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Donna Bilak, *Playful Humanism in Atalanta fugiens* (1618)

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Work-in-progress paper

“... ‘and what is the use of a book,’ thought Alice, ‘without pictures or conversations?’”

*Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865)*

## **My Project**

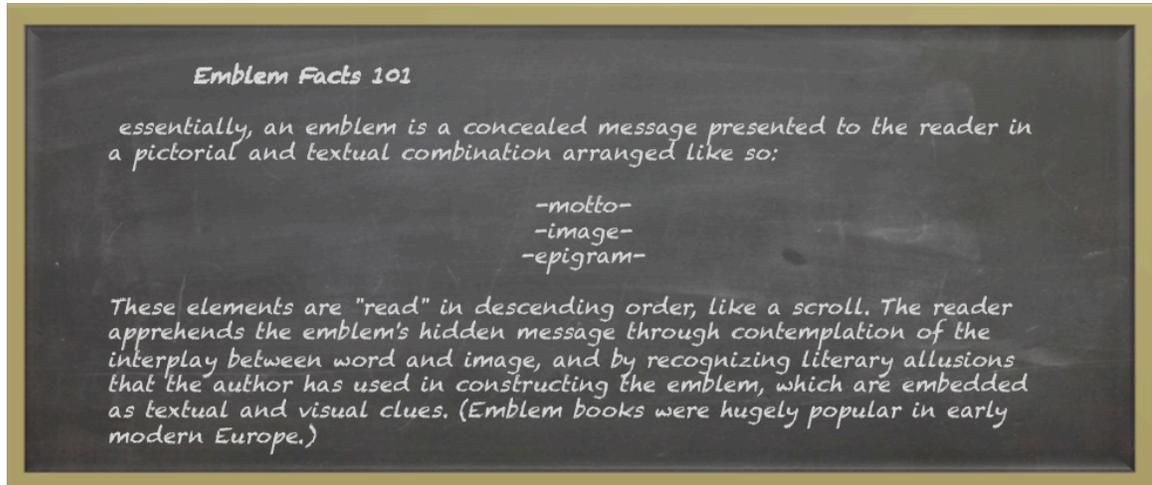
A few years back (I think it was around 2010),<sup>1</sup> I came across an essay about an emblem book published in 1618 called *Atalanta fugiens* while looking for something else in an edited volume on early modern emblems.<sup>2</sup> Amazingly, although this particular essay was about iconology it did not show a single image, so I checked out some emblems from *Atalanta fugiens* online, all heavily cropped as it turned out, whose alchemical subject matter was totally impenetrable to me. But I was taken by these beautiful engravings, and so I looked up the book at the Newberry Library a few weeks later when I went to Chicago for a digital humanities conference, spending a really nice afternoon leafing through its pages. The experience of actually going through this book marked a total break with any expectations of its content that I derived from the scholarship I had encountered earlier or from my online perusals. *Atalanta fugiens* is a quarto, so it’s relatively small (about 23 x 30 cm), it’s fairly lightweight (containing about 200 pages), and I was completely surprised to discover that each emblem came with what seemed to be a bespoke vocal score, this is really unusual in the emblem book genre. So, when you open up the book, the left-hand page of *Atalanta fugiens* presents music for three voices, and the facing right-hand page depicts the emblem; these music-emblem pairings (of which there are fifty) are each followed by

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<sup>1</sup> I had gotten distracted from writing my dissertation (“The Chymical Cleric: John Allin, Puritan Alchemist in England and America, 1623-1683” — Bard Graduate Center, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> The essay in question was by G.E. Szönyi, “Occult Semiotics and Iconology: Michael Maier’s Alchemical Emblems,” *Mundus emblematicus: Studies in Neo-Latin Emblem Books*, eds. Enenkel and Visser (2003), 301-323, although my intention was to check out Alison Adam’s essay therein on Theodore Beza for my dissertation.

a two-page discourse in Latin stuffed with hermetic and classical citations related to hidden alchemical meanings.



After lingering awhile, I finally left *Atalanta* in the Newberry's reading room – still having no idea what this musical alchemical emblem book was all about.

