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Frans Francken II's Allegories of "Fortune" and "Occasio-Opportunity" revisited

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Resumen

En esta nota se refieren las pinturas del artista holandés Frans Francken II, o el Joven, sobre los temas de la Fortuna y de la Ocasión o Oportunidad, y se ofrece un resumen del estado actual de la discusión sobre la interpretación de los motivos de los cuadros de este último tema, dándose noticia de una quinta obra de la serie, hasta hoy no considerada por los que han tratado el asunto.

Palabras clave

Frans Francken II, Fortuna, Ocasión-Oportunidad

Title

Las alegorías de "Fortuna" y "Ocasión-Oportunidad" de Frans Francken II revisitadas

Abstract

In this note, reference is made to the paintings of the Dutch artist Frans Francken II, or the Young, on the themes of Fortune and *Occasio-Opportunity*, and a summary is given of the present state of the discussion on the interpretation of the motifs of the pictures on the latter subject, and notice is given of a new work in that series, not considered until now by those who have dealt with this matter.

Keywords

Frans Francken II, Fortune, Occasio-Opportunity



The allegories of Fortune and Chance/Opportunity have attracted my attention since a long time, due not only to their symbolic richness but also to their abundant appearance in emblem books since Andrea Alciato's seminal work, as well as the frequent confusion between these different personifications. In the text below, such difference is not in question, whereas the paintings under analysis deal with both symbols in their appropriate senses, but it seems to me that the old debate regarding the motivations of the Occasio-Opportunity group is worth updating, in order to consider more recent data which may contribute to refresh the subject.

In March 1966 the prestigious Parisian art journal *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, nowadays defunct, brought an article by Albert Pomme de Mirimonde entitled “Les allégories politiques de ‘l’Occasion’ de Frans Francken II”, in which the author studies the versions by then known to him of this theme painted by that Flemish artist in the first half of the seventeenth century.



Fig. 1. Frans Francken II, *The Painter's Cabinet* (1623), Private collection, Las Arenas, Getxo, Bilbao

Frans Francken the Younger (1581–1642), the most conspicuous member of a distinguished and large family of painters from Antwerp, seems to have nurtured a special predilection for that personification, both in its character as *Occasio*-Opportunity and in that of Fortune. At least two of his known

extant works are dedicated to this last allegory, i.e., *The Painter's Cabinet* (c. 1623) in a private collection in Getxo, Bilbao, Spain (Not in Härting) (Fig. 1)¹, and the *Allegory of Fortune* (c. 1615–1620) in the Musée du Louvre in Paris (Härting, # 374) (Fig. 2)². There has been another version of this allegory in the Coppée Collection in Brussels, of an unknown date, about which there is at present no further information (Härting, # 375) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2 Frans Francken II, *Allegory of Fortune* (c. 1615-1620), Musée du Louvre, Paris

De Mirimonde's article analyses a group of three paintings presenting variations of a common overall composition centered by the image of *Occasio-Opportunity*, whose aspect he considers esoteric and whose exact subjects were not known. In the absence of any documentary

¹ This painting has been studied, from the emblematic viewpoint, by Carmen Ripollés Melchor who identifies the model for the image of Fortune as emblem XCVIII of Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata* (Ripollés Melchor, 1349). I have discussed the question of Alciato's edition probably taken as model (Amaral Jr., 50–51). However, I have not been able to find adequate models from emblem books for the other allegories of Fortune and Opportunity studied in the present article.

² This painting was deposited for some time in the collections of the Musées nationaux du Palais Compiègne, but returned to the Louvre in 1977. I thank Ms Juliette Rémy, Keeper of the Patrimony of the Musées nationaux du Palais de Compiègne, for this information. Colette Nativel, departing from de Mirimonde's cited work, dedicates an article to the study of this painting, in which she also deals with the differences between the allegories of *Fortuna* and *Occasio* (Nativel, 40-45).

evidence indicating their purposes, he tried to interpret them in the light of certain historic events of the time³.



