

La Fortune de la France and Its Dedicatee, Michel Le Blon

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La Fortune de la France, Abraham Bosse,
1635-37. Etching. France.

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The etching, *La Fortune de la France*, made by Abraham Bosse in 1635-1637 possesses an interesting story, not only in the subject matter but with the patron, Michel Le Blon. The etching depicts an allegorical figure of “fortune”, looking upon the French favorably, while there is a battle scene in the background. On the left side of the image Bosse has shown French aristocrats, clearly displaying their wealth. While on the right side, the unfortunate Spaniards are featured under cloudy skies and identifiable by their top hats.¹ Upon a closer look of the etching, there is an inscription written in French that describes the scene quite poetically. It details the abundant gifts Fortune is bestowing upon the French King Louis XIII and Queen Anne of Austria, such as the scepters and laurel wreathes.² The Latin inscription beneath the French is a dedication to Michel Le Blon, a German patron, artist and art dealer. Le Blon’s background in the world of art is essential to understanding why this work would have been dedicated to him in the first place. Le Blon worked as an agent for Queen Christina of Sweden amongst other patrons.³ The expertise Le Blon

¹ Bosse, Abraham. P. Von Baldinger-Seidenberg, and Roland Leblond. 1635. *La Fortune de la France*. Trans. Birdy MacLennan.

² “Fortune Favoring France (La Fortune de la France),” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed March 15, 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/387614?rpp=20&pg=1&rndkey=20140319&ao=on&ft=*&who=Abraham+Bosse%7cMichiel+Le+Blon&pos=1.

³ Badeloch Vera Noldus, “A Spider In Its Web: Agent and Artist Michel Le Blon and His Northern European Network,” in *Double Agents: Cultural and Political Brokerage in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Marika Keblusek and Badeloch Vera Noldus. (Brill, 2011) 161.

had acquired as a talented artist allowed him to be an excellent agent and art dealer. The countless numbers of pieces he was commissioned to buy for his wealthy clients would have led to him to this unique Bosse etching. In addition, the prominent role of the art dealer in Northern Europe during the seventeenth century is an inherent factor for the reason a man like Michel Le Blon would have this image dedicated to him.

Le Blon lived in Frankfurt until his early twenties, when he moved to Amsterdam. At this time, Amsterdam was a booming city, especially for artists and other creative types. This immense growth can be attributed to the conflict between the Dutch and the Spanish in the late 1500's. Antwerp was no longer considered the foremost trading center, and Amsterdam assumed its role as an international hub for commerce.⁴ Le Blon began to set up shop here and created an established reputation as a goldsmith by 1610. He had a successful career in Amsterdam and joined the social circle of artists and poets known as the Muiden Circle.⁵ He was also a member of a rhetoric society for Flemish immigrants. Le Blon was fully entrenched in the artistic networks of the nobility in Amsterdam, as well as other cities in the Dutch Republic.

He had no shortage of commissions and received arguably his most important one from the Swedish chancellor Axel Oxensterina. Beginning in 1632, Oxensterina requested Le Blon's service as an informant on political matters that were relevant to Sweden. At the time, Sweden was also involved with several conflicts within Europe, particularly with the Spanish during the Thirty Years War,

⁴ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 162-163.

⁵ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 163.

and thus had a need for the critical information Le Blon was providing.⁶ Le Blon and Oxensterina's correspondence often included information on both art and politics, as the two were many times intertwined⁷. Sweden was a hub for intellectuals and diplomats, such as the chancellor, who were interested in cultivating a collection of works from around the European continent.⁸ Once their working relationship was cemented, Oxensterina requested Le Blon to purchase different works of art and books for him. This required Le Blon to use his extensive connections in the art world of the Netherlands to obtain these works for the Swedish elite.⁹ Oxensterina entrusted this job to Le Blon because he was aware of his extensive artistic knowledge. Le Blon worked with another agent, Peter Spierinck, who, like Le Blon, was an art collector and very privy to the art world.¹⁰ He continued to work for the chancellor for several more years, this relationship led him to his next elite patron, Queen Christina of Sweden.