Flash-forward to here, and now. Like any research project, this one keeps generating more and more questions than I think I could ever answer. *Atalanta fugiens* is a complex work with many layers, blending song, images, poetry, cabala, and science into a paean to wisdom achieved through alchemical arts. Today, this virtuoso work by Michael Maier is best known to historians of science, art, and literature for its fifty engraved emblems, and its fifty vocal compositions have generally been dismissed by musicologists as amateurish.<sup>3</sup> Ironically enough, while *Atalanta*

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<sup>3</sup> H.M.E. de Jong, *Michael Maier's Atalanta Fugiens. Sources of an Alchemical Book of Emblems* (1969); Urszula Szulakowska, Ch.11 "Michael Maier's Alchemy of geometry of the Sun," *The Alchemy of Light: Geometry and Optics in Late Renaissance Alchemical Illustration* (2000); Hereward Tilton, *The Quest for the Phoenix: Spiritual Alchemy and Rosicrucianism in the work of Count Michael Maier* (2003); Christoph Lüthy and Alexis Smets, "Words, Lines, Diagrams, Images: Towards a History of Scientific Imagery" *Early Science and Medicine* 14 (2009), 398-439; Peter J. Forshaw, "Oratorium-Auditorium-Laboratorium: Early Modern Improvisations on Cabala, Music, and Alchemy" *Aries* 10, No. 2 (2010), 169-195; Joscelyn Godwin and Hildemarie Striech. *Atalanta fugiens: An edition of the fugues, emblems, and epigrams by Michael Maier* (1989). On the subject of music in *Atalanta fugiens*, my music collaborator Dr. Loren Ludwig has made the groundbreaking discovery that Maier in fact did not write most of the music, but

*fugiens* exemplifies an integrated approach to knowledge, scholarship around it has reflected disciplinary specialization, the result being silos of studies. But Maier was a polymath and most of us today are not, so to unpack all the riches of this book requires drawing on expertise from several different disciplines. At least, this became my strategy as I increasingly encountered things I didn't know what to do with when I finally started my research in 2013 on *Atalanta fugiens* as a postdoc. Serendipitously, this grew into Project Atalanta,<sup>4</sup> a Mellon-funded collaboration at Brown University that I co-direct with Tara Nummedal, which is producing new scholarship for a digitally-born edition of *Atalanta fugiens*, involving experts from music, mathematics, and the histories of science and the book who I came to work with over the course of earlier fellowships. One of the big take-aways from this collaboration stems from “hands-on” experimental work with musicians singing from the book in live performances. In this way, I have learned about the implicit expectations around interpretation on the part of the performer in early modern music: here, music notation presents an invitation to the performer to bring into play his or her own stylistic and expressive effects (in contrast to the more prescriptive approach to music performance that is characteristic of later periods). Conversely, historians are trained differently: we seek to firmly anchor our argument in primary and secondary sources (imagination as a methodology is generally frowned upon). These kinds of considerations have led me to start asking – have we, over the centuries, lost track of the notion of playfulness as a substantive feature of intellectual culture? This is the focus of my book project here at the Italian Academy, where I am exploring Maier's musical alchemical emblem book as a way to recover lost intellectual values around an epistemology of play.

Some more (brief) context about this book is needed before I go deeper with this premise.

*Atalanta fugiens* is Maier's retelling of a legendary race between a fleetfooted huntress named

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repurposed three-part music compositions published in John Farmer, *Diverse and Sundrie Waies of Two Parts in One* (1591).

<sup>4</sup> <https://dbilakpraxis.com/project-atalanta/>

Atalanta and her suitor Hippomenes that is narrated by Venus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>5</sup> According to the original story, Venus gave Hippomenes three golden apples from the garden of Hesperides to cast before Atalanta during their contest to distract and slow her down; he did as instructed, thereby winning the race as well as her hand. However it didn't end well for the two lovers because they managed to upset Venus, and ended up being transformed into lions as punishment for ingratitude.

Maier retooled this classical tale about transformations into an elegant audio-visual presentation of alchemical theory and practice. In Maier's version of this story, Atalanta, Hippomenes, and the Golden Apple become the personifications of mercury, sulfur, and salt – the three principal elements in Paracelsian transmutational alchemy. Maier pushes this trope even further, as his three-part vocal score (which he calls “fugues”) musically feature the interaction between the three protagonists/elements. Maier's characterization of fugue is really a pun on *fugere* (to flee), as the music in *Atalanta fugiens* is composed as a canon in which different vocal parts begin a set melody in succession. Just as Atalanta (mercury) flees, so runs her musical voice followed by Hippomenes (sulfur) at a fixed distance; the Golden Apple balances their polyphony with a plainsong melody apropos of its cast role as the stabilizing alchemical element (salt). Melody and meter thus allegorize the alchemical interplay between mercury, sulfur, and salt during the laboratory process of making the philosophers' stone, understood by contemporaries as the panacea for restoring perfect health and longevity to humankind. Alchemy was the art of material transformation by fire, and the process through which the secrets of nature could be revealed.