Fig. 3. Frans Francken II, *Allégorie de la Fortune*, ex-Coppée Collection, Brussels (whereabouts unknown).

Departing from the image in one among the many works exposed in the painting *Jan Snellink's Art Gallery* or *Cabinet of an Art Collector* (1621) in the *Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts* in Brussels (Figs. 4 and 6)⁴, attributed to Frans's brother and collaborator Hieronymus Francken II (1578–1623), in which a client bent forward peruses a painting on the lower part of the right wall, he relates the image in the picture within the picture to other two works with the same scene in reverse: one, of 1627, in the *Zamek Królewski na Wawelu* [Wawel Castle Museum] in Cracow, Poland (Härtling, # 365) (Fig. 7); the other, of 1628, attributed alternately to Frans Francken II and to David Teniers the Elder (1582–1649), in the *Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie du Périgord* in Périgueux, France (Fig. 8) (Not in Härtling).

³ It is not the purpose of this note to discuss the conclusions of the different authors who tried to interpret these pictures, exposed here in a very tight abridgement, but just to make an assessment of the present status of an interesting discussion on a theme dear to emblematists, and bring forward some related new data, especially the addition of two paintings to the series, unknown to them.

⁴ There is another version of this painting, also attributed to Hieronymus Francken II, in a private collection: *Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures*, c. 1620 (ex-Christie's, 7 July 1995) (Fig. 5). See Marr, 23. None of these two pictures within the picture is identical to the other independent works with the same overall subject studied herein, but their dates (1620, 1621) point to the existence of a previous individual version today unrecorded.



Fig. 4. Hieronymus Francken II (attrib.), *Jan Snellink's Art Gallery or Cabinet of an Art Collector* (1621), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels.



Fig. 5. Hieronymus Francken II (attrib.), *Cognoscenti in a Room Hung with Pictures* (c. 1620), Private collection (ex-Christie's, 7 July 1955).

After pointing out that the various personages and accessories representing laziness, richness, luxury, faithfulness, arts and crafts, *Musica*, *Geometria*, *Dialectica*, *Astrologia*, *Grammatica*, scattered all over these paintings, dominated by a statue of Opportunity in the center and a group of persons on the right, where Fame conducts a hero towards the personification of *Felicitas Publica* (Public Happiness) who offers him a crown, contain a symbolic meaning which turn them small allegoric repertoires worth studying, de Mirimonde seeks to identify and interpret each detail. He comes to the conclusion, in face of the pomp and circumstance of the ceremonies depicted, that compositions of mere fantasy seem to be out of consideration and that each one must depict a prince having acceded to the throne thanks to exceptional circumstances of which they have known how to take advantage. Consequently, for him the Cracow picture presumably presents an allegory of Opportunity in honor of the Russian usurper known as False Dimitri I, a friend of the arts, who reigned for a short time as Tsar in Moscow (1605–1606), and the Périgueux picture probably presents the allegory of Opportunity in honor of Shah Abbas I, The Great (1557–1628), during whose reign Persia knew an era of splendor. For this second interpretation contribute also the eastern style of the clothes of the personages, and the buildings, monuments and vegetation in the background.



Fig. 6. Hieronymus Francken II (attrib.), *Jan Snellink's Art Gallery or Cabinet of an Art Collector* (1621), Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels (detail).



Fig. 7. Frans Francken II, *Occasio – Allegory of Good Fortune* (1627), Zamek Królewski na Wawelu [Wawel Castle Museum], Cracow



Fig. 8. David Teniers the Elder or Frans Franken II (attrib.), *Allegory of Occasio* (1628), Musée d'Art et d'Archéologie du Périgord, Périgueux.



Fig. 9. Frans Francken II, *Allegory of Occasio* (1627), Zamek Królewski na Wawelu [Wawel Castle Museum], Cracow (detail).

