
GRAVITY IN ART

*Essays on Weight
and Weightlessness in Painting,
Sculpture and Photography*

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The Idea of Weightlessness in Girolamo da Carpi's *Kairos and Penitentia* (Opportunity and Penitence)

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The artist Girolamo da Carpi finished a painting called *Kairos and Penitence* for his patron Ercole II, d'Este Duke of Ferrara, in about 1541 (Fig. 1). In this painting a young man with winged ankles spirals upward and balances precariously on a sphere. He has windswept hair and holds a razor in his right hand. Light comes in from the left to illuminate him fully. This male figure personifies Opportunity, or Kairos. In the ancient Greek discipline of rhetoric, Kairos was central to the Sophists, who stressed the speaker's ability to adapt to and take advantage of changing, contingent circumstances. Both in ancient and modern Greek *kairos* means weather. In the plural it is *kairoi*, and it means "the times." In the painting Kairos prepares to shave his own head. Da Carpi shows his hair swooping up into the air in reference to the saying, "take time (occasion) by the forelock." In fact, his body twists as if he himself were "jumping at the opportunity."

In his biography of the artist, Vasari, who was a close friend of da Carpi, describes seeing a painting of *Opportunity*.¹ Rudolf Wittkower attributed the painting shown here to Girolamo da Carpi. Adolfo Venturi noted the date of 1541 and the subject of "Occasion" and "Pazienta" in a now lost document.² Kirsten Faber, writing in 2003, calls it *Kairos and Penitence* but repeats the date of 1541.³

The most amusing antique source pertaining to Kairos is the description of the lost allegoric bronze statue of him made by Lysippos. This image was kept at the sculptor's home in the Agora of Hellenistic Sikyon. In the text Posidippus (ca. 310–240 BC) describes it in an epigram as follows:

Who and whence was the sculptor? From Sicyon. The name please? Lysippos. And who are you? Time who subdues all things. Why do you stand on tip-toe? I am ever running. And why do you have a pair of wings on your feet? I fly with the wind. And why do you hold a razor in your right hand? As a sign to men that I am sharper than any sharp edge. And why does your hair hang over your face? For him who meets me to take me by the forelock. And why, in Heaven's name, is the back of your head bald? Because none whom I have once raced by on my winged feet will now, though he wishes it sore, take hold of me from behind. Why did the artist fashion you? For your sake, stranger, and he set me up in the porch as a lesson.⁴

Some of the motifs mentioned in the Posidippus text appear in da Carpi's painting. Kairos stands on winged feet and on his tip toes. He holds a sharp knife in his right hand with the blade pointing heavenward. His hair is blown to the front of his head and shoots up in

the air like flames. The female figure on the right of Kairos in the painting not described in the text by Posidippus is the personification of Penitence. Regret is all that remains when we don't seize opportunity by its lock. Penitence is a young, veiled woman looking back at her missed opportunity. Her eyes are down cast as she prepares to step out of the picture altogether. She is enshadowed because Kairos blocks the light. Thus, because of her regretful glance back at her lost opportunity I, like others, also identify her as Penitence, though the document cited by Venturi names her Patience. The seventeenth century inventory from Modena calls the two figures Fortune and Poverty.⁵

Giglio Gregorio Giraldi, was a member of the court of Ercole II, who made a systematic study of mythology, *Historiae Deorum Gentilium*. Besides the epigram of Posidippus, he mentioned an ekphrasis of Callistratus from the fourth century, and the writings of the Roman poet Ausonius Gallus, of the same period (ca. 310–395).⁶ Ausonius tells of a female type of Opportunity,⁷ whereas the two Greek authors identify a young male figure in that role. The text of Callistratus about the Kairos of Lysippos adds details pertinent to the painting by da Carpi. The appropriate parts are as follows:



Fig. 1. Girolamo da Carpi, *Kairos and Penitencia*, 1541. Oil on canvas, 83 in. x 43 in. (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).

...And he stood poised on the tips of his toes on a *sphere* [Italics mine], and his feet were winged.... [The bronze accomplished the deeds of nature and departed] from its own proper province. For though it was bronze ... and though it was void of living sensation, it inspired the belief that it had sensation dwelling within it; and it really was stationary, resting its foot firmly on the ground, but though it was standing, it nevertheless gave evidence of possessing the power of rapid motion; and it deceived your eyes into thinking that it not only was capable of advancing forward, but that it had received from the artist even the power to cleave with its wings, if it so wished, the aerial domain.⁸

Giraldi, who was the personal secretary of Ercole II, finished his literary work in the early 1530s. We can assume that Girolamo da Carpi was familiar with Giraldi's writings and possibly with the ancient text by Callistratus. Whatever the circumstances were, the presence of both da Carpi and Giraldi at the court of Ferrara reflects Ercole II's love of classical art and knowledge, and his desire to be recognized as a humanist ruler.

Callistratus was often translated with the two Philostrati authors in the same volume.⁹ A Philostratus manuscript belonging to Isabella d'Este was described in an inventory of 1541 in Ferrara.¹⁰ It is therefore possible that this translation included the two Philostratus texts and also the Callistratus ekphrasis, quoted above, with its description of the Kairos statue. Thus, Isabella's translation of Callistratus could have inspired Ercole II to commission Girolamo's Kairos from da Carpi.

