

The Art of Fire
Ceramics and Alchemy

I.

Before arriving for the first time at Spode, I brought a copy of Cipriano Piccolpasso's The Three Books of the Potter's Art with me. This is an unique technical manual of ceramics written in 1548, to which art history has never referred. ~~Having no knowledge of, nor any special interest in majolica or the art of the potter, I had nevertheless~~ stumbled across a couple of references to Piccolpasso's work from an unexpected source, namely the pseudonymous French alchemist Fulcanelli, ~~writing in the early Twentieth Century~~. For him, The Three Books was not only a tract on ceramics, it was primarily a tract containing, in it's images, the most profound of alchemical secrets. On of these references read:

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I brought it because I many years ago had

The Sibyl, questioned on what was a Philosopher, answered: "It is that which can make glass." Apply you to manufacture it according to our art, without taking account of the processes of glassmaking too much. The industry of the potter would be more instructive to you; see the boards of Piccolpassi, you will find of them one which represents a dove whose legs are attached to a stone. Don't you have, [...], to seek and find the mastery in a volatile thing? [...] Thus make your mud, then your compound; seal carefully in manner that no spirit can be exhaled; heat the whole according to art until complete calcination. Give the pure portion of the powder obtained in your compound, that you will seal in the same mud.

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"A dove whose legs are attached to a stone". Being attracted by coincidences, you could, as a visitor at Spode's before the exhibition, not avoid being pointed toward a dead dove lying on one of the floors. It could not be cleaned away, I was told, because it was fixed in clay.

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II.

Alchemists invariably call themselves not only "philosophers" and "scientists", but also, with reference to a certain trinity, refers to themselves as "artists" and the making of the stone as "the great art". Philosophy, Science and Art here being three intertwined and irreducible concepts for the alchemical quest. As we all know, today alchemy is considered neither a philosophy, nor a science, and definitively not an art.

I don't know if early modern potters called themselves philosophers or scientists, but they definitively called themselves artists.

Claudius Popelin, a French nineteenth century enamel-painter and the translator into French of Piccolpasso's tract, subsumed glass-making, enamel-painting, and ceramics as les vieux arts du feu. And for Popelin, this art of the fire was

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ordus!

inconceivable without philosophy and science. That is why Fulcanelli defines a philosopher as "that which can make glass", without being too much concerned about glass-making, but more attentive to what it shares with ceramics and enamel. For Fulcanelli, and for alchemists in general, ceramics is -- in its essence -- identical with alchemy.

As we all know, Fulcanelli's view is not shared by the art world. The art world is almost totally unconcerned with ceramic artists, ceramic history and ceramic work. The works of Piccolpasso, Bernard Palissy, or Josiah Wedgwood are of no consequence in the history of art as we know it today. Artists working after the late eighteenth century in ceramics are per definition excluded from this history.

The Fountain, arguably the most important art work today, is a ceramic work, but it has nothing to do with ceramics. Jeff Koons' Puppy (Vase) from 1998

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~~and~~ Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party from 1979 both draw heavily on a discourse of ceramics, but in so doing, emphasises the unbridgeable gap between art and ceramics. It is actually the incompatibility of art and its material -- ceramics -- which produces the meaning of the works.

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^{This}
~~It~~ is because art is not interested in materiality, not even in pigments, metals and stones. The modern system of the arts, since its inception during the second half of the eighteenth century is exclusively visual and conceptual, and The Fountain, Puppy (Vase), and The Dinner Party are visual and conceptual works. The materials, of which they are made, are interesting only as long as they are visually and conceptually perceivable. Matter is relevant only as materiality. Form is relevant only as a haptic perception.

III.

In Imperial China, ceramics was never associated with the fine arts: i.e. landscape painting and calligraphy of the scholar-artists, in the same way as fine art-sculpture -- albeit provocatively - could be said to be strictly limited to the carving of Ink-stones. The advent of alchemy in China is curiously coincidental, not with ceramics in general, but precisely with the development from porcelaneous wares during late Hān to the advent of true porcelain in early T'ang, a compound of the two earthen substances known by their Chinese names "kaōlīn" and "pētūntṣē". This development seem to be wholly indigen^{ous}, pushed ^{on} by the drug-hunting alchemists.

