



Chaos & Creation: Adam van Vianen's Gilt Ewer

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Created in 1614 by the Utrecht native silver and goldsmith Adam van Vianen (1568-1627), this gilt ewer in the Rijksmuseum is one of the principal masterpieces of the auricular or lobed style (*kwab*-style), which was perfected by him and his brother Paulus (c. 1570-1613) (fig. 1). The term 'auricular' used for this style refers to the form of the ear and is a descriptor of its strange folding, swirling, fleshy characteristics, reminiscent of organic and fluid forms. In the seventeenth-century Netherlands these forms became known as 'snakerijen', playful grotesques and capriccios.¹ The style was developed largely by Paulus van Vianen during his tenure at the Habsburg court in Prague under the prolific collector and patron Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612), where he was surrounded by a discourse about alchemy and the burgeoning field of natural science.² In this article I suggest that this extraordinary ewer, created as a monument to Paulus, is loaded with references to these topics. Unlike most decorative works of art, where shape and/or ornament can add meaningful connotations to a practical object, here it is the entire form itself that has become the carrier of meaning. Form, style and meaning merge organically into one exceptional artefact. Adam van Vianen's ewer is, as I hope to make clear, an allegory about how life comes from chaos.

< Fig. 1
ADAM VAN VIANEN,
Lidded Ewer, 1614.
Silver gilt,
h. 25 x w. 14 x d. 9 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-1976-75;
purchased with the
support of the Prins
Bernhard Fonds,
the Rembrandt
Association and
the Stichting tot
Bevordering van de
Belangen van het
Rijksmuseum.

The ewer was commissioned by the Amsterdam silversmiths' guild in 1614 to commemorate the death of Paulus van Vianen in Prague the previous year.³ The commission is a credit to the Van Vianens' significance as Dutch silversmiths, as neither lived or worked in Amsterdam. Adam's response to the personal significance of the assignment and the importance of the guild as patron is evident in the final design and execution, which surpasses anything that had been created by either brother. The ewer is technically magnificent, the intricate outside jug formed by chasing one single sheet of silver, with the lid and interior constructed separately; at a later date the whole piece was gilded.⁴ The intrigue of this object lies not merely in its initial beauty and virtuoso execution and construction, but in the gradual deciphering of its meaning and the discovery of the hidden forms. Referring in style and execution to a category of *Kunstammer* objects that were collected in Prague and elsewhere at the princely courts of Europe, alongside the admiration of the craftsmanship and materials would be an appreciation of the deeper ingenuity and wit layered into the work. Such virtuoso objects were designed to provoke admiration and awe or to function as conversation pieces, to be discussed and interpreted in intellectual circles, with hidden meanings to encourage

lively debate. These discussions were the norm among elite groups who appreciated and discussed art, including the Amsterdam silversmiths' guild and the imperial court of Emperor Rudolf II at Prague. Under Rudolf II, Paulus was appointed *Kammergold-schmied* in 1603 and developed his extraordinary style over eleven years.⁵ The Habsburg emperor was known in his time and is still remembered as the most remarkable collector and patron of the arts, with a renowned collection reflecting his interests in nature, art and alchemy.⁶

Origins of the Auricular

The earliest known examples of the auricular style are believed to be engravings by another artist, Hendrick Goltzius (1558-1617), who was also held in high esteem by Rudolf II.⁷ The first of these is a portrait of Goltzius's

teacher Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert, where the decorative cartouche below the image is bordered with auricular forms. As the image was a commemorative portrait after his teacher's death this decoration, as was recently suggested, seems to be related to themes of transience and mortality. This theory is supported by the style's later application, also by Goltzius, where he repeatedly used it in situations depicting concepts that are difficult to visualize or are beyond our natural world, such as the mythical or the divine.⁸ Its soft, rounded structure allows a vagueness for the imagination to fill in the gap between what we know and what we cannot know. It shows the origin of the auricular style residing in a blending of recognizable and abstract forms, from this attempt to consolidate the known and the unknown.

Fig. 2

PAULUS VAN VIANEN, *Tazza with the Judgement of Paris*, 1607. Silver, h. 16, diam. 19 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-1953-13; gift of the Rembrandt Association.



Fifteen years after the first examples of the auricular style by Goltzius came the earliest example in sculpture by Paulus van Vianen, in 1607, during his time at Rudolf's court. It is executed on a silver tazza (fig. 2), with bone-like auricular motifs, some of which bear resemblance to a *kwab*-styled cup in a print of Bacchus by Goltzius (fig. 3). In the development of Paulus's auricular style there is precedent for certain elements, but the final style is his own unique amalgam and genius – a reaction to the artwork, interests and discourse around him, particularly to the emperor's own passions.

