



Cornelis Bega
Dutch, 1631/1632 - 1664

The Alchemist

1663

oil on canvas mounted on panel

overall: 35 × 28.6 cm (13 3/4 × 11 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right, in gray paint on box: C. Bega Ao.1663

From the Collection of Ethel and Martin Wunsch 2013.34.1

ENTRY

The alchemist, intently hunched over his work in a dark, simple interior, single-mindedly focuses on his chemical experiment. With his felt hat pulled down firmly over his forehead, he heats the fire in a small furnace by squeezing the bellows under his arm. In this engaging painting, Bega provides a fascinating glimpse into the mysterious realm of an alchemist's workshop. He shows the alchemist in mid-experiment as he grasps metal tongs that reach into the fire, its blue-grey smoke billowing up behind the domed alembic. Below this glass distillation vessel is an open-topped vessel containing the material to be distilled. The heated vapor rising into the hooded alembic cools on contact with its glass dome. The liquid created drips from the alembic's spout into a red cloth that filters it before it reaches a receptacle on the earthen floor of the workshop.

Thick tomes, their leather covers worn and torn, their pages, filled with drawings and instructions, rumbled from extensive use, lie within arm's reach. An illustration of this distillation process bearing an undecipherable, alchemical text, perhaps torn from one of these books, is attached to the stone wall directly above the oven. [1] Beautifully rendered earthenware pots, as well as glass, wooden, leather, and metal containers of all shapes and sizes indicate the many ingredients that have gone into the alchemist's concoctions over the years, mixtures that, given the sparse and haphazard character of his workshop, probably never attained the desired results. A particularly intriguing vessel is the glazed earthenware apothecary jar on the furnace that—at first glance – seems to be labeled “silicon.” [2] Silicon, however, was not identified until the early eighteenth century; what one sees here is most likely the last part of “basilicon,” a curative ointment that was often used by alchemists in their efforts to devise new potions for strengthening

and healing the body. [3]

The alchemist's labors were intimately bound to the study and early practice of chemistry, and a huge literature evolved in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries explaining the types of physical matter and the processes by which one could conduct experiments to transform one element into another. It was, for many, a respectable profession, and its scholarly component is evident in the list of significant scientists —Bega's contemporaries—who sought to separate the essence of matter from its base components, among them Robert Boyle (1627–1691) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727). [4] Many alchemists made significant scientific contributions to the development of, among others, medicines and cosmetics as well as pigments and dyes. Nevertheless, alchemy's ambiguous status at the time derived from the ways theory and practice were intertwined, and from its origins in natural philosophy, metaphysics, and religion. Alchemists were secretive about the processes that allowed them to make their transformations, and their texts and treatises utilized a wide range of occult signs and symbols.

Alchemists conducted many chemical experiments, but the one that resonates most in the public consciousness was the effort to turn base metal, such as lead, into gold. Most alchemists firmly believed that this elusive transmutation could be achieved with the aid of the legendary and elusive "philosopher's stone" (*lapis philosophorum*), said to be the fifth element (besides water, air, fire, and earth), which could separate the physical properties of elements through transmutation. Unfortunately, the quest for the philosopher's stone and, ultimately, for gold led some alchemists astray and they would forget the underlying scientific components of their discipline. Instead, in their futile search for gaining riches through alchemy, some of them lost all of their worldly possessions and drove their families into the poorhouse. As a group they were often depicted as fools and mocked for that futile quest.

Bega and his contemporaries were fascinated by alchemy, a practice that occupied a realm somewhere between science and magic. [5] Aside from this painting, Bega executed at least two other images of an alchemist at work, one in 1661 and another one in 1663 [fig. 1]. [6] Although no evidence indicates that Bega was actively engaged in alchemy, the idea of transforming base materials into different substances through scientific knowledge and intuitive imagination, albeit done somewhat secretly, presumably appealed to his artistic sensitivities. [7] Painters, in fact, effectively transformed minerals and dyes into works of art with illusionistic qualities through a mixture of science and imagination. [8] Most of the ingredients

for basilicon for example, were used in painters' workshops as well as for making medical ointments (unguents). [9] Bega, moreover, grew up in a world where the crafting of fine objects from precious "noble" metals (as gold and silver were often described) was a matter of daily concern. A number his close relatives were gold- and silversmiths, including his father, Pieter Jansz Begijn (1600–1648), with whom Bega likely trained before entering the workshop of Adriaen van Ostade (Dutch, 1610 - 1685) in 1648. [10]

