

# The 'Allegory on the Abdication of the Emperor Charles v' by Frans Francken II: Some Observations on the Iconography of Antwerp's Plight in the Early Seventeenth Century

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## Résumé de l'article

Dans la partie de droite de *L'abdication de Charles V* (vers 1630-1640), du peintre anversois Frans Francken II, une figure de Maure barbu symbolise le continent africain. Ce personnage ressemble étroitement au *Roi de Tunis* de Rubens, qui représente Mulay Ahmad, vassal tunisien de Charles V. L'apparition presque simultanée de Mulay Ahmad dans ces deux œuvres permet de penser qu'il personnifiait l'Afrique à l'époque où Charles V régnait sur un immense empire catholique qui s'étendait aux quatre continents connus. Pour Francken II, Rubens et leurs contemporains anversois, le règne de Charles V devait apparaître comme une sorte d'âge d'or de l'histoire des Pays-Bas. La paix et la prospérité de cette période contrastait fortement avec les guerres sans fin et le déclin économique de leur propre époque. La fermeture du fleuve Escaut à toute navigation (exception faite pour les bateaux hollandais) constituait une source majeure de mécontentement. Des œuvres comme *La conquête de l'Afrique par Charles V* de Gaspar de Crayer, *La bataille de Tunis* de Rubens ou encore les créations de ce dernier pour l'entrée de l'Archiduc Ferdinand à Anvers, semblent bien opposer les gloires du temps de Charles V aux malheurs de l'époque contemporaine. On peut dès lors conclure que l'abdication de Charles V, survenue trois quarts de siècle auparavant, continuait d'intéresser les contemporains de Francken II, car cet événement évoquait les personnages et les faits prestigieux d'un vaste empire dont faisaient partie les Pays-Bas, prospères et unifiés.

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*The 'Allegory on the Abdication of the Emperor Charles v'  
by Frans Francken II: Some Observations  
on the Iconography of Antwerp's Plight in the Early  
Seventeenth Century*

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One of the most striking paintings in the Historical Section of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is the *Abdication of the Emperor Charles v* (Fig. 1) by the Antwerp painter Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642).<sup>1</sup> This mature work, dating from circa 1630 to 1640<sup>2</sup> is known to historians of Netherlandish art and culture not only because of its visual appeal but also because of the opening remarks by the late Henri van de Waal in his magisterial *Dutch*

<sup>1</sup> For the sparse literature on the work, see P.J.J. van Thiel *et al.*, *Alle schilderijen van het Rijksmuseum te Amsterdam: Volledig geïllustreerde catalogus* (Amsterdam/Maausen: Rijksmuseum/Gary Schwartz, 1976), 231. The painting is also mentioned by Z. von Manteuffel, 'Frans Franck(en) II,' *Thieme-Becker Künstler-Lexikon*, 37 vols. (Leipzig: E. A. Secman, 1907-1959), XII, 342, as part of a still basic discussion of Francken's oeuvre.

<sup>2</sup> This dating follows U.A. Härtling, *Studien zur Kabinettbildmalerei des Frans Francken II, 1581-1642: Ein repräsentativer Werkkatalog* (Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1983), n° A265.

*Portrayal of History (1500-1800): An Iconological Study.*<sup>3</sup> Van de Waal uses the *Abdication of Charles v* as a characteristic example of the seventeenth century approach to history painting and compares it to a once celebrated painting of the same event by Louis Gallait (1810-1887), a work painted in 1842 (now in the Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt on the Main) that represents the Romantic approach to the historical subject (Fig. 2).<sup>4</sup> Van de Waal points out that Gallait craved the appearance of historical authenticity. The artist therefore seized on the poignant and historical anecdote of the ailing emperor,

3 H. van de Waal, *Drie eeuwen vaderlandsche geschieduitbeelding: 1500-1800: Een iconologische studie*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1952), 1, 1-2.