According to de Mirimonde, the two personages are examples of men who had been capable of seizing hold of the opportunity of securing a throne, the former following the death of the despot Boris Godunov, the latter after the assassination of his two elder brothers. He acknowledges the fact that none of the two men glorified in the paintings presents the known physical traits of the presumed model. In fact, in a second article that will be cited below, he admits that the image of the supposed Dimitri has rather a deceiving appearance of King Henry IV of France (de Mirimonde, 1967: 122, n. 12, *in fine*). But he justifies these shortcomings by the suggestion that it had not been intention of the artist to paint portraits or describe historic events, but rather to combine a moral allegory with allusions to stories that certainly marveled his contemporaries.

In the Appendix to the article “Good Government or Fortune?” published in the following volume (68) of the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, Erwin Panofsky, referring to the Cracow painting—which, he stresses, was wrongly called an allegory of “Fortune” instead of “*Occasio*-Opportunity”,—recalls that it has much in common with a composition by the same master (Härtling, # 369, present location unknown) which he believes to have been produced in praise of the Armistice signed in May 1607 between Maurice of Orange, Regent of the Northern Provinces of the Netherlands, and Philip III of Spain, which eventually led to the “Twelve Years’ Truce” in 1609. Accordingly he suggests that both works glorify Peace and warn against War, this warning acquiring a special urgency in the Cracow picture by a pointed reference to the “propitious moment” which should not be allowed to slip away. In one of the figures on the right he identifies King Louis XIII of France, accompanied by a courtier and a prince who may or may not be meant to impersonate Cardinal Richelieu. So, in his opinion, the general scene of the Cracow painting would be obvious: the powers that be are exhorted to avail themselves of a unique and transitory opportunity to preserve the peace, but

the more specific political significance of the composition is more difficult to determine. Nevertheless he proposes that the conspicuous presence of Louis XIII would suggest a specific involvement of France: either the war between France and England, started in 1627, the date of the picture, or, perhaps more probably, the critical situation which had arisen that same year by the death of Vincenzo II of Mantua, whose succession was sought by Charles, Duke of Nevers, supported by France. However, the fact that this succession was disputed by two other candidates supported by different powers gave place to the "Mantuan War of Succession", and the warning expressed in the picture remained unheeded (Panofsky, 319–320).



Fig. 10. Frans Francken II, *Allegory of Occasio* (c. 1618-1620), Private collection, Scotland

In a final note to the article, Panofsky refers to de Mirimonde's above mentioned interpretations, and, in the case of the Périgueux painting, considers his suggestion "not unattractive". However, regarding the Cracow painting, he declares himself reluctant to withdraw his own hypothesis in its favor not only because the dates of the False Dimitri and the events contingent upon his death do not fit in too well with the inscribed date of the picture, but also because de Mirimonde's suggestion has certain weaknesses, some of which were pointed out by the author himself, as has been seen. Besides, there would be no reason to connect the Cracow painting with Polish and Russian history, except for the fact that it comes from a Polish collection, that of Dr J.O. Poplawski, which however was not formed until between 1885 and 1904, nothing seeming to be known about its previous

whereabouts. Panofsky offers some examples of pictures where Opportunity appears as a force conducive to Peace and argues that the Arts themselves, represented by other symbols, must be interpreted as the fruits thereof, and their selection and appearance are too generic to warrant specific conclusions as to the individual inclinations of the False Dimitri and his adherents (Panofsky, 326, n. 73).

