



Artist's Studio in the 19th Century

We search for forms that speak
and call it Art.



Alchemist's laboratory in the 17th Century..

They searched for the *Aurum Nostrum*
and called it The Great Work.

Art and Alchemy



Alchemical Operations, Mutus Liber, 17c.

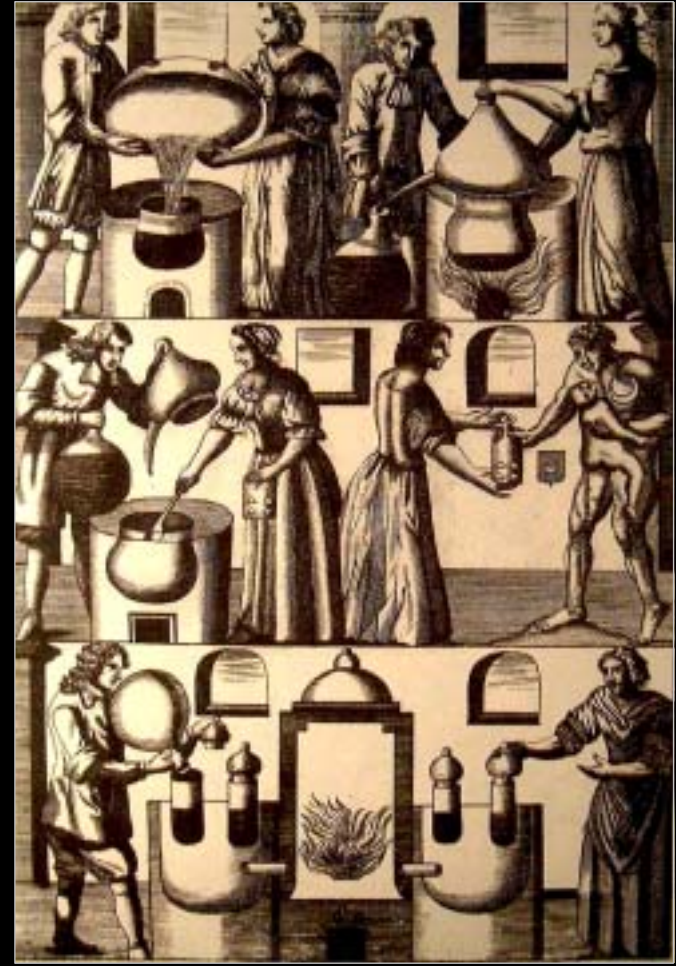
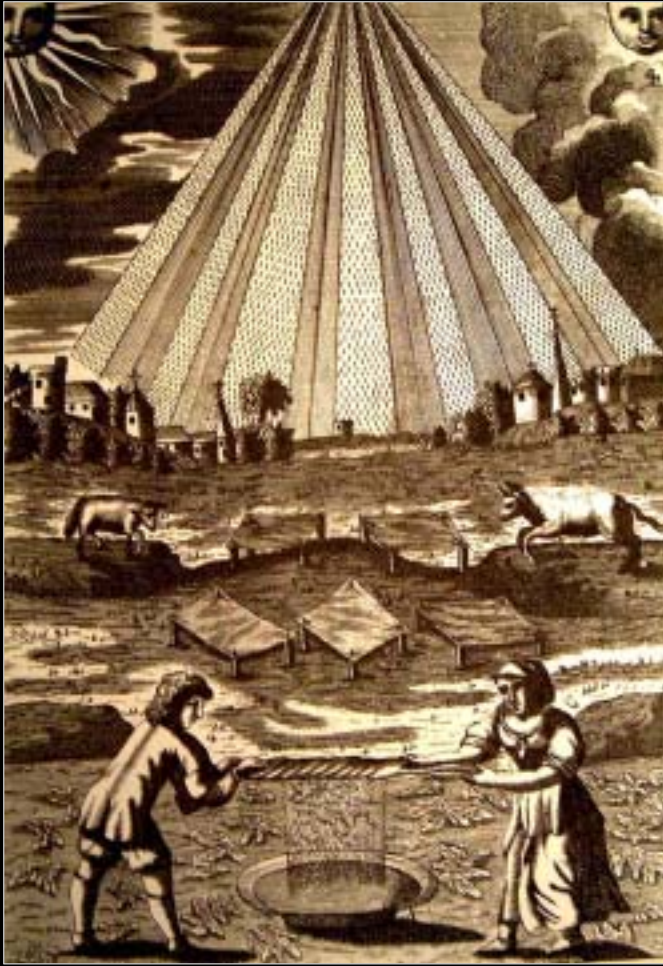
What work did alchemists do in their laboratories?



Rembrandt. Self Portrait in the Studio, 17c.

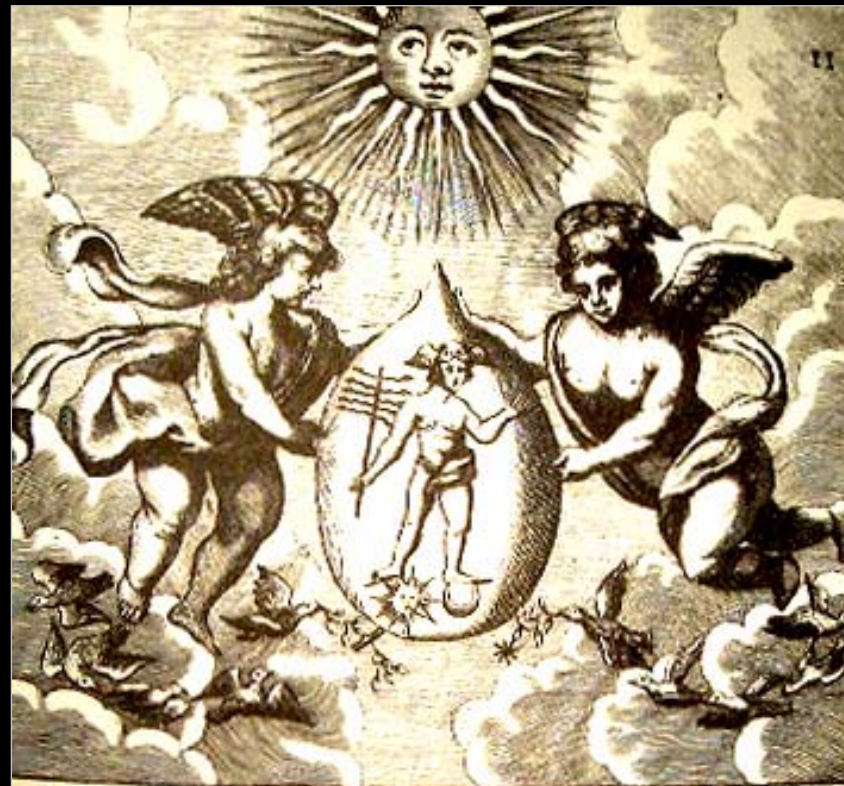
What work do we do in our studios?