4 Van de Waal, II, 1, n. 1/2. He wrongly dated the work 1841 and apparently did not realize that it is a copy of a much larger version of 1837 to 1841, now in the Musées des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels. One wonders why Van de Waal did not consult H. Vollmer, 'Louis Gallait,' *Thieme-Becher*, XIII, 101-102. For additional information on both the large and small versions of the work, see E. Holzinger and H. J. Ziemke, *Die Gemälde des 19. Jahrhunderts: Städelches Kunstinstitut, Frankfurt am Main* (Frankfurt on the Main: Verlag G. Schulte-Bulmke, 1972), 118-120.

5 Van de Waal, 1, 1-2. Translation mine.

6 Nor did Van de Waal attempt to explain why Gallait chose the subject or, more precisely, why the Belgian State commissioned the large work now in Brussels, and King William II of the Netherlands the smaller version now in Frankfurt on the Main (Holzinger and Ziemke, 118-119).

7 For much of the following exegesis, see the commentary presented alongside the picture by the Rijksmuseum; J.P. Vittu, 'Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, peintre de Tunis en 1535,' *Bulletin des belles-lettres arabes*, cxi (1977), 246; H.J. Horn, *Charles v's Conquest of Tunis: Cartoons and Tapestries by Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen* (Yale University Dissertation, 1977), 256; and Härting, n° A265.

8 See Van de Waal, II, 1, n. 2/1-2/4. Of course the main action is identified by the Latin inscription, but it contains so many abbreviations that it can be of help only to an accomplished Latinist. This inscription reads: 'S. R. Imperii spontanea resignatio a Cavolo V Imp. in Ferd. I Fr. regnorumq. haered. in Phln. II Hisp. Regem Fil. Facta Brux. Ae 1555. Ex inven. D. Petri di Hannicart.' This means something like: 'The voluntary abdication of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles v in favour of Ferdinand I, his brother and heir to the kingdoms of Austria and Hungary, and of Philip II, his son and king of Spain. Done in Brussels in 1555. As invented by don Petri di Hannicart.' Hannicart can have been no major humanist, as he is not listed in A. Gerlo and H.D.L. Verviet, *Bibliographie de l'humanisme des anciens Pays-Bas: avec un répertoire bibliographique des humanistes et poètes néo-latins* (Brussels: Presses Universitaires, 1972).

9 See in this connection the description by J.R. Martin, *The Decorations for the Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi* (London/New York: Arcade Press, 1972), 105, of a part of one of the arches erected for Archduke Ferdinand's entry into Antwerp in 1535: 'The god Neptune is seen with the trident on the right side of Charles v; the epigraph on the pedestal reads: AVSTRIACIS GEMINOS, NEPTUNE, INTERLVIS ORBES (For the Austrians, Neptune, you wash the shores of both worlds), Charles v, whose empire extends beyond the Atlantic to the New World, may rightly be called Lord of the Sea.'

who leans on the shoulder of the young William of Orange. Gallait's unified and plausible re-enactment of the historical event could serve as a model for the director of a modern historical film. Van de Waal says, whereas Frans Francken II presents an improbable combination of festive allegories and frontally composed historical events, 'Even the unity of the time turns out to be wanting,' he observes perceptively, 'for in the left background one sees how the emperor has himself conveyed in a litter borne by two mules to the monastery [of San Geronimo in Yuste] in which he will pass the last years of his life.'<sup>5</sup> Van de Waal further notes Francken's apparent disdain for the kind of anecdotal detail so dear to the heart of the Romantic painter.

This is the limit of Van de Waal's interest in the painting at least within the compass of his study. His only concern is with the work as a generic example of the seventeenth-century approach to history painting. In that context he could have discussed the penchant of Baroque history painters for elevating historical events to a higher, ideal plane, but he apparently has no interest in Francken's work *per se* and does not stop to ask why this event of 1555 should have been celebrated in a painting of about the fourth decade of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> It is this question that is the subject of the present essay. The answer necessarily takes us to works by Rubens and other contemporary Flemish artists and to the economic plight of Antwerp in the early seventeenth century.

