

Notes from the Oesper Collections

Two Alchemical Paintings

William B. Jensen

*Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, OH 45221-0172*

Hangings in the Oesper Apparatus Museum are two rather large oil paintings of several of the original alchemical displays in the Deutsches Museum in Munich done by the German painter and illustrator Ernst Dorn, of whom little is known other than that he was born in Neustadt/Colburg in 1889 and died in Munich in 1927 at the relatively young age of 38 (1). According to the framed caption which once accompanied them, the paintings originally hung on either side of the Rookwood fountain (see *Museum Notes* for April 2011) which graces the entrance foyer of the Old Chemistry Building on the Engineering Quad (2). By the time I joined the faculty in 1986 they were hanging in the office of the Department Chair in Crosley Tower. Luckily his successor, who preferred less ponderous office decoration, finally allowed them to be transferred to their current location in the Oesper Museum in 1987, though in actuality, they are formally part of the University's fine art collections and are merely on loan to Oesper.

The two paintings – one of an alchemist's study (figure 1) and the other of an alchemist's laboratory (figure 2) – were originally part of a set of 10 paintings and vignettes done by Dorn to illustrate an article on the displays relating to the early history of chemistry found in the newly completed building of the Deut-



Figure 1. Painting by Ernst Dorn of a reconstruction of an alchemist's study in the Deutsches Museum, circa 1925.

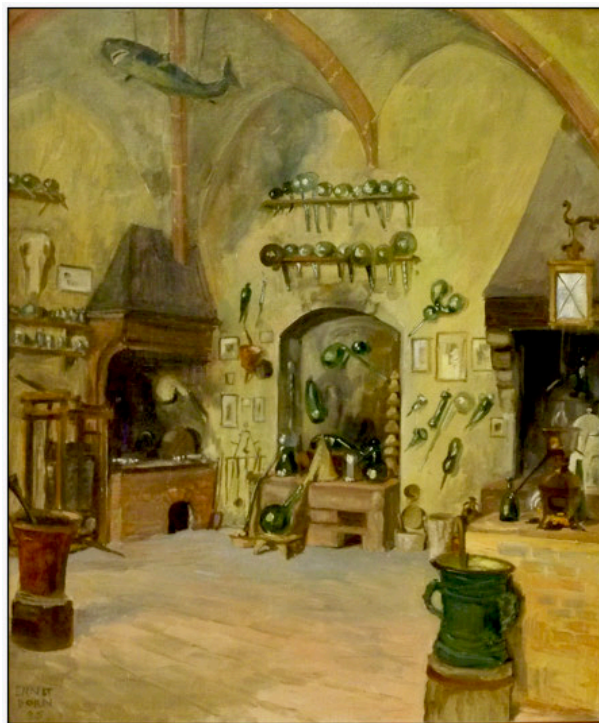


Figure 2. Painting by Ernst Dorn of a reconstruction of an alchemist's laboratory in the Deutsches Museum, circa 1925.

ches Museum, which was first opened to the public in May of 1925 (figure 3). The article in question was published that same year in the magazine *Velhagen und Kasings Monatsheft* and was written by the German chemist and chemical historian, Wilhelm Prandtl (figure 4), of the University of Munich (3). There is little doubt that it was Dr. Oesper's interactions with this author which eventually led to the two paintings finding their way to Cincinnati.

In 1930 Oesper was approached to do an English translation of a revised version of Prandtl's original article on the Chemical Section of the Deutsches Museum for the *Journal of Chemical Education* (4). Nineteen pages in length, this translation was heavily illustrated using 20 high-quality photographs (many of them full page) of the various displays rather than with Dorn's original paintings. As a thank-you for his efforts, Prandtl appears to have made Oesper a present of two of Dorn's original illustrations, having acquired



Figure 3. Picture postcard of the new building of the Deutsches Museum in winter sent to Dr. Oesper by Wilhelm Prandtl with Xmas greetings in January of 1930.

them after the artist's death three years earlier. Subsequently, the Museum's history of chemistry displays also became the basis of a highly-illustrated history of chemistry by Fritz Ferchl and Armin Süssenguth published in 1936 and of which Oesper acquired copies of both the original German edition (5) and the subsequent English translation (6) for the Chemistry Library at Cincinnati.

Indeed, the Oesper Collections not only own the two Dorn paintings, various portraits of Prandtl, and the two editions of the history of chemistry by Ferchl



Figure 4. Wilhelm Prandtl (1878-1956).

and Süssenguth, but also many of the high-quality glossy photos used to illustrate the 1930 translation in the *Journal of Chemical Education*. Comparison of these with the paintings themselves strongly suggests that Dorn based his work on the photos (figure 5) rather than directly on the displays themselves.

References and Notes

1. In keeping with this lack of information, I have been unable to locate a portrait of Dorn.



Figure 5. Photo of the alchemist's laboratory in the Deutsches Museum which was almost certainly the basis of the Dorn painting in figure 2.

2. Caption for foyer display in *Old Chemistry*, photocopy in Oesper Collections.
3. W. Prandtl, "Das deutsches Museum in München: Die Abteilung Chemie," *Velhagen u. Klasing's Monatshefte*, **1925**, 39(2), 440-451.
4. W. Prandtl, "The Chemical Section of the Deutsches Museum," *J. Chem. Educ.*, **1930**, 7, 762-781.
5. F. Ferchl, A. Süssenguth, *Kurzgeschichte der Chemie mit 200 Abbildungen*, Neumayer Verlag: Mittenwald, 1936.
6. F. Ferchl, A. Süssenguth, *A Pictorial History of Chemistry*, Heinemann: London, 1939.