Rudolf's intellectual and aesthetic interests were embodied in the collection of his vast *Kunstkammer*. This functioned as an encyclopedia of the visible world, focusing on nature and art.⁹ At the time it was considered one of the most important collections of its kind in the world in both the quantity and quality of objects.¹⁰ The function of items held in a *Kunstkammer* was not merely aesthetic; they were also to be a scholarly collection, in which many of the world's wonders could be examined and investigated by those who were striving 'to understand so many of Nature's great secrets'.¹¹ Rudolf II had a great interest in staying abreast of intellectual currents and further unlocking the secrets of nature through alchemy – the connection between his passion for art and the understanding of alchemical science being their basis in the observation of nature. The interest in collecting was not mere curiosity, it became a way of forming a kind of natural scientific catalogue and a method of organizing organic objects in an attempt to glean some understanding of 'their place in the chain of creation' with the help of many scholars, scientists, alchemists and artists at his court.

The intellectual atmosphere in Rudolf's court, the work of other artists and the emperor's own curiosity and alchemical interests can be seen in



Paulus's development of the auricular and later in how Adam epitomized this in his ewer.

Alchemy & Art

As the ewer is a product of silversmithing, it embodies discussion of material properties, and as such it is important to contextualize the contemporary intellectual beliefs surrounding its material, in this case, silver. As the Amsterdam silversmiths' guild is being specifically catered for here, the knowledge base that its members hold is significant. This knowledge was largely empirical, as it was based on experience and testing. Great inventive gold- and silversmiths of the time, such as Benvenuto Cellini and Jacopo Biliverti (Jacques Bijlevelt) in Florence, Wenzel Jamnitzer in Nuremberg, and Erasmus Hornick and Paulus van Vianen in Prague, had a profound understanding of both knowing (*episteme*) and making (*techne*), placing them in circles which discussed innovative ideas of how these materials worked and came into being, connecting them to ideas in alchemy.¹²

Fig. 3
HENDRICK
GOLTZIUS,
Bacchus, c. 1596.
Engraving,
250 x 183 mm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
RP-P-1937-821;
F.G. Waller Bequest,
Amsterdam.

Although they worked in a similar knowledge base and drew from the same ancient sources, an important distinction lies between the handling of knowledge by alchemists and more practical metal workers such as smiths, metallurgists and mining specialists. This difference being that alchemists were secretive and closed about the spreading of their information whereas knowledge was shared openly among the others, facilitating communication, shared progress and productivity.¹³ Commonly, sixteenth-century metallurgical authors were hostile towards alchemy, their criticism based not entirely on the issue of openness, but the perceived deception of alchemy's lack of practical results and the false names under which the authors published.¹⁴ It is evident from early alchemical writings that during this period what would now be categorized as science was a wider field that combined information from sources such as religion and ancient texts (such as Hermetic Greco-Egyptian books and artisanal recipe books), with observed, empirical evidence. Alchemy's traditional goal was the search for the philosopher's stone and the secret of transmuting base metals into precious and noble gold ('chrysopoeia') – and as such it had a strong metallurgical component, but it also embodied the study of *materia*, matter, in a more general sense. This combined natural theories with observation and engagement with nature and led it to be a composite of philosophy, theology and alchemy.¹⁵ To make sense of how these observed scientific processes worked, contemporary ideas traced back to the original creator, God, and ideas about how he created all life from the *materia prima* and chaos. In the words of the great sixteenth-century physician and alchemist Paracelsus: 'The first was with God, the beginning, that is *ultima materia*; this *ultima materia* he made into *prima materia*. As fruit that is to yield other fruit contains seed, the seed

is in *prima materia*, thus *ultimate* matter of the minerals is made into *prima materia*, that is in a seed and the seed is the element of water ...'.¹⁶

Paracelsus (1493-1541), a pioneer in the use of minerals and chemicals for medical purposes, was hugely influential on many ideas on the creation of the universe; much thought in this area has its basis in his texts, specifically with all matter's origin, in this *prime matter* or *materia prima*. He claimed that all natural life came into being from a female, and the first of these were the waters mentioned in Genesis, where the creation of the universe was described as: 'the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'.¹⁷ This original 'water' was also known as chaos, and once fertilized with the divine seed (*logos spermatikos*) gave birth to all natural life. Without the addition of this act of God, chaos was without order, or amorphous, and this chaotic matter was comparable to 'fluid in motion or water'.¹⁸

