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Chapter 10

Adam van Vianen and Ghosts of Silver in the Late-Renaissance World*

Richard Checketts

In remarks printed some six decades after Adam van Vianen's silver vessel was made, the

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Frankfurt-born painter and writer Joachim von Sandrart took up the Dutch word

Schnackerey to describe the work, calling to mind with that term something light-hearted,

ephemeral, curious.¹ [Figure 10.1] Yet in the circumstances of its commission, and in a

¹ Joachim von Sandrart, *Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlery-Künste von 1675: Leben der berühmten Maler, Bildhauer und Baumeister*, ed. A. R. Peltzer (Munich: G. Hirth's Verlag, 1925), p. 223: 'Groteschen oder Schnackerey'. An important early study used in much of the recent literature on van Vianen's object is Th. [Theresia] M. Duyvené de Wit-Klinkhamer, 'Een vermaarde zilveren beker', in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, vol. 17 (1966), pp. 79-103. The key monograph on Adam van Vianen and other silversmiths of the same family remains J. R. ter Molen's work, submitted as a PhD thesis to the University of Leiden, *Van Vianen: een Utrechtse familie van zilversmeden met een internationale faam*, 2 vols (Leiderdorp: J. R. ter Molen, 1984). A recent study which includes useful synthesis of earlier scholarship on both Adam van Vianen and his brother Paulus (discussed later in this chapter) is Reinier Baarsen, *Kwab: Ornament as Art in the Age of Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2018), especially pp. 21-65, and the catalogue entry with literature on p. 256. A paper by Jessica Whittle, 'Chaos and Creation': Adam van Vianen's Gilt Ewer' in *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, vol. 69, no. 3 (2021), pp. 196-215, which I encountered during the later stages of writing the present chapter, addresses some of the sources and some of the broad questions that cross over with my own discussion. While in particular the more detailed treatment of alchemical writing in Whittle's paper has been a provocative point of reference, the

wider set of uncertainties in Europe around the late-sixteenth century, what von Sandrart saw as a kind of foolery in van Vianen's work may be regarded as a more pensive expression of things unresolved. Its playfulness was borne by disconcerting flesh-like forms, evocations of the body, of bodies dissolving into matter, which appeared as more unsettlingly familiar than anything that might be confined in any simple category of the strange.

The object is about 25cm high and was described by von Sandrart as a lidded ewer.² The lid is removable, as is an inner cup or bowl pressed and chased with two lizards. [Figure 10.2] Standing on a base, an ape (playing the role of Atlas) supports the body of the vessel. This figure, a conventional emblem of artifice, is perhaps the sole instance where the work may be thought clearly to fulfil any sort of stable symbolic logic.³ [Figure 10.3] Yet in that

framing of van Vianen's work as an 'allegory of artistic creation' and in terms of 'messages' of the forms depicted in it (pp. 212-213), appears to me questionable in a number of respects, principally in so far as it suggests models of both intentionality and inscription that the object resists.

² Von Sandrart, *Academie*, p. 223: 'ein Grießkandel mit dem Deckel'.

³ For broad discussion see H. W. Janson, *Ape and Ape Lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: Warburg Institute, 1952). Whittle offers discussion directly related

role the ape seems to be at the centre of a reversal. In its allegorical marking of some kind of bounded opposition between license and control it seems to switch positions with its usual character of mischief to administer what is in van Vianen's work a momentary sense of order as the gaze settles in one isolated instance of something clearly represented.

5 Elsewhere the object offers a vague address in depictions or intimations of faces that play upon and upset such recognitions. Where the body of the vessel meets its handle, something perhaps reptilian or amphibian, of alarmingly animated and alarmingly vacuous expression; vaguer, and eerie in their crudeness, on the opposite surface there are the barely formed elements of a face. [Figure 10.4; Figure 10.5] The work is perhaps most
10 insistently troubling in its least resolved suggestions of the body, in human or animal forms discerned here or there, or felt, through the work's deeper mimetic structures, in some more visceral sense. Its fluid qualities in places congeal, taking on more definite structure in soft points that gather to pliant fleshy forms, or sinewy fibres that come together in defined folds and sharper and more bone-like edges. The work pulls between its status as a

to the object in 'Chaos and Creation', pp. 202-203. Note also that the lizards have been characterised as effectively a form of iconography signalling a relation to alchemical thought, for example in Whittle, 'Chaos and Creation', pp. 209-212.

