



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

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## Lesson 24 : Conclusion.

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Thank you for staying to the end of this course. I hope you will have been able to see something of what I have been trying to present over the past year. My main task in this foundation course was to show that alchemical symbolism should be investigated, read and understood from within itself. In my view the symbolic tradition in alchemy has suffered over the past decades from people trying to impose their own external ideas upon alchemical symbolism - in a sense trying to claim it as part of their own mindset, philosophical or spiritual perspective. It is understandable that people have wanted to do this, as alchemy is extremely obscure and largely unresearched, but I hope I have been able to sketch ways in which you can appreciate alchemical symbolism as a thing in itself.

A series of 24 quite intensive fortnightly lessons over a year might seem sufficient to thoroughly explore the riches of alchemical symbolism, but I am only too aware of how much I have had to limit myself in introducing the various facets of the subject. There is so much depth to alchemical symbolism that it proved difficult for me to do it justice in a relatively short course. Many aspects had to be left out or treated more simply perhaps than they should have been. At times it was difficult for me to find the right level in trying to reveal the depths without overburdening us in complexities.

My approach has been to show you ways of working with alchemical symbolism that are not based on any particular preconceived system. I hope that you will come away from this course with a kit of tools which will allow you to read alchemical emblems for yourself. Some among you will feel tempted to return to looking at alchemical symbolism from a comparative perspective finding all sorts of parallels with tarot, shamanism and modern esoteric imagery. In that case I hope you might be persuaded to read through the course again and try to see if the approach I have outlined might not be more relevant and productive of insight.

Just to recapitulate - the main tools I see as important in reading alchemical emblems are the following:

- Being able to identify symbols within an emblem from background or decoration.
- Taking note of any geometric structure in the presentation of the symbols.
- Seeing individual symbols within their alchemical context.
- Trying to see the narrative or little didactic drama presented in the emblem.

These four tools may seem rather simplistic but I think you will find they will lead you far into the heart of alchemical symbolism. If anything remains with you from this course, I hope it will be these four tools.

This lesson marks the conclusion of this course. Some may feel a bit cheated, thinking to themselves, "McLean has let us down, he has not given us the answers to the alchemical riddle, merely a lot of waffle and pointless exercises. Surely at the end of the course he should be revealing the mystery of alchemy to us." If you have this view then I regret that you have entirely missed the point of what I have been trying to do. Rather than providing nice abstract interpretations of alchemical emblems, I have been trying to share a process with you. If you have worked through the course then hopefully you will have begun to develop a technique for reading alchemical emblems. Once you have this it will live within you and you can either develop it further or pass on to something else. Possession of this process leaves you free to investigate this symbolism for yourself in your own way. I hope you will recognise that it is not prescriptive, nor does it incorporate any underlying philosophical mindset. I have not given you an answer, but I have hopefully given you a way to investigate the riches of alchemy for yourself.

So how do you proceed further? The only way to develop your understanding of alchemical symbolism will be to continue to work with this material. You will have to gather as much alchemical emblematic material as you can and apply your interpretative tools to them. It is not easy to make a collection of such alchemical iconography - I myself have spent many many years and a considerable amount of money on books, microfilms, photocopies and photographs. Unfortunately alchemical material is poorly researched and documented. I will continue to add material to the alchemy web site as I find time to prepare it. There are many books which contain a wealth of iconographic material on which you could draw. I assume most of the books in English are already known to you, so here is a short list of less well known titles with many alchemical illustrations, published outside the UK or USA.

**Alchimia. Ideologie und Technologie.** [Edited by Emil Ernst Ploss, Heinz Roosen-Runge, Heinrich Schipperges, and Herwig Buntz.] Munich 1970.

**Lenep, Jacques van. Alchimie.** Brussels 1985.

**Bachmann, Manuel and Hofmeier, Thomas. Geheimnisse der Alchemie.** Basel 1999

**Opus Magnum.** Trigon. Prague. 1997.

**Exaltatio Essentiae - Essentia Exaltata.** Pacini. Pisa 1992

I myself have already published one CD-Rom with high quality versions of the images from my galleries on the web site. I intend to issue a second CD-Rom in 2001 with new material. You might also want to obtain some of the coloured prints I have made of these alchemical images. I have found that by far the best way to study alchemical imagery is to live with it on the walls of your home, rather than just occasionally looking at an image in a book. Almost all the wall space in my flat is taken up with alchemical imagery. I could not have created this course unless I was constantly living in a sea of alchemical emblems.

In preparing this course I have been very conscious of the need to keep it self-contained and not assume that people had ready access to, or previous experience of, this alchemical material. So I have only been able to present you with a small representative cross section of the mass of emblematic material. There is so much more for you to explore. An aspect of alchemical iconography I was unable to pursue in any depth was the alchemical emblem sequence. Neither have we touched upon alchemical allegorical tales. I have now begun constructing further courses for those who might want to join me in penetrating more deeply into alchemical imagery. Now that this foundation course is finished, I am actively preparing a new course that will focus on alchemical sequences. Other courses may follow when time, finance and creative energies permit.

So to conclude, let us leave this course taking note of an aspect that I neglected to mention in our study of alchemical symbolism. Not all alchemists were open to this, but among the deeply serious and elevated spiritual content we occasionally catch a glimpse of humour. No more so perhaps in the emblem I included in the last lesson.



Here three alchemists are gathered in a laboratory. One of them points at a crucible set on top of a cylindrical furnace. From this crucible a stream of bubbles rise up onto the air. On the right another alchemist holding a retort containing the Keren-Happuch (the stone of power) stands before another furnace on which a distillation is taking place. He points to the stream of bubbles. Many of the bubbles are labelled with such terms as "Sol magicum" (magical gold), "Mercurius coagulatus" (coagulated or solid mercury), "Luna fixa" (the fixed silver), "Mercurius philosophorum" (the mercury of philosophers), "Aurum potabile" (drinkable gold), "Lapis philosophorum" (the stone of the philosophers). Some of these bubbles have already burst - "Sol" (gold) has gone as has "Alkahest Helmontis" (the alkahest of Helmont). The alchemist at the back with the bellows is rubbing the sting of the bubbles from his eyes. The alchemists are singing the ascending notes of the musical scale "ut... re" in the foreground, "mi... fa" sings the one on the right, while the poor suffering figure in background sings the highest notes "la mi". Perhaps their high pitch is bursting the bubbles. These are echoed in the spiritual realm above by a choir of gods in the clouds, playing a harp and singing verses from the Old Testament. One reaches down with a stick and may be trying to burst the bubbles. These gods or Old Testament figures do not seem impressed by the alchemists' work. Their choice of verses speaks loudly of their criticism of the scene below:

Exodus 20, 23. Ye shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall ye make unto you gods of gold.

Job 28, 1. Surely there is a vein for the silver, and a place for gold where they fine it.

Psalms 115, 4. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.

So perhaps one of the messages from this satirical emblem is that alchemy is a far richer realm than that of making gold and silver or other preparations. One of the riches of alchemy is its symbolism. If we work with this emblematic symbolism, learn to read it out of itself, and come into a true encounter with the inner power of these symbols, then we will find ourselves in a positive way transformed. Our life will become richer if we are able to make a space within ourselves for these amazing images. I have found that to be true for myself, and I hope that this short course might have given you the basis for making alchemical symbolism work for you in a similar way.