Aside from whatever interest in alchemy Bega may have gained from his family, the subject clearly struck a chord in Haarlem, where a fertile market for paintings of this subject must have existed. Aside from Bega, a number of other Haarlem painters, including Bega's master, Van Ostade [fig. 2] and Thomas Wyck (Dutch, c. 1616 - 1677) [fig. 3] depicted the subject. [11] Nevertheless, despite their shared interest in the theme, the attitudes and approaches of these three painters are so different that one must conclude that each came to the subject from his own distinctive viewpoint, a phenomenon that reflects the complex place that early chemistry and alchemy held in contemporary thought.

Van Ostade, who only painted the subject once, in 1661, drew upon the negative iconography of the alchemist stemming from the print that Philip Galle (Netherlandish, 1537 - 1612) engraved in 1558 after a design by Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Netherlandish, c. 1525/1530 - 1569) [fig. 4]. [12] In Bruegel's image the alchemist, who is shown dropping his last coin into a crucible, is the cause of his family's ruin, as evidenced by the empty money bags held by his distraught wife and bare cupboards in which their children play. In much the same manner, Van Ostade depicts the alchemist futilely puffing his bellows as his wife wipes her baby's bottom, a not-so-subtle commentary on the worthlessness of his endeavors. This sentiment is reinforced by the text on a sheet of paper beneath a stool. Drawn from Agricola's treatise *De Re Metallica* (1566), it reads: "*oleum et operam perdis*" ('you waste oil and labor'). [13]

Thomas Wijck's numerous scenes of alchemists in their workshops, on the other hand, are devoid of the negative associations found in works deriving from the Bruegel tradition. Wijck's alchemists are scholarly and meditative, and are often shown intently reading treatises rather than actually engaged in conducting experiments. Even though his alchemists conduct their studies in workrooms cluttered with alchemical books and instruments, Wijck's positive view of the profession approaches that of David Teniers the Younger (Flemish, 1610 - 1690), who invariably portrayed alchemists as scientists reading or conducting

experiments in a carefully appointed laboratory setting [fig. 5].

While Bega's alchemist is not portrayed as a scholar despite the thick tomes lying at his feet, neither is he a fool, despite his humble workshop and plain clothes. Bega's strength as an artist lies in his ability to convey the basic humanity of his figures, no matter how coarse or ill-behaved they might be in their social interactions, and his depiction of this alchemist is consistent with that fundamental characteristic of his artistic approach. Bega's alchemist is not just a type but a real person, whose facial characteristics are beautifully rendered in the half-light of this darkened interior. One empathizes with his efforts and wishes him well, even if the outcome of his experiment remains uncertain. That Bega thoughtfully considered how to render this figure is evident from a preliminary drawing he made of the alchemist [fig. 6]. In this black chalk drawing, with white heightening on blue paper, Bega made subtle adjustments to the angle of the man's chin and felt hat to capture the essence of the figure's seated pose, and he carefully drew the angular folds of the alchemist's clothing, even suggesting the textures of different fabrics. [14]

Other preliminary drawings must have existed that are now lost, such as compositional drawings or individual studies of the multiple objects strewn about the alchemist's workshop. Some of the objects reappear in slightly different arrangements in Bega's other painting of an alchemist from 1663 (fig. 1). In that work, the textures and materials of these still-life elements are also beautifully rendered and create an earthy complement to the human drama unfolding in the humble setting of the alchemist's workshop. Despite using a restrained palette, consisting primarily of ochers, umbers, and blue-grays, Bega had a remarkable ability to evoke the physical presence of inanimate objects through his mastery of light. By subtly accenting an edge or indicating a reflection, he made objects glow and glisten within these darkened interiors. Bega's depiction of this alchemist not only offers a fascinating glimpse into a hidden and secretive world, but his painterly genius gives this work a stunning emotional and psychological energy.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