vessel that is hollow and with parts, and a sense of an elastic plenum barely contained within its own bounds. The handle is drawn out as a part-human figure, a body whose flesh appears to melt into something at once harder and less defined than a body. Disturbing qualities seem to emerge as much from the object's loose unities as from any of its discrete parts; the spiralling forms that branch from a single coil issuing from its handle insinuate a sticky embrace whose marked symmetry discloses a creeping process of union more disconcerting than any of its elements alone. [Figure 10.3] The suggestion here of entrails, of what is inside the body, is oddly mirrored in the transforming substance of the arms of the figure of the ape. Those points at which the work invites a careful discernment of fantastical entities emerging, those vaguely more recognisable depictions of creatures or part-figures paradoxically instil a more general uncertainty. In the same way, the more naturalistically fashioned reptiles in the vessel's inner cup, encountered in certain forms of close observation bound to handling the object, would seem to activate the work's prevailing instability. Any of these more stable motifs have a quality of transience; they appear as merely temporary coalescences in a shifting state of matter. Where, for example, the stretched viscosity of the lower part of the handle terminates (or begins) in the tiny vertebrae of a spine pricked out with the utmost delicacy, and the ribs and the shoulder

blades of a human figure, this evokes a live struggle where form is in a constant process of coalescence and dissolution. [Figure 10.6] The very categories of the formless and the distinct are destabilised in the fluidity of the movement from one state to another. Such states, as they are suggested in the work, appear indifferently as just passing modifications of the same teeming mass.

Uppermost in von Sandrart's estimation of the ewer was the fact it had been raised and chased from a single sheet of silver.⁴ A singular feat, this slow and meticulous process not only demonstrated extraordinary technical facility but offered the work's discriminating viewers what was a knowing and reflexive dissimulation of molten metal. It offered a deliberate reflection on its own exceptional display of skill, presenting the labour

⁴ Von Sandrart, *Academie*, p. 223: 'aus einem Stück Silber getrieben färtigen lassen'. For the recent, highly detailed corroboration of von Sandrart's appraisal on the basis of X-radiography analysis of the construction, as well as technological reconstructions and collaboration with contemporary practitioners, see Joose van Bennekom, Ellen van Bork, and Arie Pappot, 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques of Adam van Vianen: His Silver Ewer Unravelling', in *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, vol. 69, no. 3 (2021), pp. 217-242 (pp. 222-226). Building on the earlier scholarship, Baarsen has discussed the fame of the work as marked by its appearance in numerous paintings in the years following its manufacture, as well as in the circulation of casts of the object, see *Kwab*, pp. 52-55. The work was at some point gilded; this is accepted as having been done some time after the work's manufacture: see Baarsen, *Kwab*, p. 52.

that actually left its mark – an intense, incremental concentration of effort as the object was fashioned bit by bit – in what was an arch juxtaposition with the illusion of a quite different kind of process, one that was quick and aleatory in execution, the liquefaction of metal through extreme heat, and a hard-won mastery of the material in one moment from a flowing, unruly mass. This was, equally then, an eloquent commentary on certain conceptions at the time of the artist's relation to cast metals: with the most thorough and precise of actions, the work entertains and unravels familiar fictions of the identification between maker and such materials in their molten unpredictability, of the maker's own dicing with self-dispersion in the confused forces of the arts of fire.⁵ The evocation of the skill and labour of the workshop, merging in this way with the bizarre forms of life coming

⁵ See most notably Benvenuto Cellini's dramatisation in his autobiography of the purportedly near-death experience of casting the bronze sculpture of Perseus with the head of Medusa. On this and the broader issues see Michael Cole's important study 'Cellini's Blood' in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 81, no. 2 (1999), pp. 215-235. For the notion of the arts of fire as an organising principle, see both Cole's study and especially Vannoccio Biringuccio's comprehensive work *De la pirotechnia* (Venice: Venturino Roffinello ad instantia di Curtio Navò e fratelli, 1540). Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot note van Vianen's likely awareness of Cellini's work as a goldsmith and sculptor: see 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', p. 240, note 21. It should be signalled, though, that the autobiography was not printed until 1728.

to the surface of the object, was linked too with a different kind of natural history, one pertaining to metals themselves. The whorls and waves on the lid formed the watery lair for an indistinct but monstrous aquatic creature at the same time as they evoked, no less fancifully, a process of casting – and in different ways both these suggestions would have recalled for early modern viewers an understanding of metal’s primal state as liquid.⁶

[Figure 10.6] In different ways, the work thus subtly fused its reflection on making with more fundamental questions about the nature of matter and material transformation and generation.