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<sup>5</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* X, 560-707 --- <https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph10.htm#484521428>

The book is also enciphered. I argue that Maier constructed this multimedia philosophico-chemical extravaganza around a concealed mathematical puzzle,<sup>6</sup> which is revealed to the erudite reader upon detecting clues that are embedded in *Atalanta fugiens*' music, images, and text. This transforms its reading experience into an interactive game predicated on the reader's use of imagination. So, to communicate this interlocking program of alchemical philosophy and technology, Maier deliberately fused together three different genres of publication: hermetics, emblematics, and secular vocal music. *Atalanta fugiens* is engineered as a multimedia work intended to engage the reader's sense of sight and sound. Maier's hidden message, which underpins his Gesamtkunstwerk, is thus apprehended through our sensory engagement with *Atalanta fugiens*: the pursuit of alchemy is the true path to wisdom.

### Some Thorny Issues

To be honest, I never set out to find a game, or any hidden secret in *Atalanta fugiens*, and I stumbled upon the path that Maier encoded in his emblems through the agency of coincidence. Strangely enough, my current ideas around Maier's possible intentions for designing an interactive, multi-sensory experience for what is essentially a static object (i.e., the book) are tied to a retrospective look at how and why the pieces fell into place for me. My heuristic approach has been rooted in sensory intuition triggered by my perception of visual anomalies in the emblems' images, and in experiential investigation around handling the book and experimenting with animating its contents through sound. Because I am not trained in early modern music theory or performance, my engagement with the music in *Atalanta fugiens* has been mediated through two



(I am still formulating this part)

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<sup>6</sup> My discussion of the hidden mathematical puzzle (a magic square) in *Atalanta fugiens* is part of a lecture-performance I gave in collaboration with the solo-voice ensemble Les Canards Chantants at Bard Graduate Center in April 2015, Art of Encryption (<https://youtu.be/27S704jWJk0>); skip to 47:00 in the video for the mathematical "reveal." This presentation also features my awesome musicology colleague Loren Ludwig who discusses his discovery about the relationship between Farmer's *Waies* and Maier's *Atalanta*; 53:42-1:05 in the video.

distinct channels: (1) the astonishing discovery by my musicology colleague Dr. Loren Ludwig (Director, LeStrange Viols) that Maier in fact did not write most of the music, but retrofitted his epigrams into the three-part choral compositions published in *Diverse and Sundrie Waies of Two Parts in One* (1591) by an Oxford choirmaster composer named John Farmer;<sup>7</sup> and (2) my understanding of possible relationships (and their limits) between the music, images, and text through ongoing collaboration with the solo-voice ensemble Les Canards Chantants.<sup>8</sup> Their musical interpretations, together with my visual analysis, raise questions about the nature of the interaction between the music and emblems in *Atalanta fugiens*. Given that Maier didn't write most of the music, is he indeed matching the music to the emblems' graphic and textual content?<sup>9</sup>

Here are some even more pressing things that I am wrestling with right now. Did readers even realize it was a game? Alarming, I seem to be the only person in the last 400 years to understand *Atalanta fugiens* in this way. None of the thirteen copies that I've handled to date contain the kind of marginalia that might point to ludic explorations on the part of the reader, nor do any of them bear indications of the reader's engagement with the music (mostly they are marked up around the emblems with cross-references to works cited in Maier's epigrams and discourses).

That said, the Columbia University copy is by far the most interesting of this sample group; the Jerome P. Webster Library of Plastic Surgery collection in the Augustus C. Long Health Sciences Library uptown holds a copy of *Atalanta fugiens*, noteworthy for having been rebound by a 17th-

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<sup>7</sup> Loren's analysis shows that forty of the fifty fugues in *Atalanta fugiens* are from Farmer's *Sundry Waies*; Loren feels the remaining ten are probably by Maier (musically, they are not as accomplished as those by Farmer), but for now we are internally referring to these ten as having been composed by "Not-Farmer."