This idea was continued in the Van Vianens' time by the leading competing theories on the organization of the universe, as presented by alchemically inclined scholars such as Robert Fludd (1574-1637) Michael Maier (1568-1622) and Johannes Kepler (1571-1630). Both Maier and Kepler were employed under Rudolf II, Maier as personal physician and imperial counsellor and Kepler as imperial astronomer. Maier, through his publication of a number of emblem books, sought to raise the perception of alchemy to the noblest of scholarly disciplines. He positioned it second only to theology because of its nature as the investigation of the secrets of God's creation.¹⁹ Notably, in 1614 Maier was staying in Amsterdam, before entering the service of Maurice of Hessen-Kassel. Although possibly mere coincidence, this places him in the same location as Adam around the time of the ewer's construction. Fludd's work was also

appreciated by the nobility, he worked under the patronage of King James I of England and dedicated his most renowned publication to him, second to God.²⁰ The core of Fludd and Kepler's work was in the workings of the universe. They had open public debates about how their theories on the universe disagreed, but both had a basis in the same idea, a universal, divinely ordered hierarchy.²¹ This stipulated that everything – man, nature and spirit – was made of the same basic elements, coming from God's *materia prima*. It meant that the study of nature was linked to the entire cosmic hierarchy, as the soul and the earth was made up of the same elements, all coming from God. Given that all matter was fundamentally unified along this chain, the transmutation of metals was as reasonable a process as the smelting of ore: merely matter changing forms.²²

Much of the contemporary knowledge surrounding alchemy was based on Aristotle's concept of matter. This outlined the belief that all matter was composed of the four elements – earth, water, fire and air. If one could rearrange the proportions of each element in matter, it was possible to turn lead into gold.²³ As a result, through reverse engineering, alchemy could also be seen as a route to discovering the secret to God's creations.²⁴ From this concept of reducing matter into its most basic state, primordial materials, such as silver or gold, were of great importance to alchemists. If these substances are closest to their pure elemental state, then they are as close to the *materia prima* as possible, and to what God would use in his design. Many early texts understand the creation of materials to have been formed by God in the same manner as man creates: the artist imitating nature as created by Him, or the artist as 'divine' creator and animator: 'God has various *schmeltzwerck* [objects made by melting metal] in his workshop and smelts the metals as beautifully and in as many colours as the flowers in the

field or the crests of a stonemason'.²⁵ Robert Fludd (1574-1637) made the comparison between God and man, comparing God's process of creating the universe to the work of the alchemist by 'distilling and purifying the natural elements'.²⁶ As all matter was created by God in his image, it was believed that it maintained something of the divine.²⁷ This positions artists at the same starting point as God, the only difference being what they do with the materials and as such suggesting alchemy held the key to universal knowledge by functioning as a bridge, connecting understanding our physical realm to the metaphysical.²⁸ Those with alchemical knowledge could be elevated to an almost divine plane by dismantling God's mysteries.

The Ewer as an Allegory of Artistic Creation

Returning this discussion to Adam van Vianen's ewer, we will see how imagery in the alchemical discussions at and around Rudolf's court are embodied in it. It has been claimed that this object is distinctive because it was created 'from the mind' rather than 'from nature'.²⁹ Contrary to this, I would argue that this piece is speaking directly *to* nature, the creation of life itself. Continued close contact between the brothers is evidenced in the connected development of the auricular style between them, which would have required close communication; it is also known that Paulus visited Holland in 1610. Considering Adam's likely awareness of the natural, philosophical and alchemical discourses at Rudolf's court, the fact that the ewer was to commemorate one of the best silversmiths of its time, and taking into account the intended audience for the ewer – artists who specialized in metals – their specific knowledge would allow them to read this piece as an allegory of artistic creation, praising the power of those who work with these pure materials,

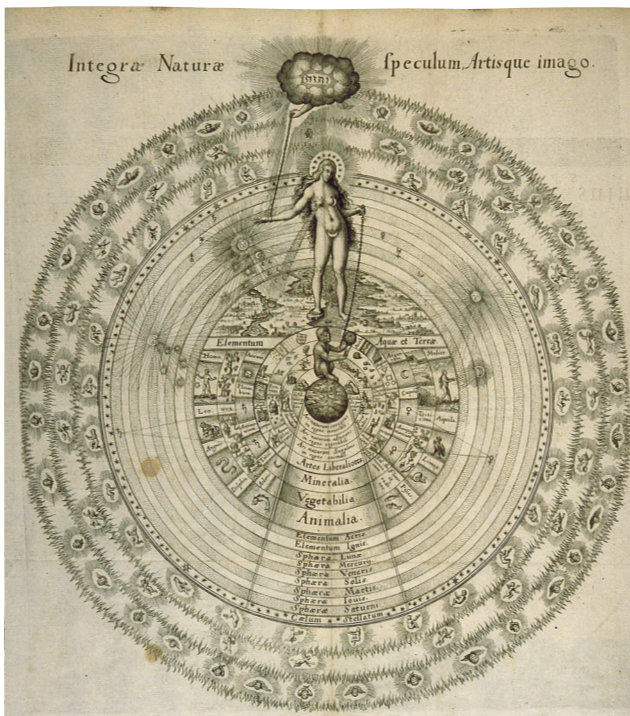
both through scientific knowledge and artistic skills, alchemy and metalwork, to shape with the same materials that God forms with. The ewer showing both men's understanding of God's processes to create and man's ability to wield that information for their own creation.