Whatever allusions to natural forces and transformations are set in play, though, these return to an insistent stillness in the object. The extraordinary inverted flame motifs rising up the handle of the lid offer a poised interplay between the spontaneous, the unrestrained, and against this a heightened care and difficulty that seems to insist upon its own duration. [Figure 10.7] Details so finely chased they can be overlooked, these fiery, dancing forms effect in their subtlety a paradoxical reversal as they demand a kind of attention slowed to a standstill. Fantasies of transformation are frozen, in tension with a

⁶ See Cole, ‘Cellini’s Blood’, especially p. 222.

wonder that depends upon recognition of the work's accomplished finality as something made, something that demonstrated the very limits of what could be done with art. Part of the work's disconcerting effect lies in this unsettled flickering between the quick and the still, like thoughts turned to glass the instant they emerge, immobilised and stuck in a permanent half-life.

The ewer was commissioned in 1614 by the Amsterdam silversmiths' guild to mark the death the previous year of another silversmith, the artist's brother, Paulus van Vianen.⁷ As has been recognised in the recent scholarship, the circumstances are noteworthy; neither of the brothers seem to have been connected with the guild at Amsterdam, nor to have worked in that city.⁸ Adam van Vianen worked throughout his career in Utrecht.⁹ For his brother, it

⁷ All accounts of the details of the commission have relied on von Sandrart's discussion of the object in 1675, as cited in note 1. While von Sandrart appears mistaken or imprecise in his claim the City of Amsterdam was responsible rather than the silversmith's guild, no doubt has been cast on the date or the purpose of the commission. Tellingly in this regard, Baarsen notes that the object was likely to have been kept in offices of the guild that were adjacent to the town hall; for this and further details see Baarsen, *Kwab*, p. 47.

⁸ Baarsen, *Kwab*, p. 47.

⁹ Baarsen, *Kwab*, p. 47.

appears that in commissioning the memorial, the guild was seeking to associate itself with a reputation that extended far.¹⁰ Noted for the subtlety of his landscape and narrative scenes as well as for the particular decorative style remarked by von Sandrart, Paulus van Vianen was of wide fame. He travelled extensively, taking on significant commissions involving periods working in Munich for Duke Wilhelm V, and in Salzburg for Archbishop Wolf Dietrich von Raitenau. From 1603 until his death he was employed, with others drawn from across Europe, at the remarkable artistic and intellectual crucible of the court of the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolf II in Prague.¹¹

Adam van Vianen's ewer was conceived as a memorial, yet it may be understood, according to currents of thought and practice in late-Renaissance Europe, as a ghost, or a dream of the dead. The circumstances of the commission, it seems, lent the object such a resonance. The work addressed the trained and skilled attention of the guild's members. It

¹⁰ The argument is made by Baarsen, with additional reflection on the formation of a Dutch identity beyond individual cities and territories: see *Kwab*, p. 47.

¹¹ For discussion, ter Molen, *Van Vianen*, vol. 1, pp. 17-28; Baarsen, *Kwab*, pp. 21-43, and p. 25 for Paulus's career up to his arrival in Prague; also van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', p. 217. The literature on the court at Prague is extensive; for an overview see R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and his World: A Study in Intellectual History 1576-1612* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

sought the appreciation of the difficult attainments of metalwork, from those with the most intimate knowledge of the matter.¹² An act of remembrance outwith any of the conventional forms of memorialisation, it was a commemoration wrought through the deepest absorption in its material, and through a rapport with the artist's brother the manner of which indeed unsettles the distinction between the living and the dead. Where it was closest to the singular task of the commission, it was an unfolding of perturbations of matter that were more akin, according to the understanding of such phenomena evident in a number of discourses at this time, to a return of the dead in phantasmic form. Dreams of the dead and ghosts were understood as bringing to light matter in its more subtle aspects; they were disturbances of matter. In this regard, van Vianen's object was in its way the estranged return not only of the artist's dead brother, but of matter also – of silver as something made both insistently present and uncannily remote.

