

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, *cassone*²—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.

2. The *cassone* was acquired from the Palazzo Strozzi by Stefano Bardini, Florence, from whose collection it came to the Metropolitan Museum in 1913. Paul Schubring, *Cassoni* (Leipzig, 1915) Tafelband, pls. LXV–LXVII, Textband, p. 283 (lists it as still in the Bardini collection). Elizabeth Gardner and Federico Zeri, *Italian Paintings: Florentine School* (New York, 1971) pp. 100–103, ill. The *cassone* is attributed to the workshop of Marco del Buono Giamberti (1042–89) and Apollonio di Giovanni (1417–65).

3. G. B. di Crollanza, *Dizionario storico-blasonico* (Pisa, 1886)

II, p. 568. Johann Siebmachers *Grosses und Allgemeines Wappenbuch* (Nürnberg, 1894), "Die Europäischen Fürstengeschlechter," I, 3. Abt C, pl. 361, p. 254. Howel Wills, *Florentine Heraldry* (London, 1900) p. 176, gives the charges as "three half-moons increscent argent," Vittorio Spreti, *Enciclopedia Storico-Nobiliare Italiana* (Bologna, 1928–35) VI, pp. 491–497, ill.

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, Mss. 37.305 Stroziano), covering the period 1446–63, lists for the years 1462–63 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 1465. 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

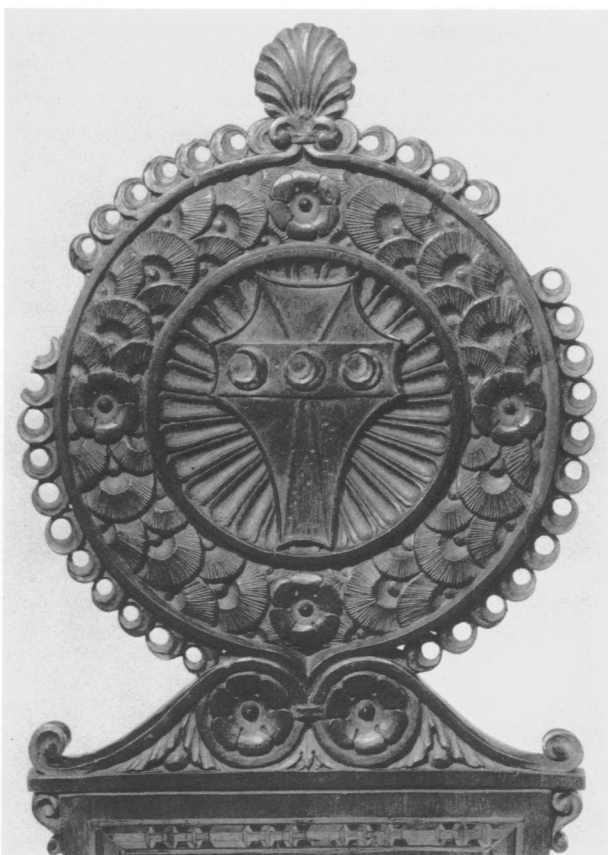


FIGURE 3
Reverse of medallion



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),⁵ 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.⁶ In both these representations the falcons are shown as preening, with

5. Pompeo Litta, *Famiglie Celebri Italiane* (Milan, 1819–61) XI, Dispensa 68, fig. 8. George Francis Hill, *Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance* (London, 1930) no. 1018, ill.

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 sagabello'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.⁷

It seems that there was a rebus hidden in Filippo Strozzi's falcon device. Not only is the falcon itself a canting device⁸—*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 "*mezze*" 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 "*mezze*" also had a second meaning, derived from *mezzare* (to wither, to grow flaggy), when yelled at political opponents.

7. Bury Palliser, *Historic Devices, Badges, and War-Cries* (London, 1870) pp. 169–171, ill., pp. 356–368, ill. Ostrich feathers were an endurance symbol (that is, a virtue symbol) similar to the diamond ring, because they stay unruffled, no matter how hard the wind blows. W. R. Staehelin "Der Vogel Strauss in der Heraldik," *Archives Héraldiques Suisses* 39 (1925) pp. 49–57. Helmut Nickel "Böhmische Prunkpfeilspitzen," *Acta Musei Nationalis Pragae*, Series A—Historia, XXIII (1969) no. 3, pp. 159–160. Helmut Nickel, "Addenda to 'Ceremonial Arrowheads from Bohemia,'" *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 4 (1971) pp. 180–181.

8. Crollalanza 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 *Lealtà*. Spreti 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.