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Another technological development, not known in China before the Han dynasty, was the art of glazing, in Chinese called liu-li, and was a development equally important for ceramics as for

alchemy. This technology was not indigen^ous for China, but certainly connected with the western expansion and the newly-opened trade-routes across Central Asia inaugurated by the Han-emperor Wu. Specifically, this liu-li, or the coloured glazes the Chinese sources speaks about, is probably of Persian origin, but the oldest still extant technical recipes for the fabrication of glass and enamels are found in the Greek alchemical papyri, reminding us that ceramics -- as alchemy -- seems to be perpetually transformed during the continuous reappearances on different times and places, while still retaining its core of substantial invariability.

When the qualities of Chinese porcelain became known in the West during early modern times, alchemy was at its peak in Europe. It is thus not a coincidence that the European porcelain was to be discovered by an alchemist. Furthermore, the concepts of alchemy was already prepared to accommodate the processes of

ceramic experimentation. First and foremost they share a focus on the elementary forces: earth, water, air, and fire, all governed by a quintessential power, in Chinese called Qi.

More specifically, we see this in alchemical illustrations concerning how to obtain your matter, digging in the earth as were they constructing a kiln, which at the same time is an inverted mountain. During the final years of the Sixteenth Century, Heinrich Khunrath issued this curious depiction of the ancient hermetic text Tabula Smaragdina, or The Emerald Table. Located in a Netherlandish "World Landscape" is a gigantic mountain, containing the hermetic verses. But the text is located within ^{this} a mountain-shaped kiln, with the fire sprouting out atop, as if the text was ~~in a kiln~~ waiting to be produced as an emerald or liu-li.

~~European porcelain was born with alchemy~~. When Johann Friedrich Böttger, an apotecary and

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alchemical impostor, finally in 1708 succeeded in producing a clay with similar qualities as its Chinese prototype, [~~August the Strong was still not satisfied and kept Böttger in custody to produce the Philosopher's Stone for him.~~ ^{and} And while the European porcelain embarks upon its commercial adventure ^{the} during the century of "Porcelain Craze", the humiliation of alchemy continues on the continent, // inverting the alchemists' doctrine of correspondance, secrecy, and initiation into the scientific rules of Robert Boyle, and later adopted ^{that is:} by the Royal Society, of the reproducibility of the experiment, the unequivocal nomenclature of matter, and, finally, an open communication ~~between peers~~, instead of initiation and secrecy.

When alchemy already was a science non-grata in late eighteenth century, Josiah Wedgewood was not interested in any alchemical quest. Wedgewood -- in particular -- was interested in getting an artistic legitimacy to his wares, to induce into them a

feeling of an educated taste. Despite its commercial success, its extremely supportive stance towards involving artists in the production, its choices of subject matters and agile sensitivity with regard to style and innovation, this project had already failed even before the introduction of Jasper Ware.

Two years after the issue of the Portland Vase, the German art historian and archaeologist Karl August Böttiger published an article on antique vases and their imitators in ^{which} ~~the influential German Journal~~

~~des Luxus und der Moden~~. Though he does acknowledge

the innovations of Wedgwood, ~~he~~ dismisses Rococo tendencies in porcelain as kitsch: "Our so beloved

porcelain vessels have still not been refined by

genuine artistry. Most porcelain is fashioned into

ridiculous dolls, resulting in the spread of a

childish taste." ~~A quote, almost verbatim echoing~~

~~the judgement of Winckelmann in his Geschichte der~~

~~Kunst des Altertums from 1764.~~

*inserting
re:
famous
judgement from
1764:*

The high quality (of not only) Wedgwood, but Meissen, Sèvres, and Spode's Bone China notwithstanding, the judgement of Böttiger and Winckelmann has proved to be the lasting judgement of the art world.

Kaendler's rococo figurines eventually pulled Wedgwood's Portland Vase with them in the art critical elite's ^econdemnation of ceramics as such.

⊗ Maria Periniola

IV.