How are the two works similar, how are they different.?



From “Mutus Liber” (the Silent Book), the Gathering and the Working

The Alchemist gathered fluid—in this case, dew, the milk of the stars; they mixed it with dirt—they called it *prima materia*, *nigredo*, the blackness of the earth (and of the soul); then they *solve et coagula* (dissolved and coagulated) the mixture... and did it over and over again...



until they got it



Vermeer: The Studio, 17th Century.

It is said that The Great Work was to make gold, and that the art work for us is to make images...



Honore Daumier, 19th Century



Artemisia Gentileschi, 17th Century

Making Pictures...

The work of art, the embodied image—it is this that galleries, museums and collectors care about.

The work of art, the making—it is this that artists care about.



Daumier: "The Sculptors' Studio," 19th Century.

We artists know some of the processes for producing the objects of art -- those processes are our craft, both the handling of the medium and the organization of visual form.



Artemisia Gentileschi, Judith and Holofernes, 17th Century

Process—that's medium and structure (form), but it's the content is the reason we do it.

Judith was to be raped by Holofernes, but she killed him. That's the subject.

Artemisia had been raped by her father's assistant.

She couldn't kill him, so she painted the killing of Holofernes... that's the content.

The Alchemists had their *aurum nostrum* (our gold), this was hers.

A modern analytical psychologist would say that the alchemists had used the process of "active imagination," imagination with passion and purpose, to project out onto the substances in the fire of the fireplace, the conflicts deep in the alchemists' own unconscious minds, and that there in the fireplace, by burning, dissolving, decanting, distilling, had transformed the substances and thus the alchemist's own buried conflicts from garbage into gold.

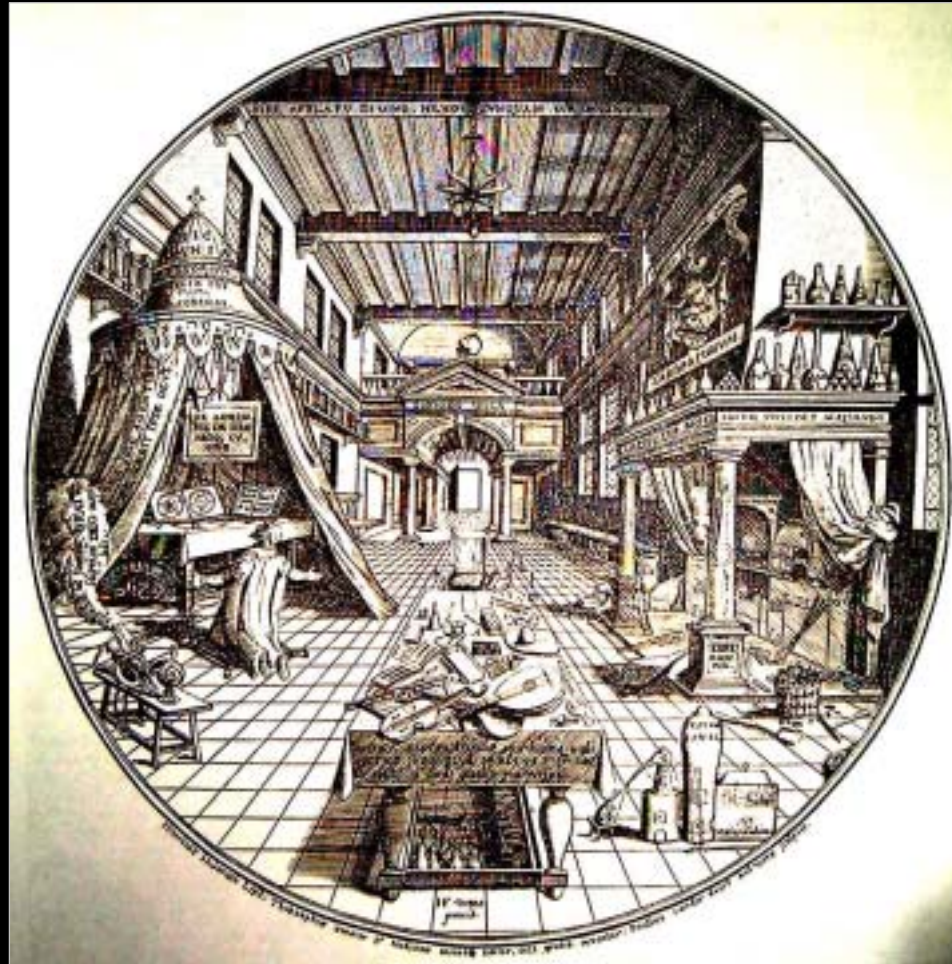


Fig. 67. Preparation of the Elixir of Life
(*"forma furni ad distillandum
aquam vitae"*).

The alchemist gathered the dew—
the milk and the tears of the stars
(and gathered other fluids too), and
“decanted” (boiled and condensed
the vapor—like how brandy was
invented from wine), and took the
dregs and ground them (solve—
sure, but also break it up any way
you can) and dissolved and decanted
and coagulated and then heated the
coagulated over the slowest fires for
the longest times and on and on and
with the goal...

