


The demiurge in the convex mirror. The Hermetic keys of Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*

Roger Ferrer-Ventosa
University of Barcelona 

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ENG Abstract: The article analyses the conceptual foundations of Parmigianino in relation to his Hermetic and Neoplatonic ideas and alchemical practice, which were important in Renaissance Italian culture. Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* embodies the artist as a demiurge, a creator of a new universe. The essay focuses on the symbolic and metaphysical significance of the convex mirror, reflecting the artist's creative power and the hidden values of reality. Melancholy, associated with Saturn, was a characteristic of artists and intellectuals in that cultural context. The following section examines Parmigianino's frescoes of Diana and Actaeon, exploring how this myth symbolizes the pursuit of wisdom and the transformative process associated with alchemy. Finally, the essay analyses Parmigianino's potential interest in alchemy based on historical accounts. The controversy surrounding Parmigianino's involvement in alchemy, along with the opinions of various scholars, is also discussed.
Keywords: Self-portrait; alchemy; melancholy; demiurge; Renaissance Hermeticism

ES El demiurgo en el espejo convexo. Claves herméticas del Autorretrato en espejo convexo de Parmigianino

Resumen: El artículo analiza las bases conceptuales de Parmigianino respecto a sus ideas herméticas y neoplatónicas y prácticas alquímicas, las cuales gozaron de importancia en la cultura renacentista italiana. El *Autorretrato en el espejo convexo* de Parmigianino se interpreta como una materialización de la idea de artista como demiurgo, creador de un flamante nuevo universo. El artículo subraya la dimensión simbólica y metafísica del espejo convexo, que refleja el poder creativo del artista y el valor de una realidad oculta. La melancolía asociada con Saturno fue una característica de artistas e intelectuales en ese contexto cultural. El artículo indaga en los frescos de Parmigianino con Diana y Acteón como tema, un mito que simboliza la búsqueda de la sabiduría y del proceso de transmutación del alquimista. Finalmente, también explora el interés del artista en la alquimia basado en noticias históricas de la época. La controversia que rodea a su grado de involucración en la práctica es debatida, exponiendo los puntos de vista de diversos investigadores.
Palabras clave: Autorretrato; alquimia; melancolía; demiurgo; Hermetismo renacentista

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. A bizarre representation of the self. 3. The Neoplatonist and Hermetic theory of the image in the Cinquecento. 4. The artist magician and his archetypical model. 5. A melancholic man. Parmigianino as a son of Saturn. 6. Diana and Actaeon or hunting wisdom. 7. Peritissimo alchemist. 8. Conclusion. 9. References.

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1. Introduction

The artist conceived as a demiurge who creates a new universe is an outstanding metaphor for referring to the creator or art, an ideal inherent to the Renaissance cultural horizon closest to Hermeticism and which most powerfully expressed it. Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1523-24) (Fig. 1) embodies that ideal in a sole image.

In what follows, an attempt is made to identify the characteristics of this way of thinking, such as the artist's emulation of the Platonic cosmic demiurge, his magical power, and his melancholy, which makes the expression 'born under the sign of Saturn' a fitting definition for him, his frenzy for the wisdom required in this worldview and the concept of image in Renaissance Neoplatonic Hermeticism. All these

aspects are developed based on how they appear in the self-portrait.

Parmigianino stood out as a painter who assumed, as few have done, this role of the Hermetic demiurgic artist. According to Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), he had wasted his life and talent because of his obsession with alchemy, a controversy briefly examined at the end of this paper¹. Besides the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, some of the aspects of the artist's works closest to Hermeticism, including other self-portraits, the frescos depicting Diana and Actaeon in the castle of Fontanellato, the Virgin with Child, St John the Baptist, Magdalene, and Zachariah, and his unfinished commission in the sanctuary of Santa Maria della Steccata, are also examined. Nonetheless, most of this paper is devoted to the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, a tondo that brought the artist great success, and which expresses many of the singularities of the demiurgic artist within the Hermetic-Neoplatonic cultural horizon, forming a compendium of theories on these currents addressing reality and the cosmos.

2. A bizarre representation of the self

The *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* by Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola (1503-1540), also known as Parmigianino, is one of the most powerful pictorial examples of the artistic demiurge. It is an exemplary case representing the cultural universe in which many Renaissance artists moved and their ambitious aesthetic quest. That tondo would become one of the great examples of an image reflection or even a "dual" one insofar as the composition includes a mirror.



Figure 1. Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1523-24). Public Domain. Source: wikiart.org.

In the case of Parmigianino, this would take the shape of the innovative device he employed to portray such an ingenious image. On account of that decision, the Neoplatonic and Hermetic ideas circulating among

his peers at the time, such as the notion of the power of images for revealing hidden values of reality, would be reflected by an artist who gained a reputation as an alchemist during his lifetime, to which Vasari's biography of him in his *The Lives of the Artists* (1550, 1568) attests. As with other artists of the period, his aesthetic taste was pervaded by a philosophy of magic and alchemy, characterizing the mindset of the Italian Renaissance. All of this would rest on the aesthetics of the demiurge, the archetypal artist who, reflected in a mirror, would emulate God, with His creative power, as underscored by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), a key philosopher of Renaissance Neoplatonic Hermeticism, for whom the creative human spirit imitated its original, the divine spirit, of which it was the image².

In this theory of the occult, art would be a fundamental tool insofar as its metaphorical symbolic language could reveal things that could not be perceived or understood at first glance. It can be claimed that when Parmigianino sketched himself, like, for example, in his *Self-Portrait Holding a Dog* (Fig. 2), currently housed in the British Museum, by means of a metaphorical language he was proposing an allegory of the artistic creative worth of a now mature artist.



Figure 2. Parmigianino, *Self-Portrait holding a dog* (ca. 1535). Public domain. Source: British Museum, by kindly permission of the British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/234974001>, Under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1986), 798-800.

² *Theologia platonica*, XIII, 3, in Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology Volume 4. Books XII-XIV* (London: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2004), 168-82.

The Italian artist painted his self-portrait in a convex mirror when he was a young man, in 1523 or 1524. The self-portraits of painters are false mirrors that reflect a constrained and idealized image. As a result of the artist's experimentation with trompe l'oeil, the beholder has the sensation of gazing into a mirror, but that is merely the impression that the painting gives. For it is a mirror that cannot reflect and in which Parmigianino seems to be looking at the beholder, which creates the idea that he is in front of it³, thus blending in with reality as if he were an extension of the real physical space, an effect commonly pursued in early modern culture.

Self-portraits can offer a sort of non-dual experience, because in them artists, subjects par excellence, become objects of scrutiny. There is a duplication, they are the invisible eye observing the scene and, at the same time, objects exhibited to the beholder.

As Ames-Lewis remarks, "Few Renaissance self-portraits, if any, are likely to have been simply depictions of the individual"⁴. With self-portraits, artists sought to explore their own image, showcasing their aspirations and addressing the need to enhance their social prestige by being recognized as intellectuals. And this is precisely the case of the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, in which the young artist is offering proof of his skills and creativity. In Ramón Andrés' words, the painting is a visual representation of what a self-portrait and self-biography are in essence: enhancement and fiction, evanescence⁵.

All self-portraits are arranged in a certain way, as if they were mirrors. This *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* shows things as they were theoretically at the moment when they were painted, reflecting the artist's physical attributes as they appeared to the naked eye, despite the distortion caused by the convex mirror. Hans Belting referred to an iconic presence, the images of people being the visual representation of something that is absent; the paradox of depicting (the bodies represented) that absence (the physical bodies that are not really there)⁶.

