

Hensmans, Pierre-Joseph

Born: September 12, 1802 – Leuven

Died: July 6, 1862 – Schaarbeek (Brussels)

During his studies of chemistry at the University of Leuven, professor Van Mons' attention is drawn to the capacities and inquisitiveness of Hensmans and appoints him as his assistant in 1819. The subject of his first study is the properties and chemistry of opium and its related compounds, which earns him a golden medal.

In 1825 he publishes a study about the reason why different alcohols cannot be purified to obtain the same concentration, because of impurities which appear during the course of the fermentation (translated and published in German by the famous chemist Brandes).

Next year he is again laureate of the *Académie des Sciences* following his article about “*Le proportionnement chimique pesé et mesuré des corps*”.

In 1827 he is the editor and author of a number of contributions to a new monthly journal about the repertoire of chemistry, pharmacy and industrial chemistry. This journal renders useful services to the scientists of this period because this kind of publications is rare and hard to obtain. The quality is proven by the many references to the work of Berzelius, Braconnet, Dumas, Gmelin, Liebig, Payen, etc.

One of his contributions is about the determination of copper in bread. Bakers often mix copper sulfate with their flour (especially in the north of France) as to obtain a better quality (!). He describes three techniques to reveal these falsifications and advises to use all three on the same sample for mutual confirmation to clear or condemn the baker judging by one test. The journal is granted only a short life and in 1834 he publishes a yearbook for the use by chemists, pharmacists and manufactures of chemicals. He refers to his collaborators De Koninck and Stas.

Hensmans' career

Even after obtaining the degree of doctor honoris causa in physics and mathematics, followed by his degree of doctor in pharmacy, he awaits vainly a further promotion till 1830 when he becomes lecturer at the University of Leuven. He still has to wait till 1838 to become professor in Ghent. The reason might be a difference of political opinion with Van Mons. After the independence of Belgium in 1830, some faculties of Leuven are abolished, and become the privilege of the University of Ghent, where he is appointed professor of pharmacy and *materia medica*. The first part of his life, till 1835 is spoiled by troubled political times, not leaving much headspace to create a flourishing interest in chemistry. Furthermore, money is lacking for research equipment. Hensman never made important discoveries, but by his dedication, his active mind and his intelligence he towers above many other chemists of his time.