



Fickle Fortune:  
Pinning Down Fortune in  
16<sup>th</sup> Century Italy

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**Abstract:** The allegorical significance of Fortune in Dosso Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune* has been largely unstudied. Though the painting's patronage cannot be confirmed, the few scholars who have written on Dossi's piece agree that Isabella d'Este is the most likely patron. If this is the case, then Isabella d'Este's role as the commissioner of this work must be taken into account. This paper proposes that the *Allegory of Fortune* is not just an allegorical representation of the quality of Fortune, but an allegory for Isabella d'Este's own struggles with fortune. By depicting such a temporal quality in a permanent state, Isabella d'Este was asserting her control over her own fortunes in life. This idea is echoed in other representations of Fortune, as well as in a Latin poem that claims that artists can assert their power over Fortune through the physical act of representing her. By giving shape to an intangible quality, both artists and patrons in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were able to trap Fortune and proclaim her to be their own. Yet in spite of these efforts, representations of Fortune continued to change, reaffirming her volatile nature.

**Keywords:** *Fortune, Allegorical Painting, Italian Renaissance Art, Isabella d'Este, Dosso Dossi*

## Introduction

Very little has been published on the *Allegory of Fortune*, a large-scale painting from 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy on display at the Getty Museum. The predominant interpretation was put forth by Dawson Carr in an unpublished paper presented at the Getty Center in 1996 (Carr, in Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998). Carr asserts that the woman in the painting is Fortune and that her attributes—the billowing cloak, cornucopia, and sphere—are based on previous, similar representations of her. The man to her left is a personification of Chance, and “together, the figures signify the volatility of fortune, which sometimes brings rich benefits, but which may suddenly and unexpectedly turn into misfortune” (Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998). Carr’s identification of the figures is most likely correct, but what is their significance?

In order to answer this question, we must first address the patronage of the painting. Patrons played an important role in the creation of art in the Italian Renaissance, mainly because they usually dictated the subject matter of pieces. They frequently requested specific images or genres of paintings from certain artists, and they often required the inclusion of a family symbol within the composition to denote their patronage of the piece. The patron who commissioned the *Allegory of Fortune* must have specifically requested the representation and probably placed personal significance in the allegory.

Although it is not entirely certain, scholars have named Isabella d’Este the most likely patron of the *Allegory of Fortune* (Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998; Fiorenza 2008; Carr, in Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998). Isabella d’Este was the Duchess of Mantua, an Italian city-state in modern-day Lombardy. She came from a family of wealth and prestige and married into the Gonzaga family in 1490, earning her noble title. Even in her own time, she was a well-known art collector (San Juan 1991). The evidence for her commission of the *Allegory of Fortune* is entirely circumstantial as no contemporary writings about the piece survived (Ciammitti, Ostrow, and Settis 1998). Nevertheless, scholars are probably correct in identifying her as the patron. The lottery tickets held aloft by the male figure are

a favorite *impresa*, or heraldic device, of Isabella d'Este. She adorned the walls of her apartments in the ducal palace of Mantua with bundles of lots, presumably to signify her own encounters with Fortune's inconsistency (Fiorenza 2008).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, an in-depth appraisal based on the relative dating of Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune* in conjunction with other artworks by the artist indicates a commission date in the mid-1530s, which is consistent with contemporary historical events relating to Isabella (Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998).

This paper will proceed on the assumption that Isabella d'Este was in fact the artwork's patron. Consequently, it proposes the following question: what motive did Isabella d'Este have for commissioning this allegorical work? Most likely, the *Allegory of Fortune* was Isabella d'Este's way of asserting her control over Fortune in order to make a public statement to the court of Mantua that she had control over her own fate. She chose to commission a visual representation of the intangible quality of Fortune so that she could make Fortune tangible and controllable. Yet, even though depicting Fortune in a single artwork solidified her into one form, her representation continued to change, sustaining Fortune's transient nature.

### **Allegory of Fortune**

Dosso Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune*, painted around 1530, displays a man and a woman in front of a dark backdrop, pressed up against the frame of the canvas. The man on the left is oriented on a strong but slightly curvilinear diagonal. His body reaches all the way to the top left corner of the canvas where his upheld

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<sup>1</sup> For all her wealth and esteem, Isabella d'Este still experienced instability in her life as luck swung in and out of her favor. As a woman, Isabella d'Este's fate and influence were very closely tied to the reputation of her husband and other male figures in her life. Consequently, she briefly fell out of favor with the Mantuan court in 1512 when her husband died, but she was restored to a position of power after her son married into an important family. Furthermore, although she was an avid collector of art and antiquities, she could do very little by herself and often had to rely on men to act for her, including in obtaining art commissions. As a result of her gender, she could never be certain of her position within elite Italian society.

fist clutches a bundle of papers. His outstretched leg disappears behind the woman in the bottom right of the canvas. He grabs his right knee with his left arm, twisting his entire body to create a barrier between himself and the woman. The woman sits opposite the man on a bubble, the sides of which are distended, appearing as though they are about to burst. Her figure is soft and follows a gentle S-curve—up from her feet, through her torso, and all the way through her face and arms. She is framed by the flowing drapery that billows behind her and by the gently curving cornucopia she holds. Her arms reach out and encircle the cornucopia, wrapping it protectively as if she is about to clutch it to her chest.



