





Alchemist

Jacob Toorenvliet
(Leiden 1640 – 1719 Leiden)

1684

oil on copper

31.6 x 25.3 cm

inscribed and dated in light-colored paint
centered along reverse: “Jacob Toorenvliet.
fec 1684.”

JT-107

How to cite

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Originating in ancient philosophy, alchemy in early modern Europe was considered a pseudoscience of transmutation, in which a base metal (for example, lead) was to be transformed into a noble metal, such as gold or silver. Reflecting contemporary perception of the mystic as well as the scientific nature of this tradition, two rather contradictory ways of portraying the alchemist exist in the visual tradition of the northern and southern Netherlands. One depicts the alchemist as a charlatan in search of the magical ability to create gold, and the other depicts him as a scientific scholar, laying the foundation for the early development of modern chemistry.^[1]

The first approach, employed throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, characterized the alchemist as the object of satire and a symbol of human folly. His futile experiments in changing base metals into gold were represented as sinful quests for personal gain. In this view of alchemy, alchemists inevitably ended up wasting precious time and money, thereby sacrificing the welfare of their families. **(fig 1)** Pieter Brueghel the Elder's (ca. 1525–69) drawing *Alchemist*, ca. 1658, depicting the alchemist as a profligate, served as an important source of inspiration for later generations of artists, including David III Rijckaert (1612–61), Jan Steen (1626–79), and Adriaen van Ostade (1610–85).^[2] In Jan Steen's *Village Alchemist*, for example, the artist depicts an elderly alchemist as being oblivious to the poverty of his surroundings, especially that of his own family. His young wife holds their infant in her arms and casts a discouraged glance up at an empty moneybag hanging from the ceiling **(fig 2)**.^[3]

David Teniers the Younger (1610–90) introduced the second common portrayal of the alchemist in the 1640s, and his example was followed by, among others, Thomas Wijck (1616–77), Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–81), and Cornelis Bega (1631–64).^[4] Despite the often skeptical view of the profession, alchemy was, in fact, a precursor to modern chemistry and pharmacology. In the course of their experiments, alchemists developed chemical processes like distillation and dissolution, and increased the knowledge of the physical world, which was of great practical use in, for instance, the chemistry of medicine, which distilled herbs to make elixirs.^[5] In Teniers's *Alchemist* in the Mauritshuis, the alchemist is portrayed as a wise and humble scientist diligently absorbed in his research and surrounded by a variety of instruments, such as distillation equipment **(fig 3)**.^[6] Teniers's alchemists are often accompanied by one or two assistants who take charge of the execution of the experiment. His laboratories do not include motifs that

Comparative Figures



Fig 1. After Pieter Brueghel the Elder (ca. 1525–69), possibly workshop or immediate surroundings of Pieter Brueghel the Younger (ca. 1564–1637/38), *Alchemist*, ca. 1600–25, 46.7 x 62.3 cm, © The Leiden Collection, New York, PB-100



© The Wallace Collection

Fig 2. Jan Steen, *The Village Alchemist*, early 1660s, oil on panel, 41.7 x 29.8 cm (16 2/5 x 11 3/4 in.), The Wallace Collection, London



Fig 3. David Teniers the Younger, *Alchemist*, ca. 1650, oil on panel, 26.6 x 37 cm., Mauritshuis, The Hague, no. 261

suggest the self-deception and resultant misery often associated with alchemy, such as empty moneybags or weeping families.

Jacob Toorenvliet's interest in the alchemist as a scientist developed over many years. In the late 1660s, undoubtedly when he was living in Vienna, Toorenvliet first painted an image of a scholarly alchemist devoted to his experiment; he then repeated the subject in 1679 after he had returned briefly to his native Leiden (**fig 4**).^[7] In the latter picture the alchemist is depicted as an intellectual deeply engrossed in his experiment, evinced by the books and notes on the table.^[8] The depiction of an alchemist as a master instructing his assistant is first seen in Toorenvliet's *Alchemist and His Two Assistants*, which he executed in the late 1660s.^[9] The Leiden Collection painting is dated 1684 and was executed during the artist's Amsterdam years. Nevertheless, the painting's composition and style, with two half-length figures placed close to each other and against a shaded background, are comparable to works that the artist made during his Viennese period.