Referring to this topic, which is of a specific pertinence to his audience, and speaking to the merit of their craft through the form of his object, is ingenious. One of the principal tasks of gold- and silversmiths' guilds was assaying, testing the purity of the metals and hallmarking them to demonstrate quality assurance. This was executed by the master assayer of the guild, a position Adam held in Utrecht over four non-consecutive years, meaning he would have conducted this test hundreds of times. Among the discoveries of the accompanying article in this bulletin is that the ewer is comprised of incredibly high purity silver, the highest tested by the team.³⁰ With Adam's expert knowledge of assaying,

this purity is certainly intentional and adds both conceptual and technical value. Base materials like silver and gold are as close to their original elemental state, or to the *materia prima*, as possible and in this ewer, we see a representation of the very potential of that matter; they can create everything. The motion inherent in this piece represents this potential, making the concept of chaos physical, embodying this flux from which all things are originally made. For this *materia prima* could be formed into anything, from human to reptile, or all of the yet undecided, unformed still molten matter. Through the ewer we can see a frozen moment of chaos emerging. Van Vianen shows he can pull any life he desires, existent or imagined. By capturing the transformation of material, as it mimics the life it contains, he is reminding us of the molten state of metal where it can become anything, while at the same time showing the range of the artist's capabilities. God, the alchemist and the craftsman may use this chaos to form any life they decide to.

Among the recognizable figures amidst the 'chaos' we find the image of the ape. It is among the most fully formed of the life forms emerging from the ewer and supports the rest of the piece above it. This image is of particular significance in light of the alchemical imagery around this time, as can be seen in Fludd's visualization of the structure of the universe, *Integra naturae speculum artisque imago* (mirror of the whole of nature and the image of art) (fig. 4). The engraving shows a hierarchy linked by a chain of subservience, starting with God, linked to a woman (also represented in the ewer, see below), symbolizing nature, who is further linked to an ape. The 'ape of nature' (*ars simia naturae*) here represents man and his imitation of nature. The verb 'to ape' is a translation from the Latin *simulo*, *simulare* (imitate, to imitate) derived from the

Fig. 4
Integra naturae speculum artisque imago, frontispiece of Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmii maioris et minoris metaphysica, physica, atque technica*, 1617-18.
Photo: Getty Research Institute, <https://archive.org/details/utrusque-cosmimaoiflud/page/n12/mode/tup>



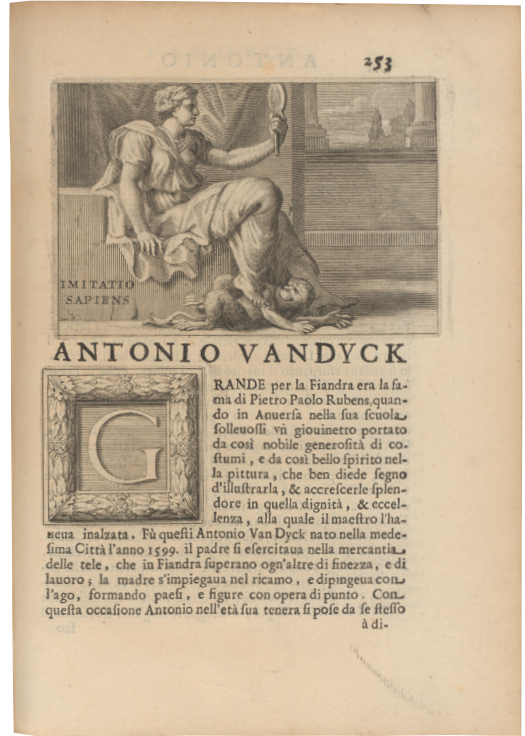


Fig. 5
Personification of
Imitation, woodcut
in Cesare Ripa
Iconologia, 1599,
p. 24.
Photo: Wellcome
Collection

Fig. 6
Imitatio Sapiens,
engraving in
Giovanni Pietro
Bellori, *Vite de'
pittori, scultori e
architetti moderni*,
Rome, 1672, p. 253.
Rijksmuseum
Research Library,
329 D7.

noun *simia* (ape).³¹ The image of the ape speaks to the long-held discussion of how man can imitate and improve upon nature, be that through art and representing creation or through alchemy and literally using God's process to create life. This role of the ape as an emblem of the arts is seen frequently in painting, its solidity in that role can be seen by how it appears in Cesare Ripa's emblem book, *Iconologia*, where it is used in the personification of imitation (fig. 5). Here, imitation is shown as a woman holding paintbrushes in one hand and a mask in the other, with an ape at her feet.³² These three symbols together suffice to convey the message of man's imitation of nature through art. In the ewer we may also observe these three symbols, art shown in the artistry of the ewer, the ape sculpted into the base and the mask alluded to in the appearance of the ape's face. Looking around