De Mirimonde returns to the subject of these paintings in an article published in the *Jaarboek van het Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten Antwerpen 1967* (de Mirimonde, 1967). In it he refers to his later acquaintance of a smaller painting belonging to the same series in a private collection in Scotland, of c. 1618–1620 (Härting, # 366) (Fig. 10), whose general concept is more akin to that in Cracow, although with numerous variations that give it, according to him, a purely allegorical character that would surpass the political allusion and would better correspond to the ‘commercialization’ of a subject originally conceived for a political purpose and meaning, being more suitable, also for its less imposing dimensions, to be sold to a bourgeois amateur than to adorn a princely residence. On the basis of the presence, in the background landscape of this picture, of a peasant who peacefully cultivates his field preparing the future harvests, and of a crowd which gathers in a temple to thank God for having given them an excellent prince, he considers judicious the thesis, he mistakenly attributes to Panofsky, on the allegorical link between opportunity and a good government⁵. He discusses, however, the latter’s interpretation of the Cracow image, arguing that it raises several difficulties, particularly due to the fact that the statue of *Occasio* and the inscription on its pedestal make allusion to an ephemeral fact of which a hero has skillfully taken advantage, which seemingly would not be the case in the events cited by Panofsky. Consequently, he insists that the False Dimitri’s adventure is perhaps still that which corresponds better to the elements in the Wawel Museum’s composition. Nevertheless, he admits that the evidence would be given only if a document proved that this picture had been ordered for Poland or, at

⁵ In his article, whose title itself already refutes de Mirimonde’s statement, Panofsky attributes such thesis—which is based on the presence of a rudder beside the image of Fortune in a Rubens’ sketch he analyzes—to Michael Jaffé and other scholars, but prefers the interpretation proposed by Allan Ellenius regarding another painting, according to whom it represents the rudder of the “ship of state” (Ellenius, 187 f.). Although for Panofsky it is true that the rudder, the means of determining and steadying the course of a ship, could be employed as the attribute of such personifications as “Providence,” “Economy” or “Maritime Abundance,” he could not remember having encountered it as an attribute of a figure personifying Good Government as a general and independent concept (Panofsky, 307–308, and n. 5).

least, that it was already in that country in the seventeenth century (de Mirimonde, 1967: 118–122).

The debate between these two scholars on this subject would not proceed, as Panofsky died in 1968, possibly having not had time to read de Mirimonde's second article.

Keith Andrews, who attributes the Périgueux painting rather to David Teniers the Elder, disagrees with de Mirimonde's historic-political interpretations, which he considers as fragile as a house of cards. He sees in these works a reconstruction of the *Tabula Ceбетis*, an ancient allegorical painting on human life presented to Socrates by his disciple Ceβes of Thebes; like Panofsky, he identifies the personage conducted by Fame before *Fælicitas Publica* as the *homo fortunatus*, and detects in the other symbols the possible remote influence of Adam Elsheimer's (1578–1610) *Il Contento* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) through Teniers's *Adoration of the Kings* (Art Collection of the University of Göttingen) (Andrews, 150–152). But he does not comment Panofsky's view on the overall intention of the works, although he probably did not ignore it.

In his 1966 article, de Mirimonde transcribes as follows the inscription engraved in a cartouche in the bottom of the Wavel Museum painting which leaves no doubt as to its primary symbolism (Fig. 9):

OCCASIO :

*Rem tibi quam
Nosces aptam
Dimittere noli
Fronte Capil (capillis?)
Lata est
Sed post
Occasio calva*

The doubt he shows as to the full form of the word *Capil*, continued in the following line of the inscription with the final syllables *lata*, which misled him into an inexact translation including the word *largement* (widely), shows that he did not link the epigram to the original *Catonis disticha de moribus* (II, 26) which reads⁶:

⁶ Panofsky (320) has indicated the verses' ancient source. The *Catonis Disticha* is a collection of couplets for the instruction of the young by an unknown author named Dionysius Cato from the 3rd or 4th century AD. This work was the most popular medieval schoolbook for teaching Latin, prized not only as a Latin textbook, but also as a moral standard. It was in common use as a Latin teaching aid as late as the 18th century.

*Rem, tibi quam scieris
 Aptam, dimittere noli:
 Fronte capillata,
 Post est Occasio calva*⁷.