To lift matter from the lower of lead
and dirt to the higher of gold and
light. And in that way got not the
foolish gold of kings but the
spiritual gold of the philosophers.
And, it was dirty work.

...



The "working part" of the alchemist's laboratory is built into the fireplace because what the alchemist does is to apply fire—passion, burning physical hope, his concentrated life energy—onto matter. He will have a specific process for burning the basic (the "raw") material, of dissolving the ash, of decanting and then distilling the liquid; he will have a process for bringing out the "spirit" of matter in order to lift lower metals into higher, in order to transform lead into gold. He will focus all of his psychic (that is, both conscious and unconscious) energies on this process. And, whether metallic gold will ever appear is not known (the laws of modern chemistry say that it will not), but certainly for some alchemists, what they called the *aurum nostrum* ("our gold") was materialized.



But the Renaissance alchemist had more than a fireplace in his studio; he also had an altar. As Paracelsus said, "Pray, seek, knock at the gates in the name of God..." The alchemist knocked at the gates in the laboratory, but he set the purpose of the knocking, of his search, by prayer... by a certain mental attitude within which the work takes place... "in the name of God." Not in the name of fame, fortune, or social status. No: only in the name of God. (Paracelsus said, "Without divine inspiration, nobody is great") The alchemist kneels, he opens his arms, he looks upward. There are open books upon the altar, one with diagrams of circles (of cosmos?), one with a text we cannot read. The altar is draped with a pavilion marked with words we cannot read in languages (Latin and Hebrew) most of us cannot understand.

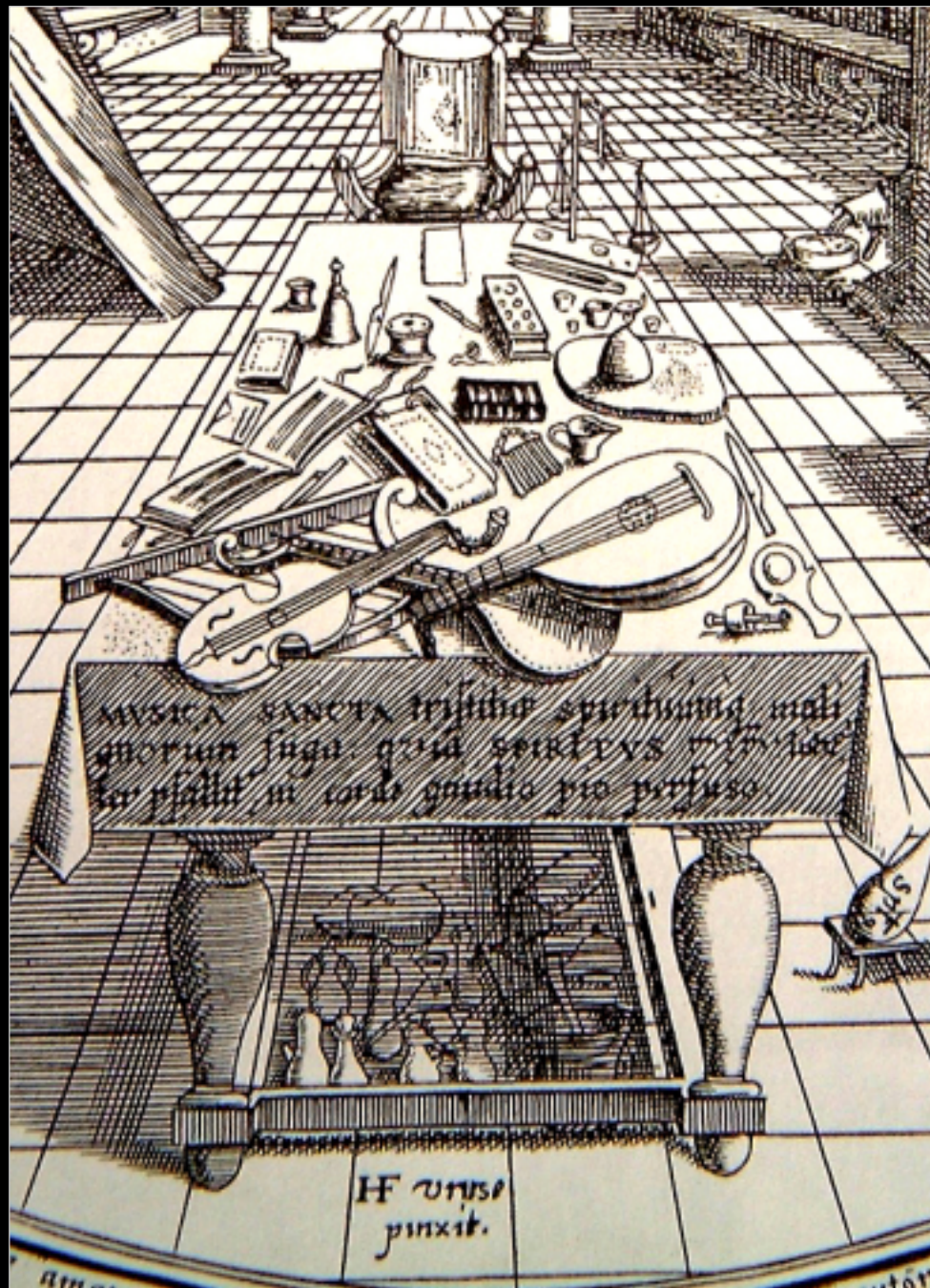


The top of the pavilion is domed, for heaven, and marked SIG OMNIA ("All Sign"). Within the darkness of the dome hangs a lamp, the focus of the alchemist's gaze. Symbolically, he seeks the light in the darkness. Physiologically, his focus on the lamp that is hung above eye level establishes and maintains a trance state that is conducive to meditation and to opening the path to the depths of the psyche. Beneath the altar, time runs its sand and there is a skull. Beneath the altar, time and death. But above, a light shines eternally in the darkness. Beside the alchemist is a table with a spiral flask (what could you drink from such a flask, what powerful winding liquid could you take down into your self?) and a censer of incense... ORATIO ("prayer") and DEO ("God") are the only words we can make out in the rising smoke.

