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Phosphorus, Sulfur, and Silicon and the Related Elements

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THE DISCOVERY OF PHOSPHORUS IN THE ART

Ludwig Maier^a

^a Novartis International Inc., Basel, Switzerland

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THE DISCOVERY OF PHOSPHORUS IN THE ART

LUDWIG MAIER*

Novartis International Inc. R-1098.P.10 CH-4002 Basel, Switzerland

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A famous painting about the discovery of phosphorus by Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797) is in the Museum and Art Gallery, City of Derby, UK, and bears the title “The Alchemist in search of the Philosopher's Stone, discovers Phosphorus and prays for the successful conclusion of his operation, as was custom of the Ancient Chymical Astrologers”. (Figure 1)

It is generally agreed today that phosphorus was discovered by the Hamburger Alchemist Henning Brand in 1669 during his search of the Philosopher's Stone by heating urea to high temperatur^[1]. For the illustration of the discovery of phosphorus a reproduction of the painting of the Alchemist by Joseph Wright is given in at least two books.

In Van Wazer's book on “Phosphorus and its Compounds”^[2] is shown a black and white reproduction of the Alchemist by Joseph Wright in which the Alchemist is looking from right to left and in Gmelins Handbuch der Anorganischen Chemie “Phosphor” Teil A System-Nummer 16^[3] is given a colorful reproduction of the Alchemist by Joseph Wright in which the Alchemist is looking from left to right. An inquiry at the Museum and Art Gallery, City of Derby, UK, confirms^[4] that in the original painting by Joseph Wright the Alchemist is looking from left to right.

Thus the reproduction of the Alchemist given in Gmelins Handbuch is the correct one, and the one given in Van Wazer's book² is a mirror image of Joseph Wright's Alchemist.

When asked about the origin of his reproduction, John R. Van Wazer wrote me^[5]:

* Correspondence Author.



FIGURE 1 The Alchemist, in search of the Philosopher's Stone discovers phosphorus, by Joseph Wright of Derby, A.R.A. (1734–97). Reproduced by permission of the Museum & Art Gallery, Derby, UK

“In the late 1950 's the Fisher Co. published a small black & white reproduction of this painting, probably in one of their advertisements, and I then requested a copy (a photo negative could explain the left/right reversal) to be used in my book. This would account for my acknowledgement of

Fisher, which was not intended to infer that the Fisher Co. ever owned this painting (original or copy) ; but was merely a courtesy reference to my source”.

Unfortunately the Fisher Co. did not answer my request about the origin of their reproduction of Joseph Wright's painting.

1. H.W. Prinzler, Phosphorus, Sulfur and Silicon, **78**, 1–13 (1993).
2. John R Van Wazer “Phosphorus and its Compounds”, Vol. I Chemistry, Interscience Publishers Inc., New York 1958, p. 94.
3. Gmelins Handbuch der Anorganischen Chemie, Achte völlig neu bearbeitete Auflage, “Phosphor” Teil A, System-Nummer 16, Verlag Chemie GmbH, Weinheim, 1965.
4. Letter of Ms. Sarah Kirby, Keeper of Fine Art and Exhibitions, Museum and Art Gallery, City of Derby, UK, October 9, 1989.
5. Letter of John R. Van Wazer to the author, May 24, 1998.