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## **LEGENDS AND REALITIES OF UKRAINIAN ALCHEMY: THE KYIV ECHO OF LEGENDS OF "PHILOSOPHERS' DWELLINGS"**

In the article, the social and cultural repercussion of the phenomenon of alchemy is considered using specific examples. The authors study the basis and motivation for the creation of modern-day alchemical legends within the "dwellings of philosophers" concept; the means of their hypothetical implementation in the symbolism and imagery of the architecture of Kyiv houses of the verge of 19-20th centuries, in particular so-called "House of Alchemists" in the Pechersk district. The concept of the archetypal nature of alchemical symbols explains why they are regularly reproduced in art on a conscious or subconscious level, and still perceived by society. A comparative analysis of the figures of the facades of the early-20th century "House of Alchemists" and similar elements of the architecture of other Kyiv buildings of that time reveals their similarity to the graphic symbols of alchemy, although it does not reveal absolute coincidences with those presented in alchemical lexicons. Therefore, the hypothesis about the alchemical intentions of the owners or architects of buildings is neither well-proven nor definitively refuted and requires further investigation. Nevertheless, the considered situation illustrates the specifics of the existence of the phenomenon of alchemy in its legendary mode, in which specific historical realities are not crucial for the creation of an attractive legend or are used selectively. Manifestations of the echo of the alchemical worldview in modern society can have both conscious and subconscious nature. In the case of the "House of Alchemists" in Kyiv's Pechersk, such an echo is the very fact of appeal to the phenomenon of alchemy. It is significant that the name "House of Alchemists" appeared in our time when the popularity of the topic of alchemy is growing in the socio-cultural space. A perceptible echo of the phenomenon of alchemy in the realities of public life is an evidence of the relevance of its existence in the modern socio-cultural environment because the basic axiological ideals of the phenomenon have not undergone devaluation over time. Nowadays, the role of esoteric and non-scientific phenomena in the life of society is not diminished, and the image of alchemy as an alternative to modern rationality acquires new relevance. This situation seems to be inherent in transitional epochs marked by global shifts in worldview paradigms and axiological orientations motivating people to rediscover the "abyss of being", in particular in the categories of alchemical philosophy with its rich figurative and mythological dimension. Equally, similar trends were characteristic of the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the mentioned "House of Alchemists" was built in Kyiv.

**Key word:** alchemy; archetypes; architecture; Kyiv; the collective unconscious; legends; symbolism.

### **Introduction**

A social philosophical analysis of alchemical philosophy and worldview reveals that an essential feature of this phenomenon in the wide variety of its manifestations is the fundamental focus on obtaining an unlimited resource (Rodyhin, 2013). In the axiological dimension, this means a desire for a global breakthrough from a discretely determined world to the realm of the infinite. The powerful mental supply of this desire seems to be a determining factor in the longevity of the phenomenon of alchemy.

The essentially invariant transtemporal core of the phenomenon is constituted around the super-idea of the infinite, which determines its deep social relevance, rooted in mentality and collective psychology. For C.G. Jung, alchemy is one of the greatest searches for the unattainable (Jung, 2008: 47). At the same time, the unlimited seems to be unattainable, and the search for the unattainable is unlimited in time. Thus, the strict time limitations of the phenomenon existence are removed.

An alchemical truth can be adequately represented in the form of multidimensional abstract symbolic analogies

(Rabinovich, 2012: 98-99). In turn, namely, the alchemical symbolism is a realm where C.G. Jung saw clear manifestations of the archetypes of the collective unconscious - long-time existing images equally inherent in people of different eras (Jung, 2013: 12-14). Characteristic archetypal motives are manifested in the dreams of modern-day people, usually not related to alchemical issues (Jung, 2003: 3). Such manifestations are not limited to the scope of dreams. The fact that they are extrapolated to the sphere of art seems to be significant and not accidental, because, according to Jung, the mother's womb of any piece of art is a human soul (Jung, 1996: 255). Dr. Jung considered, for example, the frequent exploitation of the image of open eyes, in particular fish eyes, as a hermetic symbol of constant attention (Jung, 2003: 501, 571-572). Originating in antiquity, the symbol of the "all-seeing eye" has not lost its popularity for many centuries, being used in modern iconography, in particular, as a pictogram warning about video surveillance, as well as a part of numerous street graffiti.