3. The Neoplatonist and Hermetic theory of the image in the Cinquecento

The *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is estimated to have been painted between 1523 and 1524. It offers the beholder a depiction of the young Parmigianino, as if he were looking into a convex mirror. In Ames-Lewis' opinion, the result is an extraordinary demonstration not only of the artist's technique and artistry, but also of his intellectual powers⁷. These qualities, as recounted by Vasari, explain the amazement and praise of Pope Clement VII (1478-1534)

As to the information on the painting provided by Vasari, regardless of whether or not the artist was obsessed with alchemy, a point analyzed further on, the result is fairly colorist and flamboyant, namely, the Italian architect, painter and writer's hallmark. One day, Parmigianino, a handsome and talented young man who had learned how to paint from his uncles and from Correggio (1489-1534), decided to put himself to the test with an experiment. He chose to depict his reflection in a barber's convex mirror, after having observed the strange effects that it produced. The resulting painting was so fabulous and such evident proof of the artist's skills that, as already noted, it even caught the attention of Pope Clement VII, who subsequently invited him to Rome. Once there, he developed his style, which was so appealing and novel that when the Spanish and German soldiers of Charles V sacked Rome (1527), they allowed him to carry on with his work⁸.

But in order to gain a better understanding of the context that can be glimpsed in this self-portrait, it is first necessary to examine the ideas of the Renaissance Hermetic-Neoplatonic current, very influential at the time, examples of which include the theories of the image and art within that cultural horizon.

The philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) comes after Parmigianino but shares a framework of Hermetic-Neoplatonic references with him. Therefore, it is relevant to delve into some of his ideas. For Giordano Bruno, the physical world was a mirror in which the shadow of the divine was reflected; it was the trace of ideas⁹. This shadow corresponded to the first level of ideas. On Earth, God could only be observed in shadows and mirrors, namely, as the result of a projection or reflection¹⁰. Indeed, the notion of the physical world as a shadow was already to be found in Plotinus (c. 205-270), who referred to beauty in bodies as images, traces and shadows, images being beautiful reflections on the water¹¹, although the Greek philosopher had a more ascetic attitude towards them, advising against pursuing them blindly.

This notion also brings to mind the *Corpus hermeticum* (c. 100 CE)¹². Primeval man falls in love with his own image reflected in the waters of nature, which also loves humankind, looking at his image on the surface and his shadow upon the earth. Accordingly,

⁸ Vasari, *Le vite de'più eccellenti*, 794-796.

⁹ *De imaginum, signorum et idearum compositione* I, 1, 2, in Giordano Bruno, *On the Composition of Images, Signs & Ideas* (New York: Willis, Locker & Owen, 1991), 10-11.

¹⁰ *De gli heroici furori* I, III, in Giordano Bruno, *Giordano Bruno's The Heroic Frenzies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1966), 115. Further on, in the second part, that visible shadow, its enigmatic reflections, is linked to Plato's Cave: *De gli heroici furori* II, IV, in *Ibid.*, 253.

¹¹ *Enneads* I, 6, 8, in Plotinus/Prophyry. *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books/Enneads 1* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 255-257. The idea is alluded to in *The Republic* when Plato (c. 425-348 BC) refers to one subsection of the visible world, that of images, including shadows, and reflections in water: *Republic* 509e-510a, in Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1130-1131. Secondary source: Roger Ferrer-Ventosa, "El saber de la sombra", in *Mitos e imágenes*, ed. Marta Piñol Lloret (Vitoria-Gasteiz: Sans Soleil, 2024), 75-112.

¹² *Corpus hermeticum* in Brian Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992),

³ Hans Belting, "Cruce de miradas con las imágenes. La pregunta por la imagen como pregunta por el cuerpo", in *Filosofía de la imagen*, ed. Ana García Varas (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2011), 195-196.

⁴ Francis Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual life of the early renaissance artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 243.

⁵ Ramón Andrés, *El luthier de Delft. Música, pintura y ciencia en tiempos de Vermeer y Spinoza* (Barcelona: Acantilado, 2013), 53.

⁶ Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology". *Critical Inquiry* 31, 2, (2005): 312

⁷ Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual life of the early renaissance artist*, 245.

the image of God is projected onto the physical world, because He has created primeval man in His own image and likeness. Nature and primeval man embrace in a hierogamy¹³.

As to alchemical books, so close to Hermeticism, the processes of the Great Work, with its cosmic-theological analogies, can be explained using symbolic images and mythological scenes, both ubiquitous in the alchemical lexicon, in a metaphorical language whose aim is to unite all the dimensions of reality. This is why works featuring gods during the Italian Renaissance period should often be interpreted in an astrological and alchemical sense.

Images form an essential part of the repertoire of artists, magicians and artist-magicians, since they have the ability to reveal the links between things, the quintessential hieroglyphic language, ritual, sexual attraction, mathematical relationships and so forth. All give shape to that repertoire whose basic epistemological structure is to be found in images. The *anima mundi* communicates with them and if the magician learns how to use them, he will enter into contact with that primeval cosmic force.

The ultimate truths of the universe are incomprehensible to the human mind. Still, it has an inkling thanks to its shadows, mental images of which can be graphically expressed. Bruno establishes a relationship between sight and intelligence, with those images underpinning that link. He established this in an ontology comprising three levels of intelligence: the essence of the divinity, the substance of the world (the image of that divinity); and the light of the senses or intelligence of a person. The second level, that of the world, should be read as if it were a philosophical book. As to the third level, the human soul is the rational and symbolic abode that makes it possible to glimpse the shadow of the first level, that of divine or archetypal root ideas, and which, in turn, is an image of the world¹⁴, in other words, the microcosm and the macrocosm. This central idea would be the best way of explaining something as complex as the existing universe by means of an image, a microcosm that synthesizes the macrocosm.

In Mannerism, to this general aspect is added the desire to go beyond the evident and literal in search of signs that, once deciphered, will provide a meaning. That meaning is present in Parmigianino's oeuvre, specifically in the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, one of his most highly acclaimed works.

As a matter of fact, Neoplatonism¹⁵ also made inroads into the Mannerist theory of art with Federico Zuccari (1542-1609), who combined this current with Aristotle (384-322 BC). The most important aspect of his aesthetic system lay in design, divided into two concepts: the inner design (ideas) and the outer design (forms). According to Zuccari, theologians called the inner design "idea",

although it derived from the same notion applied to artistic compositions: the common spiritual form, created in the intellect, shared by all beings in nature, which, for instance, signifies that it is possible to recognize a lion by the idea of its appearance and then to compare this idea with a real lion. Zuccari clarifies this concept using the metaphor of a mirror. Just as a mirror in a room reflects many of the pictures and sculptures in it that have no real substance but are present in spirit, so too does design allow the human intellect to become familiar with those objects and to conceive an artistic composition. In another of his relevant theories, Zuccari contended that painting was the son of nature and design, the former for displaying forms and the latter for demonstrating how they work¹⁶.

For this reason, the attention paid to the visual aspects of these art forms does not involve any shift that distances them from the mind. Quite the contrary, painters like Parmigianino were expressing the change in mentality occurring as of the mid-fifteenth century, prompted above all by the Florentine intellectual circle. Díaz-Urmeneta establishes the idea of the universe's autonomous unity and the ordering role of human beings as a feature of that mindset¹⁷.

Consequently, both theories would focus more on the perspective of Leonardo and the infinite universe of Bruno, among other variations on the theme, but in its essence there was the supreme miracle of the human being to which Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) would refer, citing the Hermetic *Asclepius* (c. 100 CE). Of course, this does not mean that it was transformed into an intellectualized art, but that it considered and played with ideas

According to Ficino, like Pico della Mirandola another of the Renaissance philosophers influenced by Neoplatonism and Hermetism, artists should infuse their paintings with heart and soul to reflect their creative spirit. Simultaneously, the best mirrors would be those that managed to reflect the inner soul of the person portrayed and not his outward appearance¹⁸. So, it would not be Parmigianino's physical aspect at the time that should be contemplated, but a representation of the innermost regions of his soul, which he metaphorically depicted in the painting, sometimes as a riddle.