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.lestrangeviols.org/> & <https://lescanardschantants.com/>

<sup>9</sup> The jury is still out on this, but the musical interpretation currently undertaken by Project Atalanta collaborators Drs. Robin and Graham Bier (Directors, Les Canards Chantants) posit that one way Maier could have made connections between sight and sound in *Atalanta fugiens* is through madrigalisms, or "text painting." It seems there are fugues where this is clearly the case, and those where this fails to hold up.

century reader in order to interleave hand-written pages of detailed citations and laboratory notes together with the emblems. We also have an *Atalanta fugiens* user story in Isaac Newton, who thought Maier's work was really great, considering him as one of the best and most useful authors within the alchemical corpus.<sup>10</sup> Newton began his alchemical book collecting and experimentation in the late 1660s; from early 1670s until mid 1690s, he was deeply engaged in experiments around chemical transformations of matter, believing alchemical operations would yield answers to his questions concerning the composition and structure of matter, and about the operation of active forces within and between material bodies.<sup>11</sup> Newton mined *Atalanta's* discourses for bibliographic content (indeed they are a veritable snapshot of the alchemical corpus up to 1617), which in turn informed his acquisitions for his own alchemical library. But did Newton know about the game? So far I haven't come across anything in the material archived online in the Chymistry of Isaac Newton Project to indicate as much. And then there is the 1687 edition of *Atalanta fugiens*, retitled *Secretioris naturæ secretorum scrutinium chymicum*. Published 65 years after Maier's death, the *Secretioris* omits the title page from *Atalanta fugiens* as well as its music; these excisions completely change how Maier's alchemical emblem book is experienced and used, as its performative and ludic dimensions are erased. Is this afterlife of *Atalanta fugiens* then a story of mistaken reception on the part of its readership? What sort of hermeneutic strategies ought I consider to deal with all this?

Some thoughts on just that. Since I came to apprehend Maier's concealed mathematical puzzle through recognition of deviations in patterns in my analysis of the emblems, plus ready access to a range of experts (music, mathematics, religious studies) through whom I could filter my ideas,

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<sup>10</sup> Karin Figala and Ulrich Newmann, "Michael Maier (1569-1622): New Bio-Bibliographical Material" *Alchemy Revisited: Proceedings of an International Congress at the University of Groningen, 17-19 April 1989*, ed. Z.R.M.W. von Martels (1989), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Scholarship about Isaac Newton and alchemy: William R. Newman, Ch.7 "Isaac Newton and Eirenaeus Philalethes," *Gehennical Fire: The Lives of George Starkey, an American Alchemist in the Scientific Revolution* (1994); Chymistry of Isaac Newton Project (<http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/newton/>); see also Mordechai Feingold, *The Newtonian Moment: Isaac Newton and the Making of Modern Culture* (2004).

then perhaps my kind of sensory processing can be understood in terms of embodiment (though in truth I am still trying to wrap my head around embodied cognitive science).<sup>12</sup> Yet this is potentially fruitful for how I think this might help me to approximate the early modern reader's experience with *Atalanta fugiens*, which is gauged through knowledge of the specific rules governing how to read an emblem, and thus making the reader sensitive to the presence of any aberrations therein. An important point to raise here: early modern emblem culture was much more malleable than emblem books would indicate (this is a highly specialized genre). Overall, emblem culture writ large is characterized by interactivity, which could play out on a monumental scale,<sup>13</sup> as well as on an intellectual level.<sup>14</sup> Situated within this broader socio-cultural landscape, a reader's expectations for a given emblem book was essentially directed by the intention to discover an emblem's concealed message, achieved through the contemplation of its graphic and textual components, combined with knowledge of the literary corpus that its author drew from in its composition. I imagine that a reader in 1618 upon receiving a copy of *Atalanta fugiens* would have reacted along the lines of "right, so what does this one say?" and then set about looking for clues in the emblems. It's safe to say, on the basis of the research done by Les Canards Chantants, that the music can indeed be performed, which introduces a new kind

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<sup>12</sup> The pro-contra debate around this subject was the focus of a really interesting Embodied Cognition Reading Group (for me, mainly because of disagreement among the invited speakers) organized by two Columbia postdocs, Andrew Goldman and Carmel Raz, "Two Enduring Confusions in Embodied Cognition" (18 November 2016), which featured Kenneth Aizawa, and respondents Kevin Ochsner, Mariusz Kozak, and Stephen Flusberg. See also F. Adams and K. Aizawa, "Why the Mind is Still in the Head," *The Cambridge Handbook of Situated Cognition*, eds. Robbins and Aydede (2009), 78–95; and B. Z. Mahon, "What is embodied about cognition?" *Language, Cognition and Neuroscience*, 30(4) 2015, 420–429.

