NOTES

Two Falcon Devices of the Strozzi: An Attempt at Interpretation

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Among the various pieces of Florentine furniture in the Museum’s collections credited with having come from the Palazzo Strozzi, two—a three-legged stool, sgabello (Figure 1),1 and a painted marriage chest, cassone2—bear exceptionally intriguing heraldic devices.

The sgabello bears on top of its backrest a circular medallion carved in relief with the Strozzi arms—or, a fesse gules charged with three crescents argent3—on a tournament targe, surmounted by a jousting helm crested with a wreath on which is standing a falcon preening its right wing (Figure 2). The punch-dotted background of the medallion is enlivened by the richly dagged helmet mantlings and by scattered small feathers plucked out in the preening. The frame of the medallion is encircled by a row of close-set crescents—originally twenty on either side—adapted from the main charge of the shield. On the reverse of the medallion the Strozzi shield is repeated, but it is here of chanfron shape, a heraldic form much favored in Italy (Figure 3).

The cassone (Figure 4) has painted on its front panel a many-figured representation of the conquest of Trebizond by Sultan Muhammed II (1461),4 but on either side panel there is an impresa incised with great flourish into the gilded gesso and surrounded by a dark painted background. This impresa consists of a curled scroll, inscribed with the nearly obliterated letters m.e.z.z.e., arranged around a large caltrap turned upside down, on which is perched a jessed and belled falcon (Figure 5).

1. The sgabello was bought from the Palazzo Strozzi by the Viennese collector Albert Figdor, from whose collection it came to the Metropolitan Museum in 1930. Joseph Breck, “Two Chairs from the Figdor Collection,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 25 (1930) pp. 239–242, ill.; sales catalogue, “Die Sammlung Dr. Albert Figdor, Wien” (Vienna, 1930) II, pt. 1, no. 657, ill. It has been published in practically all the standard works on Renaissance furniture.


4. It is not known why this event was chosen for the decoration of the chest and its presumed (lost) companion piece. The account book of Marco del Buono and Apollonio di Giovanni (Florence, Biblioteca nazionale, Ms. 37.305 Strozzianno), covering the period 1446–63, lists for the years 1452–63 a commission of one pair of cassoni as dowry chests for Caterina, daughter of Benedetto di Marco degli Strozzi, who was to marry Jacopo degli Spini in 1455. The price—37 florins—is mentioned, but the subject matter of the decoration is not. (Information regarding the commission comes from a letter, 1967, by E. Callmann to the Museum’s Department of European Paintings.)
FIGURE 1
Sgabello from the Palazzo Strozzi, Florence, before 1491. Fletcher Fund, 30.93.2

FIGURE 2
Medallion with arms of Filippo Strozzi on sgabello

FIGURE 3
Reverse of medallion
FIGURE 4
Cassone from the Palazzo Strozzi, after 1461.
Kennedy Fund, 14.39

FIGURE 5
Impresa on side panel of cassone

The arms on the sgabello are similar to those on the reverse of a medal of Filippo Strozzi (1426–91), attributed to Niccolo Fiorentino and thought to have been made on the occasion of the foundation of the Palazzo Strozzi (1489), where it is recorded that certain medals were buried on August 6, 1489. On the medal, however, the bird is sitting on the branch of a tree from which the armorial shield—a targe of the same shape as that on the sgabello—is suspended. In both these representations the falcons are shown as preening, with

6. Terisio Pignatti, Nobili Italiani del Rinascimento (Milan, 1961) p. 57, illustrates a similar chair, wrongly described as belonging to the Metropolitan Museum, which shows a medallion with the falcon sitting in the tree from which the shield is hanging.
feathers flying all around them. These flying feathers, strikingly decorative as they are, are actually a violation of the heraldic rule that a crest should be of a shape that could be worn firmly affixed to an actual helmet. For this reason the crest in the sagabell’s medallion should be more properly called an impresa adapted as a crest.

An impresa was a personal badge, chosen by its owner—often deliberately obscure in its meaning, but always with deeper significance—to be used whenever the hereditary family arms were felt to be not distinctive enough or too ceremonious. Preferably, an impresa should contain a pictorial symbol and a word device, the motto. Sometimes the latter could be expressed as a rebus, as was the case with the impresa of Pietro de’ Medici (d. 1470), which consisted of a scroll with the word SEMPER and a falcon grasping a diamond ring, to be read as “Sempre fa-l-con Di(o) amante,” or that of Lorenzo il Magnifico (d. 1492), which combined a diamond ring, a scroll with the word SEMPER, and three ostrich feathers of white, green, and red to indicate that, where the love of God is present, the virtues Faith, Hope, and Charity were always to be found.

It seems that there was a rebus hidden in Filippo Strozzi’s falcon device. Not only is the falcon itself a canting device—strozziere meaning “falconer”—but the words for “feather”—penna—and for “to molt, to mew”—mudare—are close enough to pena (sorrow, misfortune) and mutare (to change, to remove) to afford acceptable plays upon words. An impresa suggesting the changing or removing of sorrow or misfortune would have been very appropriate for Filippo Strozzi, who, as a political enemy of the Medici, had been banished from Florence, but was later permitted to return.

A similar rebus may be represented by the impresa on the cassone, since the word for caltrap—tribolo—is ambiguous too, and can mean “tribulations, trouble.” Taking into account that the tribolo is reversed, the pictorial device could express tribulations changed and rendered harmless.9

The letters MEZZE on the scroll are most likely a slogan, similar to the “Palle, palle” shouted in the streets by the partisans of the Medici faction. “Palle” (balls) referred to the six roundels of the Medici arms, and “meze” is clearly derived from the three crescents or half-moons—mezzelune—in the Strozzi arms. Since “palle” had the same second meaning that “balls” would have in English, it can be suspected that “meze” also had a second meaning, derived from mezzare (to wither, to grow flaggy), when yelled at political opponents.


8. Croallalianza gives the Strozzi crest as a falcon “al naturale.” Litta illustrates the tombs of Carlo Strozzi (S. Giovanni de’ Fiorentini, Naples) and of Leone and Lorenzo Strozzi (S. Andrea della Valle, Rome) both of which display arms with falcon crests, but at the head of the entry “Strozzi di Firenze” he illustrates the Strozzi arms with a helmet bearing as a crest a white dog, crested with black and yellow plumes and with a golden collar inscribed Lealì. Sprezi gives the collared dog as the crest of the Strozzi. Both crests were canting devices, the falcon referring to strozziere, the falconer, and the collared dog to strozza, throat or gullet.

9. It is tempting to see a suggestion of this cassone being one of the pair made for the wedding of Caterina Strozzi and Jacopo degli Spini in the appearance of the reversed caltrap, the spikes of which might be interpreted as spine, thorns, to be construed as a pun on the groom’s name.