If we consider that the only real thing from the past is the one acting at least today in its consequences (Lukasiewicz, 1999: 198), then there are reasons to assert the reality of the phenomenon of alchemy in modern society. This polymorphic phenomenon renews its relevance with expressive traits of fantasy because the perception of its manifestations is not constant and has a distinct temporal nature (Rozov, 1995). In addition, the application of the concept of "historical truth" to the completely mythologized realm of the alchemical universe is problematic. Thus, the correspondence of the alchemical legend to historical realities does not seem to be crucial (Rodyhin, Rodyhin, 2018). However, the very fact of its creation acquires significance as the evidence of a response to a certain social demand (Rodyhin, Rodyhina, Rodyhin, 2013). Thus, attempts to create new "alchemical" legends - a social echo of the existence of the phenomenon - become significant.

No less important is the study of an intertwining of historical realities and legends in an urban space, with its own mythology and socio-cultural chronotope. An example of such a space could be found in historical buildings of the city of Kyiv, including the so-called "House of Alchemists" studied in this article.

**This article aims** to use specific examples to consider the social echo of the phenomenon of alchemy in urban space; the basis and motivation for the creation of modern alchemical legends; the means of their hypothetical implementation in the symbols and emblems of architectural forms; to compare their form and content with noted historical analogues.

**The research methodology** included descriptive and comparative methods, analysis and synthesis, analogy, and modeling. The idea of a possible alchemical interpretation of the decorative figures of Kyiv houses was the basis of the research hypothesis. Materials of alchemical primary sources and dictionaries ("lexicons") of alchemical graphic symbolism were used for comparison. Based on this hypothesis and the available information, a speculative experiment was conducted to decipher the mentioned graphic elements of facade decoration in the context of alchemical symbolism.

### Results and discussion

Recently, the bas-relief figures on the facade of the early 20th-century building in Pechersk district of the city of Kyiv (built 1910; 8/15A Levandovska Str.) were presented on the Internet in terms of the secrets of the hermetic symbolism of Gothic cathedrals or other medieval buildings - "Dwellings of Philosophers" in the terminology of the 20th-century alchemist Fulcanelli (see: (Fulcanelli, 2008)), - in order to make the house an attractive object of sightseeing. Accordingly, the building was named "the House of Alchemists".

This fact is an illustrative example of the socio-cultural echo of the phenomenon of alchemy in its legendary mode with a projection on specific locations of urban space, like the legend of the Golden Street of Prague - "the street of alchemists".

Since legends, in particular, alchemical ones, have their own self-sufficient logic, which allows them to exist as a phenomenon of public consciousness almost independently of specific historical facts, one should try to consider the legend of the Kyiv "House of Alchemists" as a self-sufficient set of ideas and conduct a speculative experiment for the purpose of hypothetical deciphering of graphic elements of its facade in the context of alchemical symbols.