<sup>13</sup> Some examples of contemporary constructs in ludic humanism: Villa d'Este <https://www.foliamagazine.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Villa-dEste-a-Tivoli.jpg> (a 16th-century Italian Renaissance garden landscaped so as to provide visitors with an interactive experience of humanist interpretations of ancient legends); civic entries known through extant accounts and artists inventories (commemorative public events held by a city and characterized by the dynamic emblemization of socio-political messages through ephemeral artworks and multimedia staging); theatrical enactments in courtly masques; see also the Les Canards Chantants *in situ* performance of a 16th-century the intarsia vocal score that decorates the Eglantine Table at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire --- <https://youtu.be/X3-xOHp6kho>

<sup>14</sup> Paula Findlen, "Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990) 292-331.

of sociability to alchemical discourse, one that is based on entertainment. Whether as a group activity or a solitary endeavour, Maier's intentions that his multimedia alchemical project will engage the reader's sense of sound and sight is explicitly stated in his title:

*Atalanta fleeing [fugiens], that is, new chemical emblems of the secrets of nature. Accommodated partly for the eyes and understanding [intellectui]; with figures cut in copper, and mottos, epigrams and notes added; partly for the ears & recreation of the mind [animi], with more or less 50 musical flights [fugis] of three voices, of which two correspond to one single melody suitable for singing the couplets; singularly pleasing to be seen, read, reflected upon, understood, judged, sung & heard.*<sup>15</sup>

With Maier's directive that the music be "sung and heard," principles of reconstruction constitute helpful analytic tools for dealing with this, and are fresh on my mind having just finished a three-year postdoc with The Making & Knowing Project,<sup>16</sup> directed by Pamela Smith (History) here at Columbia. In Pamela's project, reconstruction is a haptic research and teaching tool grounded in material engagement to open up the textual interpretation of "how-to" entries in a French 16th-century proto-scientific manuscript compilation of artisanal technologies. While music reconstruction as a methodology for *Atalanta* is active, rendering Maier's fugues dynamic is not just the purview of making sound, but also requires expert transcription of the score (which is reliant on musicological interpretation) into modern notation in order to make its performance accessible to the non-specialist, either for research or pleasure. Then there's Michele's world of language variation, which I have just begun to discover: can I repurpose error detection in order to examine the audio-visual content of *Atalanta fugiens* to spot Maier's stimuli and/or ways that he is deliberately being "(un)grammatical"? That is to say, in terms of Maier's intentionality around breaking the rules that dictate emblem book convention by inserting "tells" into his own emblem constructions, something I posit he also does with the music.<sup>17</sup> (Maier's fugues are peppered with notational and metrical errors, many of which are purposely introduced; these

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<sup>15</sup> The English translation of Maier's Latin title page is mine.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.makingandknowing.org/>

<sup>17</sup> I believe that Maier's musical errors are deliberate and also represent an encoded message, though one that has a different delivery system from the kind that defines the encoded emblems; however Loren is in vehement disagreement with me on this theory – to be continued.

errors are the main reason that musicologists have panned *Atalanta's* fugues, however without the knowledge that Maier was not the composer.) How might research in language change be useful to me in terms of retracing where, when, and why we have decoupled the links that were once understood to make up the circle of learning, and removed play as an integral feature of education and learning?<sup>18</sup>

Basically, I am at a point in my project where I am playing with structures and postulating a cognitive process. Maier's musical alchemical emblem book is full of unexpected things. How are they registered? What is social/contextual, and what is empirical in terms of understanding *Atalanta fugiens'* particular integration of sound, sight, and intellect with alchemical theory and laboratory practice? This kind of positioning necessitates having to define what "the norm" was in Maier's world, and, extrapolating from that, what *Atalanta fugiens'* reception by contemporaries may have been.

### **A Case Study on Play**

Maier's "norm," at least from 1609 until 1611, was the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolf II in the hilltop fastness of Hradčany castle in Prague.<sup>19</sup> One could argue that Maier was primed for play during his time there as court *medicus* to Rudolf, so a few paragraphs about Maier's boss provides useful context. Rudolf II was an enigmatic figure often characterized in past scholarship as a reclusive, mad, inept ruler and a rapacious collector. That said, the collective research of R.J.W. Evans, Paula Findlen, and Eliška Fučíková presents a convincing and more nuanced

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<sup>18</sup> NB: Michele, I hope I am not horrifying you with the direction my thoughts are taking around your research subject...