The vessel's shifting forms, as they were imagined most directly to commemorate Paulus van Vianen, were a close if highly distinctive commentary in the manner of work

¹² Baarsen makes the important observation that after this commission Adam van Vianen's practice reverted to a more conventional, if still virtuosic, mode that he had worked in before: see *Kwab*, pp. 50 and 56.

for which he had been noted. That style of ornament traced out the margins of a ewer which Paulus had made in the year of his death, of broadly similar shape and dimensions to Adam van Vianen's, framing a virtuosic depiction of the narrative of Diana and Callisto from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.¹³ [Figure 10.8] Yet in Adam van Vianen's work, the performance was played out with such fluent resolve, exceptional at once in its expansiveness and its concentration, that the object appears transformed by its model. As the work's peculiar form of remembrance, certain qualities of the earlier vessel – the involute bud that completes the lid, the carapace on the neck – are as if magnified, or as if having taken on life to become an excessive outflowing that forms the very body of the work. [Figure 10.9] Adam van Vianen's work is as if affected by a slowing of attention, the measured detachment of seeing thickened into a mimetic rehearsal of gestures, the acts of making into a kind of material generation whose subject was the material itself. Quite distinct from a simple displacement of discrete categories of the marginal and the central in a work of art, this is an act of commemoration which involves a more fundamental

¹³ For Paulus van Vianen's object, which was paired with a basin, see Baarsen, *Kwab*, p. 35, and the catalogue entry with literature on p. 256. For the narrative see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book 2, lines 401-530.

destabilisation. Perhaps suggestive of a state of grief more than the formalities of a memorial, Adam van Vianen's object brought into an unsettled identity what is most intimately felt and what is wholly other. Where it offers to the view its fleshy forms, suggestions of the body in papillate swellings, still vaguer promises of some endlessly yielding, endlessly giving responsiveness to the touch, these uneasy intimations of tenderness or desire merge insensibly with those of moist innards, of cartilaginous ridges and visceral coils that hint at the body's deeply known but unspeakable fabrics. The object's substance spills between intimacy and repulsion, between a species of longing and a horror equally induced, equally diverted. Where it was fashioned as a memorial, the ewer took form in a constitutively unresolved state of matter and bodily affect.

Concerning the return of the dead, one of the more sustained bodies of writing in this period (if of complex status as representative in any way) may be found in the works of the physician, astrologer, mathematician, and natural philosopher Girolamo Cardano. With much else, Cardano wrote notable works on the topics of death and consolation, on the

immortality of the soul, and on prophetic dreams.¹⁴ On the appearance of the dead in dreams, Cardano wrote that they do not communicate to us their proper selves, nor anything that is proper to them, because they do not exist; whatever remains to them are only the ripples of affect, material impressions detached from the human in its proper state.¹⁵ The dead in dreams are strangers, akin to us, yet, in Cardano's metaphor, not from our own *civitas*.¹⁶ Their province is affect alone, yet, as he wrote at one point, 'totus homo

¹⁴ Principally *De consolatione* [1543], ed. Marialuisa Baldi (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2019); *Somniorum synesiorum libri quattuor / Les quatre livres des songes de Synesios* [1562], 2 vols, ed. and trans. Jean-Yves Boriaud (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2008); *De immortalitate animorum* [1545], ed. José Manuel García Valverde (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2006). See, further, the collected works in the edition published around ninety years after Cardano's death: *Opera omnia*, 10 vols (Lyon: Ioannis Antonii Huguetan and Marci Antonii Ravaud, 1663). Where I have consulted this work directly, references are to the facsimile edition, ed. August Buck (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1966). For broad studies see Eckhard Keßler (ed.), *Girolamo Cardano: Philosoph, Naturforscher, Arzt* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994); Marialuisa Baldi and Guido Canziani (eds), *Girolamo Cardano: le opere, le fonti, la vita* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1999); idem, *Cardano e la tradizione dei saperi* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2003); and Alphonso Ingegno, *Saggio sulla filosofia di Cardano* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1980).

¹⁵ Cardano, *Somniorum synesiorum*, vol. 1, p. 124: 'Mortui personas nostras significae non possunt, ut reliqua quae sunt propria; nos enim sunt, nec res publicas nisi quatenus sunt partes civitatis; relinquitur igitur ut affectus solos decernant.' For further discussion that accounts for ghosts as disturbances of matter see, for example, Cardano's *De subtilitate libri XXI* [1550] in *Opera omnia*, vol. 3, pp. 652-653.