4. The artist magician and his archetypal model

Although portraits also had a secular meaning during the Renaissance, that does not imply that the sacred dimension disappeared. Both could be reflected at the same time, albeit at different levels. Those portraits shared two characteristics, previously antithetical: the image of a specific individual, the historical and physical human being, on the one hand, and their transformation into icons, like those of saints,

¹³ *Corpus hermeticum* I, 14, in Brian Copenhaver (ed.), 3.

¹⁴ Giordano Bruno, "Oratio valedictoria", in Juan Bosco Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz, *La tercera dimensión del espejo: ensayo sobre la mirada renacentista* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 2004), 361-363.

¹⁵ For a study of the Neoplatonic roots of Florentine art during the 1460s, see Francis Ames-Lewis, "Neoplatonism and the Visual Arts at the Time of Marsilio Ficino", in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy*, eds. Michael J. B. Allen & Valery Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁶ Federico Zuccari, "La idea de los pintores, escultores y arquitectos", in *Renacimiento en Europa*, ed. Joaquim Garriga (Barcelona: Gilly, 1983), 328-339.

¹⁷ Juan Bosco Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz, *La tercera dimensión del espejo: ensayo sobre la mirada renacentista* (Sevilla: Universidad de Sevilla, 2004), 224.

¹⁸ *Theologia platonica*, X, 4, in Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology Volume 3. Books IX-XI* (London: The I Tatti Renaissance Library, 2003), 144-151.

who did not resemble historical people, but only represented a reference to them, on the other.

The *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* is a paragon of artistic virtues, although these nearly always verge on Hermeticism and evince Parmigianino's demiurgic practice. Owing to the convex shape of mirrors of this type, the self-portrait was circular. Tondi were designed to be moved and hung in any place, depending on the whims of their owners. However, not all tondi were intended for hanging. For instance, *deschi da parto*—decorative trays or birth salvers commissioned during the Renaissance to celebrate childbirth—were not originally conceived for hanging, although they could be later placed like paintings.

As Arnheim notes, round frames, namely, tondi, contrast with their surroundings, prompting their isolation. In contrast, rectangular ones adapt to the shape of the architectural context, given that the walls on which they are usually hung are practically always rectangular¹⁹.

Theoretically, according to Vasari, for the purpose of transmitting the strange reflections in a convex mirror, Parmigianino employed a wooden ball cut in half as a canvas on which he then painted what he saw reflected in it²⁰. In other words, it was that mirror as a whole that ultimately became the device that helped him to achieve a plausible effect.

Although painters employed mirrors in their works and the Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophies included them as metaphors of the divine²¹, Italian artists did not make use of them as much as their Flemish counterparts did for achieving odd perspectives. This changed with Giovanni Bellini (c. 1430-1516) and Giorgione (c. 1475-1510), due to which the influence of Flemish painters, above all van Eyck, increased. In Bialostocki's words, "It is striking that the round, convex mirror does not appear in Italian pictures and does not play in Italian art the ingenious role given to it by Netherlandish artists"²².

Some scholars, Bialostocki included, have held that the distortions would have dissuaded Italian artists much more than their Flemish counterparts. Bialostocki then refers to Giovanni Bellini's *Allegory of Vanitas-Prudentia* (c. 1490-1505) (Fig.3) as an exception to the rule, although "even when we meet a case in which an Italian artist represented a round mirror, it does not play any role in the creation of an illusionistic effect but is given a purely symbolic meaning"²³. Nevertheless, from that point onward, we can find Venetian examples in which the representation of the mirror already gives a visual illusion, serving to reflect different sections of the represented object.



Figure 3. G. Bellini, *Allegory of Vanitas-Prudentia* (c. 1490-1505). Public domain. Source: Wikipedia

Needless to say that Bialostocki overlooked Parmigianino's self-portrait, while his point of view is debatable, despite the fact that they are certainly less examples than in the Flemish artistic milieu. This seems to have been down more to different traditions and particular tastes than to anything else. Precedents of this painting include Petrus Christus' *A Goldsmith in His Shop, Possibly Saint Eligius* (1449) (Fig. 4), in which there is a small section with a convex mirror reflecting the image of two men, and Quentin Matsys' *Money-Changer and His Wife* (1515) (Fig. 5) with a small convex mirror reflecting a window²⁴.

As to the forms portrayed, he displayed his prowess as a demiurgic artist, for the painting reflects his enormous ingenuity. Its optical deformations create a false effect that has garnered more scholarly attention over the centuries than other, more conventional techniques. The painter would repeat this ingenious visual play in subsequent works.

For example, in the *Virgin with Child, St John the Baptist, Magdalene and Zachariah* (Fig. 6), Parmigianino painted Zachariah in the foreground,

¹⁹ Rudolf Arnheim, *The Power of the Center. A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 115-117, 139.

²⁰ Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti*, 794.

²¹ On the importance of the round forms for Hermetism and Neoplatonism, see Roger Ferrer-Ventosa, "On the Perfect Sphere: The Preference for Circular Compositions for Depicting the Universe in Medieval and Early Modern Art", *Religions*, 15, 2, 171 (2024), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020171>

²² Jan Bialostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting. Reality and Transience", in *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in honor of Millard Meiss*, eds. Irving Lavin & John Plummer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), 67.

²³ Bialostocki, "Man and Mirror in Painting. Reality and Transience", 67.

²⁴ It serves to reinforce Hans Belting's argument about the value of mirrors and windows as metaphors in Flemish painting of the period: Hans Belting, *Miroir du monde: l'invention du tableau dans les Pays-Bas* (Paris: Hazan, 2014), 129, 148-153.

almost as if he were entering or exiting the canvas or a transposition of the beholder into the holy scene—Bouleau calls it “a figure used as a screen”—²⁵a visual device for erasing the difference between the plane of the beholder and that of the depicted, a fusion of both in the magical “mirror” of the image. In his work Parmigianino, an artist who excelled in his desire to innovate, specifically used to perform an experimental visual analysis.



Figure 4. Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in His Shop, Possibly Saint Eligius* (1449). Public domain: Source: Wikipedia.



Figure 5. Quentin Matsys, *Money-Changer and His Wife* (1514). Public domain: Source: Wikipedia.



Figure 6. Parmigianino, *Virgin with Child, St John the Baptist, Magdalene and Zachariah* (c. 1530). Public domain. Source: wikiart.org

The self-portrait composition is based on the artist's face and his right hand. As Arnheim claims, the face and the hands serve as powerful compositional focal points for the visual structure of the human body²⁶, even more so when they are the focus of the composition owing to the distortion of the convexity that is reflected in it.

Both the face and the right hand are distorted as much by the mimetic representation of the mirror's effect as by the desire of the artist. It is difficult to disagree with Baltrusaitis' opinion that the head should have been larger, namely, half its size in real life, for it gives rise to an unreal representation of space²⁷. In his self-portrait, Parmigianino has an androgynous appearance—an aspect also noted by Hoyos—²⁸which demonstrates yet again the artist's appreciation of alchemy-Hermeticism²⁹. The fact that he identified with that figure perhaps contributed to his interest in the science of Hermes.

The oversized hand seems to call attention to his right hand (*recta manus*) as an artist, a tendency in Renaissance painting, and to the fact that the work has been painted by his own hand (*di sua propria mano*). *Recta manus* was a recurrent theme in Renaissance self-portraiture³⁰. Additionally, it allowed him to mark the shadows delicately, another feature deriving from the theory of Renaissance painting. In the Middle Ages, the idea of the image often ignored the issue

²⁶ Arnheim, *Power of the Center*, 162-171.