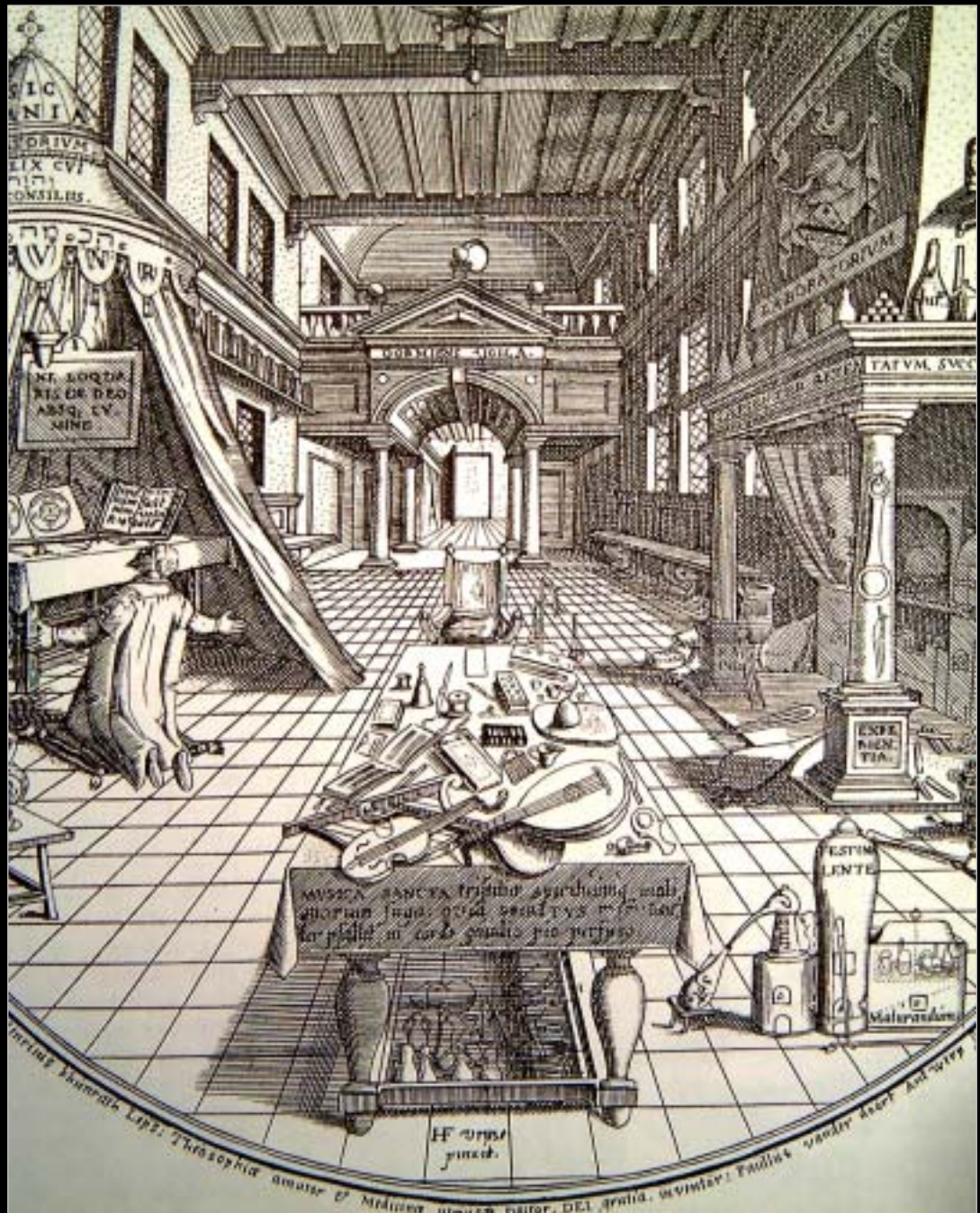


In the foreground, between work in the laboratory ("seek, knock at the door") and prayer at the altar ("in His Name") stands a table of instruments for the standard measurement of matter: weights, a scale, calipers, and instruments for the measurement of sound: the bells; but, more prominently than these instruments of measurement and calculation, of reason and logical deduction, are instruments of musical production and books of musical notation--and the words MUSICA SANCTA followed by other words we cannot read are written on the table cover.