June 14, 2015

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Cornelis Bega, *The Alchemist*, 1663, oil on panel, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, inv. no. 84.PB.56. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program



fig. 2 Adriaen van Ostade, *The Alchemist*, 1661, oil on oak, National Gallery, London. Photo © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY



fig. 3 Thomas Wijck, *The Laboratory of an Alchemist*, c. 1665, oil on panel, Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister



fig. 4 Philip Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Alchemist*, c. 1558, engraving, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Print Purchase Fund (Rosenwald Collection), 1970.13.3



fig. 5 David Teniers the Younger, *Interior of a Laboratory with an Alchemist*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, Chemical Heritage Foundation Collections, inv. FA. 00-03-23. Courtesy of Roy Eddleman; photograph by Gregory Tobias.



fig. 6 Cornelis Bega, *Study of an Alchemist*, c. 1663, black chalk with white heightening on blue paper, Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp, inv. no. MMB.1049. Photo © Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerpen

NOTES

- [1] According to Lawrence M. Principe and Lloyd DeWitt, *Transmutations – Alchemy in Art: selected works from the Eddleman and Fisher collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation*, Philadelphia, 2002, 17, this drawing resembles a woodcut that appears in various editions of the alchemical treatise *Liber fornicum*.
- [2] Bega's jar resembles an apothecary jar in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, inv. BK-NM-10038. For an extensive discussion of apothecary jars, see the website of the Société d'Histoire de la Pharmacie, Paris, and especially the online article by Louis Cotinat, *L'âge d'or des faiences d'apothicaires* (1973), <http://www.shp-asso.org/index.php?PAGE=pots%202>
- [3] Silica was only discovered by Antoine Lavoisier in 1787, and the term "silicon" was first used in 1817 by the Scottish chemist Thomas Thomson. I

am most grateful to Professor Lawrence M. Principe, Drew Professor of the Humanities, Department of the History of Science and Technology and Department of Chemistry at Johns Hopkins University for identifying this inscription as “basilicon.” The full inscription would most likely have read: “U. BASILICON” or “UNG.BASILICON”, where the abbreviation U. or Ung. stands for ‘unguentum’. (correspondence with Henriette Rahusen, August 8, 2014).

- [4] For this history, see, among others, H.A.M. Snelders, *De geschiedenis van de scheikunde in Nederland*, part 1: *Van alchemie tot chemie en chemische industrie rond 1900*, Delft, 1993, 11-25; Lawrence M. Principe and Lloyd DeWitt, *Transmutations – Alchemy in Art: selected works from the Eddleman and Fisher collections at the Chemical Heritage Foundation*, Philadelphia, 2002; and Lawrence M. Principe, *The Secrets of Alchemy*. Chicago, 2013, especially chapter 5: “The golden age: practicing chymistry in the early modern period.”
- [5] In 1663 Bega also painted *The Astrologer* (oil on panel, 36.9 x 29.6; London, National Gallery, inv. NG1481), another subject that occupied a realm that drew upon both science and magic. For an excellent discussion of this painting, see the commentary by Savenaz Ayooghi in Peter van den Brink, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, eds., *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten* (Exh. cat. Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Stuttgart, 2012, 233-236, no. 66.
- [6] Cornelis Bega, *The Alchemist in his Workshop*, 1661, oil on canvas (36 x 46 cm.), Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel (stolen in 1945). For an illustration, see Peter van den Brink, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, eds., *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten* (Exh. cat. Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Stuttgart, 2012, 243.
- [7] Several Haarlem artists from earlier generations, most significantly, Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617) and Jacob de Gheyn (c. 1565-1629), did engage in alchemical studies.
- [8] This concept is discussed by Jessica Korschanowski (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen) in a lecture at the Rijksdienst voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RKD), The Hague, 22 May 2014, “Between folly and erudition: The image of *The Alchemist* in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish genre painting.”
- [9] The French edition (1580) of Guy de Chauliac’s *Inventarium Sive Chirurgia Magna* (La Grande Chirurgie), originally published circa 1363, lists them as: *cire* (wax), *mastic* (resin, used in varnishing), *verd de gris* (verdigris, likely as a drying agent), *terebinthine* (turpentine), *litharge* (lead oxide, similar to massicot), and *galban* (resin). My gratitude to Elizabeth Berry Drago for the above information on the link between Basilicum and artists’ materials, and for her insights into the widespread practical and commercial applications of

proto-chemistry in the seventeenth century in general.