²⁷ Jurgis Baltrusaitis, *Le miroir. Essai sur une légende scientifique* (Paris : Aline Elmayan et du Seuil, 1978), 252.

²⁸ Antonio de Hoyos, *Parmigianino. Ensayo para una biografía* (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 1992), 29-30.

²⁹ Roger Ferrer Ventosa, “El andrógino: una persona no dual.” *Goya*, 377, (2021).

³⁰ Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual life of the early renaissance artist*, 243.

²⁵ Charles Bouleau, *The Painter's Secret Geometry* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2014), 174.

of the shadows cast by bodies, owing in part to its ontological character. According to that theory, as icons represented the spirit, the bodies depicted frequently lacked shadows³¹.

The hand also allowed Parmigianino to refer to Mannerism, the artistic current to which he belonged, to wit, not only *maniera* or manner, but also handmade. The hand of the artist cannot be portrayed more definitely than this. Similarly, it also calls to mind the Platonic *mania*, which Hermetic-Neoplatonic Renaissance men called frenzy, closely associated with melancholy. In this case there is no etymological link between the Italian word for hand and *mania*.

But the main idea is that of the demiurge, another essential Platonic concept expressed in the artist's tremendous display of personal talent and his self-iconization. The term "demiurge", which was already an archaism in the time of Plato, signified "artisan", among other things. Plato suggested the idea of a craftsman, although for the cosmos, who would bring order to all that existed. It appears in quite a few dialogues, although it is in the *Timaeus* where the cosmological role is established. It was the demiurge who tied a knot in the world's soul. When creating time, he caused the sun, the moon, and the five planets of classical cosmology to emerge so that their movement would divide temporal magnitudes³². Plato extolled the demiurge as an excellent and matchless creator, without malice, and claimed that he would like everything to be made in his image and likeness³³, the flawless work of a peerless maker. So as to form the cosmos, the creator focused on the perfect immutable model, which would be demonstrated by the fact that the world was beautiful and its creator good³⁴.

Concerning Hermeticism, this figure was used to explain its vision of the cosmos. According to the first treatise of the *Corpus hermeticum*³⁵, the human creator possessed a divine soul. Perhaps it is for this reason that human beings, whose *nous* is the image of God—together with the world—recreate reality as artists, imitate that divine *nous* of He in whose image and likeness they have been made and, when observing the creative work of the divine artisan, want to emulate Him³⁶.

In other words, an artist influenced by that cultural horizon may feel that his creative actions are a limited and imperfect version but a version of those of a god who has created the world. If human beings can be classified as a beautiful work, as is held in the Hermetic *Asclepius*³⁷, this is because of their divine essence, the *nous* that is the image of the divine. And

if they have been made in the image and likeness of God, their potential can be inferred as their ability to generate³⁸.

Moreover, the great miracle of humankind can be justified in that, for example, humans continue the creative work of the world that God started. Certainly, it can be deduced that the theurgic magician or the artist can develop it closer to the divine model. Broadly speaking, a roughly Hermetic sensitivity considers that, of all creatures, the human being has the divine potential to be an agent of creation, owing to his *nous* made in the image and likeness of God. The demiurgic artist would be capable of creating the appearance of an autonomous universe in their artwork, showcasing their divine power of creation.

The artistic filiation was so intense that, as already noted, the very word "demiurge" was an archaism for craftsman. Artists were not only compared to God, but so as to explain Him—or His demiurgic version—analogy with artists or craftsmen were employed. For instance, in the text *Korē Kosmou* from *The Excerpts of Stobaeus* (compiled in the 5th century), God is called "Master and Craftsman of this new world"³⁹. That demiurgic craftsman possessed a universal dimension, with the aim of bringing order to matter. Whereby the authors of Middle Platonism, the Platonist philosophers of the transitional phase between early Platonism and Neoplatonism, like Plutarch (c. 46-c. 119), and Apuleius (c. 120-c. 170), were accustomed to employing similes with artistic and artisanal activities to describe the role of the demiurge⁴⁰.

Creation was conceived as an ongoing process in which human beings played an important role, given the filiation of their *nous* with the divine. Bruno considered that the universe was infinite because this was the nature of God, so the conception of the universe was considerably better. And if God were infinite, it followed that whatever originated from Him would also be so; God instantly comprised infinite dimensions of an equally infinite number⁴¹.

That relationship between aesthetics and theology has undergone substantial changes throughout history. According to Kris and Kurz, there are at least two versions of the analogy between God and artists. On the one hand, the medieval version, in which to understand divinity it was compared to artists and, on the other, the Renaissance version, in which it was the other way round, namely, so as to enhance the dignity of the creator of art, he was related to the archetypical creator: God⁴².

³¹ Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997), 44.

³² *Timaeus* 38c, in Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato* (London: MacMillan & Co, 1888), 123.

³³ *Timaeus* 29e, in Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato*, 91.

³⁴ *Timaeus* 28c-29a, in Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato*, 87-89. "If now this universe is fair and its Artificer good, it is plain that he looked to the eternal", *Timaeus* 29a, in Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato*, 89. But although this universe is the most beautiful among generated beings, it is not perfect, as only the original model can be.

³⁵ *Corpus hermeticum* I, 12, in Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, 3.

³⁶ *Corpus hermeticum* 1.13, in Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, 3.

³⁷ *Asclepius*, 6, in Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, 69.

³⁸ See Roger Ferrer Ventosa, "El artista demiúrgico. Creación de vida autónoma de las estatuas animadas a los autómatas, homúnculos y replicantes". *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas*, Vol. XLIV, n. 120, (2022). <https://doi.org/10.22201/ii.18703062e.2022.120.2772>

³⁹ *Hermetica II: The Excerpts of Stobaeus*, SH 23, in M. David Litwa (ed.) *Hermetica II: The Excerpts of Stobaeus, Papyrus Fragments, and Ancient Testimonies in and English Translation with Notes and Introductions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.

⁴⁰ Carl Séan O'Brien, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought. Secondary Gods and Divine Mediators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 305. In *The Republic*, Plato employs the expression 'maker of images': Plato, *The Republic, of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1941), 324.

⁴¹ Giordano Bruno, *Mundo, magia, memoria* (Madrid: Biblioteca nueva, 2007), 175 & 181.

⁴² Ernst Kris, & Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 54-57.

The demiurgic artist influenced by Hermeticism did not seek to produce exact copies. In the Neoplatonic tradition of aesthetic theory, it was held that the inner vision was more important than the mere imitation of what could be seen with the naked eye, inasmuch as it sought to represent the essence of things, their archetype. As expressed in this theory, the aim would have been to connect with the imaginal or even with the intelligible dimension, with the root ideas, so as to depict the model that was transferred to the realm of the senses.

This question about what should be copied was a subject of reflection in Renaissance aesthetics. It is believed that one of the changes of the Cinquecento with respect to the Quattrocento was the greater importance attached to imagination, invention, the unfinished and, consequently, interest in sketching, all of which are evidently characteristics of Mannerism. According to the theory of Neoplatonic art, artists were supposed to focus on that which had already been the center of attention of the demiurge: the immutable model, which was the one that ought to be imitated, rather than that generated by matter⁴³, which would be its embodiment.

Accordingly, the artist would be an original and authentic author. But who was that author? Etymologically speaking, that which he himself is. The cosmic maker would have therefore served as an original model to be imitated, a model of the aesthetic maker, thanks to which the artist was able to create microcosms in his images, monadic universes that reflected the original model created by the cosmic demiurge.

