

# The Iconography of the Pharmacy in the past and at present

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I am currently writing my dissertation in art history about the architecture of the pharmacy. An important aspect of my research involves the iconography of pharmacies in Norway and some other European countries; Austria, Italy, Spain and Sweden. My study of old and new Norwegian pharmacies has inspired me to investigate how certain iconographic motives have developed through the ages.

## **What is iconography?**

In his important book, **Meaning in the Visual Arts** from 1955, Erwin Panofsky defines "iconography" as "...that branch of the history of art which concern itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art." A prerequisite for any iconographical analysis of art is a thorough knowledge of relevant literary sources and their cultural historical context. In order to understand the iconography of pharmacy architecture and design, one must therefore become acquainted with the history of pharmaceutical practice and the manuscripts and books related to the profession. During the course of my research project, I have attempted to identify certain pictorial and architectural motives, which have traditionally been and are still being used in pharmacies, motives which have an obvious reference to the history and traditions of the pharmacy.

## **The motifs**

An investigation of the pharmacy architecture and design reveals a number of motifs which seem to be common in all the countries I have been working with. Ancient Greek and Roman culture has provided the architects and designers of pharmacies with quite a number of recurring classical themes. In the architecture and decoration of pharmacies since the Renaissance, one often discovers references to Asclepios and Hygiea and their cult. A marked preference for classical or classicizing architectural structure and ornament remind one of the origins of pharmaceutical science in antiquity. Of great impor-

tance is the scientific literature of Hippocrates and Galenos, both of whom are often depicted in the pharmacy. Medieval, Christian references to pharmaceutical practice are also found, as f.ex. in the twin saints Cosmas and Damian, but they are rare in the Nordic Countries. In Scandinavia, animal motifs are more common. Herbs connected to their use as medicines are often used. Another important group of motifs are connected to location - paintings of buildings or people related to the local pharmacy. The last category of motifs is pharmaceutical instruments or references to the process of making medicine.

### **One case**

The most beautiful, traditional pharmacy in Oslo, Norway is the Swan pharmacy. The present building was constructed in 1895 –96 by the respected architect Ove Ekman. Bernard Wilhelm Gustav von Krogh has decorated the ceiling. The pharmacy is a typical case of the iconography of the pharmacy. The style of the furniture is classical with columns and capitals. An important part of the interior decoration is the ceiling with the painting of the ancient Gods, Asclepios and Hygiea surrounded by depictions of herbs, which refer to the content of the medicine. A very important part of the iconography of this pharmacy is, of course, the Swan.

Why did pharmacies so often use animal emblems? This often-asked and intriguing question is difficult to answer. One could possibly argue that animals have connections with the drugs simply because parts of the animals have traditionally been used as an ingredient in traditional medicine. A more persuasive answer would however emphasize animal-motifs symbolic character. There are three major sources of the animal symbolism used in the ornamentation and decoration of pharmacies: Antiquity, Christian culture and Nature.

The first animal in Norwegian pharmacies was the Swan. This beautiful white bird is one of the strongest brandnames in pharmacy even today.

One finds a depiction of the swan in relief-sculpture of the Ara Pacis the altar of peace commemorated the peaceful era inaugurated by the first Roman emperor Augustus. This occurrence of the Swan on a Roman altar reveals that classical Antiquity is an important source of pharmaceutical iconography. The Swan is Apollo's bird. And as we all know Apollo was Asclepios' father.

One also finds a depiction of the Swan in the Wiener Dioskurides, a manuscript from c.512 A.D.. This important scientific manuscript was written to help people to collect and use the right herbs for their medicines. The manuscript shows us how Cygnus looks.

The Swan is also often depicted in the apsis-decorations of early Christian churches. In such depictions, one often notes a cosmic iconographical context. In the apse decoration of Sta. Maria Maggiore in Rome, the swan is depicted together with God who creates the earth, the moon and the stars, and together with Jesus and Virgin Mary in heaven. In my hometown Bergen you will find St. Mary's Church from medieval times. The church got a new pulpit in the 17th century. The iconography of this pulpit is rare. It consists of the stellar globe with the symbols of the zodiac and the constellation of the Cygnus (or swan). But how is this constellation related to the pharmacy? In an investigation of the pulpit and the religious thoughts of Bergen in that time one has found that the people who ordered the pulpit were priests and doctors influenced by magic religious thinking. They had read religious books inspired by Paracelsus, and they knew a lot about alchemy.

In the "pre-scientific" medieval ages, one way to know how to treat the patient was to follow the zodiac. In the medical literature of the time, one can find pictures of the zodiacman with the signs signifying different parts of the body. Other pictures show Christ in the middle of the Zodiac. One might even find the zodiac with St. Cosmas and St. Damian. I think there might be a connection between this type of medicine and the use of some animals in the emblems of the pharmacy. I have in literature inspired of alchemy found two maps, one, which shows the stars with zodiac and animal symbols, and one which shows the same with Christian symbols. Those maps are made in Holland, and we know that Dutch artists have made the pulpit in St. Mary's church too. I think that the Swan symbol may be related to this.

The Swan symbol is the most important iconographic motif in the new pharmacy building that was made in Bergen in 1920 after a big fire in the centre of the city. According to old stories the swan emblem in front of the building was made of iron from the fire site of the old pharmacy. Even today young people in Bergen connect the Swan pharmacy with quality and potent medicine.

## Present

What about the pharmaceutical iconography of today?

In the last 10 years of the 20th century, there has been a renaissance of traditional pharmaceutical iconography in Norway. Pharmacy-interiors are often panelled with light wood in a Nordic tradition, and there have been experiments with new functional details. In some new pharmacies one notes depictions of herbs, which shows a knowledge of the traditional iconography and the history of pharmacy.

But what is happening today? In Norway a new pharmaceutical law has been passed which enables non-pharmacists to own pharmacies. In the last year, chains of pharmacies have been established in Norway that are trying to establish their brandnames in the market. Their advertisements reflect no understanding of the rich pharmaceutical traditions which have informed the architecture and design of pharmacies for centuries. These new chain-stores attempt to create a new image for new and different brandnames. Modernity is emphasized at the expense of tradition. The main thought is how to provide the same medicines more economically. Competition is tough, and few apothecaries seem to be willing to take care of the old pharmacy buildings

During the last two years, Norway two old, traditional pharmacies, the Swan Pharmacy in Ålesund, and The Bee Pharmacy in Bergen have closed. I am afraid of what will happen to them.

What will replace these and other traditional pharmacies? Have the new signs and symbols any iconographical connection to the pharmacy?

The first sign we got was the A1 pharmacy. "What is this?" the people say. Is it the British popgroup A1?

Another brand is Vitus. In our country no one knows about the saint Vitus. The logo is a snake, but contrary to the old pharmacy emblem, there is no connection to Hygiea.

Pharmaceutical iconography is an important part of our cultural heritage. In our post-modern time many people seek the security of tradition - of traditional symbols and professions. If traditional pharmaceutical iconography disappears, the profession will lose an important feature which connects people to the pharmacy. Today, people can walk straight by a pharmacy without even knowing what it

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is. They are drifting around looking for something they remember from the past.