Van de Waal alludes to 'the allegories of the continents, lands, and seas in the foreground' of Francken's *Abdication of Charles v*.<sup>7</sup> The picture shows Charles v dividing his dominions between Philip, his son on his left, and Ferdinand, his brother on his right. An understanding of the historical event is necessary to identify them,<sup>8</sup> for none of the principal actors is a good likeness, not even Charles himself. The emperor wears the Order of the Golden Fleece and sits on a throne garnished by the Austrian double-headed eagle. He is shown quite literally laying down his power, for his sword, sceptre, and imperial orb lie on a cushion at his feet. In the left foreground, Neptune, in the company of Tritons, Nereides and the like, represents the seas of Charles' world empire.<sup>9</sup> Behind Neptune we see one of the twin columns of Hercules with Charles' favourite motto, 'Plus Ultra,' meaning 'still further' or 'further beyond,' which symbolized the emperor's mission to carry the Christian faith across the seas, beyond the boundaries of the columns planted by Hercules at Gibraltar.<sup>10</sup> In the right foreground three women kneel who probably represent (from left to right) Europe, America and India. Not only their costumes identify the second and third, but also an abundance

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FIGURE 1. Frans Francken II. *Allegory of the Abdication of the Emperor Charles v*, ca. 1630-1640. Panel, 134 × 170 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (Photo: Rijksmuseum).



FIGURE 2. Louis Gallait, *The Abdication of the Emperor Charles v.* 1842. Canvas, 121 × 170 cm. Frankfort on the Main, Städtelsches Kunstinstitut (Photo: Städtelsches).

of exotic objects and animals. The armadillo, for instance, is native only to South America. The three crowned women in the right background hold banners with the arms of the seventeen provinces of the northern and southern Netherlands, and of Charles' Spanish and Italian possessions.

This inventory leaves three allegorical figures unaccounted for. Immediately to Philip's right, a woman holding a sceptre probably represents the Habsburg homeland of Austria. To her left, a figure holding the imperial orb may well represent the Holy Roman Empire, whose leadership Charles was surrendering to Ferdinand. At the right border, finally, stands a Moor who bears an unmistakable resemblance to the *King of Tunis*, painted about 1620 by Francken's fellow townsman Peter Paul Rubens (Fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> Placed to the right of Europe, the Americas and India, he almost certainly personifies Spain's African possessions or, to put it more accurately, Charles v's African ambitions.

The name of Charles v became associated with the continent of Africa by way of his conquest of Tunis in 1535.<sup>12</sup> The emperor defeated the Berber pirate and Ottoman admiral, Kheir-ed-Din Barbarossa, but

10 Van de Waal, II, 1, n. 1/4. For more complete and up-to-date information about the origins and meaning of the device, see E. Rosenthal, 'Plus ultra. Non plus ultra. And the Columnar Device of Emperor Charles v,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxiv (1971), 204-228; 'The Invention of the Columnar Device of Emperor Charles v at the Court of Burgundy in Flanders in 1516,' *ibid.*, xxxvi (1973), 198-230; and 'Plus Oultre, the Idea Imperial of Charles v in his Columnar Device in the Alhambra,' in R. Enggass and M. Stockstad, eds., *Hortus Imaginum: Essays in Western Art* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1974), 85-93.

11 For the basic study of this painting, see J. S. Held, 'Rubens' *King of Tunis* and Vermeiren's Portrait of Mulay Ahmad,' *The Art Quarterly*, III (1940), 173-181. The date that I give follows Held, 179.

12 The emperor was involved in other African ventures, the siege of Cherchell in 1530 and the expedition against Algiers of 1541, but he was not present at the former and had to abandon the latter due to a terrible storm. See R.B. Merriman, *The Rise of the Spanish Empire in the Old World and the New*, 4 vols. (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1918), III, *The Emperor*, 296-298, 335-339. The Tunisian campaign, however, was a successful and celebrated crusade, even if, especially from a modern point of view, it had its share of flaws and ironies. See A.I. Andrews, *The Campaign of the Emperor Charles v against Tunis and Kheir-ed-Din Barbarossa* (Harvard University Dissertation, 1905), 233-237, and Horn, 11-12.



FIGURE 3. Peter Paul Rubens, *The King of Tunis*, ca. 1620. Canvas, 100.3 × 71.1 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts).