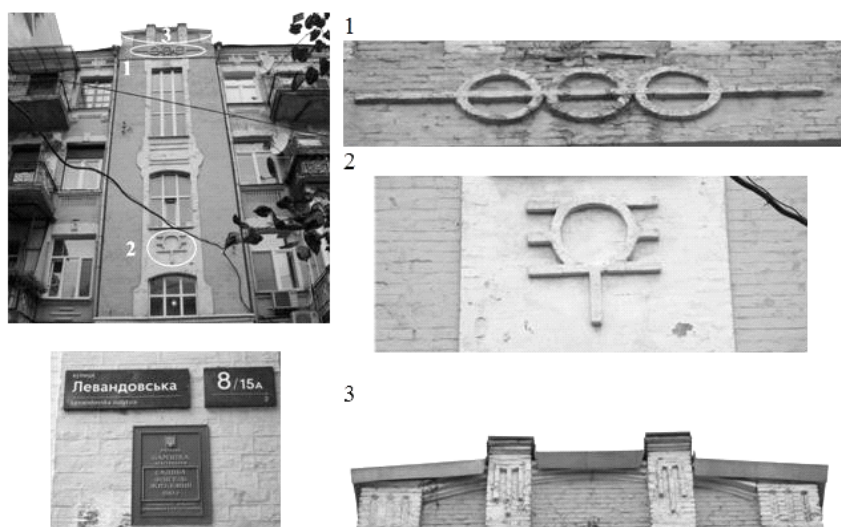


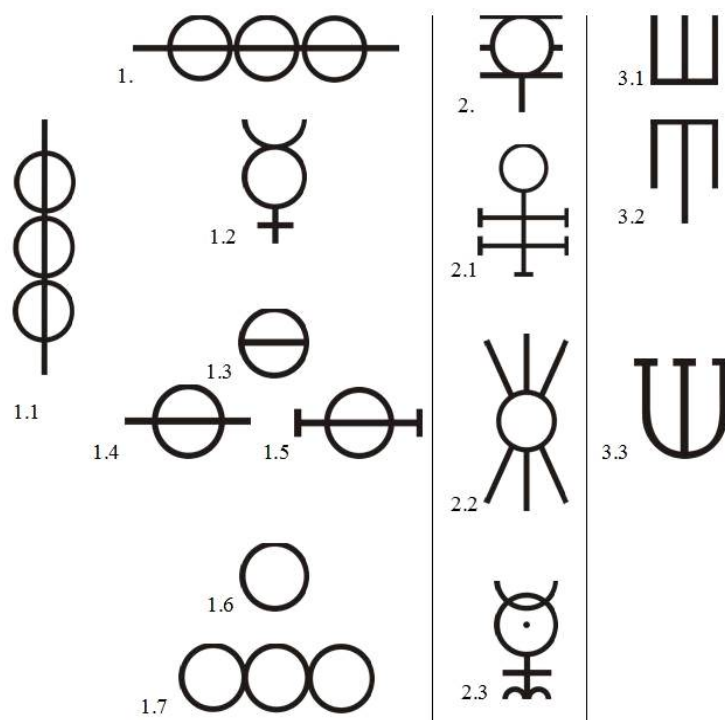
Fig. 1. The general view of the facade and the images of certain groups of symbols of the "House of Alchemists"

For the convenience of further consideration, we should conditionally number the above-mentioned architectural elements of the facade as symbols 1-3 (Fig. 1, here and below - photos by K. Rodyhin).

Symbol 1 allows for numerous interpretations. It seems probable that this is a stylized image of the caduceus of Mercury decorating the house whose owner was a merchant (compare with the vertically rotated version of symbol 1: Table 1, symbol 1.1). In general, the sign of the caduceus is repeatedly found in the early 20th-

century Kyiv buildings, for example, 9/28 Shevchenko Blvd. It is still actively exploited in the commercial sphere, for example, in the logo of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Ukraine. However, the established commercial orientation of perception does not deprive the symbol of deep alchemical content, even if it is not realized by either the customer or the performer. After all, Mercury-Hermes is one of the main characters of alchemical mythology, and the caduceus is his defining symbol and characteristic attribute.

**Table 1. Figures of the facade of the “House of Alchemists” (1, 2, 3.1, 3.2) and similar alchemical symbols**



Fulcanelli interpreted an image of a serpent entwining a golden scepter, that was found on the Notre Dame de Paris portal among many other images, in the following way. He identified it as a symbol of philosophical Mercury and considered the basis for the creation of the emblem as a Sulphur-Mercury interaction, where the serpent represents Mercury, and the golden scepter Sulphur. The product of this process is “philosophical Mercury”, designated by Hermeticists with the symbol of the caduceus (*Fulcanelli, 2008: 126*). These considerations clearly illustrate C.G. Jung’s views on the alchemical Great Work that is carried out in the interrelated psychophysical realm (see: *Jung, 1997b: 248*), as well as V. Rabinovich’s remarks on the polymorphism of existence and perception of alchemical realities in several planes, in particular those of natural science and philosophical symbolism (*Rabinovich, 2012: 50*).