Woven into the character and the plot of Bruce

Chatwin's novel Utz from 1988, is a revenge against this humiliation of porcelain with the help of alchemy these humiliations of alchemy and porcelain. In a

fictitious article, called "The Private Collector",

he writes that an object in a museum case "must

suffer the de-natured existence of an animal in the

zoo. In any museum the object dies -- of suffocation

and the public gaze -- whereas private ownership

confers on the owner the right and the need to

touch. As a young child will reach out to handle the

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and with such friends...

* of porcelain, with alchemy acting as [witness]
with the help of alchemy ("with friends like these...")

thing it names, so the passionate collector, his eye in harmony with his hand, restores to the object the life-giving touch of its maker."

The young child in Utz's world is precisely juxtaposed to Böttiger's and Winckelmann's "childish taste", because it is pre-conceptual in its visio-tactual fascionosum. It is the very negation of the educated disinterested pleasure that the museum educates and this fascionosum cannot be satisfied within an exclusively visual context. Art theory sublimates this desire with the concept of "haptic", a kind of tactile disinterestedness. But this compromise is unacceptable from Utz's position, and thus he ^{has} ~~have~~ to reject that art is a public matter. Instead, art rests on a private and possessive intimacy, by no means enlightening, and certainly not raising any ethical or moral standards, rather the opposite: ^{it is} thievish, forgerous, jealous, and secretive, not at all unlike most of the alchemical authors I know of.

This "life-giving touch" is mentioned a couple of times in the novel, first when we hear about the young Kaspar Utz receiving his first Meissen piece, ^{running} pivoting ~~"the figurine in the flickering candlelight~~ and ~~ran~~ his pudgy fingers, lovingly, over the glaze and brilliant enamels." ^{in the flickering candlelight} ~~I find it especially~~ intriguing that Chatwin, when he describes the actual touching of the porcelain figurines, this ^{"in the flickering candlelight"} takes place ~~in candlelight~~, as if the resurrective touch would be impossible in direct light. In alchemy we also find numerous references to transformative processes that can only take place in indirect light, Fulcanelli, ~~for to stick with him,~~ likens a secret alchemical substance with "nostoc", a greenish dew or fungus-like cryptogam, which grows on stones during the night and disappears when the sun rises. The greenish colour here invoked, ~~nevertheless~~ points at an immature stage of a ^{and} vegetative ~~growing~~, but still mineral substance, reminding us of the Chinese notion of liu-li as a

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distant mountainous stone of a green colour, or, if we turn to the West, the green emerald hidden in Khunraths textual ^{matter} ~~kiln~~ of the Emerald Table. In a similar vein, Piccolpasso ~~curious passage,~~ urges the potter that the firing of the kiln should always be done under a waxing moon, else the fire will be lacking in brightness.

Utz repeatedly refers to Adam, Golem, Kabbalah, alchemy, or Christ giving life to clay birds, which makes the narrator to insist on the question whether or not Utz actually believes that his porcelains figures are alive -- that is, in a non-metaphorical sense. At one occasion, Utz answers: "I am and I am not," [he said.] "They are alive and they are dead. But if they were alive, they would also have to die. Is it not?" As if Utz were pointing at another concept of life, distinct from the notion of "mortal life".

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And I believe he was. At another occasion, the answer is quite different. After Utz had recounted for the narrator that the Dresden banks during the inflation in 1923 had issued emergency money of red and white Böttger porcelain, he said that most porcelain experts had interpreted Böttger's discovery as the utilitarian by-product of alchemy -- like Paracelsus's mercurial cure for syphilis. Utz did not agree, the narrator continues: "He felt it was foolish to attribute to former ages the materialist concerns of this one. Alchemy, except among its more banal practitioners, was never a technique for multiplying wealth ad infinitum. It was a mystical exercise. The search for gold and the search for porcelain had been facets of an identical quest: to find the substance of immortality."

For me it is obvious that it is this defining fire, this "secret" or "hidden" fire, Chatwin is alluding to, being equally essential for the perception of porcelain as the manufacturing of porcelain. When it

tactile sensation

comes to the "life-giving touch" it has to be protected from direct light, enlightenment, publicity, and direct visual exposure, as nostoc or any lunar activity.