Queen Christina was aware of Le Blon's services for quite some time and their correspondence began in 1650, when she enlisted him to provide her with Dutch art.¹¹ Christina also took a liking to Italian art as well as the Flemish artists and Le Blon made a very large commission for her from the artist Jordaens for ceiling paintings in the royal palace. Le Blon enjoyed the status this position gave

⁶ Han Ferdinand Helmolt, *The World's History: Western Europe to 1800*. (Roma: Rarebooksclub.com, 2012), 573.

⁷ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 164.

⁸ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 167.

⁹ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 168.

¹⁰ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 167-169.

¹¹ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 168.

him a great deal. The title 'Agent of Sweden' granted him certain privileges within society.¹²

For Michel Le Blon, his role as an art dealer was woven into his career as an agent who relayed occasionally confidential information to the crown of Sweden.¹³ This part of the occupation was obviously not included in every Dutch art dealer's job description in the sixteenth century. However, the world of art dealing gained enormous recognition beginning in the 1630's and 1640's, precisely when Le Blon's communication with the chancellor commenced.¹⁴ This rise in art dealing as a profession began with the emergence of wealthy patrons who had very specific taste. Sometimes the patron was not able to travel to the city where the art was produced and dealers would provide that service for them, just as Le Blon did for his Swedish customers.¹⁵ Dealers would benefit a great deal from this service they provided because the artists most of the times preferred to deal directly with them in order to make an appearance on the market. As the intercessors between the artists and the providers of the raw materials, as well as the market, dealers had a great deal of power in their positions.¹⁶

The stock dealers had was quite extensive, according to the tables illustrated by Montias in his article, "Art Dealers in The Seventeenth Century Netherlands". Montias presents information from a variety of dealers in cities such

¹² Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 167.

¹³ Badeloch Vera Noldus, "A Spider In Its Web," 170.

¹⁴ John Michael Montias, "Art Dealers in The Seventeenth Century Netherlands," *Simiolus, Netherlands Quarterly For the History of Art* 18.4 (1988): 245. doi: 10.2307/3780702

¹⁵ Montias, "Art Dealers," 245.

¹⁶ Montias, "Art Dealers," 246-248.

as Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Haarlem and shows the number of paintings to be anywhere from 100 to upwards of a thousand paintings in their inventory.¹⁷ The sheer number of paintings was sure to put these dealers in the upper echelon of the art world.

Le Blon is a prime example of a prevalent collector, dealer and artist who would have been extremely familiar with the work of Abraham Bosse. Bosse was an active printmaker and etcher from 1622 to the late 1660's. This time period coincides precisely with Le Blon's career, especially the prime being when Bosse created *La Fortune de la France*, dedicated to Le Blon himself. Le Blon was active in the very same circles as Bosse, with comprehensive knowledge of his works and his contemporaries such as Charles Le Brun. Although Le Blon was working in the Dutch arena, he was nonetheless a cultivated intellectual aware of the world around him. The subject matter of *La Fortune de la France* would have appealed to Le Blon because he was invested in the Dutch world, which was also in conflict with the Spanish as the French were.¹⁸ The depiction of the Spanish not faring well would have excited any Dutchman, especially Le Blon. Also, the allegorical figure and symbols would have been well known to Michel, through his love and familiarity with art.

By demystifying the vague Latin inscription at the bottom of Abraham Bosse's etching *La Fortune de la France*, it is possible to understand how it came to be dedicated to Michel Le Blon, and who this seemingly unknown man really was. Le Blon's career, initially as an artist, then as an art dealer for Swedish royalty, follows

¹⁷ Table 2. Montias, "Art Dealers," 254.

¹⁸ Hans Ferdinand Helmolt, *The World's History*, 573.

the pattern of many art dealers in the Netherlands during the 17th century. He gained prominence through networking with Amsterdam's finest intellectuals and artists and eventually made so many connections he found himself employed by the Swedish chancellor, Oxensterina and then Queen Christina of Sweden. This coveted position, along with the nature of the work of an art dealer, allowed him to have access to a wide variety of artist and pieces. This is most definitely the way in which he came in contact with Bosse, and had this etching dedicated to him.

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