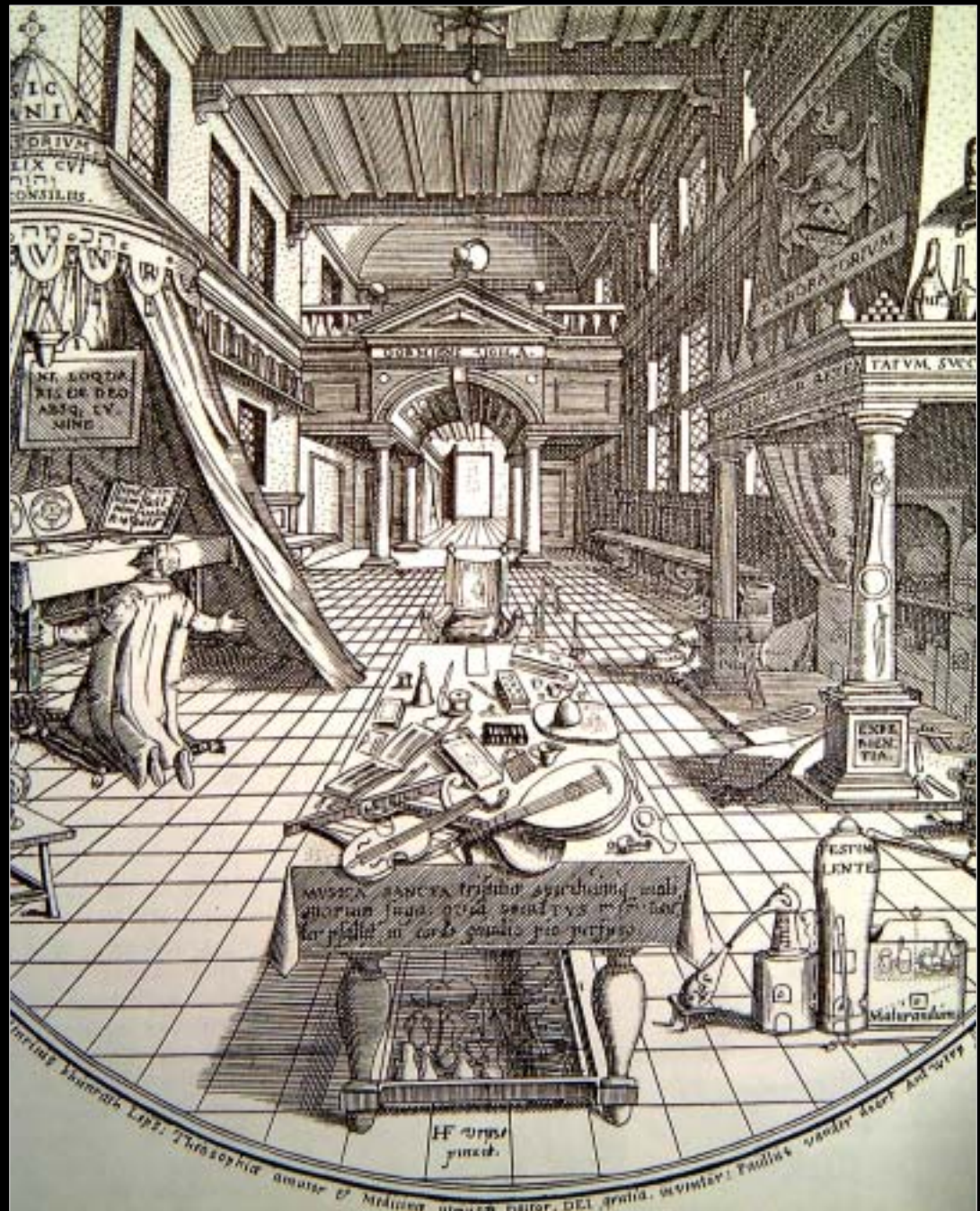
It is as if music were the true product of work and prayer, and as if the alchemist's purpose, his intended result, the *aurum nostrum*, his "our gold" was art.



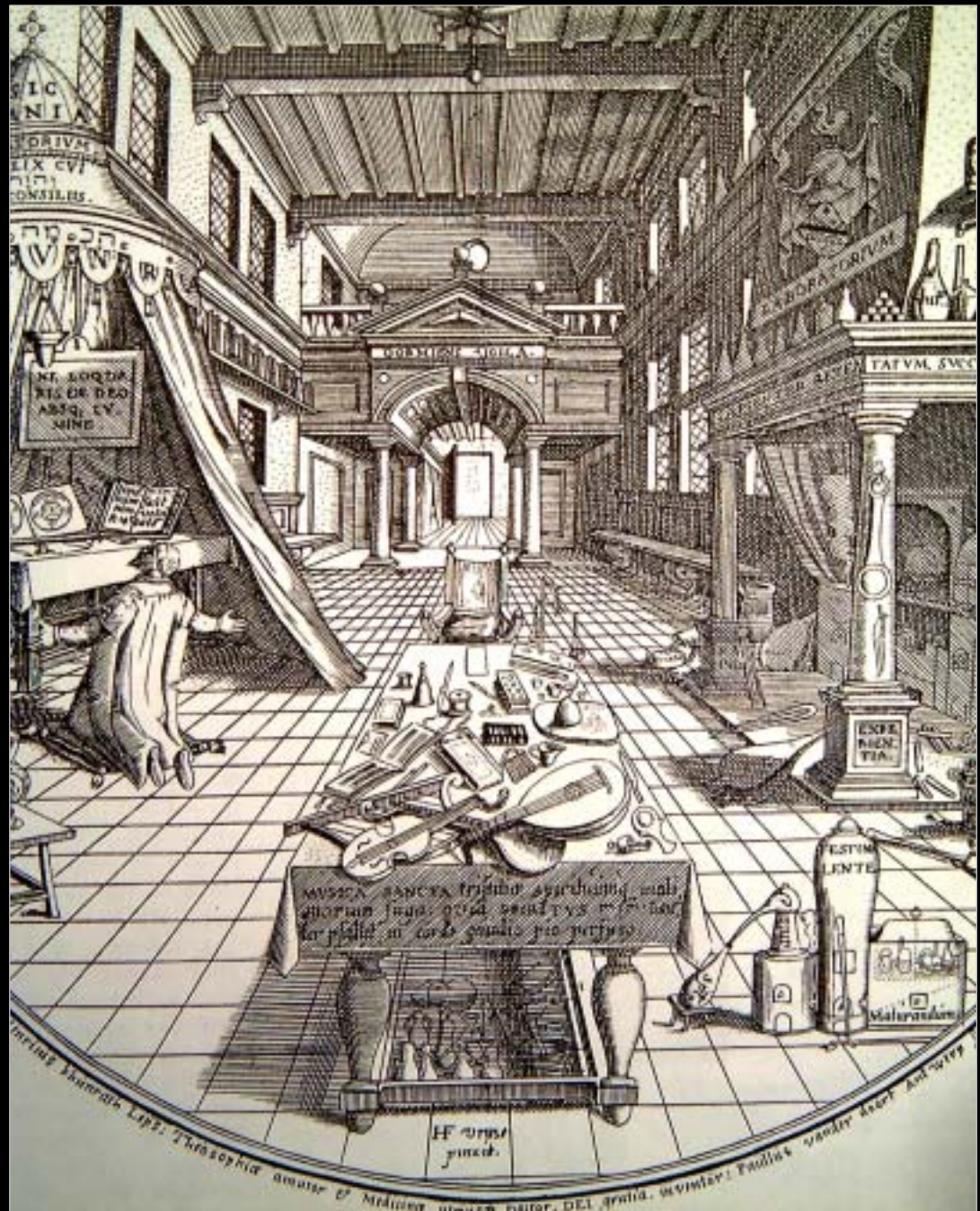
And then at the back of the laboratory, in the hallway leading to the vanishing point, there is a curtained sleeping alcove which the alchemist enters beneath a lintel which reads *DORMIENS VIGILA*, or "sleep with vigilance"...