FIGURE 4. Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, *Muly Ahmad*, ca. 1536. Etching, 495 × 377 mm. Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet (Photo: Rijksmuseum).

allowed him to escape. Charles then restored to his throne Muly Hasan, a notoriously cruel and corrupt ruler as well as an Infidel. Furthermore, Hasan's period of renewed tenure as vassal of Charles v was shortlived, for in 1542 his equally cruel son Muly Ahmad blinded and deposed him.<sup>13</sup>

Rubens' *King of Tunis* is in fact Muly Ahmad. The portrait is probably based on a painting or drawing of Muly Ahmad by the war-artist of the Tunis expedi-

tion, Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen (1500-1559),<sup>14</sup> a lost work that also stood as model for Vermeyen's own etched portrait of Ahmad (Fig. 4).<sup>15</sup> It is unlikely that Rubens was concerned about historical details when he painted his *King of Tunis* and used the features of Muly Ahmad for the Moorish kings in several of his depictions of the Adoration of the Magi.<sup>16</sup> But that the portrait of Muly Ahmad meant more to Rubens and contemporary Flemish artists than simply a portrait of a Moor is suggested by the near-simultaneous appearance of Ahmad in Frans Francken II's *Abdication of Charles v*. Francken's painting allows the hypothesis that the figure of Muly Ahmad personified Africa at a time when Charles v ruled over an enormous Catholic empire that extended to all four of the known continents.<sup>17</sup>

A digression into seventeenth-century political and diplomatic history is necessary.<sup>18</sup> The period under discussion, the 1630s, falls well past the mid-way point of the Eighty Years War, which ran from shortly after the arrival of the Duke of Alba in the Netherlands in 1567 to the complete recognition of the legitimacy and independence of the Dutch Republic in 1648. The hostilities soon disrupted the trade of Antwerp, the only deep-sea port of the southern Netherlands. By 1585, the year in which rebellious Antwerp fell to the Spaniards under the command of the Duke of Parma, the Dutch controlled the Scheldt estuary and had cut the port off

13 Held, 179.

14 Held, 177-178, who considered only the possibility of a lost painting by Vermeyen.

15 See A.E. Popham, 'Catalogue of Etchings by Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen,' *Oud-Holland*, XLIV (1927), 179, n° 14 [sic, should be n° 13]. In addition to the impressions listed by Popham there is one in the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam and another in the Museum Boymans van Beuningen in Rotterdam (which I illustrate). The *Muly Ahmad* was no doubt one of several of Vermeyen's depictions of the expedition that were protected by his imperial monopoly of 1536 and 1538. See Horn, 25-27.

16 Held, 179-180, and W.G. Constable, 'Rubens in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston,' in G. Theunis, ed., *Miscellanea Leo van Puyvelde* (Brussels: Éditions de la Connaissance, 1949), 129-130. Ahmad also appears in Rubens' *Lion Hunt* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rennes.

17 This proposition goes well beyond the assertion of Held, 179, that to Rubens the King of Tunis was probably just the hero of a romantic tradition, one of the African natives who had made common cause with the most catholic emperor Charles v in his struggle against the 'Turks.'

18 To many Dutch and Belgian readers the following material is common knowledge. For detailed and reliable information in English, see S. F. Bindoff, *The Scheldt Question to 1839* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1945), 82-107.



from the North Sea. Spain and the Spanish Netherlands signed a truce with the Dutch Republic in 1609, but the Scheldt remained closed to all but Dutch shipping. With the benefit of hindsight it seems that Spain's hopes of recovering the rebellious northern provinces had evaporated by that year. But, after the termination of the truce in 1621, Spain continued to wage war and intrigue against the Dutch.

The reunification of the Netherlands under the rule of the Spanish crown and the Catholic faith was one of the constant objectives of Rubens' efforts as a diplomat.<sup>19</sup> Rubens himself apparently believed deeply in this cause and expressed his convictions in his art. As Müller-Hofstede has argued convincingly, Rubens repeatedly copied Titian's portraits of Charles v because, to Rubens, Charles personified the first half of the sixteenth century, when the Netherlands were still unified under the rule of one Catholic and Spanish king.<sup>20</sup>

