

Edinburgh International Science Festival – Magical Mercury

✘ The Edinburgh International Science Festival is no stranger to exploring the magic, stories and art that surround science and nature in our society, so it is no surprise that 'Mercury-A Window on the Invisible' celebrates the mythology and beauty of this enigmatic substance, as much as its properties and uses.

Professor Andrea Sella from University College London described Mercury as 'the most beautiful and most reviled' of the chemical elements. He recalled putting his hands in a bucket of mercury as a schoolboy, where it squeezed his hands 'like the clammy grip of death.' It is so profoundly strange and beautiful that it holds endless fascination, as deadly as it is entrancing.

Professor Sella uses film, television, historic apparatus and of course the oxymoronic liquid metal itself to educate and entertain. He takes us on a journey from the Bronze Age, through the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, to the development of scientific research as we know it today. News to me was the role Mercury played in allowing the precise measurements of gases which were vital to the modern scientific method.

Sella described its myriad uses in the development of many areas of science, from lighthouses to telescopes and the study of earthquakes.

Surprisingly, its beauty is not confined to the liquid form. The glorious red pigments of many great paintings are made from Cinnabar. This exotic substance is in fact Mercuric Sulphide from which liquid Mercury is obtained on heating. Professor Sella explained that without Cinnabar (or Mercury)

Vermeer and Titian could not have bequeathed the world their treasured masterpieces.

And yet, despite his enthusiasm and fascination with the element, he is quick to point out that for all its intoxicating beauty, is also fatally toxic in its salt and vapour form. Mercury is paradoxically chemically inert and deadly poisonous, beautiful and deadly.

Festival goers were so captivated by the event that the majority were reluctant to leave as they gathered round the magical substance, captivated by quicksilver like so many before.