According to Fulcanelli, just as the symbolic serpent wraps around the rod, so the alchemical Mercury holds Sulphur firmly. Sulphur “infects” and “spoils” Mercury, forming the original compound (“of the first order”) of the Great Work, which should turn into “Red Sulphur” after long and painstaking manipulations, and eventually overcome the shocking path of fulfillment of alchemical dreams (*Fulcanelli, 2008: 126, 129*). However, this, at first glance, purely fantastic route in the field of confusing philosophical abstractions and symbols may have a completely natural explanation. The chemical elements

Mercury (Hg) and Sulphur (S) react surprisingly easily with each other even with short-term grinding in a mortar under normal conditions ( $\text{Hg} + \text{S} \rightarrow \text{HgS}$ ). The reaction product (mercury sulphide HgS) is a chemically stable substance of black color, which looks visually consistent with an alchemical idea of the consequences of the beginning of the Great Work: the stage of Nigredo or Blackening. Under certain conditions, black mercury sulphide turns into a red crystalline modification, which can be speculatively related to the “Red Sulphur” mentioned by Fulcanelli, although hardly with the result of the classical scheme of transmutation, the stage of Rubedo or Redness. Here, natural science and philosophical abstractions clearly demonstrate the integral nature of the alchemical worldview.

The stylized image of the caduceus is accepted as an astronomical symbol of the planet Mercury (Table 1, symbol 1.2). The abstract philosophical Mercury and the chemical element Mercury (Hydrargyrum) are also denoted by this symbol and play an exceptional role in alchemy. Philosophical Mercury is one of the roots of metals according to Heber’s sulphur-mercurial theory. A similar image of the caduceus repeatedly appears in alchemical iconography, in particular:

- on the arch of the Cemetery of Innocents in Paris: according to legends, it was built with funds of the famous 14th-century adept Nicolas Flamel (*Flamel, 1624; Flamel, 2001: 96*);

- in his treatise *Hieroglyphic figures* (Flamel, 1993: 72; Flamel, 2001: 96);

- in Basil Valentine's *Twelve Keys* (the second key) (*Basil Valentine*, 2008: 74);

- in *Ancient Chemical Work* by Abraham Eleazar (*Abraham Eleazar*, 2001: 51), etc.

In his *Mytho-Hermetic Dictionary*, the 18th-century alchemical philosopher Dom Pernety pointed out that the caduceus consisted of three parts: a golden handle topped with an iron apple, and two serpents that seem to seek to swallow each other. The first serpent symbolizes the volatile part of philosophical matter (apparently, philosophical Mercury. - Authors), while the second one - fixed (i.e. philosophical Sulphur. - Authors), fighting each other in an alchemical vessel. A graphic embodiment of this basic alchemical plot is, for example, an engraving of a "double Ouroboros" in Abraham Eleazar's treatise (*Abraham Eleazar*, 2001: 21), where one serpent has wings, i.e. can fly, while another one has not.

The philosophical gold, symbolized by a handle, reconciles this struggle of opposites (*Pernety*, 2012: 131). The image of the caduceus is distributed in various versions, for example, with three (*Flamel*, 2001: 96) or two rings (*Flamel*, 1993: 72; *Flamel*, 2001: 96; *Abraham Eleazar*, 2001: 51).

Reducing this symbol to one ring brings its interpretation to a fundamentally different plane. Thus, according to an alchemical author Samuel Baruch, a circle horizontally divided in half (Table 1, symbol 1.3) symbolizes the Spirit that forms a triad with Body and Soul (a motif reminiscent of the Holy Trinity), which correspond to the philosophical Mercury and Sulphur (*Abraham Eleazar*, 2001: 98). As often happens in alchemical philosophy, these interpretations are not absolute and exist in a variety of versions. Pernety interpreted the Spirit in numerous ways, but they were mostly associated with a volatile principle or philosophical Mercury (*Pernety*, 2012: 103-104), but not with the third component of the Paracelsus-modified Sulphur-Mercury system - Salt, whose graphic image coincides with that given in Samuel Baruch's interpretation of the symbol of the Spirit.

It should be noted that the Salt symbol also has numerous variations. A horizontally divided circle, beyond which the line does not extend, can be presented as a symbol of philosophical Salt in the alchemical triad (*Gessmann*, 2012: 99), in particular, with the note "the key to alchemical art" (*Morozov*, 1995: 273).

At the same time, this sign can mean not only philosophical Salt but also common table salt - sodium chloride (*Gessmann*, 2012: 167). The sign of salt in this meaning is still on the coat of arms of the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, known for its salt mines and a giant deposit of halite (sodium chloride).