the eyes and top of the face the skin seems to be coming away and peeling back. At the top the skin merges into an auricular form – as if wearing a mask itself. The development of this idea to allow for the artist or 'ape' to be emulating, rather than merely imitating, was also seen later by Giovanni Pietro Bellori in his *Lives* of seventeenth-century artists. In it he includes the image *Imitatio Sapiens*, another personification of imitation, viewing herself in a mirror while holding the ape underfoot (fig. 6). This imagery shows contempt for copying directly from nature, and how the power of artists is the genius of being able to select and merge the very best of what they observe to create something superior to what nature itself could ever show.³³ Bellori confirms this, writing: 'The idea constitutes the perfection of natural beauty and unites the truth with the verisimilitude

of what appears to the eye, always aspiring to the best and the most marvellous, thereby not emulating but making itself superior to nature, revealing to us its elegant and perfect works, which nature does not usually show us as perfect in every part.’³⁴ The positioning of the ape on the ewer is reminiscent of the posing of Atlas,

holding up the heavens on his shoulders, separating man from the gods (fig. 7). This idea is metaphorically beautiful, considering Atlas’s associations with philosophy, astronomy and mathematics, and it positions man – the ape, the imitator – as bearing the responsibility of the heavens and supporting the creation of life above it.



Fig. 7
CHRISTOPH RITTER (III)
after JODOCUS
HONDIUS (I),
*Goblet, Representing
a Terrestrial Globe,*
c. 1640.
Silver gilt,
h. 25.5 x diam. 10.9 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
BK-2011-28; purchased
with the support of
the BankGiro Lottery,
the Mondriaan Fund,
the Rembrandt
Association, with
additional funding
from the Prins
Bernhard Cultuur-
fonds, Fonds 21,
the vsbfonds,
J. Gans-Premsele
and L.B. Gans,
Amsterdam.

Further evidence that the ewer is intended to represent artistic creation is the fact that it was hammered with great technical skill from a single sheet of silver – an action which intrinsically draws attention to the artist's supreme ability to create. The artist is demonstrating his technical ability to the silversmiths' guild by going through this exceedingly laborious task. This can be seen as an act of professional competition with the makers in the guild, his own brother, who never attempted such a feat, and with himself. Surpassing the technical, it is an act of artistic virtuosity; for Adam, not just the final result but the artistic process of making had to be ingenious and reminiscent of God's work. He must extricate the whole out of the matter in order to have truly created life. It harks back to the great sculptors of marble creating work out of a single piece of stone, 'ex uno lapide' and the metaphysical idea of the sculptor's role of liberating the figure in his mind from its pre-existent state in the material.³⁵ This action and the associated ego and pride carried forward into non-reductive sculpting processes, as we see in the process used by Cellini and his renowned single pour casting ('aus einem Guss') of his *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (fig. 8). In his adaptation of the method for creating an entire figure in a single piece, thus meeting the challenge and accomplishing it in metal, he endeavoured to produce a monumental piece without joins, the metal solidifying from liquid as one whole, equalling the pre-existing form in marble.³⁶ Cellini and Van Vianen had in common their training as goldsmiths and would have had similar pride in the execution of their work, not confining their genius to their design. Cellini looked down on sculptors who settled for 'piecing together their figures'; to have joins in the final work was to admit defeat.³⁷ He insisted that this founding process had to be as *ingenious* as the modelling.³⁸



Cellini captured the spirit of life in his cast by completing it in a single pour of liquid metal. As we have seen, all matter was believed to come from a *materia prima* and contained a spirit and essence of life. Metals were believed to contain primarily water, which was why they could return to liquid when melted.³⁹ This highlights the importance of material unity to capture life; Cellini must cast in one pour so that the liquid life-holding metal can cool and solidify into one form. Van Vianen approached this by working in one unified sheet of metal

Fig. 8
BENVENUTO CELLINI,
*Perseus with the
Head of Medusa*,
1545-54.
Bronze, h. 5.50 m.
Florence,
Loggia dei Lanzi.
Photo: Alamy



Fig. 9

BAREND GRAAT,
Pandora, c. 1676.
 Oil on canvas,
 113 × 102 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 inv. no. SK-A-5027;
 purchased with a
 contribution from the
 B.J. Peiser Bequest.

and through it representing its liquid state itself, so that it may always appear to be alive.