¹⁶ Cardano *Somniorum synesiorum*, vol. 1, p. 124.

semper afficitur [man as a whole is affected always]'.¹⁷ Affect for Cardano must be

distinguished from what constitutes the human; yet as the bearers of affect, ghosts are both

other and a reminder that such otherness is a condition of human identity. In this way, the

spectral appearance of undead souls in a work on dreams has a distinct relation to

5 Cardano's earlier and more extensive consideration of the soul after death in the *De*

immortalitate animorum, printed in Lyon in 1545.¹⁸ In what was a kind of synthesis of

long-standing controversies, the view Cardano set out was that the immortal soul is

identified with an individual whose body it has departed, but as a soul it retains no trace of

the memory or experience that constituted that individual.¹⁹ The *De immortalitate*

¹⁷ See Guido Giglioni, 'Girolamo Cardano on the Passions and their Treatment' in *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, vol. 12, no. 6 (2006), pp. 25-40 (p. 33), citing Cardano's *De varietate rerum* in *Opera omnia*, vol. 3, p. 149.

¹⁸ For a critical edition, with José Manuel García Valverde's detailed introductory study, see note 14 above. Further discussion of various questions around the immortality of the soul in Cardano's thought can be found in Ian Maclean, 'Cardano on the immortality of the soul' in Baldi and Canziani (eds), *Cardano e la tradizione dei saperi*, pp.191-207; and García Valverde, 'The Arguments against the Immortality of the Soul in *De immortalitate animorum* of Girolamo Cardano' in *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), pp. 57-77.

¹⁹ See García Valverde, 'The Arguments against the Immortality of the Soul', pp. 58-59. Perhaps most notably for the present discussion, Cardano's writing on death and the soul should be seen in its relation to a significant controversy of the early sixteenth century

animorum was, though, characterised by complexity and by protracted reflections on a series of doubts about the nature of the soul, and on other manifestations of human life beyond its proper confines.²⁰ In this regard, the haunted figures in the work on dreams were both the fleeting appearances of ghosts, and a deeper unsettling of ideas of the immortal soul within the larger frameworks of which Cardano's works were a part.

Cardano's fame was extensive, reaching well beyond the cities in Northern Italy where he practiced medicine and taught.²¹ His books, encyclopaedic and eclectic in their

following the Fifth Lateran Council's issue in 1513 of the bull *Apostolici regiminis*, which placed strict constraints on what could be taught on the soul's immortality, with a demand that any such teaching defend Christian doctrine. Most directly, the controversy was fuelled by Pietro Pomponazzi's publication three years later of his *De immortalitate animae* (Bologna: Justinianus Leonardus Ruberius, 1516), which was widely seen as a more or less open defiance of the bull. For general overview see Paul Richard Blum 'The Immortality of the Soul' in James Hankins (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Leen Spruit, 'The Pomponazzi Affair: The Controversy over the Immortality of the Soul' in Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Sixteenth-Century Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 225-241.

²⁰ Detailed discussion (including on evidence for the work's reception as an expression of doubts or arguments against its avowed claims) is offered in García Valverde, 'The Arguments against the Immortality of the Soul'.

²¹ For an illuminating approach to Cardano's fame focusing on study of the printing of his works, see Ian Maclean, 'Cardano and his Publishers 1534-1663' in Keßler (ed.), *Girolamo Cardano*, pp. 309-338. It is worth noting that Cardano's works were published in widely

scope, circulated throughout Europe. But he can hardly be regarded as typical, nor as occupying the kind of position that might fit easily with any notion of influence within the present account. Where his writings were widely known, they were subjected to equally noted critique for inconsistencies and obscurity.²² They appear to have placed themselves in a vague and difficult middle ground between formal academic modes and more popular styles of address.²³ Not representative exactly, but equally it would be questionable to overlook the ways in which Cardano's diverse enquiries throw light on complex patterns

dispersed cities including Nuremburg, Lyon, Basel, Paris, as well as Italian centres such as Venice, Rome, Milan, and Bologna. Cardano himself travelled as far as Scotland: see Giovanni Aquilecchia, 'L'esperienza anglo-scozzese di Cardano e l'inquisizione' in Baldi and Canziani (eds), *Girolamo Cardano: le opere, le fonti, la vita*, pp. 379-391.