<sup>19</sup> <https://cdn.globalauctionplatform.com/009a4934-436f-461f-bdc8-a5be00aa6e86/2dabbc2c-7d0e-4dab-8627-a5be00b3a007/original.jpg>

Rudolf's accession was at Regensburg, 12 October 1576. A few years later, Rudolf relocated the imperial court from Vienna to Prague at Hradčany Castle in 1583; Fučíková outlines Rudolf's reasons for the move in "Prague Castle under Rudolf II, His Predecessors and Successors, 1530-1648" in *Rudolf II and Prague*, ed. Fučíková (1997), 15.

portrayal of Rudolf II as the ruler of a politically unstable kingdom during a fraught period of religious turmoil, and as a complex personality who epitomized humanist ideals that were manifested in his stunning and vast art collection, aka the *Kunstammer*.<sup>20</sup> Karel van Mander (the “Dutch Vasari”)<sup>21</sup> gives an account of the emperor’s art collection in his 1604 *Schilderboeck*:

Whoever so desires nowadays has only to go to Prague (if he can), to the greatest art patron in the world at the present time, the Roman Emperor Rudolf the Second; there he may see at the Imperial residence, and elsewhere in the collections of other great art-lovers, a remarkable number of outstanding and precious, curious, unusual, and priceless works.<sup>22</sup>

This pithy description does not communicate the colossal nature of Rudolf’s collection, or the sheer amount of space required to contain it.<sup>23</sup> Following the emperor’s move to Hradčany, the castle’s second floor Gallery quickly proved too small a space to contain his growing collection of paintings, so a new room, the Spanish wing, was purpose built above the Spanish stables to house the imperial picture collection.<sup>24</sup> Construction of the New Hall followed, built beside the Spanish wing (and twice as large) to contain the emperor’s sculpture collection. Additionally, rooms within Queen Anne’s summer pavilion also accommodated Rudolf’s collection, and

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<sup>20</sup> R.J.W.Evans, *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History* (1973); Paula Findlen, *Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (1994); Eliska Fučíková, *Prague in the Reign of Rudolph II* (2015). The Met Museum provides an excellent and succinct explanation of the term and concept of *Kunstammer* in this online essay, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd\\_kuns.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd_kuns.htm)

<sup>21</sup> See the J. Paul Getty Museum entry for Karel van Mander, <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/artists/2960/karel-van-mander-dutch-1548-1606/>

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Evans, *Rudolf II and His World* (1978), 162. Also, Evans, Fučíková and Campbell in *The Stylish Image* (1991), 17-18 note that Rudolf’s collection was founded on two principal sources: acquisitions (e.g. gifts, and purchases secured by imperial agents), and products from the imperial workshops. Also, Rudolf owed a debt to earlier Habsburg patronage: the nucleus of the artisanal community at Prague was formed by masters who had worked for his father (Maximilian II), or for his grandfather (Ferdinand I). Rudolf inherited from Maximilian II artists and natural philosophers who deeply influenced new arrivals to the imperial court at Prague, as well as numismatic collections, a minor collection of paintings and statues, and an extensive library. Rudolf was also a music patron; see Peter Carmelo Comberati, *Late Renaissance Music at the Habsburg Court* (1987).

<sup>23</sup> Creation of space to contain Rudolf’s ever-expanding collection meant ongoing construction at Hradčany; see Evans, Fučíková and Campbell, *The Stylish Image*, 17. Court architects and engineers engaged in full-scale construction at Hradčany between 1583 and 1612; a body of buildings emerged that came to serve as Rudolf’s residence and state rooms, in addition to housing the imperial collections, the workshops of court artists, and their living quarters; *ibid.*, 17. See also Paula Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” *Rudolf II and Prague* (1997), 209-214. For information about the new manner of interior decoration brought to Hradčany by Vredeman and other associates, see Fučíková, “Prague Castle under Rudolf II, His Predecessors and Successors, 1530-1648,” *Rudolf II and Prague*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 185-86.

according to Findlen, this northern section of the imperial residence housed the majority of the emperor's pictures (i.e., the Titians, Correggios, Brueghels, Dürers).<sup>25</sup> As his collection grew ever larger, Rudolf laid plans to construct a one hundred-room palace in the Royal Game Park.<sup>26</sup>

Lets take a quick look into this world. We, the privileged visitor to Rudolf's *Kunstammer*, have been ushered in via an antechamber known as the Corridor Wing. At its entranceway hangs Giuseppe Arcimboldo's magnificent series of the seasons and elements, whose centrepiece is his portrait of Rudolf as Vertumnus,<sup>27</sup> the Roman god of seasons. (Click [here](#) to see Rudolf II in mortal guise.)<sup>28</sup> Painted around 1590, Arcimboldo's portrait presents us with a useful object lesson in early modern concepts of playfulness, communicated through the filter of transformation and metamorphosis, which are integral to understanding the presentation, mechanics, and reception of Maier's *Atalanta fugiens*.