5. A melancholic man. Parmigianino as a son of Saturn

As a character trait of artists, sages and alchemists, melancholy was another of the cornerstones of the Renaissance Hermetic-Neoplatonic cultural horizon, the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* having been associated with that mood. In Fagiolo dell'Arco's view, Parmigianino's self-portrait represents melancholy in the Renaissance tradition of works with this Hermetic-Neoplatonic meaning. In fact, this element also appears in other earlier works of the painter⁴⁴, while Fagiolo dell'Arco even goes so far as to call him "*Uomo malinconico*"⁴⁵.

Etymologically speaking, it means "black bile" or "black humor". Saturn, as the lord of time, was also the patron of this state, prone to regretful reflection on the passing of time with the resulting nostalgia, expressed elegiacally, in which fragility and pain were assumed, which led to a closer relationship with death and even suicide. During the period when Saturn was dominant, there occurred a *catabasis* into one's own personal hell.

According to the broadly Hermetic theory of life and society, impediments help sages, who need introversion, a meditative mood in which they can ponder. Therefore, those who devoted themselves to study

or meditation came under the influence of Saturn, the god of deprivation for the rest of the humanity. In contrast, the god guided artists, mystics and intellectuals, for seclusion, doubt and even productive sadness formed part of the creative process⁴⁶.

That ambivalence of intellectual limitations but, at the same time, insightfulness led to a dual assessment of its influence on the basis of Hermeticism-Neoplatonism. On the one hand, it was defined by the restrictions that the bringer of old age, deprivation and difficulties that prevented humans from succeeding imposed. On the other, however, it enhanced wisdom and the full development of the *nous* or intellect, the most divine aspect of human beings.

Ficino, the great Hermetic philosopher of the Early Renaissance often reflected on this. The translator of the *Corpus hermeticum* and courtier magician in the Florence of the Medici was precisely born under the sign of Saturn, and recognized as such since when he came into the world, the planet was in Libra. According to the literature, this meant that his life would be marked by frequent attacks of despondency and that he would always be prone to such a mood⁴⁷.

Ficino contended that Saturn lorded it over the pantheon and the planetary system as the most powerful (and highest) of all. Those who devoted their time to enquiring into secrets were not only Hermetic but also belonged to the lineage of Saturn, since that energy allowed them to delve deeper into the highest things and to persevere in and focus entirely on their study⁴⁸. According to him, Saturn was the tutelary god of contemplative and intellectual people, whose lives tended towards ideas, a Jupiter but for sublime souls. Those who truly devoted their time to contemplation relished their happiness and lived to a ripe old age, nourishing themselves with the fruits of the Earth and untiringly pursuing the study of wisdom and religion⁴⁹. To Ficino's mind, intellectuals and artists, above all philosophers, were melancholic because they observed and reflected on incorporeal things, which resulted in their minds separating from their bodies, an attitude that made the latter lifeless and melancholic⁵⁰.

That attention to this humor was no more than yet another expression of Ficino's Neoplatonic roots. As scholars of Neoplatonic theory were introspective, Azara suggests that the poignancy of their thoughts would have resulted from the fact that they were aware that those ideas would never come to fruition⁵¹. There was a dialectic tension between whatever was not going to take place and the need to escape from matter. Platonic sages felt nostalgic about the intelligible world from which they hailed, for they

⁴³ *Timaeus* 28a-b, in Plato, *The Timaeus of Plato*, 87.

⁴⁴ Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino: un saggio sull'ermetismo nel Cinquecento* (Roma: Mario Bulzoni Stampa, 1970), 32.

⁴⁵ Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino*, 53.

⁴⁶ On the melancholy affecting artists and alchemists: Laurinda S. Dixon, "Bosch's *Garden of Delights Triptych*: Remnants of a 'Fossil' Science". *The Art Bulletin*, 63, 1 (1981): 110. Rudolf Wittkower, & Margot Wittkower, *Nati sotto Saturno* (Torino: Einaudi, 1968).

⁴⁷ Gary Lachman, *The Quest for Hermes Trismegistus* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2011) [e-book], pos. 2579.

⁴⁸ *De vita libri tres*, III, 24, in Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1980), 173.

⁴⁹ *De vita libri tres*, III, 22, in Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 165-166.

⁵⁰ *De vita libri tres*, I, 4-5, in Ficino, *The Book of Life*, 6-9.

⁵¹ Pedro Azara, *Imagen de lo invisible* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1992), 143.



Figure 7. Parmigianino, *Camerino in the castle of Fontanellato* (1523-24). Public domain. Source: wikiart.org.

contemplated truth before descending like a meteorite towards incarnation. But they perpetually longed for their real home, which gave rise to melancholy.

In view of that interest, it should come as no surprise that the science of Hermes also had its melancholic facet. The *nigredo* stage or black melancholy is necessary for any process of creation, the required breaking down so as to imagine something new. Before inventing something, it was essential to dissolve that which was old and fossilized. In the psyche, psychological melancholy would be equivalent to breaking down matter in the *nigredo* stage, a sort of gelid state, the spirit of winter, a frozen hell before spring returns and kings are reborn. With this *catabasis* or descent into their own personal hell, alchemists put themselves to the test.

6. Diana and Actaeon or hunting wisdom

One of Parmigianino's masterpieces is the fresco featuring Diana and Actaeon, which adorns a small room, the Camerino, in the castle of Fontanellato. It was produced around 1523 (Fig. 7), when the artist was about to turn, or had just turned, 20, before his trip to Rome, and is approximately contemporary with the self-portrait. Nonetheless, he probably had little say in the choice of the theme which, in all likelihood, was decided on by his patron Gian Galeazzo Sanvitale or by some or other learned member of his court. It is certainly significant in an artist who ended up earning himself the epithet of expert alchemist, given the parallels that can be drawn between this myth and Hermetic alchemy. Indeed, Fagiolo dell'Arco offers an alchemical interpretation of the piece⁵².

In the symbolic corpus of the science of Hermes, the truth is that Actaeon has personified the alchemist, who scrutinizes matter-Diana in search of his

material and spiritual quintessence, so as to discover the ultimate secrets of the cosmos, absolute wisdom which is both beautiful and true. Once those secrets have been revealed when Actaeon sees Diana naked, just as she was born, she transforms him into a stag, which is subsequently torn apart by his own hounds incapable of recognizing him. In other words, the quintessence shatters the ignorance that the alchemist has possessed and he is no longer now a human seeker.

In the frescos decorating the Camerino in the castle of Fontanellato, which was originally designed as a bathroom, Parmigianino placed a round mirror at the center (Fig. 8) of a program based on Diana and Actaeon, maybe as an allusion to the long tradition linking this myth to the nature of images. Like Narcissus, Actaeon is a hunter of images. This metaphor already appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), when Actaeon sees his reflection in the pool the whole episode being understood as a transgression⁵³.

The myth operates as one of the essences of the image, whereby the mirror's centrality. As in a mirror, images naturally reflect something. Those of this myth mirror the transformation process from a natural state of being (Actaeon as a human being) to the thing they proposed (a stag). Lastly, the image as a reflection and the stag both belong to the realm of Diana, the personification of night, combining the changing nature of the moon and water.

It was the philosopher Giordano Bruno, greatly influenced by Hermetism, who often used the myth as a Hermetic explanation in his *The Heroic Frenzies* (1585). He incorporated Hermetic ideas into his cosmological theories, exploring the mystical aspects of knowledge

⁵² Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino*, 34-41 & 255.

⁵³ *Metamorphoses* III, 187-312, in Ovid, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (London: J.F. Dove, 1826), 61-64.



Figure 8. Parmigianino, *Round mirror in Fontanellato* (1523-24). Public domain. Source: Wikipedia.

and the universe. Although he lived a bit later than Parmigianino, both seemed to share a similar cultural horizon and consequently employed similar symbols. We know Bruno's intention here with greater certainty, the myth being the image of the sage who pursues wisdom so as to understand the truth, but who is ultimately hunted down by that same wisdom that tears his ignorant self to pieces.

