

cat. no. 1

## Frans Francken the Younger

1581 – Antwerp – 1642

### *Esther before Ahasuerus*

Signed and dated lower left: D f francken [inv.] et f. Antw / A° 1622

Oil on panel

75.2 x 112.7 cm.

#### **Provenance:**

London, collection Edmund Larken, Esq (1766-1831)

His sale, London, Christie's, 16-17 June 1831 (Lugt no. 12697), lot 91 (17 June):

'Old Francks : Esther and Ahasuerus, 1622', 6 Pounds, to Ewart

Belgium, private collection, until 2006

Sale Amsterdam, Sotheby's, 9 May 2006, lot 11

London, Johnny van Haften, Ltd., 2006

New York, The Leiden Collection, until 2023

#### **Literature:**

Possibly E. Duverger, *Antwerpse kunstinventarissen uit de zeventiende eeuw*, 14 vols., Antwerp 1984-2009, 3 (1987), p. 156 (doc. 670: 1629); 6 (1992), pp. 39 (doc. 1580: 1649), 267 (doc. 1745: 1652), 296 (doc. 1769: 1652)

L.S. Lerner, 'Les « fils » d'Esther : À la recherche du temps perdu comme micro-littérature', in: *MLN* 133/4 (French Issue, September 2018), pp. 831-857, pp. 849-850, fig. 5

## The Power of Women

### **Esther before Ahasuerus**

Frans Francken the Younger's 1622 *Esther before Ahasuerus* couples ambition, monumentality and brilliant execution with timeless narrative relevance. First surfacing in 2006, the painting has until now largely escaped scholarly attention, and has never been contextualised within Francken's output. Depicted is the Old Testament story of Queen Esther kneeling before her husband Ahasuerus, king of Persia. As recounted in the Book of Esther, Ahasuerus' first wife, the beautiful queen Vashti was, on the advice of the king's councillors, banished

for disobeying her husband's order of appearing before him wearing the royal crown during a lavish feast. With Vashti gone, a beauty pageant was held and Esther, a young Jewish woman, was chosen as the new queen. Esther's Jewish identity, however, remained unknown to Ahasuerus and his court, only her uncle and guardian Mordechai knew. One day Mordechai overheard an assassination plot against the king. He informed Esther and instructed her to tell her husband, which she did, thus thwarting the conspiracy. Soon after Ahasuerus appointed Haman as grand vizier, ordering everyone to bow down to him. Mordechai, however, refused to bow to Haman, on account of his Jewish faith. This enraged the haughty



grand vizier so, that he decided to have Mordechai and all the Jews in Persia killed, slandering them, and fabricating lies, thus convincing his king to permit him to execute his heinous plans. Hearing all this, Mordechai urged Esther to reveal to her husband her own Jewishness, and Haman's genocidal plot. Although hesitant – going to the king without being summoned meant risking her life – she agreed.

This heroic and crucially important royal audience is depicted by Frans Francken. Seated on his throne in a palace interior, Ahasuerus grants his beloved Esther her say, pointing his sceptre at her as she kneels with her maidens in front of her husband, with Haman standing beside him and his councillors looking on. Francken truly wore himself out in the lifelike depiction of his protagonists and the individual courtiers, the meticulously rendering of the colourful, luxurious fabrics of their clothing – Haman's robe is even painted with gold, no doubt referencing his conceit – pillows and luxurious tapestries, and the lifelike depiction of the dogs, and monkeys in the foreground. By deploying her natural grace and eloquence, Esther gets her king not only to listen to her but is able to arrange for a dinner – and then another – at which she finally reveals her identity, and exposes Haman's evil intent. Thus, the Jewish people are delivered,



Fig. 1 Philips Galle after Maerten van Heemskerck, *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, 1564, engraving, 20.5 x 24.8 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (image reversed)

and Haman ends up being hung from the very gallows he himself erected for Mordechai. In turn, Mordechai is rewarded with Haman's position for his role in thwarting the conspiracy against the king, and is being paraded around the city on horseback, wearing royal robes and a crown, a scene depicted in the left background.

### Solomon's Idolatry

For his composition, Francken could draw on a well-established pictorial tradition from which he did not deviate significantly (fig. 1). Rather, the painting's exceptionality lies in its spectacular grandeur and magnificent execution. Adding, moreover, another dimension to our understanding of it is another work of near-identical measurements, painted by Francken in the same year 1622, equally ambitious and showcasing – while depicting a different Biblical narrative – a strikingly similar composition. This painting, *Solomon's Idolatry*, now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu (fig. 2), shares with the Lilian work so many characteristics, that one cannot but wonder about the extent of a shared, interconnected genesis.<sup>1</sup> The Getty painting depicts the story of Solomon, the wise king of Israel, as recorded in 1 Kings 11. Against the explicit wishes of the Lord, Solomon in later life loved many foreign women. He had 700 princess wives and 300 mistresses who with their seductive powers turned his affections away from the Lord, and toward other gods. Solomon even constructed an altar dedicated to Chemosh 'that detestable Moabite idol, and to Molech, the detestable Ammonite idol. Solomon did this for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and sacrificed to their own gods.' (1 Kings 11: 7-9). The scene is situated in nearly the identical architectural setting found in the Lilian work and follows the same compositional build-up. It likewise shows the protagonist with stretched hands and wearing a lush mantle, facing left while kneeling centre stage on a luxurious exotic carpet, here witnessed not by a row of male advisors behind him, but by a row of his wives and concubines, and including the near-identical *repoussoir* figure – Haman in the Lilian work, a courtier in the Getty painting – in the left foreground.