²² The most notable and widely read critique was Julius Caesar Scaliger's *Exotericarum exercitationum liber quintus decimus, de subtilitate, ad Hieronymum Cardanum* (Paris: Michaelis Vascosani, 1557). For a particularly nuanced reading of the immediate reception of Cardano's work see Kristian Jensen, 'Cardanus and his readers in the sixteenth century' in Keßler (ed.), *Girolamo Cardano*, pp. 265-308.

²³ For the tension between different forms of address see Jensen, 'Cardanus and his readers', in particular pp. 305-307; and Ian Maclean 'Cardano and his Publishers 1534-1663', pp. 325-326. Maclean has elsewhere argued that evidence of speculative investment in bringing the works to press (specifically French translations) indicates Cardano's publishers saw in his work the potential for popular success: see 'Montaigne, Cardano: The Reading of Subtlety / The Subtlety of Reading in *French Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1983), pp. 143-153 (pp. 143-144).

thought and practical knowledge in late-Renaissance Europe. In their contradictions and divergent modes of address, Cardano's writings on death and the soul are indicative of the spectrum of ideas that could be entertained as much through negations or hesitations as through affirmation, and through what was not settled as much as through any discrete and logically circumscribed thesis. Their significance here is heuristic. Before any question of a transmission of ideas in any simple sense (where for the present discussion we might note that Adam van Vianen left no trace of any participation directly in the world of letters: we do not know what he read), the writings themselves are evidence of long-standing, unresolved, yet specific associations between conceptions of death, the body and identity, and questions of the workings of matter in its basic forms.

The speculations on ghosts and related phenomena Cardano set out were one register of a set of debates around the nature of matter in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth century. In the terms of natural philosophy and metaphysics (and putting schematically a body of writing more diverse than can be addressed fully here), this brought together a number of more or less opposed, or more or less complementary models, including revivals and transformations of ancient atomism, traditions of Platonism and hermeticism, alchemical theories, medical humanism, cosmologies of an animated

universe taken over from Stoic and other late-antique currents.²⁴ Principally, such models placed themselves in opposition to hylomorphic conceptions of substance set out in scholastic and Aristotelian philosophy (the common object of dispute in so far as this was the prevailing model taught on university curricula). The notion there of ‘substantial forms’, as essentially composites, defined matter in its most basic state as necessarily acted upon from without by some separate formative or generative principle. Amongst the entangled network of systems that took shape in response to this (including reforms of the Aristotelian and scholastic frameworks from within), both the lines of tension and the broader commonalities lay in the attribution of some principle of animation within matter.

Across a number of diverse currents of thought, the actions of matter itself came to be identified as the sole or prime cause of material change and of the characteristics of

²⁴ For broad overview in succinct form see Alfonso Ingegno, ‘The New Philosophy of Nature’ in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, eds Charles B. Schmitt and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). For surveys of more particular relevance to the questions that figure most strongly here, see D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (University Park, Penn: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Hiro Hirai, *Le concept de semence dans les théories de la matière à la renaissance de Marsile Ficin à Pierre Gassendi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005); and idem, *Medical Humanism and Natural Philosophy: Renaissance Debates on Matter, Life, and the Soul* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

material things. In this regard, the challenges to the scholastic and Aristotelian view of substance could open the space for a radical view of human thought and action, a radical ethical framework in which even the most rarefied human ideas, even the totality of precepts of civic life and religion, were to be understood as the outcomes of a common impulse unfolding in the lowest levels of matter.²⁵ The unbidden power that matter assumed here mirrored the thinking on ghosts and the dead in dreams. Just as such phenomena disturbed the borders of the human in spectral half-presences caused by matter cast adrift from those principles that defined the human, here matter in its primal state was understood to be possessed of a will that ultimately grounds rational thought and action.

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²⁵ To take one distinct example, the influential Calabrian philosopher Bernardino Telesio in the mid- to late 1500s integrated a system of ethics within his explanation of all phenomena brought down to the most basic terms of two formative entities, heat and cold, seeking to occupy the same matter, each exercising a faculty of *sensus* tied with a drive to unite with and augment its own kind, and through this process of conversion to destroy its opposite. Telesio's principal work (in its final, enlarged form) was the *De rerum natura iuxta propria principia libri IX* (Naples: Orazio Salviani, 1586). For broad studies see Luigi de Franco, *Bernardino Telesio: la vita e l'opera*, second edn (Cosenza: Edizioni Periferia, 1989); and Roberto Bondí, *Il primo dei moderni: filosofia e scienza in Bernardino Telesio* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018).