The inspiration for Toorenvliet's positive depictions of alchemists was undoubtedly David Teniers the Younger, whose paintings were highly regarded by Archduke Leopold Wilhelm and his successors in Vienna. Teniers's pictures of alchemists would have been familiar to Toorenvliet while he was in that city. As in Teniers's pictures, there is no allusion to misery or deception in Toorenvliet's paintings of alchemists.^[10] In the Leiden Collection painting, Toorenvliet's alchemist has one hand on the crumpled pages of a manuscript resting on a work table filled with vessels and a wooden bellows. He interacts easily with his assistant, who has come to show him a piece of metal he has been heating in the fire partially visible behind them. It is a moment of intellectual exchange, where the two men respond to the results of the experiment they are conducting. With a surety of touch and command of his subject, Toorenvliet creates an engaging scenario, where the men's active gesture and counter-gesture reflect the excitement of the moment and the expectation of discovery.



Fig 4. Jacob Toorenvliet, *An Alchemist*, 1679, oil on copper, 22 x 17 cm, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm, NM 661

Endnotes

1. Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings II. Dutch Paintings c. 1600–c. 1800*, (Stockholm, 2005), 457; Carolyn Rose Rebbert, *Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science?* (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum) (Greenwich, 2009), 3, 11–16.
2. For Brueghel's drawing and Philip Galle's print after it, see Friedrich Wilhelm Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450–1700* (Amsterdam, 1949–2010), 3: 296; Nadine M. Orenstein, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints* (Exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen) (New York, 2001), 170–73, no. 61; cf. Matthias Winner, "Zu Bruegels 'Alchimist,'" in *Pieter Bruegel und Seine Welt*, ed. Otto von Simson and Matthias Winner (Berlin, 1979), 193–202. For David III Rijckaert, see Bernadette van Haute, *David III Ryckaert: A Seventeenth-Century Flemish Painter of Peasant Scenes* (Turnhout, 1999), nos. 79–82, 84; for Jan Steen, see *The Alchemist*, Städel Museum, Frankfurt (inv. no. 898); for Van Ostade, see *The Alchemist*, National Gallery, London (inv. no. 846) and another work in a private collection in the United States (photograph at the RKD (Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie/Netherlands Institute for Art History), artwork no. 120536).
3. The moneybag is joined by a bloated bladder, which was considered a variation of the theme of blowing bubbles, symbolizing transience and vanity of life. For this motif, see Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen in de zeventiende eeuw* (Exh. cat. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) (Amsterdam, 1976), 117–18. The two figures behind the alchemist could be common theatrical stooges, namely the hunchback and the boor, emphasizing the folly of the alchemist's quest. John Ingamells, *The Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Pictures: IV Dutch and Flemish* (London, 1992), 359–60, no. P209.
4. For Teniers, see, for example, the picture in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig (inv. no. 140) and the one in Wasserburg Anholt, Fürst zu Salm-Salm, Isselburg (inv. no. 389); Margret Klinge, *David Teniers de Jonge: Schilderijen/tekeningen* (Exh. cat. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) (Antwerp, 1991), 136–37, no. 42; and Rüdiger Klessmann, *Die flämischen Gemälde des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts* (Braunschweig, 2003), 102–3, no. 140. For Van Mieris, see Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris (1635–1681) the Elder* (Doornspijk, 1981), 15, no. 11; and Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 85–87, no. 6. Bega seems to have put more emphasis on the representation of still life motifs; see Peter van den Brink, and Bernd Wolfgang Lindeman, *Cornelis Bega: Eleganz und raue Sitten* (Exh. cat. Aachen, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum; Berlin, Gemäldegalerie der Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (Aachen, 2012), nos. 69, 70. Thomas Wijck made a series of paintings in which the

alchemist's family sometimes appears but is not impoverished: *The Alchemist*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv. no. SK489) and *The Alchemist*, The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