If the line goes beyond the circle, we get the interpretations "spirit" (symbol 1.4) (*Pernety*, 2012: 214) or "alcohol, spirit" (symbol 1.5) (*Morozov*, 1995: 275). The symbolic combination of salt and the spiritual principle can be supported by a biblical passage: "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" (Matthew 5:13). In the public consciousness, salt has a figurative meaning of the deep essence of things.

A circle without a dash (symbol 1.6) means eternity (*Morozov*, 1995: 273; *Gessmann*, 2012: 89). Thus, three circles connected by a common axis (symbol 1) can mean an eternity of three components, such as Mercury, Sulfur, and Salt of the Paracelsian concept; Body, Soul and Spirit; the unity of the three worlds - "the material, the

moral, and the divine" according to Desbarrolles (*Desbarrolles*, 1868: 87), or even the postulate of the Holy Trinity reinterpreted in an alchemical context.

A sign of the three horizontally connected circles (symbol 1.7) is also represented in alchemical symbolism. Although, in this case, the symbol had an auxiliary operational meaning and was used in practice to denote a certain substance, namely Calx metallorum (*Gessmann*, 2012: 126).

Another symbol (Fig. 1, symbol 2) is stylistically similar to the auxiliary alchemical symbols (functional prototypes of modern chemical symbols), widely represented in written sources (*Gessmann*, 2012; *Morozov*, 1995; *Thompson*, 1988). Similar in features of performance (combination of circle and dashes) symbols can mean a general concept of "powder" (Latin: pulvis) according to Gessmann (Table 1, symbol 2.1) (*Gessmann*, 2012: 203) (a similar symbol in the same sense is found in Heinrich Eschenreuter's *Five small treatises*, attributed to Basil Valentine (*Basil Valentine*, 2008: 519)) or the operation of rubbing (Latin: fricare) (symbol 2.2) (*Gessmann*, 2012: 218). However, considering the abstract philosophical meaning of the previous one (symbol 1), the technochemical nature of this sign (symbol 2) seems unlikely. In this context, it is worth noting a certain similarity of the symbol with the hieroglyphic monad of John Dee (symbol 2.3), which embodies the whole cosmological concept (*Dee*, 2001: 279).

Surprisingly, another interesting symbol of the "House of Alchemists" was left out of the attention of travel agencies (Fig. 1, symbol group 3, Table 1, symbols 3.1, 3.2). It can be interpreted as an illustration of the basic alchemical principle of general unity and analogy in the Universe: "That which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracle of one only thing" (Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus). In general, the symbol consists of two symmetrically arranged groups of figures: a recessed trident-like shape directed upwards and a convex one directed downwards. The three teeth can symbolize the alchemical triad Mercury-Sulphur-Salt or Body-Soul-Spirit. The figures directed upwards are open to the influence of good celestial forces (a certain analogy of a horseshoe that brings good luck). The figures directed downwards are subject to opposite forces - earthly, impure, evil. In order to achieve balance and harmony, an adept should connect artificially separated parts that complement each other - a certain embodiment of the principle of additionality like the Taoist Yin-Yang.

The interpretation of the symbol is not limited to this. A certain modification of the trident figure pointing upwards (symbol 3.3) can be used as an auxiliary alchemical symbol of Calx metallorum (*Gessmann*, 2012: 126). However, another interpretation seems more attractive. If an adept combines the figures of the symbol in some way (Fig. 2), he can get a semblance of the Apostle Peter's key (which opens the gates of Heaven), depicted in one of the Flamel's hieroglyphic figures in the Cemetery of the Innocents (*Flamel*, 1624).

Even if the authors of the bas-reliefs of the "House of Alchemists" did not have any alchemical intentions in their creation, it does not fundamentally affect the understanding of the situation, because in this case it could be explained with the subconscious influence of a huge layer of alchemical symbolic information encoded in the collective unconscious, the archetypes of which resemble forms without content or, according to Dr. Jung, an old dry riverbed, where water can return at any time (*Jung*, 1997a: 85). Under such conditions, alchemical symbolism

can manifest itself regardless of whether the author is aware of it and how it is evaluated by others. An architectural symbolism is a clear example of how the “memory of the alchemical Middle Ages comes to life” in the creative manifestations of modernity (Rabinovich, 2012: 22).

A clear confirmation of this thesis is the comparison of mascarons on the pediment of another early 20th-century house in Kyiv (23 Velyka Zhytomyrska Str.), and an alchemical engraving from Michael Maier’s *Symbola aurea* (Maier, 1617:5) (Fig. 3).