- [10] For information on Bega's family, see Pieter Biesboer, "Cornelis Bega (Haarlem, 1631-1664). Eine Biografie," in Peter van den Brink, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, eds. *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten* (Exh. cat. Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Stuttgart, 2012, 25-26. Aside from Bega's father, who was both a gold- and silversmith, and a member of the Haarlem Saint Luke's guild, Bega's uncle Dominicus Jansz Bagijn (died 1636) was a silversmith and sculptor; the brother of his paternal grandmother, Dominicus Fredericxz van Lijnhoven (1587-1637), was a noted silversmith, and his sister was married to the silversmith Cornelis Fransz Ebbekin, whose son Pieter Cornelisz Ebbekin (1622-1666) was also a silversmith. I would like to thank Henriette Rahusen for emphasizing the importance of this family heritage in connection to Bega's interest in proto-chemistry.
- [11] Hendrik Heerschop (1626/1627-1690) was another Haarlem artist that painted scenes of alchemists. For one such work, see David De Witt, *The Bader Collection : Dutch and Flemish paintings*, Kingston, Ont., c. 2008, 151, no. 88.
- [12] See Nadine M. Orenstein, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, (Exh. cat., Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), New Haven 2001, 170-173, no. 60f.
- [13] Neil MacLaren and Christopher Brown. *The Dutch school: 1600-1900*. 2 vols. National Gallery Catalogues. Revised and expanded ed. London, 1991, 1: 298-299, no. 846; 2: plate 257. The original Latin phrase '*et oleum et operam peridi*', from Act 1, scene 2, of Titus Maccius Plautus' comedy '*Poenulus*' (c. 195-189 BC), was retitled by Georg Agricola in Book 2 of *De re metallica*, Basel, 1556, to the phrase used in the painting. This translation differs slightly from the one used by MacLaren and Brown.
- [14] For an excellent discussion of this drawing, see the discussion by Baukje Coenen, in Peter van den Brink, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, eds., *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten* (Exh. cat. Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin), Stuttgart, 2012, 239-240, no. 68.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric mounted to a panel. The panel is made from one plank with a vertical grain. It has been beveled on all four sides. It is unclear if Bega mounted the canvas to the panel or if it was done by a different hand at a later date. The panel is consistent with those used during the period, but

cupping is visible in the canvas, indicating that it was primed while on a stretcher rather than a panel, and the paint stops approximately 0.7 cm from the bottom edge of the fabric, suggesting that this area was a tacking margin.

The ground is a warm gray color and it is extremely thin. The paint is also sparingly applied, with little to no impasto. In some areas, both the paint and ground are so thin that the canvas is readily visible. The paint was applied mostly wet-into-wet and the ground was used to create the midtones. Bega used small, short, parallel brushstrokes in the face, highlights, and white tablecloth. The varnish is thick and glossy.

Infrared reflectography at 1.5–1.8 microns [1] indicates that the alchemist's head was moved slightly to the right and shows a shape at his lower back. Originally, his back may have projected out further or his proper left elbow may have protruded out behind him. The blue fabric hanging below his thigh and the fabric on his lap initially had different shapes.

The painting is in very good condition. The panel remains in plane and the paint and ground are stable. There is a moderate craquelure network with a few minute losses at the intersections of some of the cracks. There is a larger loss in the figure's belt. The paint has also crizzled in several areas, most notably in the background in the upper left corner. Discreet inpainting is located along the edge in the upper right corner and along the perimeter, approximately 0.5 cm from the edge. There is additional inpainting about 2 cm from the left edge in two locations, which are evenly spaced from each other and from the top and bottom of the painting, dividing the panel in thirds.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara focal plane array InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filters.