Holding together a set of attributes at once material and immaterial, silver may in some sense be regarded as a ghostly presence at the moment van Vianen's ewer was made.

Broadly, the value of precious metals was understood to inhere within matter as properties that were subject to enquiries in the province of natural philosophy.²⁶ Yet it is clear, at the same time, that the exploration of supposed intrinsic virtues of such metals was shadowed in this period by uncertainties whose causes were outside and elsewhere, dispersed across large and complex networks of exchange and social relation that were increasingly remote and obscure. The unsettled presence of silver at this conjuncture was a quality of van Vianen's work.

One aspect of the provocations staged in the vessel, which seems to play directly on its condition as something made from a precious material, was the way its emerging forms alluded to current beliefs about the spontaneous generation of life from putrid matter.²⁷ In

²⁶ Illuminating in this regard is the discussion set out by Gasparo Scaruffi, for a time master of the Mint at Reggio, who reflected in some detail on the value of precious metals as based both in their supposed natural virtues and on their distribution in the earth (drawing both on Biblical accounts and on Plato), see Gasparo Scaruffi, *L'Alitinfo* (Reggio: Hercoliano Bartoli, 1582).

²⁷ For a pertinent account of views of spontaneous generation, which includes extensive bibliography and raises some intriguing connections with van Vianen's object, see Karin

the very immanence of the association of the object's material with imagery of life forming out of some foul substance, silver, as a noble material, became implicated in a poised reflection on the object's own status, on the uncertain nature of things of monetary value.

Belief in the possibility of spontaneous generation of lower animals permeated the porous boundaries between scholarly traditions stemming from classical sources – in this case Aristotle, Pliny, Lucretius, Ovid, and others – and what were broad and popular accounts of creation.²⁸ It is certainly the case too, as part of a renewed and systematic attention among natural philosophers in the early seventeenth century, that such ideas, quite specifically brought to bear on metals and minerals, would have been encountered in some form by Paulus van Vianen in Prague at the court of Rudolf II. There Anselmus de Boodt, physician to the Emperor from 1606 until the latter's death in 1612, in a book principally concerned with the properties and value of gems, had set out a detailed account

Leonhard, 'Pictura's fertile field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of sottobosco painting' in *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2009/2010), pp. 95-118; see also Whittle, 'Chaos and Creation', pp. 209-211.

²⁸ Note here Carlo Ginzburg's seminal study of the complex relations between 'popular' beliefs and more formal or codified knowledge (in certain ways germane to the question of the generation of life touched on here) in *The Cheese and the Worms*, trans. John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

of the generation of metals and minerals through a ‘seminal’ principle working within matter, exercising an inner formative power which de Boodt called the *spiritus architectonicus*.²⁹

Such exhaustive investigations of the immediate physical properties of precious materials, whether of the kind set out by de Boodt at the court of the Hapsburg empire, or in other forms elsewhere, were at the same time the expression of obscurities of value which by their nature were intangible. In the very act of making van Vianen’s object, silver assumed this doubled aspect. Van Vianen had been the assay master at the Utrecht silversmiths’ guild, an institution closely connected with the city’s Mint, between 1606 and 1607 and between 1610 and 1611, and he would go on to be guild master in the years shortly after the object was made.³⁰ He was professionally engaged in understanding both

²⁹ For de Boodt’s work, the *Gemmarum et lapidum historia* (Hanover: Typis Wechelianis apud Claudium Marnium and heredes Ioannis Aubrii, 1609), see Hirai, *Le concept de semence*, pp. 375-399, especially p. 388. For discussion of renewed enquiry among natural philosophers of the early seventeenth century into the phenomenon of spontaneous generation, see Hirai’s studies of Fortunio Liceti and Daniel Sennert in *Medical Humanism and Natural Philosophy*, pp. 123-150 and 151-172.

³⁰ See van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, ‘The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques’, p. 229. The tenure as guild master was from 1615 to 1616. On the connections between the guild and the Mint, see below note 34.

silver's minute constitution, and its determinations as a commodity and as money. It was generally the case in this period that artworks made of silver occupied a direct, if suspended relation to money in so far as it was a widespread practice to fashion such objects from melted down coins; and similarly it was a common, if potential fate for such artworks to be destroyed and reborn as bullion or money.³¹ Van Vianen's distinct knowledge of silver transformed what was in this regard a provisional or hypothetical relation to monetary value into a more marked quality of his vessel. In an illuminating technical study, Joose van Bennekom, Ellen van Bork, and Arie Pappot have shown, through the use of X-ray fluorescence analysis, that van Vianen used an alloy of silver which appears to have been of his own invention.³² It was highly purified silver, with notably less bismuth than was used in compositions identified through similar analysis of comparable artefacts produced by silversmiths in this period, though containing a greater copper content than would be found were the process one only of purification. The process

³¹ For detailed discussion, see Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, pp. 228-229.