This ideal also shows up in two paintings by the Ghent painter Gaspar de Crayer (1584-1669).<sup>21</sup> The works in question were displayed on one of two triumphal arches erected on the occasion of the entry of Archduke Ferdinand into Ghent in 1635. In this case the allegorical method is once again in full flower. The capture of Africa by Charles v (who was born in Ghent) is held up as an example for Ferdinand (Fig. 5). Hans Vlieghe writes:

Dressed in armour and decked with the attributes of his imperial dignity, Charles v steps out of a sloop and grabs a frightened woman by the arm. Her skin is brown and she wears an elephant's trunk with two tusks over her long hair. She is Africa and can also be recognized by the animals that accompany her and that, according to the *Iconologia* of Cesare Ripa, are her attributes: the lion, the scorpion, the snakes...<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the connection between Charles v and his great progenitor Scipio Africanus is spelled out by means of a depiction of the triumph of Scipio. Doubtless the hope expressed by these paintings was that Ferdinand would smile on Ghent and re-establish the unity and prosperity of the mid-sixteenth century, thus earning him a place in the ranks of such heroes as Charles and Scipio.<sup>23</sup>



FIGURE 5. Gaspar de Crayer, *Charles v Conquers Africa*. 1635. Panel, 459 × 304 cm. Ghent, Museum van Bijloke (Photo: Claerhout).

It is with the notion of Charles v as the paragon of Habsburg virtue that we arrive at the key to the meaning of the most well-known treatment for the seventeenth century (or any other) of Charles v's African ambitions,<sup>24</sup> Rubens' *Battle of Tunis* (Fig. 6).<sup>25</sup> In this painting, which is generally dated around 1620 but sometimes as late as 1638,<sup>26</sup> Rubens may have meant to depict the battle of the wells, in which Charles v led his international forces to the important victory that preceded the fall of Tunis.<sup>27</sup> Rubens depicted the battle as a mêlée of Christians and infidels, with little respect for fact in either the disposi-

which owes its extraordinary growth to the divine emperors Maximilian I and Charles v, and other ancestors of yours, will surely recover, together with all the Belgian provinces, its former splendour and peace under your government and protection."

19 This statement, which again borders on common knowledge, could only be fully documented by an arm's-length bibliography. For a single source, see R.S. MacGurn, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), 14-16, 161-167, 221-227, 283-290, 357-363.

20 J. Müller-Hofstede, 'Rubens und Titian: das Bild Karls v.', *Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst*, xviii (1967), 81.

21 See C. Van de Velde and H. Vlieghe, *Stadversieringen te Gent voor de Blijde Intrede van de Kardinaal-Infant* (Oudheidkundig Museum, Abdij van Bijloke, Ghent, 1969), 39-40, 57-59, 91, 99, and figs. 44, 45, 50.

22 Van de Velde and Vlieghe, 58. Translation mine. I quote only a fraction of their fascinating material on this work.

23 For the similar sentiments addressed by Jacob Edelheer of Antwerp to the Archduke Ferdinand at the time of the latter's entry into that city in 1635, see Martin, 215-216: 'And he concluded in unavoidably threadbare phrases, by declaring that public prayers had been offered "for the health and safety of Your Serene Highness, so that this city,

24 Several lesser known evocations of the event will be discussed in my forthcoming monograph on Vermeiren and his *Conquest of Tunis* series.

25 See R. Klessmann et al., *Verzeichnis der ausgestellten Gemälde des 17. bis 18. Jahrhunderts im Museum Dahlem* (Berlin: Brüder Hartmann, 1966), n° 798G; P. Kelch, *Peter Paul Rubens: Kritischer Katalog der Gemälde im Besitz der Gemäldegalerie Berlin* (Berlin-Dahlem: Reiter Druck, 1978), 73-78; and J.S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: A Critical Catalogue*, 2 vols. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), I, 386-388.

26 See Held, *Oil Sketches*, I, 387.

27 Andrews, 204-207. Held, *Oil Sketches*, I, 386, proposes that the painting depicts the battle of June 19. Does he mean the battle for Goleta, which took place on July 19?