(Fig. 1) Dosso Dossi, *Allegory of Fortune*, 1530, J. Paul Getty Museum. <http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/822/dosso-dossi-giovanni-di-niccolo-de-lutero-allegory-of-fortune-italian-about-1530/>

Curvilinear lines, which invite the viewer's eye to wander throughout the painting, dominate the composition. The flow of the drapery, the curves of the bubble, and the dynamic gestures of the two figures create movement within the scene, imbuing the composition with the sense that something is about to happen. The scene is temporal, meaning it depicts a single moment in time. Yet that single moment is charged with a sense of impermanence. This impermanence is directly related to the meaning of the female figure, who, as mentioned above, has been identified as a personification of Fortune (Carr, in Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998). The temporality of the piece emphasizes the fickle and ever-changing nature of Fortune, even as she is captured in a singular pose.

### **Capturing Fortune Through Art**

The significance of capturing Fortune in a single moment is elucidated by an emblem and accompanying poem by Andrea Alciati. In his *Emblemata*, a book of emblems published circa 1621, Alciati created a very similar scene to Dossi's in the woodcut entitled *Ars naturam adiuuans*. In fact, his composition appears to be derived from Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune — Ars naturam adiuuans* postdates Dossi's *Allegory* by about 20 years (Ciammitti, Ostrow, and Settis 1998). Alciati's version of Fortune also sits upon a sphere, holding a curving cornucopia like Dossi's. Such attributes of Fortune, however, are common. The poses of the male figures mark the two pieces as similar and serve as the basis for the belief that the *Ars naturam adiuuans* is derived from *Allegory of Fortune*. The way Mercury raises his staff in the *Ars naturam adiuuans* is reminiscent of the upheld arm of Chance in *Allegory* (Ciammitti, Ostrow, and Settis 1998). Furthermore, the orientation of Mercury's torso and head, the former toward the viewer and the latter toward Fortune, mirrors Chance in *Allegory*. In both pieces, the placement of the legs is similar, and the knee closest to the viewer is bent. The orientation in the images is toward Fortune, and, in both cases, the knee closest to the viewer is bent. Although the poses are by no means identical, they share certain similarities that indicate the two images may be related.



(Fig. 2) Andrea Alciati, *Ars naturam adiuuans* 1550, from *Emblemata*, published 1621 at Padua, Glasgow University Library. <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciati/emblem.php?id=A21a099>

Of particular note with the *Ars naturam adiuuans* is the *subscriptio*, or the poem that accompanies it. *Ars naturam adiuuans* is part of the *Emblemata* and catalogues many of Alciati's emblems. Each emblem consists of an engraving and a *subscriptio* that Alciati created together. The poem accompanying *Emblem 99* concerns fortune and art. It reads as follows:

*Ut sphaerae Fortuna, cubo sic insidet Hermes:  
 Artibus hic variis, casibus illa praeest:  
 Adversus vim fortunae est ars facta: sed artis*

*Cùm fortuna mala est, saepe requirit opem.  
Disce bonas artes igitur studiosa iuventus,  
Quae certae secum commoda sortis habent.*

Just as Fortune sits upon a sphere, so Mercury  
sits upon a cube.  
He presides over diverse arts; she is the mistress  
of [random] acts of chance.  
Art is made to counter the power of fortune,  
but when fortune turns out badly, often she  
requires the aid of art.  
Learn then, oh studious youth, the useful arts,  
for these have in themselves the advantage of an  
assured fate. (trans. Moffitt 2004)

In this poem, Fortune is described as a wild and reckless force; she is “the mistress of random acts of chance [who] sits upon a sphere.” Alciati’s depiction of her in the engraving is consistent with this description — she “sits upon a sphere” and cradles the cornucopia behind her with her arm wrapped around its stem. Fortune holds her bounty away from Mercury in a protective pose, making it clear that it is her choice to bestow prosperity on whom she wishes. Her unstable placement over the sphere advances the idea that she can change direction at any moment. Dossi’s image of Fortune operates in a similar way, jealously guarding a cornucopia by encapsulating it in her arms. In *Allegory of Fortune*, she instead sits on a bubble, further emphasizing her precarious position and drawing the analogy that luck can burst. Both images of Fortune are in an unstable position, representing her role as inconsistent and fickle.

