A New Cabinet Piece by Frans Francken II

Carina Fryklund
Curator, Paintings, Drawings and Prints before 1700
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The Nationalmuseum has acquired an important oil painting by the Antwerp-based artist Frans Francken II (1581–1642), a representative par excellence of Flemish small-figured history painting. *The Wedding at Cana* (Fig. 1) belonged to the collections of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, parts of which were de-acquisitioned by the Soviet authorities towards the end of the 1920s. It was later purchased by the Swedish ambassador Vilhelm Assarsson (1889–1994), who bequeathed it to the Swedish Academy.¹

*The Wedding at Cana* depicts the story of the first miracle performed by Christ, as told in the Gospel of St. John (2:1–12). The wedding guests are gathered around a table in a richly appointed interior hung with gilt-leather wall coverings, with the bride and groom seated under a baldachin at the centre. To the left is an open view of a yard with a well at which servants are drawing water. Christ has vacated his seat opposite the bridal couple and is shown standing in the left foreground, turning water into wine to replenish the magnificent silver-gilt jars. The panel’s horizontal format is underlined by the long table set parallel to the picture plane and by the isocephalic arrangement of the figures. The theme was a popular one in the large and productive Antwerp studio of the Francken family, an extended family of

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¹ The painting was de-acquisitioned by the Soviet authorities in 1929.
The elongated figures in Mannerist poses typical of Frans II hardly changed after c. 1620, as the artist continued to employ the same thickset, bearded male figures wearing turbans and heavy fur-trimmed cloaks, and graceful, fine-limbed female figures with stereotypical doll-like heads and peppercorn eyes (Fig. 5).\(^9\) The latter type developed around 1615 and can be seen, for example, in *The Wise and the Foolish Virgins* of 1616 (private collection).\(^{10}\) Despite the slightly monotonous repetition of heads in the Stockholm *Wedding at Cana*, the artist succeeds in animating the scene and clarifying the narrative through subtle variations in expression and gesture. The viewer’s eye is drawn to the central themes of the painting: the union of two families, the celebration of marriage, and the divine presence of Christ as the bridegroom, symbolizing the union of Christ and his bride, the Church.

The advanced techniques in painting technique and composition employed by Frans II are evident in the Stockholm *Wedding at Cana*. This canvas, dated c. 1610–15, is an autograph replica of an identical painting, signed *[D]en[J]ongen FF INV[entor]*, formerly on the art market in Dijon (present whereabouts unknown).\(^4\) The figures are sketched freehand on the *imprimatura* in a liquid medium using a fine pointed brush (Fig. 4).

The carefully constructed stage-like setting of the terraced antechamber in which the wedding banquet takes place, alternating with an exterior view to the left, as well as several of the principal figures, can also be found in a large canvas of c. 1610–15 in Seville Cathedral (Fig. 3).\(^7\) One may compare, for example, the figure of Christ in the left foreground; the servant next to him who is bending forward, pointing at a wine jar; the bride flanked by the groom and an elderly woman under a baldachin; the bearded man wearing a turban, seated on the near side of the table to the right, who turns to meet the viewer’s gaze; and the lady in a red gown by his side. In addition to compositional drawings, studies of individual figures and groups must have been kept on hand in the studio and used repeatedly over a period, though none have survived.\(^8\) Before being worked up in paint, the figures in the Stockholm painting were sketched freehand on the *imprimatura* in a liquid medium using a fine pointed brush (Fig. 4).

Despite the slight tonal differences between the two *Wedding at Cana* paintings, the Stockholm version is clearly the work of Frans II, given the similarities in composition, figure types, and painterly style. The combination of these characteristics strengthens the attribution to Frans II and underscores the artist’s skill in rendering complex narrative scenes with a level of detail that is typical of his work during the early 17th century.
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preferred a warmer colour scheme of deep red, olive green, blue and yellow ochre tones, as seen in the garments of the wedding guests in the Stockholm painting. As time progressed, he came increasingly to rely on a glazing technique, perfected during the 1620s, using superimposed layers of more fluid binding oils, sometimes of different colours, to give his garments a shimmering transparency. Early paintings such as the Stockholm Wedding at Cana, on the other hand, typically show variation in the application of the paint: thickly, in opaque layers, as in Christ’s red mantle; or thinly, in multiple layers of coloured glazes, as in the violet tunic (Fig. 6). Glazes are still largely monochromatic, and sparingly used, and colours do not yet attain the degree of complexity and nuance seen in later works. Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery from 1612, in Basel, shows a comparable colouring and handling (Fig. 7).12

A leading painter of narratives in miniature, Frans II measured himself against Peter Paul Rubens and other great Flemish masters of his time. The rich variety of costumes, materials and textures in his lively multi-figured scenes, and the harmony of the colours in relation both to each other and to the architecture, amply compensate for his stock repertory of figures.

Notes:

Fig. 4 Frans Francken II (1581–1642), The Wedding at Cana, signed c. 1610–15 (infrared reflectogram of undersketch, detail showing a pentimento in the position of a leg). Oil on oak, 58 x 120 cm. Purchase: Sara and Johan Emil Graumann Fund. Nationalmuseum, NM 7504.
One cannot entirely rule out workshop collaboration on the Stockholm Wedding at Cana, given the noticeable difference in the style of individual heads, as well as the more painterly execution of certain figures.

Frans Francken II, The Wise and the Foolish Virgins, oil on oak, 68.5 x 110.4 cm, signed D.J.f.franck INt Ano 1616, Germany, private collection; see Härting 1989, no. 142, colour pl. 49.

For a discussion of Frans II’s characteristic glazing technique, see Härting 1989, pp. 60–61.

Frans Francken II, Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, signed and dated 1612. Oil on oak, 49 x 66 cm. Kunstmuseum, Basel, 1152.


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At least eight paintings of this subject, ranging in date from c. 1605 to c. 1615/20, have been attributed to Frans II; see Härting 1989, nos. 151–157.


For a discussion of Frans II’s characteristic glazing technique, see Härting 1989, pp. 60–61.

6. Frans Francken II, The Wedding at Cana, oil on wood, 68 x 118 cm, signed D.I.FF INV, Dijon, G. de Salvatore art dealership; see Härting 1989, no. 152, ill. Härting, who had not seen the painting in the original, dated it around 1605 (“Mitte des ersten Jahrzehnts des 17. Jahrhunderts”). To the present author, it seems more likely that the Dijon and Stockholm paintings date from the same period as the Seville Wedding at Cana, which Härting dated to c. 1610–15 (see further note 7).


9. One cannot entirely rule out workshop collaboration on the Stockholm Wedding at Cana, given the noticeable difference in the style of individual heads, as well as the more painterly execution of certain figures.

10. Frans Francken II, The Wise and the Foolish Virgins, oil on oak, 68.5 x 110.4 cm, signed D.I.F.franck INN Ano 1616, Germany, private collection; see Härting 1989, no. 142, colour pl. 49.

11. For a discussion of Frans II’s characteristic glazing technique, see Härting 1989, pp. 60–61.

12. Frans Francken II, Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery, oil on limewood, 49 x 66 cm, signed D.J. F.Franck Inventor et fecit 1612, Basel, Kunstmuseum, inv. GKS 1152; see Härting 1989, no. 135, fig. 30.