

THE IMAGE AND IDENTITY OF THE ALCHEMIST
IN
SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NETHERLANDISH ART

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DECLARATION

This dissertation contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text of the dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the representation of the alchemist in Netherlandish art during the heyday of alchemy in seventeenth-century Europe amidst the Scientific Revolution. While contemporary debates regarding the position that alchemy and magic in general had on the development of modern science has held particular interest for scholars working in the discipline of the history of science, the rich iconographic tradition of the alchemist in seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting has not been explored in detail from a wider socio-cultural perspective. It is for this reason that the image and identity of the alchemist is analysed in selected seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings in order to not only explore their position within the Scientific Revolution, but also to shed light on their meaning and function within the socio-cultural context of the Golden Age in the Netherlands. The contradictory perception of the alchemist in this period as either fools and charlatans or ‘scientific’ scholars is shown to reflect the fear and apprehension that accompanied the dynamic nexus between religious change and scientific experimentation in this transformative period of the early modern European Scientific Revolution, in addition to heightened class-consciousness amidst the Golden Age in the Netherlands.

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