FIGURE 6. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Battle of Tunis*, ca. 1638. Panel, 76.5 × 120 cm. Berlin-Dahlem, Gemäldegalerie Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Photo: Anders).

tion of the battle or the costumes worn by the participants. Charles v appears on horseback just to the left of centre. Müller-Hofstede suggests that this figure was inspired by Titian's renowned *Charles v at the Battle of Mühlberg* of 1548,<sup>28</sup> but in fact it is closer to Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen's depiction of the emperor in his *Conquest of Tunis* series (Fig. 7).<sup>29</sup>

Rubens must have seen Vermeyen's *Conquest of Tunis* in the principal room of the Alcázar in Madrid, where it hung almost constantly in the seventeenth century.<sup>30</sup> That Rubens did not make use of Vermeyen's generally reliable depictions to lend his *Battle of Tunis* a greater historical authenticity is indica-

tive of the same kind of historical sensibility that is reflected by Frans Francken II's painting as well as by the other early seventeenth-century works under discussion. *The Battle of Tunis* is retrospective and nostalgic, evoking the golden age when Charles v ruled over a Catholic empire on which the sun never set. Even in this concept, however, Rubens' painting is essentially unhistorical. The *Pax Christiana* proclaimed by Vermeyen's *Conquest of Tunis* was an aspiration of Charles v that never came to fruition. Nevertheless, Rubens' work expresses the very essence of the propagandistic message of Vermeyen's series.<sup>31</sup>

28 Müller-Hofstede, 81, as well as Kelch, 74, and Held, *Oil Sketches*, 1, 386. For a reproduction and a brilliant exegesis of Titian's equestrian portrait, see E. Panofsky, *Problems in Titian: Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 84-87, and fig. 97.

29 The tapestry of the *editio princeps* series in which Charles v rides in this manner – the eleventh – is lost. For the corresponding cartoon, see E. von Engerth, 'Nachtrag zu der Abhandlung über die im kaiserlichen Besitze befindlichen Cartone, darstellend Kaiser Karls V. Kriegszug nach Tunis, von Jan Vermeyen,' *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, ix (1889), pl. xxii. Note that the eighth piece of the series, which is also lost, showed Charles much as in Titian's *Battle of Mühlberg* (see von Engerth, pl. xix-xx). That Rubens knew Titian's equestrian portrait is certain. He copied the work in 1603-1604, during his brief visit to the Spanish court, and later rendered an equestrian portrait of Philip iv, now lost, as a pendant for

Titian's painting. See M. Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford/Ithaca: Phaidon Press/Cornell University Press, 1977), 692, pl. 226, and L.L. Ligo, 'Two Seventeenth-Century Poems Which Link Rubens' Equestrian Portrait of Philip iv to Titian's Portrait of Charles v,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, LXXV (1970), 346-350.

30 The evidence is found in S.N. Orso, *In the Presence of the 'Planet King': Studies in Art and Decoration at the Court of Philip iv of Spain* (Princeton University Dissertation, 1978). I am not able to specify the relevant pages, as I used the typescript revised by Orso for publication by the Princeton University Press. My own research, again in a typescript awaiting publication, indicates that the *editio princeps* tapestries of the *Tunis* series remained in the Alcázar, while a second smaller set made for Mary of Hungary travelled throughout Spain and even to Portugal.

31 On this subject, see Horn, 233-251.



FIGURE 7. Jan Cornelisz. Vermeyen, *Charles v as Crusader*, ca. 1546-1551. Charcoal and water colours on paper. Detail of *The March to Rada*, cartoon for the eleventh tapestry of the *Conquest of Tunis* series. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum (Photo: Meyer).

The literature on Rubens' *Battle of Tunis* is curiously devoid of discussions of why and for whom Rubens depicted the event. Only recently has Julius Held pointed out that the successful crusade of his most illustrious Habsburg progenitor, Charles v, was of interest to King Philip iv of Spain.<sup>32</sup> A fairly recent dissertation by Stephen Orso establishes that, throughout the seventeenth century, Spanish monarchs greatly favoured Vermeyen's *Conquest of Tunis* tapestries for display at a variety of important affairs of state in Madrid and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> This does not prove, however, that Rubens painted his *Battle of Tunis* for Philip iv, whether as an independent work of art or as a *modello* for a planned larger work.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Rubens may well have painted the intimate work for himself.<sup>35</sup> However, he saw himself first and foremost as the servant of the Spanish crown and of the regents who represented Philip iv in the southern Netherlands. An able diplomat who was skilled in the interpretation of the propaganda of his time, Rubens must have grasped the meaning of Vermeyen's *Conquest of Tunis* and understood why this series and its events loomed so high in the estimation of the Spanish Habsburgs. Indeed, their court painter apparently fully shared their nostalgia for the reign of Charles v.

