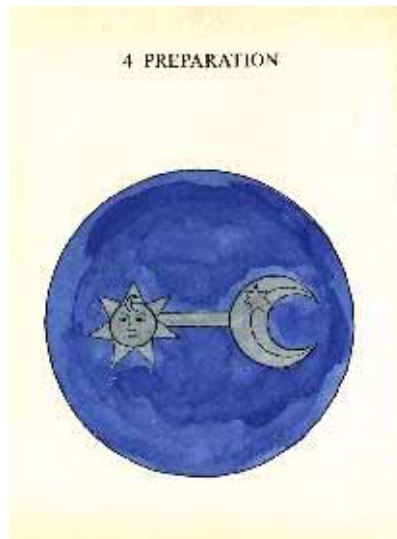
In our first lesson we tried to identify the individual symbols that make up an alchemical emblem. The next point we have to investigate is just how these individual symbols are placed and positioned within the space of the emblem. Rarely are symbols just placed randomly within the emblematic space, and usually they are found to relate to each other through some underlying geometry.

A common arrangement is that of the above and the below, as with the two birds in emblem 43 of the *Atalanta fugiens* or the figure in the sepulchre and the uprising soul form in the 7th woodcut in the *Rosarium philosophorum* :

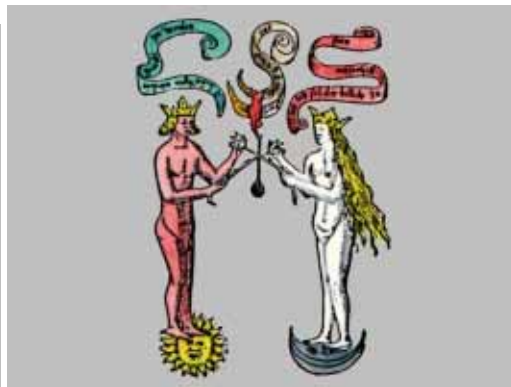


This vertical polarity often bears with it the idea of the Macrocosm and Microcosm, or the spiritual and the earthly. We will not pursue these interpretations further at this point in the course. For now it is enough that we train ourselves to recognise the underlying geometric patterns. One we are familiar with this facet, the task of interpretation will be made easier.

The next pattern which often is found in emblems is the horizontal polarity, the left-right placement of symbols. An example from a *Crowning of Nature* manuscript.



The left and right polarity is very common and often elaborated in various ways. Thus a more complex left/right polarity is seen in the Rosarium philosophorum emblems two and three.



In emblem two the red king on the left holds a branch in his right hand, while the white queen on the right also holds a branch in her right hand and they reach out their left hands to grasp each other.

In emblem three the red king on the left holds a branch in his right hand, while the white queen on the right holds the branch in her left hand, and they touch each other's branch with their left and right respectively.

This may seem to be a minor point, but it is not. Such details are usually important in alchemical emblems. They give us clues, for example, to the active and passive elements being depicted. At this stage in our work we will just try and recognise

these left/right polarities rather than immediately trying to interpret these. Often the associations can be quite subtle.

Of course, most emblems are not one dimensional and usually these two geometrical polarities are found together in the same emblem. Thus with the Rosarium examples, a bird descends from above. These two polarities of the above/beneath and left/right can form a kind of cross, or sometimes a square. Thus emblem 24 from the Mylius *Philosophia reformata* series should be read as being based on a cross form.



We will try and identify these in the examples later.

In some emblems these polarities are extended somewhat. Rather than being naked polarities standing entirely on their own, we often see that they create an intermediate space in which another symbol or group of symbols stand. These are often the key elements of the emblem, as this intermediate space is seen as that active region within which the transformation is truly taking place. This intermediate space can stand between the left and right, or between the above and the below.



Most often the active space is found between above/below and right/left polarities. This can be disguised or overlain with a complex piling on of symbols, but once you have sufficient experience of looking at this emblematic material, this underlying geometrical structure will become immediately obvious to you. You are already familiar with this image from lesson 1.



There are other geometries to consider, but we will leave this to a later lesson.

Exercises

Let us now proceed to the exercises. Here I would like you to identify and list the individual symbols as you did in the exercises in lesson 1, but this time you should try to identify the underlying geometry and draw a little diagram to illustrate just how the symbols are related to one another through this geometry. Thus taking as an example, emblem 24 from the Mylius *Philosophia reformata* series shown above, you should analyse it as follows.

Vertical:

Crow flying upright - crow on its back

Horizontal:

King - Queen

Sceptre - Lily branch

Other:

Rectangular stone on ground to which the king points.

Example 1: Avicenna's work from Maier *Symbola aurea mensae*.



Example 2 : First Key of Basil Valentine.



Example 3 : Emblem 9 from Splendor Solis. [Ignore the stylised decorative border.]



Example 4: 15th century manuscript in the British Library, Harley 2407.



Example 5: Figure from Azoth series in Mylius *Philosophia reformata*.



Example 6: Woodcut from the series in Basil Valentine's *Azoth*.



Example 7: [More of a challenge.] Hermaphrodite from Khunrath's *Ampitheatrum*.