Baarsen discusses the common practice of melting down of artworks with reference to Paulus van Vianen: see *Kwab*, p. 62.

³² Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', pp. 229-232, and pp. 237-238.

of material experimentation this represents was vital to the production of the object. It appears to be a precondition of the virtuosity on display in the making, to the extent that it facilitated particular combined properties of extended malleability and tensile strength required for the seamless fashioning of all the work's shifting forms from a single sheet of silver.³³ Before anything else, Van Vianen's ewer was a work in the subtle arts of alloys and assaying, something whose very conditions of existence were embedded in technologies and forms of knowledge bound up in the tenuous and shifting relations between value and its physical forms as money and bullion.

The Mint at Utrecht had been established in 1567 by Philip II of Spain; it was a concrete reminder of how silver infused the ramifying conflicts in which the city and the Dutch Republic had been embroiled since the Spanish rule and the beginnings of the Revolt in the Netherlands in the mid-sixteenth century.³⁴ And further than this, the trials of

³³ Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', p. 238

³⁴ For the establishment of the Mint see Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot, 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', p. 229. The authors note the Mint moved in 1586, and that the newly founded silversmiths' guild in 1598 converted the premises of the former Mint building into their guildhall. For general overview of the conflicts and their

silver taking place within the Mint were integral to the most extensive transformations of nature and acts of violence far beyond Dutch soil, through Spanish imperial relations extending in global networks from the sites of silver extraction in the Americas, to the mercury mines in Almadén, to the declining centres of silver production within Europe, and, still further beyond these and other Atlantic connections, to the flows of demand for American silver in East Asia.³⁵ In the depth of its engagement with the material as occasioned by the work's singular act of commemoration, the indeterminacies of van Vianen's object were properties of silver in its more distant aspect.³⁶

ramifications see Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1995), especially chapter 18, pp. 421–432.

³⁵ See Dennis Owen Flynn and Arturo Giraldez, 'Cycles of Silver: Global Economic Unity through the Mid-Eighteenth Century' in *Journal of World History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2002), pp. 391–427; Jason Moore "'This lofty mountain of silver could conquer the whole world": Potosí and the Political Ecology of Underdevelopment 1545–1800' in *The Journal of Philosophical Economics*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2010), pp. 58–103, which deals extensively with the use of mercury in silver extraction. Van Bennekom, van Bork, and Pappot offer a useful discussion of the sources of silver in this context 'The Unsurpassed Silversmithing Techniques', pp. 227–228.

³⁶ I am indebted here to links drawn by Helen Hills in a number of studies, recently 'Colonial Materiality: Silver's Alchemy of Trauma and Salvation' in *MAVCOR Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2021).

Analysing a number of their different manifestations, Girolamo Cardano at one point made the enigmatic remark that the demon which is in charge of the spirit of the dead is the one whose face will look most like one's own in the mirror.³⁷ Such an observation challenges any secure projection into distance and otherness of those things characterised as strange.³⁸

5 What is apprehended as strangeness may rather be the return of something too familiar. Or the estrangement is not of the thing apprehended, but in its denied proximity. Here, the remark perhaps brings to light a sense of what could be put as the distinct objectivity of van Vianen's artwork. Its unsettled allure, fused in qualities unspeakable both in its conception as a memorial and in its place in the wider configurations it occupied, was a
10 strangeness not in distance but in presence. What was and remains difficult to resolve in the object is the very immediacy of actual and specific human relations.

³⁷ See *Paralipomenon* [begun 1561] in *Opera omnia*, vol. 10, p. 469: 'velut faciès nostra in speculo visa', cited, with insightful commentary to which I am indebted here, in Armando Maggi, 'The Dialogue between the Living and the Dead in Cardano's Thought' in *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2010), pp. 473-480 (p. 478).

³⁸ For similar reflection from a different perspective see Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 241: 'what [is] all too strange is what is secretly all too comprehensible, confirming Freud's dictum that the uncanny is repulsed only because it is all too familiar.'

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