5. See, for example, the sixteenth-century alchemist Paracelsus, who was the founder of modern pharmacology: Carolyn Rose Rebbert, *Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science?* (Exh. cat. Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum) (Greenwich, 2009), 15–16.
6. Quentin Buvelot, *Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis: A Summary Catalogue* (Zwolle, 2004), 302–3, no. 261.
7. Susanne Henriette Karau, “Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)” (PhD diss. Universität Berlin, 2002), nos. A 94, 102; and Görel Cavalli-Björkman, *Dutch and Flemish Paintings, vol. 2, Dutch Paintings c. 1600–ca. 1800* (Stockholm, 2005), 475, no. NM661. Toorenvliet made another alchemist in 1676, see Susanne Henriette Karau, “Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)” (PhD diss., Universität Berlin, 2002), no. A61.
8. This type of scholar can also be found in another group of pictures dated 1679, which represent men of learning, such as a Jewish scholar or an old man holding a book. Susanne Henriette Karau, “Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)” (PhD diss. Universität Berlin, 2002), nos. A91, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 103–4, 105.
9. Susanne Henriette Karau, “Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719)” (PhD diss. Universität Berlin, 2002), no. B26. This picture was probably inspired by *An Alchemist and His Assistant in a Workshop* (ca. 1655) by Frans van Mieris the Elder, alongside whom Toorenvliet apprenticed with his father, Abraham Toorenvliet. See Quentin Buvelot, Otto Naumann, and Eddy de Jongh, *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681*, ed. Quentin Buvelot (Exh. cat. The Hague, Mauritshuis; Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art) (Zwolle, 2005), 85–87, no. 6.
10. Toorenvliet's alchemist is even dressed in a fur vest and fur-trimmed hat similar to those worn by the alchemist in Teniers's painting in The Hague.

Provenance

- (Sale, Al. Helfert, Dorotheum, Vienna, 1910).
- (Possibly Sotheby's, London, 16 November 1960, no. 103 [£200 to Moss]; sale, Galliera, Paris, 29 November 1965, no. 133).
- (Sale, Christie's, Paris, 23 June 2009, no. 38 [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2009]).
- From whom purchased by the present owner.



Exhibition History

- Greenwich, Conn., Bruce Museum, “Alchemy: Magic, Myth or Science?” 26 September 2009–3 January 2010 [no number, lent by the present owner].
- Williamstown, The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, “An Inner World: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting,” 5 March–17 September 2017 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Frimmel, Theodor. “Jacob Toorenvliet als Wiener Maler und die Verteilung seiner Arbeiten in österreichischen Galerien.” In *Von alter und neuer Kunst*. Edited by Theodor Frimmel, 75. Vienna, 1923.
- Karau, Susanne Henriette. “Leben und Werk des Leidener Malers Jacob Toorenvliet (1640–1719).” PhD diss. Universität Berlin, 2002, 103–4, no. A105.

Versions

Versions and Copies

1. After Jacob Toorenvliet, *Alchemist with His Assistant*, oil on panel, 34.3 x 25.9 cm, Nationalgalerie, Prague.

Technical Summary

The support, a relatively thin, rectangular copper sheet, has been hammered then rolled and has raised burrs along the reverse of all four edges. The panel does not flex when handled. There are three brown oxidation products, two inscriptions, and a light-colored wax dot, but no wax collection seals, stencils, labels or maker’s mark.

A dark ground or underlayer has a gritty, sandy texture with pin-sized raised dots. The paint has been applied smoothly with glazes wet-into-wet through the flesh tones with no areas of impasto or low rounded brushwork. Fine brushstrokes define the figure’s hair, beard, and fur collar of his jacket. The paint has flaked off the tops of the pin-sized raised dots and a fine network of craquelure has formed along most of the composition. Together with the panel’s hammered surface, the raised dots and craquelure give the painting a textured appearance even though it



has been smoothly painted.

The painting is unsigned and undated on the front, but is inscribed and dated twice on the reverse.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Compositional changes visible in the images and as pentimenti include shifts in the position of the alchemist's proper left profile and to the fingers of the assistant's proper right hand, which rests on the alchemist's shoulder. Pentimenti along the lower left corner indicate that the horizontally oriented, folded, white paper was added after the bellows were painted, and the pot with lid was applied after the alchemist's proper right forearm was painted.

The painting was cleaned and restored in 2009 and remains in a good state of preservation.