There is the same inscription on the face of the square pedestal of the statue of Opportunity in the Périgord museum painting, but, according to de Mirimonde, it has been altered by excessively heavy cleanings and repaints. He reproduces it in footnote 16 indicating the corrections he deemed necessary. In his second article, he transcribes correctly the “Catonian” distich, but again without indication of its origin.



Fig. 11. Frans Francken II, *Allegory of Chance* (1627), Gosudárstvennyj Ermitáž [State Hermitage Museum], Saint Petersburg

The Gosudárstvennyj Ermitáž [State Hermitage Museum] in Saint Petersburg owns a painting dated 1627 (Fig. 11)⁸ which is the identical twin

⁷ The thing which seems fitting to you, do not give up; Opportunity has a forelock in front, after that is bald.

of the one in the Wawel Castle Museum, unknown to de Mirimonde and Panofsky, although it entered the Hermitage's assets in 1921 from the collection of the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich. Its presence in Russia might possibly contribute to strengthen de Mirimonde's suggestion as to the political subject matter, which was in part based on the location of the other painting in Poland, the other country directly involved in the episode of the False Dimitri. On the other hand, the evidence of a third version in Scotland, thus greatly expanding their geographic dissemination, does not help to confirm such idea, even though we ignore the reason of its presence there, in spite of de Mirimonde's hypothesis. Apparently neither the Wawel Museum nor the Hermitage are convinced of his interpretation, since they keep giving to their paintings respectively the titles *Occasio – Allegory of Good Fortune* and *Allegory of Chance*, with no subtitles, although, in the identification and description of the secondary symbolic images scattered throughout the painting, the Hermitage uses exactly de Mirimonde's expressions, but without any reference to Dimitri.

The Museum of the Périgord also keeps calling its painting just *Allegory of Occasio*. Nevertheless, in the beautiful catalog *L'univers des Orientalistes*, in which the photo of the painting is in reverse, Gérard-Georges Lemaire fully abides by de Mirimonde's interpretation (Lemaire, 36–37). In a recent article on the sculpture as an object that the painter incorporates in his work, Concepción de la Peña Velasco just exposes de Mirimonde's opinions without taking sides (De la Peña Velasco, 60–61).

In 2013, an oil on wood painting with the title *An Allegory of Chance*, dated c. 1630, supposedly from a Czech collection, was sold at an art auction in Prague. As far as it is possible to judge from the comparison of the available photographs, it seems to be identical in every detail to the one in the Scottish collection, except for its slightly smaller dimensions: 55 x 88 cm.⁹ The Catonian inscription is clearly legible on *Occasio*'s pedestal. The characteristics of this newly discovered painting seem to reinforce de Mirimonde's hypothesis of a 'commercialization' of the subject.

⁸ C. Nativel has already pointed out, in the above mentioned article, the existence of this version, but in Fig. 1 she mistakenly illustrates with its photo a reference to the Cracow version (Nativel, 35). In fact, they seem to be exactly identical.

⁹ See the image in the Arthouse Hejtmánek 2013 catalogue *Výtvarné Umení Starožitnosti Design 16.-21. století Sběratelství v českých zemích [Fine art, Antiques, Design 16th to 21st Centuries Collecting in the Czech lands]: <http://www.arthousehejtmank.cz/cs/archiv/aukce-2013-sberatelstvi-v-ceskych-zemich-1/seznam-umeleckych-del/alegorie-nahody-13726?filters%5Bevent%5D=1&paginator-page=22> (accessed on 05.07.2017). The auction house did not answer my query on the provenance of this work.*

In conclusion, the possible various individual meanings of this series of paintings additional to their obvious overall basic theme of Chance or *Occasio*-Opportunity still remains, for the time being, an open discussion, challenging the curiosity of art historians and emblem experts, in the continuous absence of documental evidence.



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¹⁰ I am grateful to Doctors Luís Gomes, Ingrid Höpel, Almerindo E. Ojeda, and Peter Stoll for their kind help with bibliography.

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