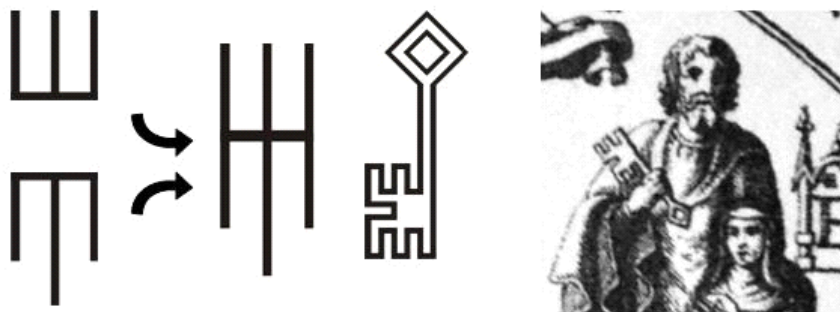


Fig. 2. A possible combination of symbols 3.1, 3.2



Fig. 3. Mascarons of the Kyiv house and alchemical emblems

In terms of style and general appearance, the figures of the “House of Alchemists” are similar to many other decorative facade elements of buildings of that time (for example, at 53 Zlatoustivska Str.; 42, 75 Sichovykh Striltsiv Str.; 23 Velyka Zhytomyrska Str.) and indeed bear some similarity with noted symbols of alchemical iconography (Fig. 4, 4.1 - 4.4). Similar figures of facade decor are present in a contemporary (early 21st-century) building at Velyka Zhytomyrska Str. near the Landscape

Alley (Fig. 4, 4.5). The graphic simplicity of these emblems, which are usually a combination of a circle and other simple graphic elements, draws attention. In this aspect, they resemble a number of figures from the *Paradoxical Emblems* by Dionysius Andreas Freher (Freher, 2001: 22, 26, 27, 29, 32, 41, 42-47, 50, 55, 56, 60, 145) and drawings of John Dee’s *Hieroglyphic Monad* (Dee, 2001: 278, 279, 283, 286, 291, 292, 294, 295, 313, 314, 322, 328, 331).

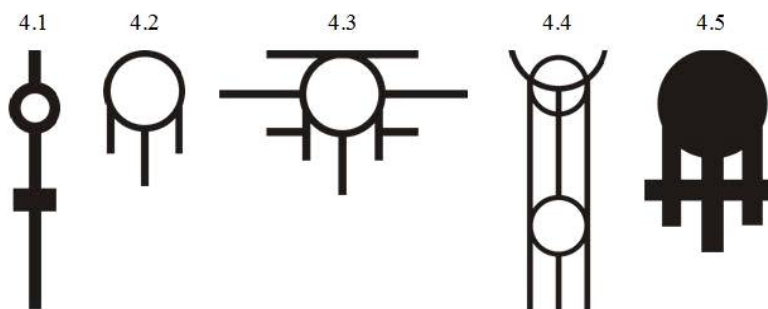


Fig. 4. The graphic elements of facades of Kyiv houses, bearing similarity with the figures of the “House of Alchemists”

Thus, one should assume that the ancient alchemical (or structurally similar) symbols remained popular at the turn of the 19-20th centuries, in the era of the Decadence, flourishing spiritualism, and total fascination with esoteric and spiritual practices. Considering the reproduction of these symbols on modern buildings and the creation of urban alchemical legends, one should conclude that they have not lost their significance and social aesthetic appeal to this day. Thus, the remarkable echo of the phenomenon of alchemy, even in its legendary mode, is an evidence of its “action in its consequences”, and in certain sense, a manifestation of the relevance of its existence in a present-day socio-cultural environment.

### Conclusions

Echoes of the alchemical worldview are actively manifested in modern society. These manifestations can have both conscious and unconscious nature.

In the case of the “House of Alchemists” in Kyiv’s Pechersk, such an echo is the very fact of appeal to the phenomenon of alchemy. It is significant that the name “House of Alchemists” has appeared in our time when the popularity of the topic of alchemy is growing in the socio-cultural space.