The awe and appreciation engendered by this method is explicitly noted by Adam's son Christiaan van Vianen (1598-1671) in the full title of the set of engravings after his father's inventions – *Constighe Modellen, van verscheijden silvere vaten, en andere sinnighe wercken, gevonden ende geteeckent door den vermaerden E[delen] Adam van Vianen, sijnde meerendeels door hem uyt een stuk silvers geslagen seer nut voor alle liefhebbers van de conste*. (Artistic models, of various silver vessels, and other spirited works; invented and drawn by the famous Adam van Vianen, mostly hammered by him out of a single piece of silver, most pleasant for lovers of the arts.)⁴⁰ The ambition behind the ewer was recognized at once to universal acclaim, and the frequency with which it featured in paintings attests to its continued fame. It is portrayed both in its original silver

and in its later gilded state, used in paintings to represent either wealth and extremely costly objects or, presumably due to its strange appearance, ideas beyond human imagination such as biblical or mythological scenes. Its use in the image of the mythical Pandora with the vessel of darkness bestowed on her by the gods might indicate that associations with the ideas of chaos and human interaction with matters of the divine continued to inform the reading of the ewer (fig. 9). This universality cemented the ewer's place in art history and ensured that its image continued to provoke debate.

Arising out of the interpretation as the creation of life, it is notable that the recognizable forms on the exterior of the ewer are intentionally female (figs. 10, 11). The ape at the base has been formed with evident female genitalia; she supports the vessel, as females support life, while a figure of a woman bends forwards to form the handle, another structurally supportive role. The body of the ewer is formed externally as a nautilus shell, a symbolically charged image (see below), and in the interior 'womb' of the piece we find the birth of two lizards. These iconographic choices again link up with the idea of creation and the birth of new life, the concept of the vessel itself. If the ewer is in fact a representation of man imitating God's ability to give life, here the artist is recreating his own vessel to do it.

The Shells and Creation

The womb-like section of the vessel, which incubates the reptiles, is formed in the shape of a nautilus shell, another popular *Kunstammer* object. The nautilus is a marine mollusc, with a fantastic shell that fascinated artists of the time and it was frequently fashioned into drinking vessels (fig. 12). As a sea creature, the nautilus references the environment required to give birth to the lizards. This, combined with the



Figs. 10, 11
Details of *Lidded Ewer*
(fig. 1).



Fig. 12
ANONYMOUS,
Nautilus Cup, c. 1590.
Silver gilt, nautilus
shell, h. 32.5 x w. 19.5 x
d. 11.7 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. BK-1953-23.

functional use of the jug for holding water or wine, would allow the lizards to emerge into the world as the liquid empties. Its long presence in works of art has spawned many different iconographic interpretations of the nautilus shell. Its spiral shape is inextricably linked with mathematics and natural science, being representative of the 'proportio divina' or 'golden ratio', a fundamental characteristic of the universe.⁴¹ Through this, the shell came to represent the microcosm and macrocosm referred to earlier: how a part of the universe reflects the whole, because of the material unity of the natural world. Both Fludd and Kepler referred to the golden ratio in their





work on universal unity: how the mathematical equation observed on a small scale in the spiral can be seen in identical patterns at all levels of the hierarchy of the cosmos. In Adam's ewer, the shape of the nautilus shell can be read as yet another layer in the metaphor for this universal theory of creation. It was made at a time when what had always been invisible and unknown about nature and the universe was becoming known;

Fig. 13
 HENDRICK GOLTZIUS,
Portrait of the Haarlem
Shell Collector
Jan Govertsen
van der Aer, 1603.
 Oil on canvas,
 107.5 x 82.7 cm.
 Rotterdam,
 Museum Boijmans
 Van Beuningen,
 inv. no. 3450;
 on loan from P.&N.
 de Boer Foundation.
 Photo: Studio Tromp

Fig. 14
 JACQUES DE GHEYN II,
Neptune and
Amphitrite, second
 half of 16th century.
 Oil on canvas,
 103.5 x 137 cm.
 Cologne, Wallraf-
 Richartz-Museum &
 Fondation Corboud,
 inv. no. WRM 1792.
 Photo: Rheinisches
 Bildarchiv Cologne,
 Meier, Wolfgang,
 rba_doooo95



scholars were being forced to reconcile what had always been believed about God's creation with what they now observed empirically. This links with the beginnings of the development of auricular ornamentation by Goltzius, a means of physically representing the unknown in juxtaposition to the known.

The nautilus also had other relevant interpretations during this period, both showing wealth (fig. 13) and acting as a symbol of chastity, libido and fertility (fig. 14).⁴² This erotic reading of the shell is supported by the other shell-shape on the ewer, the scallop (fig. 15). The scallop or clam shell had widely accepted erotic connotations in seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. It was used commonly in relation to the birth of Venus, the goddess of love, beauty, passion and procreation. The goddess came into being after her father, the god Uranus, was castrated. She was born of seafoam formed from his seed and floated to land fully grown in a clam shell. The imagery of her conception out of the water and her divine father's seed is a perfect mirror of the idea of God creating life from the fluid chaos.

The Lizards: Life Casts and Spontaneous Generation

Similar in birth to Venus's formation from seafoam is that of the final creatures to be investigated in this piece – the lizards. These lizards would be revealed inside the nautilus shell when the lid of the ewer was lifted (fig. 16). The creatures appear as if they are emerging out of the molten liquid of the vessel, the ends of their feet elongated as if melting into the metal surrounding them, which is formed



Fig. 15
Lidded Ewer (fig. 1).