There are two facets of Rubens' conception of the rule of Charles v. The first was the notion of the universality of Charles' empire, and the second was the prosperity of the Netherlands within it. These ideas underlay not only his *Battle of Tunis* but also the decorations conceived by Rubens for the triumphal entry of Archduke Ferdinand into Antwerp in 1635.<sup>36</sup> Predictably the specific concern of the city of Antwerp and of her most distinguished painter expressed in these decorations was that the river Scheldt should be reopened to Flemish shipping.<sup>37</sup> We may reasonably assume that all educated fellow

townsmen of Rubens, including Frans Francken II and his unknown patron, at once understood the intended contrast between the past glory of Charles v and the present sorry plight of their city.

We can now attempt to interpret the meaning of Frans Francken II's *Allegory of Charles v*. Francken was in all likelihood asked to paint the work for a reason more important than because some unknown patron thought it might be nice to own an allegory on the subject of Charles' abdication. Francken's allegorical painting was very probably commissioned because Charles' abdication, an event about seventy-five years in the past, continued to be of topical interest. The event remained interesting because it contained the prominent display of the personifications and trappings of a vast empire that included the still unified northern and southern Netherlands. It was the dismemberment and decline of this empire, which began with Charles' abdication and which was hastened along by the revolt of the Netherlands, that was of great concern to many in the Spanish Netherlands, and especially to the Antwerp of the 1530s and 1540s. When we realize this we can understand why Francken's allegory was painted and what it evoked in the breast of the contemporary spectator: the memory of a more harmonious and prosperous age, for Antwerp and for Flanders.

32 Held, *Oil Sketches*, 1, 387-388.

33 Orso, *op. cit.* (note 30). See my comments there.

34 The latter possibility is argued by Held, *Oil Sketches*, 1, 387.

35 Held, *Oil Sketches*, 1, 387, considered this possibility but concluded that 'the triumph of Charles v at Tunis is a rather improbable subject for such an exercise.' I disagree.

36 Martin, *passim*.

37 Martin, 19-24. As Martin points out, the theme of the closed Scheldt had already figured in the decorations for the joyous entry of Archduke Ernest of Austria into Antwerp in 1594.



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## RÉSUMÉ

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Dans la partie de droite de *L'abdication de Charles V* (vers 1630-1640), du peintre anversois Frans Francken II, une figure de Maure barbu symbolise le continent africain. Ce personnage ressemble étroitement au *Roi de Tunis* de Rubens, qui représente Mulay Ahmad, vassal tunisien de Charles V. L'apparition presque simultanée de Mulay Ahmad dans ces deux œuvres permet de penser qu'il personnifiait l'Afrique à l'époque où Charles V régnait sur un immense empire catholique qui s'étendait aux quatre continents connus. Pour Francken II, Rubens et leurs contemporains anversois, le règne de Charles V devait apparaître comme une sorte d'âge d'or de l'histoire des Pays-Bas. La paix et la prospérité de cette période contrastait fortement avec les guerres sans fin et le déclin économique de leur propre époque. La fermeture du fleuve Escaut à toute navigation (exception faite pour les bateaux hollandais) constituait une source majeure de mécontentement. Des œuvres comme *La conquête de l'Afrique par Charles V* de Gaspar de Crayer, *La bataille de Tunis* de Rubens ou encore les créations de ce dernier pour l'entrée de l'Archiduc Ferdinand à Anvers, semblent bien opposer les gloires du temps de Charles V aux malheurs de l'époque contemporaine. On peut dès lors conclure que l'abdication de Charles V, survenue trois quarts de siècle auparavant, continuait d'intéresser les contemporains de Francken II, car cet événement évoquait les personnages et les faits prestigieux d'un vaste empire dont faisaient partie les Pays-Bas, prospères et unifiés.

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