A comparative analysis of the figures of the facades of the early 20th-century “House of Alchemists” and similar elements of the architecture of other Kyiv buildings of that time reveals their similarity to the graphic symbols of alchemy, although it does not reveal absolute coincidences with those presented in alchemical lexicons. Therefore, the hypothesis about alchemical intentions of owners or architects of buildings is neither well-proven nor definitively refuted; so, it requires further investigation.

Nevertheless, the considered situation illustrates the specifics of the existence of the phenomenon of alchemy in its legendary mode, in which specific historical realities are not crucial for the creation of an attractive legend or are used selectively.

A perceptible echo of the phenomenon of alchemy in the realities of public life is an evidence of the relevance of its existence in the modern socio-cultural environment because the basic axiological ideals of the phenomenon have not undergone devaluation over time.

Nowadays, the role of esoteric and non-scientific phenomena in the life of society is not diminished, and the image of alchemy as a kind of alternative to modern rationality acquires new relevance. This situation seems to be inherent in transitional epochs marked by global shifts in worldview paradigms and axiological orientations motivating people to rediscover the “abyss of being”, in particular in the categories of alchemical philosophy with its rich figurative and mythological dimension. Equally, similar trends were characteristic of the period of late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the mentioned “House of Alchemists” was built in Kyiv.

From the standpoint of modernity, the “hermetic art” of alchemists is seen as a kind of bridge between past and future, magic and experimental science, Hellenistic Gnosticism and Jungian psychology of the unconscious, and so on. In this way, alchemy continues to exist in the history of civilization.

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### ЛЕГЕНДИ ТА РЕАЛІЇ УКРАЇНСЬКОЇ АЛХІМІЇ: КИЇВСЬКЕ ВІДЛУННЯ ЛЕГЕНД ПРО «ФІЛОСОФСЬКІ ОСЕЛІ»

У статті на конкретних прикладах розглянуто соціокультурне відлуння буття феномена алхімії, досліджено підґрунтя та мотивацію створення новітніх алхімічних легенд у дусі концепції «філософських осель», засоби їх гіпотетичної реалізації в символіці та емблематиці архітектури київських будинків межі XIX - XX ст., зокрема так званого «будинку алхіміків» на Печерську. Концепція архетипового характеру алхімічних символів пояснює, чому в царині образотворчості на свідомому або підсвідомому рівні вони регулярно відтворюються та сприймаються соціумом. Проведений порівняльний аналіз фігур оздоблення фасадів «будинку алхіміків» початку XX ст. та подібних елементів архітектури інших київських будинків того часу виявляє їх подібність до графічних символів алхімії, хоча й не виявляє абсолютних збігів із представленими в алхімічних лексиконах. Відтак гіпотеза щодо алхімічних інтенцій власників або архітекторів будівель не є ані достеменно доведеною, ані остаточно спростованою і потребує подальших розвідок. Однак незалежно від цього розглянута ситуація ілюструє специфіку існування феномена алхімії в його легендарному модусі, коли для створення привабливої легенди конкретні історичні реалії не мають вирішального значення або використовуються вибірково. Прояви відлуння алхімічного світогляду в сучасному соціумі можуть мати як свідому, так і підсвідому природу. У випадку з «будинком алхіміків» на київському Печерську таким свідомим відлунням є сам факт апелювання до феномена алхімії. Показово, що назва «будинку алхіміків» з'явилася саме в наш час, коли відбувається зростання популярності теми алхімії в соціокультурному просторі. Відчутне відлуння феномена алхімії в реаліях суспільного життя є свідченням актуальності його буття в сучасному соціокультурному середовищі, адже засадничі аксіологічні ідеали явища не зазнали темпоральної девальвації. Нині, коли роль езотеричних і позанаукових феноменів у житті суспільства не є знівельованою, образ алхімії як альтернативи модерній раціональності набуває нової актуальності. Така ситуація видається типовою для перехідних епох, позначених глобальними зрушеннями світоглядних парадигм і аксіологічних орієнтацій, що спонукають людей наново відкривати «безодню буття», зокрема і в категоріях алхімічної філософії з її багатим образно-міфологічним виміром. Рівною мірою подібні тенденції були притаманними і періоду кінця XIX - початку XX ст., коли й було побудовано так званий «будинку алхіміків» у Києві.

*Ключові слова:* алхімія; архетипи; архітектура; Київ; колективне несвідоме; легенда; символіка.

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