Fig. 16
Detail of Lidded Ewer
(fig. 1).



into swirling patterns to simulate the mysterious birth. ‘Lesser’ animals such as these were believed to arise *ex nihilo*, from putrid matter.⁴³ The image of these animals forming out of thick liquid matter fits the contemporary idea of spontaneous generation.

This topic was of great interest to alchemists as they could replicate it by understanding how life was made. Lizards were classed among ‘lower’ or chthonic animals, creatures which live in subterranean or submarine environments, such as snails, mice, shells, frogs and insects.⁴⁴ Aristotle theorized these creatures and the notion was further developed in the sixteenth century by scholars such as Giambattista della Porta and Paracelsus, who maintained that they were born in a process of spontaneous generation out of putrefying matter.⁴⁵ ‘The generation of all natural things is of two sorts, as [there is] one that happens by means of nature alone without any art, [while] the other happens by means of art – namely alchemy. In general, however, one could say that all things are born from the earth by means of putrefaction. For putrefaction is the highest step, and the first beginning of generation, and putrefaction takes its origin and beginning from a moist warmth. For the continual moist warmth brings about putrefaction and transmutes all natural things from their first form and essence.’⁴⁶

The belief was that their existence came in and out of being, in eternal, fluid flux, externally requiring only moist, swampy conditions and the sun’s heat to develop life.⁴⁷ This dependence on the external heat of the sun is what characterized them as ‘lesser’ because they lack their own inner vital heat – which was equated to the soul, meaning that they were bloodless and impure.⁴⁸ According to Aristotle’s theories, there was a correlation between their being less in form, and therefore less in vitality and

soul than more complex creatures; this is why these creatures could dissolve and reform themselves in these muddy conditions while more pure and intelligent beings must remain solid in form.⁴⁹ The birth and dissolution of the lizards is treated in the inherent action of the ewer – its use as a vessel for filling drinking glasses. This action allows another mirror of Fludd’s tripartite theory of the origin of all things. He believed that the creation of life came when dark chaos was animated by divine light and produced the waters. This was based on the three generative principles originally conceptualized by Paracelsus, sulphur, salt and mercury, which Fludd associated with light, darkness (chaos) and water (the Spirit of God).⁵⁰ This is symbolized by the action of removing the lid of the ewer to allow in the light, pour out the water and birth the lizards. When the ewer was refilled, the lizards would melt away again and be obscured by the rippling liquid over them.

This theory links back to the concept of the microcosm and universal unity, all life developing the same way as it did at the origin of time. Chaos was considered both a destructive and fertile entity, from the initial birth of the universe began an echoing cyclical pattern of creation and destruction throughout all life.⁵¹ Aristotle therefore postulated that sexual reproduction worked like God’s acting on the liquid chaos; the semen as a pneumatic substance full of life-giving spirit acted on the liquid menstrual blood to create new life.⁵² The lizard’s spontaneous generation also speaks to the power of chaos and *materia prima* to create life, through the combination of the destructive forces of putrefaction in the wet environment and the external animating heat of the sun.

The hyper-realistic rendering and posing of these lizards in the ewer would have been immediately recog-

Fig. 17

WENZEL JAMNITZER
(attributed). *Life-cast
Lizard*, c. 1530–60.
Lead, h. 1.5 x l. 7.2 cm.
Berlin, Kunstgewerbe-
museum, Staatliche
Museen zu Berlin,
inv. no. K 5912.
Photo: bpk/
Kunstgewerbe-
museum, SMB/
Saturia Linke



nizable to viewers who were familiar with *Kunstammer* and *studiolo* collections because of their close similarity to life casts.⁵³ Life casts are usually small creatures or plants cast from life in various media, and as natural curios they were common in *Kunstammern* and on the desks of scholars in their studies (figs. 17, 18). The inventory of the imperial *Kunstammer* in Prague, for example, lists life casts stored in a gold writing table or box: ‘Another gold writing table by Jamnitzer the Elder, in which lie all manner of cast animals, to which your Maj.[esty] has the key.’⁵⁴ One of the usual techniques for making these casts was to mould the recently killed animal or plant in plaster, burn away the organic matter and fill the resulting space with liquid metal.⁵⁵ Life casts were popular because they reflected humanist thinking in terms of the artistic appreciation and intellectual understanding of nature. The skill required to cast animals successfully meant that the artist had to understand nature itself: with the making came an understanding and development of natural knowledge.⁵⁶ The resulting hyper-realistic casts inspired awe at the

artist’s mimetic skill, which could rival God in its ability to recreate nature. There could be no more literal symbol of the imitation of God’s work than the life cast, making as it were an indistinguishable copy from God’s mould. They were yet another way of showing a mastery of life through the observation of animals.