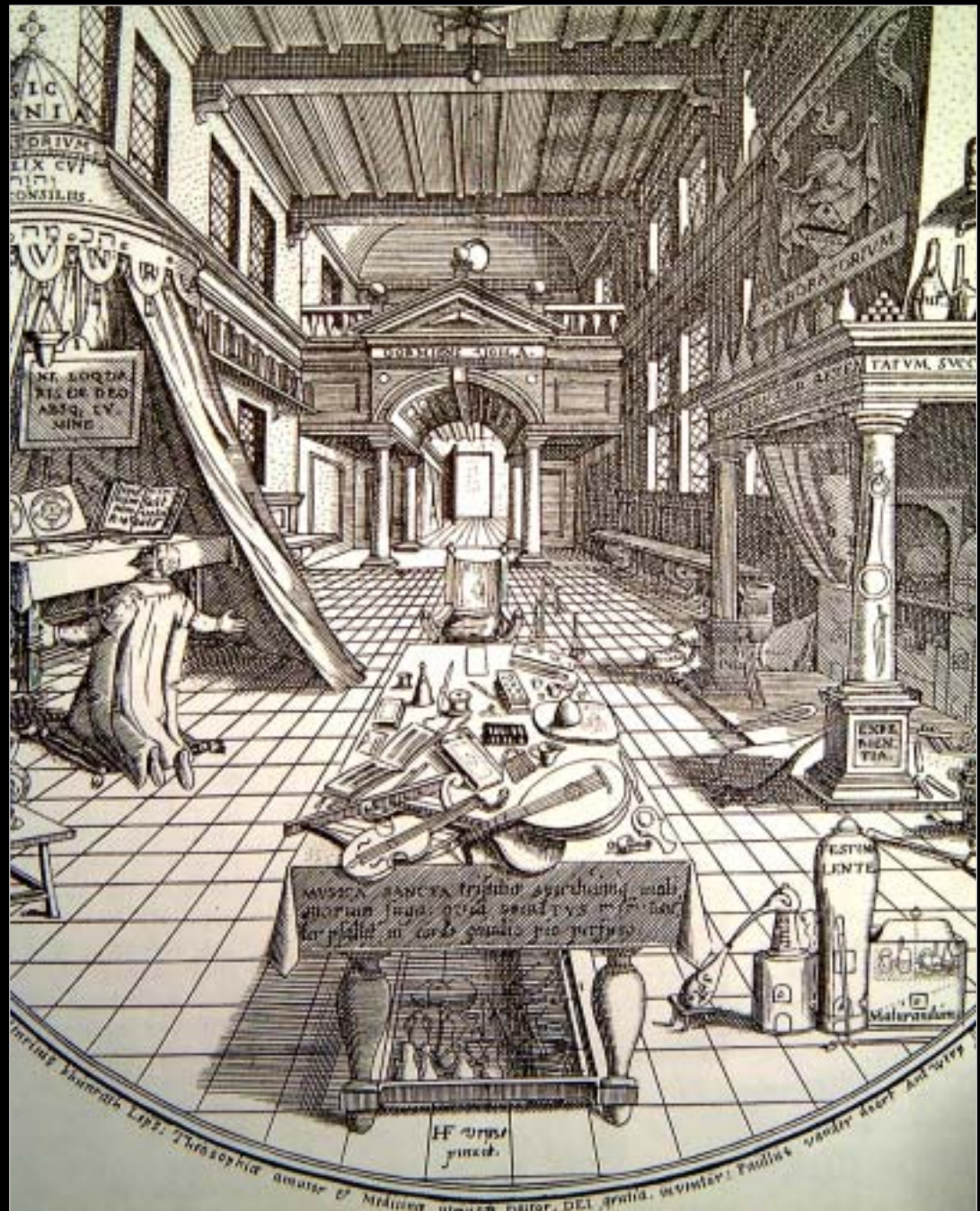
Anthony Storr, in his book *Solitude*, writes: "Integration also takes place in sleep... When faced with a problem to which there is no obvious answer, conventional wisdom recommends 'sleeping on it' ["*dormiens vigilia*], and conventional wisdom is right. Some kind of scanning and re-ordering process may take place during sleep, (although the exact nature of the process remains mysterious) [and that is] the stage of the creative process called 'incubation'."



Storr goes on, “This first stage is preparation. The creative person develops some preliminary interest in a particular subject, collects material, and reads everything he can find about it. [And the alchemist collects the *prima materia*] Next, a period of time intervenes during which the accumulated material simmers [and the alchemist cooks the *prima materia* in the *athanor*, or alchemist's furnace, an oven specially designed to maintain steady medium low or "simmering" temperatures for very long periods of time] or is unconsciously scanned, compared with other mental contents, organized, or elaborated.”