As follows. In Arcimboldo's portrait, the emperor is imaginatively depicted as a composite of fruits and vegetables, a botanical bounty meant to symbolize a return to the Golden Age under Rudolfine rule that, interestingly, I (as your virtual tour guide) want to point out is also distinctly evocative of anatomical studies, such as those found in Andreas Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* (On the Fabric of the Human Body),<sup>29</sup> first published in 1543.<sup>30</sup> Let's compare these two images, Vertumnus and Vesalius. First, look how the selection of garden-variety plants that make up the emperor's face and body evoke the musculature that lies beneath the skin. For instance, focus on how Arcimboldo's artful vegetal arrangement depicts Rudolf's throat and chest: the

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<sup>25</sup> Findlen, "Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy," *Rudolf II and Prague*, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Evans, Fučíková and Campbell, *The Stylish Image*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertumnus\\_\(painting\)#/media/File:Portr%C3%A4tt\\_Rudolf\\_II\\_som\\_Vertumnus\\_Guiseppe\\_Arcimboldo\\_-\\_Skoklosters\\_slott\\_-\\_87582.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vertumnus_(painting)#/media/File:Portr%C3%A4tt_Rudolf_II_som_Vertumnus_Guiseppe_Arcimboldo_-_Skoklosters_slott_-_87582.jpg)

<sup>28</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f9/Hans\\_von\\_Aachen\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Emperor\\_Rudolf\\_II.jpg/473px-Hans\\_von\\_Aachen\\_-\\_Portrait\\_of\\_Emperor\\_Rudolf\\_II.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/f/f9/Hans_von_Aachen_-_Portrait_of_Emperor_Rudolf_II.jpg/473px-Hans_von_Aachen_-_Portrait_of_Emperor_Rudolf_II.jpg)

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/Images/1200\\_pixels/Vesalius\\_Pg\\_178.jpg](https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/historicalanatomies/Images/1200_pixels/Vesalius_Pg_178.jpg)

<sup>30</sup> Dániel Margócsy researches the print runs, reception, and influence of this work; see his project Vesalius Census, <https://vesaliuscensus.wordpress.com/about/>

sides of the cervical neck are represented by two elongated, angled vegetables (a cucumber? some kind of greenish eggplant?); these abut with a large ribbed gourd for his sternum, and what appears to be the bottom of a turnip with a protruding root represents Rudolf's Adam's apple.

Shifting our view slightly to our right, we note how an orderly stack of scallions make up Rudolf's trapezius, whose curving lines flow into those of a downward-tilted head of lettuce used to indicate the thick deltoid muscle at the shoulder joint (a large cabbage leaf on Rudolf's opposite shoulder brings to mind an epaulette, from which drapes a swag of beautiful, fragrant flowers, likely meant to represent Roman dress)...

...and now turn to look at the engraved anatomical image of Vesalius' male figure,<sup>31</sup> rendered *écorché*, flayed.<sup>32</sup>

How do we (in our role as early modern viewers of this painting) know to peel away the emperor's skin, and to thus see these vegetal forms as a subcutaneous play of muscle and ligaments? Imagine that we are transmitted all of this nuanced visual information because our intellect is accustomed to making creative associations across different media, and with connecting them to the socio-political valences that dictate behaviour in European court culture – while the portrait of Rudolf as Vertumnus was meant to amuse, it also served as imperial *Representatio*.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, we (still as an erudite early modern audience) are steeped in an intellectual culture that explores natural history via the interplay of nature and art (in the sense of *technē*) through objects known as *naturalia* (the works of nature) and *artificialia* (the works of

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/bodies/vesalius/renaissance.html>

<sup>32</sup> The term *écorché* is used to describe a specific kind of illustration whereby an anatomical subject is rendered to display musculature *sans* the skin's outer covering.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann discusses Arcimboldo's portrait of Rudolf II as Vertumnus as an example of Hapsburg representations of power in Ch.4 "Serious Jokes," *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting* (2010), 91-114.

man).<sup>34</sup> So, was this association between Vertumnus with Vesalius intentional and readily understood? I would argue yes.

