

Judocus Johannes Hubertus VOUNCK

Born: Leuven, Belgium (April 17, 1733)

Died: Leuven, Belgium (March 20, 1799)

Josse Jan Hubert Vounck is the eldest of fifteen children. In 1751 he registers in the home for students “De Lelie” but for an unknown reason interrupts his studies and works for a period of 6 years as an assistant in his father’s pharmacy. On the 9th of October 1759 he graduates nevertheless as a licentiate in the medicine with different theses on the rules of hygiene. On April 10 of 1760 he takes over the chair of chemistry from professor Jan Jozef De Smedt (ca.1730-1777). From the 1st of February 1769 on he has a seat as a founder-member in the *Société littéraire*, which becomes later on the *Académie Impériale et Royale des Sciences et Belles Lettres* (The Imperial and Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters).

Chemistry as an independent science

His predecessor professor J.J. De Smedt judged that physical experiments are the essential starting point to obtain a clear insight into the four elements that make out the backbone of chemistry. In the same year of his nomination Vounck turns implicitly his back to this vision judging that medical students possess a sufficient knowledge of physics as they already have the concerning lectures behind them in the Faculty of Arts. He neither advocates the undisputed authority of Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) whose principles of chemistry rather belong to the courses of physics in the Faculty of Arts. In Germany and France, new visions in the field of chemistry have arisen that have to be taken into serious consideration. The principles of chemistry according to Boerhaave cannot be part any more of the curriculum of physics of the Faculty of Arts.

Experimentum praecedet explicationem

From the scientific as well of the didactic angle Vounck’s lectures are centered on practical experimentation. The theoretical part of the course should limit itself to the explanation of chemical terminology and the description of the instruments. As a young man he puts together a special collection of items found in nature and builds up his “drogen-kabinet” which in the future will prove very useful to illustrate his lessons. When drawing up and interpreting the experiments, Vounck stimulates the critical attitude towards the established authors.

Formerly, measures had already been taken to substitute the course on “eaux minérales” by a course on “Matière Médicale” as a supplement to the chair of chemistry. On the 10th of April 1760 Vounck is appointed professor in this field by the empress Maria-Theresia (1717-1780) after mediation by the royal commissioner Patrice François de Neny (1716-1784).

Together with his colleagues he judges the practical exams of his successor Karel Van Bochaute (1732-1793)

Up to date and didactically sound teaching

Vounck's lectures are less murky, better organized and more elaborate than those of his predecessor and are also more successful. In the classical tradition, his curriculum is divided into three parts: first, the minerals (first comes mercury, then iron, copper, lead, tin silver and gold), in their pure state or as making part of their compounds with other chemicals earlier studied, going from simple to more complex followed by the compounds of botanical and animal origin.

His laboratory is well equipped and contains a number of sophisticated instruments.

His younger brother Hendricus Josephus obtains his degree of licentiate in medicine on the 28th November 1770 with a thesis (disputatio) on the practicability of the table of affinities established in 1718 by the French chemist Etienne-François Geoffroy (1672-1731). The first translation into Dutch is published in 1773 (P.J. Macquer) and their application reaches a peak around 1780 in the studies of the Swede Torbern Bergman (1734-1784)

Vounck is appointed professor of anatomy and surgery in 1772, as successor of professor De Smedt, who is not keen on performing dissections. Vounck takes over the anatomy theater of professor H.J. Rega (1690-1754), builds up a collection of anatomical sections, purchases surgical instruments, etc.

He obtains his doctorate in 1775 and is admitted to the the "strictum collegium", the highest office of the faculty. The people of Leuven profusely celebrate this event. Vounck is nominated as the court physician of Charles of Lorraine (1712-1780) and is present at his deathbed.

Vounck disagrees with the educational reforms of Emperor Joseph II (1741-1790) and first takes refuge in Sint Truiden and later on in the principality of Liege. On his return to Leuven he finds that his scientific equipment has been moved to Brussels, from where he personally fetches it back. In 1794, during the French Revolution, Vounck is taken hostage in France until all the war debts of the university have been paid off. As the sole professor of medicine he teaches all the subjects after his return. This will lead to his death in 1799, after the French have closed down the university. His publications (he wrote 12 books) and his library, are publicly auctioned by the French together with the bequest of Rega (1690-1754)

On the 20th of February 1776, aged 43, he marries the 24-year old Johanna Maria Paraciers (1752-1842). The marriage leaves no heirs.

On the occasion of the exhibition “300 Years of Chemistry in Leuven: 1685-1985”, close to his birthplace a square carrying his name is inaugurated as a permanent tribute to professor Vounck,