This metaphor had already been employed by Nicholas of Cusa, one of philosophers who Bruno greatly admired, in one of his last treatises, *De venatione sapientiae* (*On the Pursuit of Wisdom*) (1463), but "pursuit" in the sense of hunting: "For philosophers are nothing but pursuers of wisdom"⁵⁴. Those with a more Italian Renaissance spirit, like Parmigianino and Bruno, would have linked that Hermetic mystical yearning to the gods.

For Bruno, Actaeon was a symbol of the human intellect, the personification par excellence of the virtues of the species. He developed the metaphor in two dialogues: at the beginning of the fourth dialogue in the first part and in the second of the second part⁵⁵. Actaeon, out hunting the divinity, sees the most beautiful face reflected in the waters, a fragment of which

Bruno takes advantage to draw parallels between water and mirrors⁵⁶. In my view, it would be a reference to the primeval human being, the divine image, something deeply rooted in Hermeticism⁵⁷.

In a sonnet, qualified by Yates as Petrarchan⁵⁸, Bruno played with symbolic language in a very iconic way. The love felt for the beloved woman corresponds to that felt for God. Bruno was searching for a natural contemplation that revealed the splendor of the divinity in beings and inanimate objects; he strove to see the divine light reflected in the shadows, as

⁵⁴ *De gli heroici furori* I, IV, in Bruno, *Heroic Frenzies*, 124.

⁵⁷ In the Hermetic *Asclepius*, mankind, as with the cosmos, is considered to have been created in the image and likeness of God: *Asclepius* 10, in Copenhaver (ed.), *Hermetica*, 72-3. Similar comparisons can be found in the *Corpus hermeticum*.

⁵⁸ Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 283, 287, 394. The metaphor of Actaeon had already been used by Petrarch himself in his *Canzone* XXIII. After a number of frustrated attempts, the narrator is transformed into a stag who sees the beautiful and cruel Diana, a revealing Petrarchan election of adjectives—"Bella et cruda", Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 2010), 100. The motion of the burning midday sun recalls (and differs from) how Bruno employs the metaphor as a reference to divine knowledge of nature. Then, he is obliged to flee from Diana, the greatest hunter of all. Petrarch's Actaeon has Christian connotations, for the contemplation of the lovely but cruel goddess, with a female body, leads to his destruction.

⁵⁴ *De venatione sapientiae*, I, 5, in Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical speculations* (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1998), 1283.

⁵⁵ *De gli heroici furori* I, IV, in Bruno, *Heroic Frenzies*, 123. *De gli heroici furori* II, II, in Bruno, *Heroic Frenzies*, 225-226.

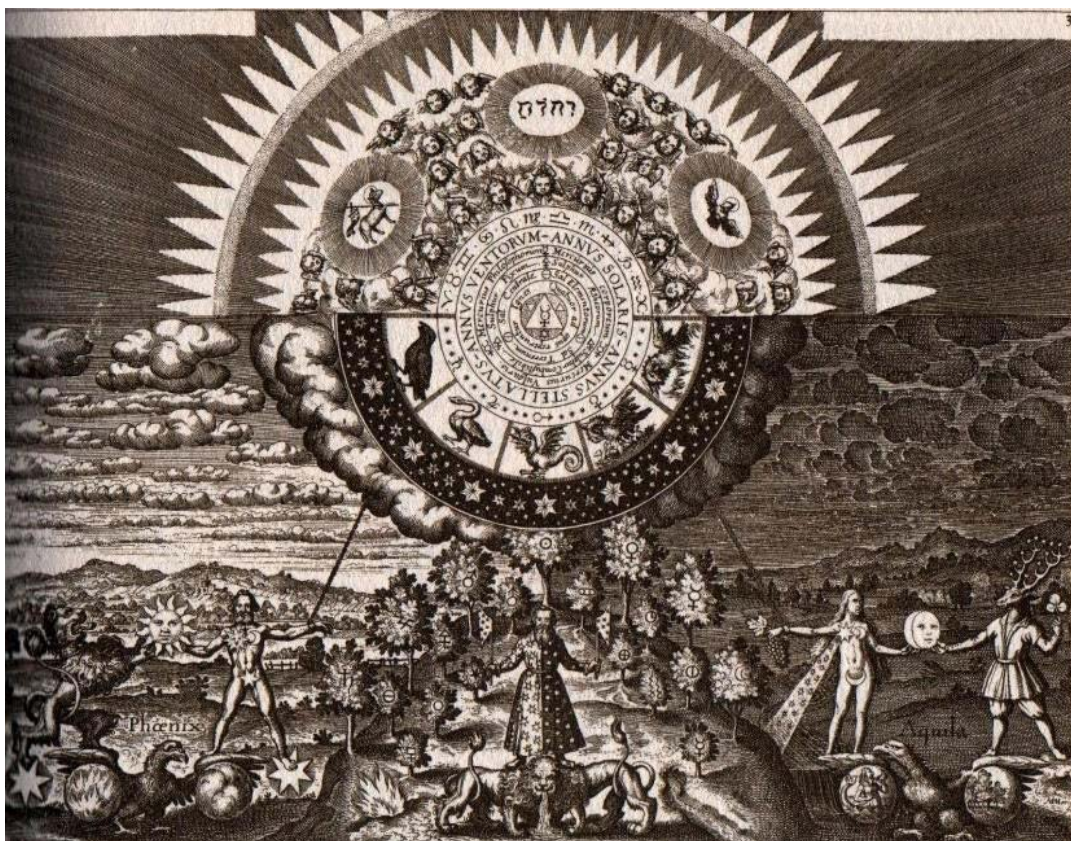


Figure 9. J.D. Mylius, *Opus medico-chymicum* (1618). Public domain. Source: Wikipedia.

Apollo was reflected in Diana, the sun in the moon⁵⁹. The images deriving from the human senses or imagination are like unfinished windows onto the ultimate cosmic reality; the seer has to interpret them, as if he were an Actaeon following in Diana's footsteps. With a few indications, he has to be able to conceive that which exists fully, the infinite or Diana⁶⁰.

According to Bruno, the sage should act like Actaeon, namely, he should pursue the vision of the truth until being torn apart and devoured by his own pack of hounds. When the sage truly becomes Actaeon, the hunter who has been searching for Diana-God is transformed into a sacrificial offering, to wit, Diana's stag⁶¹. For this reason, in some alchemical engravings the goddess appears next to a being with a human body and a stag's head (Fig. 9).

In the intellectual process and in the wish to become an Actaeon, devoured by Diana-God's pack of hounds, the eyes of the beholder first become a mirror that reflects a representation of goodness and beauty. That movement triggers Actaeon's emotions, prompting him to desire the object (Diana) and to want to become one with it (her). As a result of this desire, the intellect will try to attain it⁶².

It is Bruno's gaze that is frenzied. In Bruno, the hunter of wisdom has to possess a fundamental virtue in that Platonism close to the mysteries and in those philosophers whose thinking was based on it:

mania or, as the Renaissance Hermetic Neoplatonists called it, frenzy, enthusiasm, in this case for knowledge possessed by those who felt it.

In Ficino's theological conception, eyes and visual stimuli were very important in the process of generating frenzy, while revealing the secret of the ultimate truth. It was eyes that pierced humans with love—this idea had already appeared in the amatory poetry of troubadours—not because of a mere perception, but because they were seduced and, love-struck, drawn towards the object of their devotion⁶³. The beloved figure settled in the spirit through images; the rest was then down to imagination.

In sum, Bruno's Hermetic interpretation of the episode revolves around the theory of the image; the wise man loves being torn apart by the vision of the divine, because that involves leaving behind his lower status as a human so as to attain the highest stage, viz. his union with the divine.