Fig. 2 Frans Francken the Younger, *Solomon's Idolatry*, signed on the pedestal: f. franck in cf A / 1622, oil on panel, 77.2 x 109.9 cm., Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum

### Gender, Virtue and Vice

Do these arresting analogies imply an added relation between the stories of Esther and Solomon: is there reciprocity between them beyond their compelling visual alignment? Both stories take place in periods and lands far removed from one another in time and place, so a potential connection should not be sought in historical or geographical proximity, but rather in narrative similarities – or contrasts. Recapitulating, it turns out that the connections are certainly there, and that they centre around oppositions of gender, virtue and vice: whereas in the Lilian painting the heroine Esther kneels before her husband the king and a row of entirely male advisors, the group in front of which Solomon kneels in the Getty work consists exclusively of females, Solomon's wives and concubines, who have lured their king away from the Lord. Both paintings thus entertain the notion

of female exercise of power, in opposite but visually strongly corresponding ways. While the story of Solomon's idolatry centres on the negative influence that the king's wives and concubines bear on his decision-making, in the case of the virtuous Esther the narrative concentrates on the positive difference made by a single woman, who through wisdom, courage and careful navigation prevents her misled king from making a fatal decision, therewith saving herself and her people.<sup>2</sup>

In both paintings, these core negative and positive implications of feminine power over a man are further exemplified by female allegorical statues in niches in the centre background, prominently presiding over the events taking place (figs. 3, 4). In the Getty painting the statue carries a book and a mask, in the Lilian work the statue holds a shield

and a 'caduceus' (snake staff).<sup>3</sup> While in both cases the specific combination of attributes remains ambiguous to an extent, the Getty statue's mask is an irrefutable reference to deceit, traditionally encountered with allegorical personifications such as Fraus (Treachery), Inganno (Deception), Seductio (Temptation) and Mendacium (Lie).<sup>4</sup> As for the Lilian statue, she can tentatively be identified as 'Hermathena', a composite merging Minerva (Athena, with her shield) and Mercury (Hermes, with his caduceus), that shares several of these sibling gods' specific qualities.<sup>5</sup> Hermathena was known for learning and eloquence, clever intelligence, ruse and winning strategy in life, as is underlined by an engraving after Hans von Aachen (1552-1615), which shows Hermathena representing the concept of Cursus, or career (fig. 5). Moreover, according to Ripa, Eloquence ('Eloquenza') – Esther's quality *par excellence* – is represented by the parrot ('the parrot is an attribute of Eloquence, for she does great wonder with tongue and speech, mimicking therein Man'), not coincidentally the bird sitting on the ledge of the niche.<sup>6</sup>

Were, then, these two corresponding paintings conceived as pendants? So far, no archival evidence for that assumption has surfaced. Still, the observations laid out here clearly indicate that they were thought out as a unit, if not as pendants, then certainly as 'sister paintings'.

JH



Fig. 3 Detail of fig. 2, background statue



Fig. 4 Detail of cat. no. 1, background statue



Fig. 5 Aegidius Sadeler after Hans von Aachen, *Hermathena / Cursus*, engraving, 39.8 x 29.6 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

## Notes

- 1 For this painting, see: U Härting, *Frans Francken der Jüngere (1581-1642) : die Gemälde : mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog*, Freren 1989, pp. 57, 246, cat. no. 74, fig. 55.
- 2 On the theme of the Power of Women in early modern art, see before all Y. Bleyerveld, *Hoe bedriechlijk dat die vrouwen zijn : vrouwenlisten in de beeldende kunst in de Nederlanden circa 1350-1650*, Leiden 2000. While the Esther story here serves to exemplify female virtue, such positive examples remained significantly less common in sixteenth and seventeenth century art and literature than negative examples of female vice. Time and again contemporaneous notions on feminine nature prove to be overwhelmingly unfavourable, misogynist. The deceptive wives of biblical, mythological, and historical women – a.o. Eva, Bathsheba, Delilah, Phyllis, and many more unnamed – continuously served to warn against the destructive powers of women in general. Motivated by lust, foolishness, credulousness, financial gain or revenge, and invariably using sex and/or alcohol as their *modus operandi*, these seductive women cunningly brought down even the best of men, the wise king Solomon being a perfect example.
- 3 I thank Yvonne Blyerveld for our discussion on the possible meaning of these statues. Email, July 2023.
- 4 See C. Ripa (D.P. Pers, transl.), *Cesare Ripa's Iconologia of Uytbeeldinghen des Verstants*, Amsterdam 1644, pp. 29-30 (*Fraus* and *Inganno*, depicted with a mask); see also numerous prints, in which female personifications of these concepts invariably carry masks.
- 5 The shield held by the Lilian statue might also reference the female personification of Veritas (Truth), who is sometimes depicted holding up a shield to protect Humanity from vices such as Hypocrisy, Ignorantia and Mendacium (Lie). Cf. Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert's print after Adriaen de Weerdt, *Truth Protects the Believer against all Evil*, of c. 1570. See: I.M. Veldman, *De wereld tussen goed en kwaad : late prenten van Coornhert*, exh. cat. Gouda, Stedelijk Museum Het Catharina Gasthuis 1990, pp. 102-103, ill. The print is part of a series in which the negative personifications of Mendacium (Lie) and Seductio (Seduction) are depicted several times with masks as their attribute.
- 6 Ripa/Pers 1644, pp. 594-598, esp. pp. 595, 597. Interestingly, Ripa's female personification of 'Forza sottoposta al' Eloquenza' ('Violence overcome by Eloquence'), so fitting to the Esther narrative, also carries a caduceus.