Fundamentally, Rudolf's *Kunstkammer* functioned as a synchronous collection involving many people and moving parts, as well as providing the environs for the emperor's private contemplation. Rudolf also "collected" cutting-edge natural philosophers, occultists, and alchemists, bringing such scholars under imperial patronage as gemologist and emblemist Anselm Boethius de Boodt, botanists Rembert Dodoens and Carolus Clusius, astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler.<sup>35</sup> Rudolf's roster of personal physicians included Johann Pistorius (author of *Artis cabbalisticæ*, 1587), Oswald Croll (*Basilica chymica*, 1609), Robert Fludd (who produced one of the most influential occult treatises of the seventeenth century, his magisterial history of the macrocosm and microcosm, *Utriusque cosmi historia*, 1617-19), and Michael Maier (who was a prolific author of alchemical treatises from 1617 until his death in 1622). This was the cultural and intellectual milieu in which Maier participated between 1609 and 1611. Art and science were blurred boundaries at Hradčany – Maier certainly didn't hold such distinctions – and artisans and scholars working in the castle complex interacted with one another extensively.<sup>36</sup> The multi-dimensionality of Hradčany castle exemplifies how Rudolf II viewed his existence, and his rule, as a Renaissance Maecenas "who commanded the world from the vaults of his

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<sup>34</sup> Scholarship on early modern natural history: Allen G. Debus, *Man and Nature in the Renaissance* (1978); Paula Findlen, *Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (1994); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (1998); David Freedberg, *The Eye of the Lynx: Galileo, His Friends, and the Beginnings of Modern Natural History* (2002); Peter N. Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (2000); Brian W. Ogilvie, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe* (2008).

<sup>35</sup> William Eamon discusses the theme of novelty that characterized scientific inquiry and literature in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, conceived "as the discovery of *new* things rather than as attempts to demonstrate the known"; *Science and the Secrets of Nature* (1994), 271 and 228.

<sup>36</sup> For example, at Hradčany Brahe and Kepler had at their disposal Europe's finest instrument makers, Habermel and Bürgi; see Mout, "The Court of Rudolf II and Humanist Culture," *Rudolf II and Prague*, 222. Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann connects Arcimboldo and Hoffmann to technical innovations made by the imperial clock and instrument makers, citing common interest in particular mechanical matters; see *The Mastery of Nature* (1993), 172-3.

museum.”<sup>37</sup> It bears mentioning that Prague emerged as one of Europe’s most cosmopolitan cities during the emperor’s thirty-five year reign.

All this came to a crashing halt in 1611. Rudolf was deposed that April by his brother Matthias, and “died” nine months later. Maier was out of a job. It seems that in the wake of things falling apart in Prague, Maier left for Mülhausen in Thuringia (a hub in the Hanseatic trade), where he was the guest of Christoph Reinhart, the town magistrate there, to whom he dedicated *Atalanta fugiens* seven years later.<sup>38</sup>

In that intervening period, Maier produced a musical alchemical emblem book that is an elegant, eloquent compound of classical mythology, Christian faith, and hermetic philosophy, encoded in the emblems whose layers of meaning the reader continually peels back to apprehend. The garden of Hesperides, where Maier sets his story, is a metonym for the Garden of Eden, where the expulsion of Adam and Eve elides with the punishment of Atalanta and Hippomenes. Maier’s Golden Apple is the fulcrum between the tree of life in Genesis 3:22-24 and the alchemical elixir of life given biblical testimony in Revelation 22:1-2, wherein the arbor vitae’s curative properties, fed by the crystal clear waters of the river that flows from the throne of God, is an archetype for Eden restored. *Atalanta*’s middlemost emblem, Sapientia, Lady Wisdom, awaits us in the heart of this book as our alchemical guide towards enlightenment for those who approach her with hand and reason, *ratione manueque*, according to her epigram. *Atalanta fugiens* was Maier’s own evocation of a return to a Golden Age, published on the eve of what would become known as the Thirty Years War.

~ TO BE CONTINUED ON WEDNESDAY ~

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<sup>37</sup> Findlen, “Cabinets, Collecting and Natural Philosophy,” *Rudolf II and Prague*, 209.

<sup>38</sup> I find this puzzling; I mean, why not dedicate it to a potential princely patron?

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