The *subscriptio* claims that Fortune’s countering force is Mercury who represents art. The poem makes the explicit argument that “art is made to conquer the power of fortune.” Accordingly, Mercury is represented as the balancing figure to Fortune’s uncertainty in Alciati’s *Emblemata*. He sits upon a solid block that shows every indication of consistency and raises his winged staff in a calm, commanding gesture.

In both the *subscriptio* and Alciati’s *Emblemata*, art takes

control of Fortune. In fact, it is not just Mercury but all artistic representations that have power over Fortune. The *subscriptio* encourages youths to practice art because it can produce “an assured fate.” The process of delineating Fortune’s body and freezing her in a single moment bestows the maker with control over Fortune.

The principle underlying the *subscriptio*—the idea that depicting Fortune is a way of controlling her—can be applied to Dossi’s act of creating an image of Fortune for Isabella d’Este. In fact, not only did Dossi give Fortune an image in order to ground her, he also used a stone sculpture from antiquity as the basis of her pose, lending her figure greater solidarity. Italian Renaissance painters commonly used ancient statues as inspiration for their works. In his book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, Giorgio Vasari comments on how the discovery of ancient sculptures influenced the works of his contemporaries. He stated that “these statues caused the disappearance of a certain dry, crude, and clear-cut style,” and that the Renaissance artists would base their works on these amazing ancient artworks (Vasari, n.d., trans. J.M. Dent 1900).

The body of Fortune in Dossi’s *Allegory of Fortune* is clearly derived from the marble statue of a crouching Venus (**Fig. 3**) (Fiorenza 2008). Although only the torso of the statue remains, the sculpture is hunched over in almost the same half-seated pose as Fortune, the left knee raised and the right shoulder dropped. The gentle folds of the stomach and the soft modeling of the marble flesh are reflected in Dossi’s figure of Fortune. Using a classical sculpture as a model served two purposes. First, it lent an air of education and dignity to the depiction. Visitors to Isabella d’Este’s *studiolo*, a space where she kept all her collections and entertained members of the Italian aristocracy, would have been familiar with classical sculpture and most likely noticed the reference. This increased Dossi’s and Isabella d’Este’s prestige by showing they were learned in ancient art. Second, by basing the figure of Fortune upon an image of stone, Dossi was using his own art and art that had lasted thousands of years to assert control over Fortune. In doing this, Dossi transferred the permanence of



(Fig. 3) Marble Crouching Venus, Roman 1st-2nd century CE, Rome.

stone from the torso of Venus into his version of Fortune on the canvas. Although it was common practice to model painted bodies after ancient sculptures, the case of the *Allegory of Fortune* carried more meaning. By basing his fleeting figure of Fortune on a permanent and enduring work of stone, Dossi imbued Fortune with an added sense of groundedness. This modeling made Fortune more concrete and controllable.

When applying the Latin verse regarding art's control over Fortune to Dossi's composition, we can see how the *Allegory of Fortune* was Isabella d'Este's attempt to control Fortune. Like the bundles of lots she used to decorate her apartment, the choice to commission a representation of two uncontrollable forces, Fortune and Chance, was a quasi-heraldic device. Isabella d'Este took control of what could harm her by representing it. This allowed her to conquer Fortune using the power of art. Art is able to exert power over Fortune because the artist constructed

Fortune into a body upon which Isabella d'Este could act.

Isabella d'Este was a well-known art collector and always aware of her image. Her *studiolo* served as a space in which she could assert both her person and the image of herself she wished to project to the guests she invited to view her collection (San Juan 1991). Therefore, the inclusion of the *Allegory of Fortune* within this space thrust Isabella's struggles with Fortune out of the private sphere and into the public eye.

The *Allegory of Fortune* was Isabella d'Este's way of affirming that she had overcome bad fortune and was once again in control of her own fate. The painting was a public assertion of this, yet the lottery ticket motif decorating Isabella's apartment acted as a private reminder of her struggle. It is unknown whether or not the rest of the court understood the painting's significance (Ciammitti, Ostrow, and Settis 1998). However, the *studiolo* was a place to think about the act of artistic representation, and, in the case of *Allegory*, that representation was an act of conquering Fortune. Therefore, it is quite possible that others would have been aware of the message.