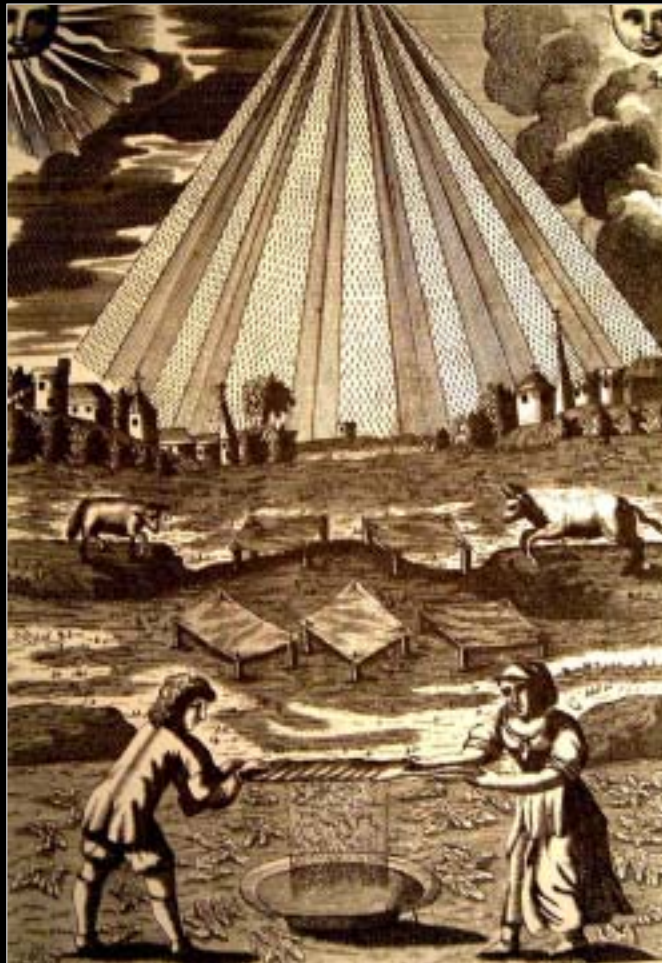


Storr says, “We do not understand what goes on during this period of incubation, but it is a necessary prelude to the next stage, that of illumination. This is the time at which the creative person has a new insight [*aurum nostrum*], discovers a solution to his problem, or in some other way finds that he can order the material which he has accumulated by employing an overriding principle or an all-embracing conception. The time taken for incubation can vary from a few minutes to months or even years.” [And the alchemist might maintain the temperature in the *athanor* for months or even years.]

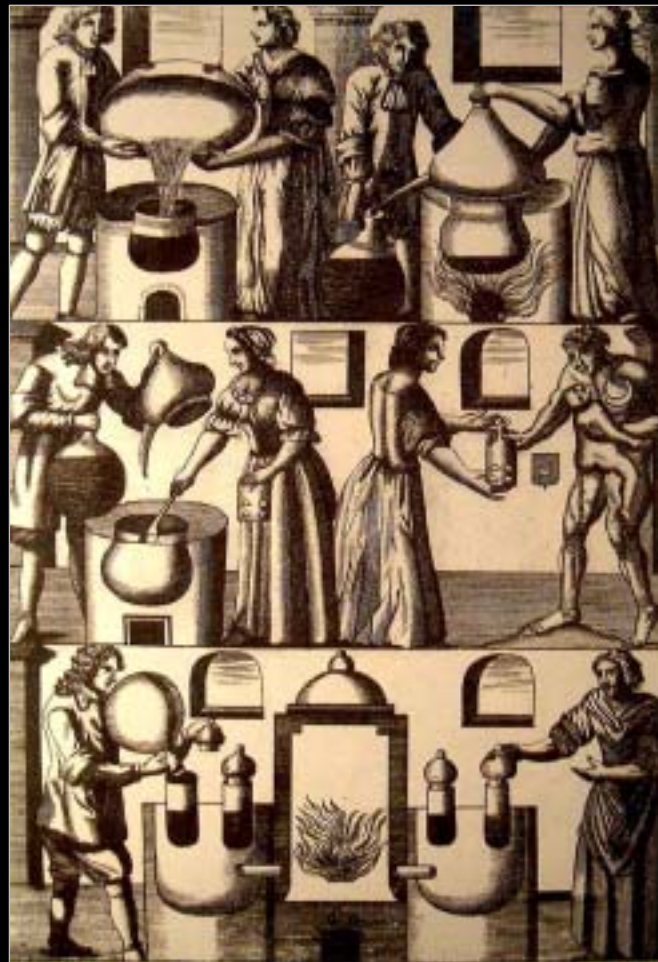




Work, pray, play, sleep, and work again... in the space that is the creation of the outpouring of the light, the space where every line leads back into the source of the light, the space that is whole, round, rounded away from the rectangular space of ordinary life and its noise and chaos. The alchemist's laboratory was a space of sanctuary and solitude away from the world; it was a space where instead of the search for the world's knowledge, values and gold, the alchemist searched for alchemical knowledge, values and gold—the *aurum nostrum*.

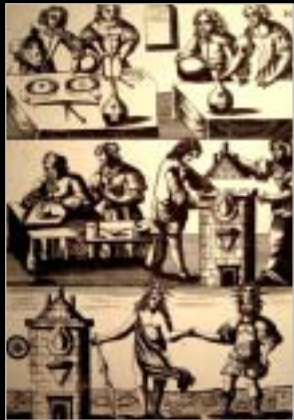


The alchemists' substances were the stuff of nature seen with alchemical eyes, manipulated and transformed with alchemical hands. The alchemists called them matter, primal force, sun and moon and salt, mercury and sulfur -- the body, soul and spirit -- and then called them *prima materia*, *yliaster*, *nigredo*, *elixir vitae*, *aurum potabile*, *aurum nostrum*, *lapis philosophorum*.



The alchemist's tools were the laboratory and its apparatus.

1. The mortar and pestle to grind matter to powder for the dissolution or the sublimation
2. The furnace, the *athanor*, for heating the matter in the crucible or the retort
3. The crucible, the sealed container of solid matter for sublimation in the furnace
4. The retort, the alembic, the sealed container of liquid matter for distillation atop the furnace
5. The flask, a hermetically sealed globe of glass to contain the product of the work



From "Mutus Liber" 17th Century.

The work of the alchemist was long

to select: find the *prima materia*

to grind: dismember the *prima materia*

to calcinate: burn the *prima materia* to its lowest form, the ash, the *nigredo*

to sublimate: heat the ash in a sealed crucible to capture its "spirits"

to dissolve: liquefy the sublimated *nigredo* in some special fluid: water, oil or dew; acid, base or neutral

to decant: carefully pour off from the dregs the liquid essence

to distill: vaporize the liquid essence to capture its "spirits"

to contain: preserve in the flask the spirit of the transformation of matter, the Philosopher's Stone



The artist's studio may be a space of sanctuary and solitude, spaces where we may search for our own artistic knowledge and values—spaces where we may seek our own gold, may discover our own *aurum nostrum*.