Finally, by the same token, the sacred fountain is a symbolic element frequently found in the alchemical corpus, both in images, as seen in the *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550) (Fig. 10), and in texts, such as *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz* (1616), among others, as well as directly in the explanations found in treatises, involving processes of dissolution (*solve*) and purification. In this symbolic framework, Diana or the material must be bathed in the sacred fountain to cleanse its impurities and undergo transmutation into the Philosophers' Stone. It is important to note that the presence of a fountain

⁵⁹ For Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz, it means that the seeker is not searching for Apollo or the absolute truth, which would blind him, but for the moon's reflection, the beautiful image: Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz, *La tercera dimensión del espejo*, 249.

⁶⁰ Díaz-Urmeneta Muñoz, *La tercera dimensión del espejo*, 310.

⁶¹ *De gli heroici furori* II, II, in Bruno, *Heroic Frenzies*, 224-227.

⁶² *De gli heroici furori* II, III, in Bruno, *Heroic Frenzies*, 239-240.

⁶³ In *De amore* 6, VI, in Marsilio Ficino, *Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1944), 188-189.

in artwork doesn't necessarily imply an alchemical meaning each time; however, it becomes noteworthy in the case of an artist who was later described as obsessed with the alchemical practice. The alchemists' strong interest in thermal waters, preferably more mineralized (or metallized), is a recurring theme in this type of literature⁶⁴.

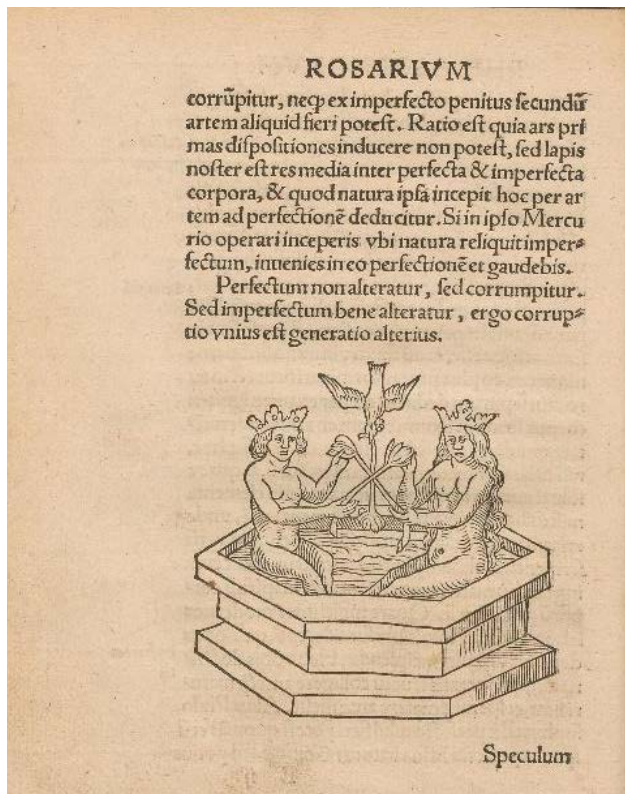


Figure 10. Anonymous, *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550). Public domain. Image by kind permission of e-rara: <https://www.e-rara.ch/cgj/content/zoom/3179414>

7. Peritissimo alchemist

The extent of Parmigianino's involvement in alchemical research is one of the most controversial aspects related to the painter. Therefore, to conclude this examination of the foundations of the Hermetic-Neoplatonic *forma mentis* in Parmigianino's oeuvre, the following pages are dedicated to exploring his probable appreciation of alchemy, a practice traditionally associated with the cultural context described here. Although James Elkins warns of the risk of exaggerating the importance of alchemy as a ruling metaphor in works of art, in the case of Parmigianino⁶⁵, both his paintings and the news about his life do indeed point to an important role of the so-called science of Hermes.

The demiurgic capacity associated with Hermeticism appears as emphatically as it does in Parmigianino in very

few other artists of the period. To demonstrate this, the focus has been placed on the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, one of his most significant works that earned him the greatest reputation in his lifetime. But why is it attributed to Hermetic roots? His contemporaries had already mentioned that influence, like Vasari, owing to his alchemical research, a practice linked to Hermeticism.

Another factor is that there were painters approximately contemporary to him who had taken their first steps in the science of Hermes. There are extant woodcuts by Beccafumi whose alchemical theme is much more explicit than that of Parmigianino's works (Fig. 11). Additionally, Vasari also demonstrated his passion, although in his case only applied to the field of metallurgy. And the painter from Parma remained in close contact with Rosso Fiorentino, another Mannerist interested in the practice⁶⁶.



Figure 11. Domenico Beccafumi, *The Various Operations of Alchemy* (1530-35). Public domain. Source: Wikipedia

Through the analysis of the self-portrait, it can be observed how some of the elements that it contains can be linked to alchemical and Hermetic-Neoplatonic themes—the artist's androgyny and the melancholic state and demiurgic feeling that he conveys—without these, of course, being conclusive evidence. Although for Vasari the painter became obsessed with alchemy in the final years of his life, a certain inclination towards Hermeticism can be glimpsed in some of his previous works, such as this

⁶⁴ Elisabetta Fadda, "Arte e alchimia negli ultimi anni del Parmigianino," in *L'art de la Renaissance entre science et magie*, ed., Philippe Morel (Paris: Somogy, 2006), 295-324, 315, n. 21.

⁶⁵ James Elkins, "On the Unimportance of Alchemy in Western Painting," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift / Journal of Art History*, 61:1-2 (1992), 21-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/002233609208604304>

⁶⁶ Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, & Francesca del Torre Scheuch, "Pre-messa", in *Parmigianino e la pratica dell'alchimia*, eds. Sylvia Ferino-Pagden & Francesca del Torre Scheuch, *et al.* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2003), 15-17.

self-portrait, which also reflects a worldview linked to the science of Hermes.

It warrants noting that the comparison between alchemy and painting has traditionally enjoyed much critical fortune. By and large, the focus has been placed on the analogies between the alchemical process and the preparation of colors for painting on canvas⁶⁷. Practical alchemy provided artists with artificial colors. For instance, the Renaissance artist Cennino Cennini referred to the Great Work for preparing painters' pigments⁶⁸. Even Philip Ball believes that it is probable that the rich ultramarine, deriving from lapis lazuli, was the result of alchemical experimentation⁶⁹.

But whether or not Parmigianino was an alchemist has been a controversial issue in academia, with differences of opinion. As already observed, it was Vasari who offered clues about Parmigianino's alchemical leanings when claiming that the artist was fascinated by the science of Hermes. In his *The Lives of the Artists*, he attached such importance to this issue that he even went so far as to blame the Great Work for having obsessed him to such an extent as to send him to an early grave⁷⁰. In his accusatory biographical note on the painter, one of the most critical, he claims that, even though he possessed a beautiful and charming spirit, he was adversely affected by the alchemical chimera of turning base metal into gold, which was the reason why he persevered in a quest that was a waste of time and, consequently, was always penniless and the target of contempt and defamation⁷¹.

According to Vasari, he became particularly obsessed with alchemy during the final years of his life, after having returned to Parma, where he attempted to freeze mercury to make his fortune, but which obliged him to spend much more on ovens than he earned, in addition to being exceedingly time-consuming. In Vasari's account, when he realized that he could not meet the deadline of his commission in the sanctuary of Santa Maria della Steccata, he fled from Parma. In hiding, he devoted his heart and soul to alchemy, a time during which he led a disorderly life as a result of which he took on a wild, bearded and hirsute appearance. Finally, he even ceased to fear for his personal safety, returning to Parma where he was arrested and died of indignation⁷².