Additionally, the painting could have been seen as an extension of the Este family's fortune as a whole. Isabella was not just concerned for her own well-being but also about her family's place in society. The bundle of lots may have been Isabella's own symbol, but the incised design on the golden vase next to the figure of Chance alludes to a profitable marriage between her son and Margerita Paleologa, a woman who came from a family of great influence (Carr, in Humfrey, Lucco, and Bayer 1998). This marriage was a turning point in Isabella's own life fortunes. She had fallen out of favor with the court, and her son's marriage returned some of her former status. Giancarlo Fiorenza argues that the "*Allegory of Fortune* transforms the various devices of the Este to proclaim the legitimacy of their dynasty, which enjoys the benefits of Fortune's bounty" (Fiorenza 2008). Thus, the painting is a heraldic device that represents not just Isabella's own fortune but also the affluence of her entire family.

An engraving produced in Italy for the French monarchy by Giulio Bonasone, an Italian artist, shows that representations of Fortune as a heraldic device were not unique to Isabella

d'Este. Not only does this engraving provide another example of overcoming Fortune by the process of delineation, it also serves to demonstrate that even after depicting Fortune, she still changes.

In *Fortune and Abundance Bearing the Arms of France*, the typical attributes and pose belonging solely to Fortune have been disrupted. She stands over her sphere rather than sitting atop it, and the complementary figure of Abundance carries her cornucopia. Fortune, with a cloth billowing behind her, reaches across her body to hold a large rudder in one hand while simultaneously stepping forward with her right foot. It appears as if she is descending from her pedestal, which anticipates a shift in elevation that consequently makes her pose unstable. Abundance, in a somewhat firmer stance, reaches out to stabilize the large rudder that Fortune holds. Together, the two figures hold aloft a large French coat of arms, topped by a crown.

As in Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune* and the *Emblem*, this engraving's figures of Fortune and Abundance are drawn in order to control them (*Fig. 4*). They are both fickle qualities, inclined to change as represented by the rudder, moving cloth, and sphere. But in the engraving, Bonasone imbues the women with a sense of graceful serenity. Choosing to represent them in this calm state of being is an attempt to tame their wild natures through the act of engraving them as exactly what they are not — docile. Again, art is used to “counter the power of fortune” (Alciati, trans. Moffitt 2004).

Yet, the figures of Fortune and Abundance still retain some degree of instability. Interestingly, Bonasone chose to present Abundance and Fortune as the pillars upon which the French coat of arms rests. The placement of the shield appears to be a bit unsteady; each woman has a strong grip and a muscular arm, but the placement of the hands is not symmetrical, and the coat of arms appears to lean slightly to the left. This may acknowledge that allowing fickle qualities (such as Fortune and Abundance) to be the sole supporters of France is inherently unstable. Once again, this goes back to the idea that drawing the two allegorical figures as supporters necessitates that they must be supportive. Most notably, Fortune and Abundance are below the coat of arms, marking them as inferior. Therefore, France (as represented by



(Fig. 4) Giulio Bonasone, *Fortune and Abundance Bearing the Arms of France*, from *Emblems of Achilles Bocchius*, 1555, London. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details)

the shield) has conquered Fortune and Abundance by forcing them to submit to its will. Bonasone's engraving puts this situation into a permanent state. Using the power of art, Bonasone is able to capture Fortune and Abundance for the benefit of his patron, the French monarchy. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how much Fortune's pose has changed from Dossi's *Allegory of Fortune* and

Andrea Alciati's *Ars naturam adiuuans*. She has evolved from a seated to a standing figure, and Bonasone's engraving now depicts her with wings. Even while trying to capture Fortune in a single form, she continues to change, speaking volumes to her varying nature.

## Conclusion

There is something in the act of depicting Fortune and making her a concrete figure that gives the creator a sense of control over their own unknowable fate. This is what Isabella d'Este attempted to do in *Allegory of Fortune* — commissioning the piece for her *studiolo* in order to proclaim to the court of Mantua that she had control over her own luck. The Latin emblem and other representations of Fortune support and echo this interpretation. The artistic process of capturing Fortune herself in a single moment and a singular position allows Fortune to be claimed. Of course, each depiction of Fortune makes numerous references to her unpredictable and constantly changing nature; there is no way to definitively make Fortune one's own, but forcing her into a single form gave the patron, whether Isabella d'Este or the French monarchy, a feeling of control.

Yet, Fortune continued to change. Representations of her shifted from painting to painting and print to print. Despite artists, patrons, and countries trying to pin her down, Fortune was never truly constrained to a single form because countless other images of her existed. Ultimately, although depicting Fortune gave a sense of control, it was an illusion — just like the techniques used to convince the viewer that Fortune's form was really there and not just paint on canvas or ink on paper.

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