The artist's substances are the stuff of experience—perception and memory, emotion and reason, symbol and thing.

The substances of sight—space, color and motion...

The emotions, the sense of persons and places, of situations and events...

All the thoughts, the reason and calculation, the logic and abstraction...

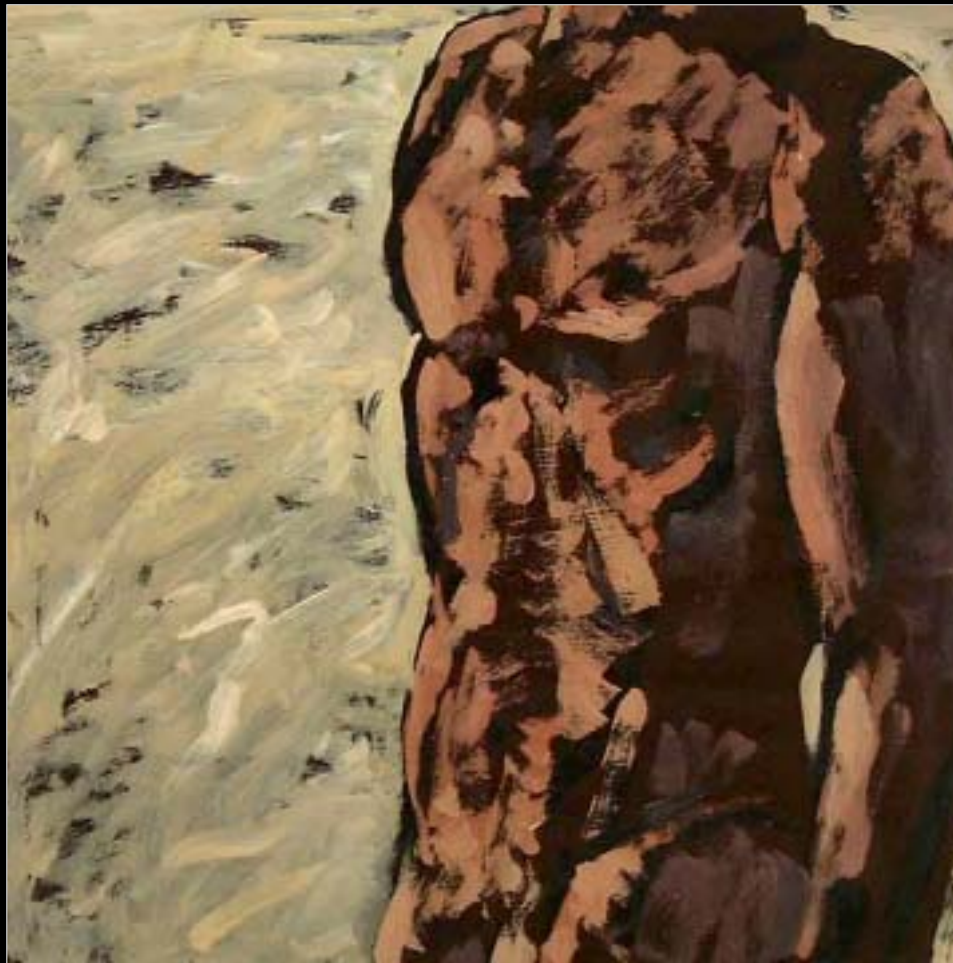
All the symbols, the “this in the painting is that in my life” that is the stuff of meaning for us.

And all of that is our stream of rainbow seed pouring out into the world.

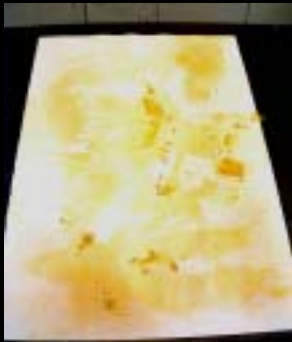


The artists' tools are our studios and media...

Our paper or canvas, our pigments, our colored powders and their binders, our brushes and knives, our needles and scrapers and rollers and presses—



and our bodies, the first tool and the last tool our souls will ever know.



select



grind



calcinate



sublimate



dissolve



decant



distill



distill



distill

From #2, May 2001. Acrylic on paper, 44 x 30 in.

The work of the artist is long:

to select: find the *prima materia*—the dirt in a tenement window—

to grind: dismember the *prima materia*—break open the color...

to calcinate: burn the *prima materia* to its lowest form, the ash, the *nigredo*: darken, break, tear at the old glass to find what the dirt reflects...

to sublimate: heat the ash in a sealed crucible to capture its "spirits"—but it was only flight from darkness...

to dissolve: liquefy the sublimated *nigredo* in some special fluid: water, oil or dew; acid, base or neutral—

break it open, look in the center for the form you know is there... the "blood flower" of my darkest sexuality...

to decant: carefully pour off from the dregs the liquid essence—and in the earth of that filthy window find the true symbols of my salvation...

to distill: vaporize the liquid essence to capture its "spirits"—

the sun of eternity, the Scorpio Sign that becomes the red seal of the flesh of The Tree of Life.

to contain: preserve in the flask the spirit of the transformation of matter, the Philosopher's Stone—to save and to show the painting.



Contain—Untitled, acrylic on paper, 44 x 30 in. #2, May 2001



Fig. 67. Preparation of the Elixir of Life
(*"forma furni ad distillandum
aquam vitae"*).

The alchemist's work was long, and in the long waiting by the crucible sealed in the athanor, the long watching by the flask as each drop fell from the retort, the alchemist saw as in a mirror the signs and symbols of the soul. The goal of the Great Work was the Philosopher's Stone, a mysterious substance which, when it touched base matter gave not the gold of kings but the revelation of the glory life.



As for the alchemist, so for the artist—
In the mirror of our work we may find not the foolish gold of kings
but the Philosopher's Stone of the power and glory of life.



Do It Now

End