However, Vasari's opinion was subsequently contradicted, as was the case of Ludovico Dolce in his *A Dialogue on Painting* (1557), also known as *Aretin* after Pietro Aretino, precisely one of the first people to own the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, according to the Italian architect, painter and writer, who denied that Parmigianino had been obsessed with alchemy⁷³. Having said that, judging by Dolce's account, this denial seems to refer to the age-old confusion between alchemy and *chrysopeia*, the latter indeed being the

art of attempting to transmute base metals into gold, for he insists that the painter scorned money and, consequently, would have had no interest in such a transmutation. But, despite popular belief, *chrysopeia* is not equivalent to alchemy, but merely one of its branches.

All considered, Vasari was not the only person to hint at Parmigianino's interest in the Hermetic art. Edoari da Erba, another scholar of the artist who was roughly his contemporary, also emphasized that obsessive facet of the painter, whom he referred to as a "*peritissimo*" (highly skilled) alchemist⁷⁴. This remark is particularly relevant owing to the fact that Edoari studied the experts in the occult arts of the period, for his own grandfather had been an alchemist, and, moreover, was highly versed in the history of Parma. As he would have us believe, in Parma of the Cinquecento there was a network of researchers who devoted their time to these issues, which in alchemical terminology could almost be called a golden chain of transmission of Hermetic wisdom⁷⁵.

As to that controversy, which is still a subject of debate in some academic circles, it was Fagiolo dell'Arco, an expert in Parmigianino, who took the firmest stance in this respect⁷⁶. He contended that the influence of alchemy on him was reflected in his original and innovative spirit and in his ability to think in images. By dell'Arco's reckoning, many of his works can be interpreted along these lines.

Earlier on in the twentieth century, Rudolf and Margot Wittkower had included Parmigianino among those artists with an interest in alchemy, on the basis of Vasari's account⁷⁷. Schwarz also corroborated that interest. According to him, the artist saw himself in this alchemical light. His interest in the subject reached such a point that he was unable to finish the frescos in the sanctuary of Santa Maria della Steccata in Parma (Fig. 12)⁷⁸.

Elisabetta Fadda has pointed in the same direction when interpreting those frescos—one of Parmigianino's last commissions for which he was accused of failing to fulfil his contractual obligations—from an alchemical perspective. In the part that he managed to complete there are three wise virgins and three foolish ones, representing the soul mindful of God. Above and next to them there are six vases with lights burning in different colors within them, two black ones, two white ones and two red ones (Fig. 13). Those knowledgeable of the symbolism of the Great Work would immediately associate the three colors with the three principal stages of alchemy, to wit, *nigredo*, *albedo* and *rubedo*, plus the two works, namely, the Small and the Great Work, the moon and the sun. Nonetheless, the problem with Fadda's interpretation is that they are not ordered in this way.

⁶⁷ Ferino-Pagden, & Torre Scheuch, "Premessa", 15-17.

⁶⁸ Philip Ball, *Bright Earth. The Invention of Colour* (London: Vintage, 2008), 87.

⁶⁹ Ball, *Bright Earth*, 85-115.

⁷⁰ Ferino-Pagden & del Torre Scheuch, "Premessa," 15-7.

⁷¹ Vasari, *Le vite de'più eccellenti*, 793-794.

⁷² Vasari, *Le vite de'più eccellenti*, 798-800.

⁷³ Aretino, in Mark W. Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 182.

⁷⁴ In Elisabetta Fadda, "Da Parma a Casalmaggiore: Parmigianino ultimo atto", in *Parmigianino e la pratica dell'alchimia*, eds. Sylvia Ferino-Pagden & Francesca Del Torre Scheuch, *et al.* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2003), 39.

⁷⁵ Fadda, "Da Parma a Casalmaggiore", 40-48.

⁷⁶ Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino*, 11-14.

⁷⁷ Wittkower, & Wittkower, *Nati sotto Saturno*, 98-100.

⁷⁸ Arturo Schwarz, "Introduzione", in *Arte e alchimia. Arte e scienza. XLII Esposizione internazionale d'arte, La Biennale di Venezia*, ed. Arturo Schwarz, (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1986), 17.



Figure 12. Parmigianino, *Santa Maria della Steccata* (1531-39). Public domain. Source: Wikipedia



Figure 13 - Parmigianino, *Detail Santa Maria della Steccata* (1531-39), *rubedo vase*. Public domain. Source: Wikipedia.

The colors of the vases are inherent to alchemy and their forms denote a practical knowledge, some or other direct experience of them⁷⁹ as the art was practiced at the time. Notwithstanding the frescos' religious meaning in the Marian context of the sanctuary, this did not prevent Parmigianino from including the paraphernalia of the Great Work and, more importantly in the case of this work, his sufficient interest in alchemy to employ them in one way or

another. In the alchemical literature there are a number of books containing similar engravings depicting vases of that type resting on tripods⁸⁰.

It is fair to say that the frescos on the vault can also be interpreted according to Christian mysticism. Nevertheless, exegetes contrasting one interpretation with the other fail to take into account that most medieval and Renaissance alchemists reflected on and symbolized the metaphysical part of the practice

⁷⁹ Fadda, "Arte e alchimia negli ultimi anni del Parmigianino," 303.

⁸⁰ Fadda, "Arte e alchimia negli ultimi anni del Parmigianino," 319, n. 60.

in Christian terms, however heterodox they might have been in some cases.

But, as occurred in the Cinquecento, this assumption has come in for a certain amount of criticism. Mino Gabriele, a great connoisseur of the so-called science of Hermes, finds fault with dell'Arco's alchemical interpretation, at least in relation to some works, such as an engraving of the Resurrection which, despite addressing the same theme as that of the *Rosarium philosophorum* and other alchemical books, is in his opinion very different as regards the meaning of its symbols. He also analyses the enigmatic inscription appearing in the *Virgin with Child, St John the Baptist, Magdalene and Zachariah*, while censuring dell'Arco's alchemical interpretation of the *Madonna with the Long Neck* which, to my mind, in an excessive Christian exegesis, approaching the symbolism of the two paintings from a sole perspective⁸¹.

Another detractor is Hoyos who denies that Parmigianino was obsessed with alchemy, putting his use of chemical apparatuses down to the preparation of medicines to cure his melancholy⁸². Be that as it may, it warrants recalling that the Saturnine disease was a constituent element of the character of the Hermetic artist, as well as the starting point of all alchemical Great Work.

8. Conclusion

As a final anecdotal remark, this self-portrait was acquired by Rudolf II, the so-called alchemist-emperor. Wrongly attributed to Correggio, it was displayed in the imperial treasury in Prague until 1608⁸³. To sum up, it would have been a visual symbol of Parmigianino's artistic achievements as a painter, because of the difficulties that he had faced and overcome and the originality of the work⁸⁴.

In the foregoing, an attempt has been made to describe some of the most relevant features of the philosophical schools that forged Parmigianino's worldview, which are necessary for gaining further insights into the painter and his oeuvre. That constellation of Renaissance philosophy included Plato, Plotinus, Nicholas of Cusa and Hermetic texts, which first influenced Ficino and then Bruno. It has been shown here how, as themes, motifs and interests, they can be found in the oeuvre of Parmigianino, especially in his most celebrated work, the *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*.

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⁸¹ Mino Gabriele, "Linguaggi alchemici e iconografia cristiana: il caso del Parmigianino." In *Parmigianino e la pratica dell'alchimia*, eds, Sylvia Ferino-Pagden & Francesca Del Torre Scheuch et al. (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2003), 29-31. James Elkins also criticizes that alchemical interpretation based on the form of the Virgin, see James Elkins "On the Unimportance of Alchemy in Western Painting," 22-23.

⁸² Hoyos, *Parmigianino*.

⁸³ Fagiolo dell'Arco, *Il Parmigianino*, 63 & 257.

⁸⁴ Ames-Lewis, *The Intellectual life of the early renaissance artist*, 215-217.

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