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Chemical symbolism through the ages: A Rookwood fountain's visual journey

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Chemical symbols and imagery have changed dramatically throughout history, representing the predominant scientific understanding of their era. At the University of Cincinnati, a one-of-a-kind Rookwood Pottery fountain created in the early 20th century provides a unique artistic embodiment of this evolution. Recently, during the renovation of UC's Old Chemistry building in 2025, this century-old artifact underwent a careful 2-year preservation journey as a Rookwood specialist disassembled and reinstalled the fountain. The fountain's design elements have even inspired architectural features in the renovated building, creating a bridge between chemistry's past and future. This presentation will explore the rich symbolism integrated into this remarkable ceramic artifact, which traces the development of chemical nomenclature and symbolism from ancient cultures through the quantitative revolution of the modern era. The fountain's design incorporates ancient planetary/metallic symbols, alchemical imagery from medieval texts, representations of the four Aristotelian elements and three Paracelsian principles, phlogiston theory, Dalton's early atomic notation, and quantitative instruments embodying the state of the art of Chemistry at the time. The fountain serves as a physical timeline chronicling how chemists have represented and communicated their understanding of matter's fundamental nature over time.

Toward Consensus in Standardization: The 1892 Geneva Congress on Organic Nomenclature

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By the end of the 19th century, the rapidly expanding field of organic chemistry had produced a disorganized collection of competing names for newly discovered compounds. In response to the lack of standardization, chemists from across Europe convened in Geneva in 1892 at the *Congrès de Nomenclature Chimique*. This meeting marked the first international effort to establish a systematic method for naming organic compounds, resulting in the ‘Geneva system’, a set of rules that laid the foundational principles for the nomenclature of aliphatic compounds and demonstrated the viability of international agreement in chemical language. Although the rules established at the Geneva Congress were later expanded and revised, the consensus achieved at the meeting formed a crucial step toward the modern system of standardized nomenclature in use today. This presentation will examine the historical context, determinations, and lasting impact of the Geneva Congress on the evolution of chemical nomenclature.