It became traditional for reptiles and other lower creatures to be the subject of these life castings because of their connection with *ex nihilo* generation. Paracelsus’s explanation of spontaneous generation as it pertains to birds provides an intriguing blueprint for alchemists: ‘If a living bird be burnt to powder and ashes in a sealed vessel and its remains be left to rot into mucilaginous phlegm in “a horse’s womb” [venter equinus – a technical term for hot, decaying dung], the same phlegm may again be incubated to produce “a renovated and restored bird” [ein renovirter und restaurirter Vogel].’⁵⁷

Comparing this process to life casting provides an interesting parallel, as regeneration can occur by burning and not just rotting. The final aesthetic appearance of the animal is not all that is being mirrored in the life cast, it also



Fig. 18
ANONYMOUS,
*Portrait of a Man
with a Secretary*, 1650.
Oil on canvas,
102.5 x 127.2 cm.
London, Royal
Collections Trust,
inv. no. 922152.
© Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2021

mimics the technique by which it is born. Life casting can thus be understood as an alchemical form of instantaneous putrefaction and rebirth. The animal immediately putrefied and ‘petrified’ by fire, spontaneously regenerated in its full and astonishingly lively form.⁵⁸

Man has conquered nature, found a way to freeze life forever in its perfect state, achieving on a small scale, it seems, the aim of the philosopher’s stone. Aristotle claimed that art can function in two different ways – ‘the arts either, on the basis of Nature, carry things further [*epitelei*] than Nature can, or they imitate [*mimēitai*] Nature’.⁵⁹ What Van Vianen achieved, though not literally by life-casting nature, but rather by chasing it by hand, took things further. His work represents everything a life cast can,

but pushes it further by chasing rather than casting; not merely taking a mould from God’s example but creating it himself: emulating rather than imitating. In other words, beyond mimicking natural forms he was mimicking the process of creation of life itself, capturing a stage in the theorized birth of the animal that cannot be captured. The lizards are not yet fully formed, still partially liquid and merged with the chaos that surrounds them. Van Vianen freezes them in this state, ‘casting’ the moment of the regeneration of these animals.

Conclusion

Given the ewer’s intended audience and its commemorative function, the vessel can be read as an allegory of artistic creation. Designed in remem-

branch of his brother Paulus, Adam van Vianen's ewer embodies the essence of what his brother's legacy, the auricular style, meant. As the style was developed during Paulus's time in Prague, immersed in the alchemical and natural science interests of Rudolf II, it embodies such a discourse. The object itself communicates these contemporary alchemical and natural scientific dialogues through its form and materiality. It represents the moment of chaos mixing with the *materia prima*, the initial creation of all things, both as it occurred at the origin of the universe at the hands of

God and in this literal moment as it is frozen in time by the artist, eternally showing all life being pulled out of liquid chaos. The artist creates an allegory of how these primordial materials are used by God to create life, and how the artist can manipulate and mimic this process. He then supersedes the work of God by the way he improves upon it, through designing forms and monsters that never existed, imbuing the ewer with mythical themes, referencing other artistic techniques and even stopping death by capturing life in an eternal frozen moment.

ABSTRACT

With its bizarre melting surface and the solid forms emerging out of it, this seventeenth-century ewer by the goldsmith Adam van Vianen arouses curiosity and invites investigation. Commissioned in memory of his brother, Paulus van Vianen, who largely developed the auricular style perfected in it, this ewer is a work that rewards exploration – the more you investigate the more there is to see and be delighted by. The incredibly complicated construction of this piece attests to evident careful design and intent in every form in it, raising the question as to their individual meaning and the message they convey as a whole. This study answers the ewer's call to curiosity by investigating the meanings of the individual forms and the commonalities that connect them as a group. The result is a surprising journey into the world of seventeenth-century alchemy, natural philosophy and *Kunstkammers*. Research into the iconographical meaning of both the visible forms and the folding surface in the context in which it was created has led the author of this analysis to conclude that the ewer functions as an allegory for the process of artistic creation, visualizing the artist bringing life into the world out of chaos.

NOTES

- * I would like to express my sincere thanks to Frits Scholten for his support and suggestions in the writing of this article. Also, to Arie Pappot for the invaluable addition of his expertise.
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 - 2 Reinier Baarsen, 'The fantastical designs of the Dutch Golden Age', *Apollo Magazine* (June 2018), see <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-fantastical-designs-of-the-dutch-golden-age> (consulted June 2021).
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 - 4 Baarsen and Castelijns van Beek 2018 (note 1), pp. 52-53.
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- 22 Ibid., p. 245.
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- 28 Stanislas Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy: The Secret Art*, London, 1973, p. 7.
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- 40 Baarsen and Castelijns van Beek 2018 (note 1), p. 11.
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- 43 William R. Newman, *Promethean Ambitions: Alchemy and the Quest to Perfect Nature*, Chicago 2004, p. 42.
- 44 *Ibid.*
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