PROVENANCE

Cornelis Backer, Amsterdam;[1] (his sale, Zoeterwoude, 16 August, 1775, no. 13);[2] (Abraham Delfos, Leiden); Jonkheer Menno Baron van Coehoorn [d. 1800], The

Hague; (his estate sale, Phillipus van der Schley, Amsterdam, 19 October 1801 and days following, no. 6);^[3] Louis-Bernard Coders [1741-1817], Amsterdam and Liege; (sale, Maison des Divisions, Paris, 25 January 1802 and days following, no. 16);^[4] (Alexandre-Joseph Paillet, Paris); (sale, Maison des Divisions, Paris, 18 April 1803 and days following, no. 28);^[5] (Bon-Thomas Henry, Paris). Louis-Chrétien Lorch, Paris; (his sale, Maison des Divisions, Paris, 19 November 1804 and days following, no. 13);^[6] (Nodin, Paris); M. Gabory, Rouen; (his estate sale, Hôtel de Bullion, Paris, 15-16 April 1822, no. 5).^[7] private collection, England, 1938. Marchese San Pieri Talon, Bologna; (his sale, Franco Semenzato, Venice, 2 June 1985, no. 13);^[8] (French & Co., New York); sold October 1985 to Robert H. [1928-2009] and Clarice C. Smith, Bethesda; sold November 1989 to (French & Co., New York);^[9] (Bob P. Haboldt & Co., New York), by 1990;^[10] purchased 1992 by Mr. and Mrs. Martin Wunsch, New York; gift 2013 to NGA.

[1] The provenance is based on Peter van den Brink et al., *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten*, exh. cat., Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Gemäldegalerie, Aachen and Stuttgart, 2012: 283, no. 69, where the association of the NGA painting with the paintings described in the various sale catalogues is deemed to be probable.

[2] The description and size of the painting given in the sale catalogue correspond extremely well to the NGA painting. The measurements, given in Rheinische feet as “hoog 13 ½ breed 11 ½ duim,” are equivalent to 35.3 x 30 cm. The NGA painting is 35 x 28.6 cm.

[3] The painting is listed in the sale catalogue as being on panel, indicating that the canvas support had been mounted on board by this time. The dimensions given are the same as those in the 1775 sale catalogue.

[4] The measurements given in the sale catalogue in French feet equate to 43.3 x 35.2 cm. These are larger than those of the NGA painting, but perhaps they include the frame.

[5] The measurements given in the sale catalogue are 34 x 28 cm.

[6] The measurements given in the sale catalogue are 34 x 20 cm, but the second measurement is probably an error and should have been 28 or 29 cm.

[7] The measurements given in the sale catalogue in French feet are "L. 13 p., H. 9 p." These equate to 35.1 x 24.3 cm.

[8] In the catalogue for the last of the sales in which the painting appeared, the measurements are given as 35.5 x 29 cm.

[9] The details of ownership by the Smiths are in their collection records; copies are in NGA curatorial files.

[10] In March 1990 the painting was with Haboldt at TEFAF (The European Fine Art Fair) in Maastricht, The Netherlands.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

2012 Cornelis Bega: *Eleganz und raue Sitten*, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; *Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin*, 2012, no. 69, repro.

2016 *Drawings for Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt*, National Gallery of Art, Washington; *Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt*, Paris, 2016-2017, no. 105, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1984 Scott, Mary Ann. "Cornelis Bega (1631/32-1664) as Painter and Draughtsman." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park. Ann Arbor, 1984: 335, no. 147.
- 1990 Sutton, Peter C. "Recent Patterns of Public and Private Collecting of Dutch Art." In Ben P.J. Broos, ed. *Great Dutch Paintings from America*. Exh. cat. Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The Hague and Zwolle, 1990: 113.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

- 1998 Fredericksen, Burton B., ed.; archival contributions by Ruud Priem; assisted by Julia I. Armstrong. *Corpus of Paintings Sold in the Netherlands during the Nineteenth Century, Volume 1: 1801-1810*. Los Angeles, 1998: 85.
- 1998 Peronnet, Benjamin, and Burton B. Fredericksen, eds. *Répertoire des tableaux vendue en France au XIXe siècle, vol. 1: 1801-1810, part I: A-N*. Los Angeles, 1998: 128, 129.
- 2004 Franits, Wayne E. *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting. Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution*. New Haven and London, 2004: 140, 282 n. 36.
- 2012 Brink, Peter van den, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindemann, eds. *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten*. Exh. cat. Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen; Gemaldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Stuttgart, 2012: 241-243, no. 69, repro.
-

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Cornelis Bega/*The Alchemist*/1663," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/161648> (accessed June 04, 2023).