For their assistance in the preparation of this exhibition I wish to thank Susan Barrett, Heather Gibson and her able staff at art4business, Roberta LaRocca, Corrado Minimo, and Carolyn Vivaldi. I am indebted to Salar Alsardary and the various colleagues and students at USP who assisted me with the Arabic inscription and the cataloguing of the objects. My warmest gratitude goes to Wyeth Pharmaceuticals for their enthusiastic and generous support of this inaugural exhibition collaboration, which I hope endures as a yearly event.

Acknowledgments

Grinding Stone to Art Object: The Mortar and Pestle from the Renaissance to the Present

Michael J. Brody

As the Director and Curator of the Marvin Samson Center for the History of Pharmacy at University of the Sciences in Philadelphia (USP), it gives me great pleasure to present a selection of some of the most interesting mortar and pestle sets from our collections. It is only fitting that USP, founded in 1821 as the College of Apothecaries (notably the western hemisphere’s first school of pharmacy), should maintain important holdings of these vessels. With thirty-one examples from over a dozen countries, and in materials such as stone, metal, wood, glass, ceramic, and ivory, the current exhibition attests to the astounding diversity these objects have displayed over the past 450 years.

Of all the articles comprising the pharmacist’s armamentarium, mortars and pestles hold a place of honor as the indispensable, and therefore most characteristic, tools of the profession. Since written history began, their association with pharmacy has been so intimate that they have become emblematic of the apothecary’s art. They were probably the earliest implements used in the preparation of pharmacy and medicine as well as in the preparation of food by primitive man. The antiquity of these devices is well documented in early writings, such as the Egyptian “Papyrus Ebers” of c. 1550 B.C.E. (the oldest preserved medical manuscript) and the Old Testament (Numbers 11:8 and Proverbs 27:22).

Whether improvised from nature to be used primarily as grinding stones [no. 28] or designed, fabricated, and decorated to a degree that merits status as veritable art objects [nos. 7, 8, 12, 18], mortars are found in every corner of the earth. Their users include members of isolated tribes, professional and household cooks, students, scientists, and pharmacists. At least two mortars on display have specialized functions in food preparation: the Mexican example, formed from volcanic rock [no. 9], whose rough composition excels at cutting and grinding chili or red pepper; and the highly decorative Near Eastern wooden example [no. 3], with a tall and narrow inner cavity specifically designed for crushing coffee beans. The centerpiece of the exhibition, a large brass mortar dated 1707, bears the imperial monogram of Frederick the Great [no. 31], and was almost certainly used by the king’s personal apothecary.

Michael J. Brody is the Director and Curator of the Marvin Samson Center for the History of Pharmacy at the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia

Mortar (mortar(ˈr))

Seems to derive from the Old French mortier; the Latin mortarium is of obscure origin, though as early as the fourteenth century it referred to both crushed drugs and a vessel in which substances were mixed, ground, or pounded.

Pestle (pes(ə)l, ‘pɛst(ə)l)

Can be traced back to the thirteenth-century Old French pestel, from the Latin pesillum, for pounder, which derived from ponsere, to pound, bruay, or crush.

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Checklist of the Exhibition

Sixteenth century mortars and pestles were frequently used in the medical and pharmaceutical professions; the “Rx” (prescription) insignia appears twice on the body. The pestle is labeled “coricidin,” a prescription drug for cold symptoms which was made; the upper portion of the pestle is composed of wood.

2. Stone mortar and pestle, perhaps India, 20th century

3. Cast iron mortar, Russia, 16th century

4. Cast iron mortar, perhaps India or Northern Africa, 20th century

5. Porcelain mortar and pestle, Morris L. Cooper Co., Baltimore, MD, c. 1955

6. Porcelain mortar and pestle, Hungary, early 20th century

7. Stoneware mortar and pestle, Hungary, early 20th century

8. Metal mortar and pestle, USA, circa 1963

9. Metal mortar and pestle, probably Germany, c. 1939

10. Brass mortar and pestle, perhaps India, 20th century

11. Brass mortar and pestle, probably Germany, 19th century

12. Hardstone (porphyry) mortar and pestle, probably China, 19th century (or earlier)