In all sources from classical antiquity that mention the statue of Kairos, certain traits of the figure are consistent. He stands for decisive action, yet descriptions stress his transience and rapidity. Though depicted in art as stationary, he represents motion. As an idea he is always running, about to take off the ground, poised on tiptoe, ready to fly, caught in mid-movement and still perfectly balanced. As descriptions from antiquity suggest, Kairos embodies a "pregnant pause" between two successive movements as seen so often in works of the late classical period in Greece.¹¹ The impression is one of weightlessness, greater height, extreme elegance and poise. Kairos remains self-contained yet caught between two moments. This ambiguity stresses the artist's need for pinpoint accuracy in depiction and the slipperiness of the concept. The relief in Turin and the now lost relief from the Palazzo Medici Riccardi, show Kairos running on his tiptoe while balancing a pair of scales on a razor — a formidable task at which few would succeed.¹² The now lost Medici relief was previously in the collection of Lorenzo il Magnifico and from 1543–45 to at least 1568 kept in the loggia of the Palazzo Medici.¹³ Throughout the 16th century the Medici and Este families stood in bitter rivalry with one another. Coffin has pointed out that da Carpi had made several artworks for the Este court that were meant as "pictorial propaganda."¹⁴ The fact that Girolamo da Carpi used the topic of Kairos — which mirrored a piece prominently displayed in the Medici collection — in one of his paintings for the Este court leads me to believe that his choice of subject matter was not coincidental. Rather, it was meant as a voice of opposition against the Medici in the South. In 1597 Duke Alfonso II d'Este died without an heir and his art collection was dispersed while members of the Medici family continued to dominate Italian politics for a number of centuries.

In his Kairos da Carpi differs from earlier depictions of Opportunity portrayed as a female as described by Ausonius Gallus as follows: "I am a goddess seldom found and known to few. Opportunity my name"¹⁵ For example, a follower of Andrea Mantegna designed a mantle piece for the Castello di San Giorgio in Mantua after 1490, titled *Occasio*. This figure of Occasio violently twists while maintaining her balance on a sphere. Her hair obscures her face. Behind her on a pedestal stands Constantia (Constancy), attempting to prevent a young woman, perhaps Penitentia, from pursuing Occasio. In the Mantuan piece, the figure of Opportunity pushes herself off the sphere in a violent, diagonal motion and appears to be fleeing from Penitentia. The backside of her head is already shaved which causes Opportunity to spring away in this dramatic fashion while displaying excessively fluttering drapery. Despite having shaved Opportunity's head already, Penitentia still was not able to grab her by her forelock in due time. In da Carpi's painting Kairos does not display this type of violent movement. Still both figures are shown in precarious poses and Kairos even appears to move heavenward.

As compared with da Carpi's painting, the grisaille from Mantua creates a potentially interactive relationship with the viewer especially because of the different degrees of emphasis placed on the two figures. Kairos is clearly more important than Penitentia here and he is shown here in the opportune moment; the backside of his head has not been shaved yet. Penitentia is in the shadows and pushed to the margins. Opportunity here has a positive meaning because the chance to seize his hair is still possible.

In Ercole's time it was essential for a ruler to take opportunity by its forelock in order to achieve political or military profit. Kairos, in terms of opportunity, could secure political success and survival, therefore encompass all the good things a ruler wished to accomplish. However, the ruler also required patience, and that is how the female figure was identified in the document of 1541 published by Venturi. Opportunity comes to the patient man who seizes it at the right

moment, thus achieving a profitable outcome for himself and for his people. Patience, indeed, was one of Ercole's principle virtues, and the very meaning is expressed in one of his mottos: *superanda omnis fortuna*,—through patience man stands above the powers of fortune.¹⁶

The figure of Penitence, seen walking out of da Carpi's composition, was often confused with Patience. This confusion of concepts, especially at the Este court at Ferrara, was not accidental. If we start to look at *imprese* from this period and at attitudes toward them, we find that Girolamo Ruscelli makes a connection between Ercole's Patience emblem and "Fortezza" (Fortitude).¹⁷ Ruscelli was familiar with the political climate at Ercole's court. When he uses the word "Fortezza" he means "Fortitude of the mind: which includes Justice as being the first and principal force over all the others."¹⁸ This definition of Fortezza describes the personality of the Ferrara sovereign and implies a natural understanding of justice on his part.¹⁹

Thus, in seizing opportunity Ercole II will achieve the right outcome which, in fact is Justice. Ruscelli continues: "In doing so you will win or drive all things to an end.... With Patience one governs and leads to a better ending, it is neither too laborious, nor difficult or impossible, because with Patience one wins."²⁰

What we see that in da Carpi's painting for his patron is a desideratum for Ercole II. This practice of offering benevolent ideas, iconographies or symbols for a prince was not new at Ferrara. Previously, in 1497, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti wrote *De triumphis religionis*, for Ercole II's father. It is a study of his father, Ercole I, and his religiosity. In it Sabadino describes the virtues of Ercole I: piety, magnanimity, fortitude, magnificence, liberality, munificence, justice, clemency, affability, reliability, prudence, temperance, continence, chastity, love, grace, hope, and faith.²¹ However, one stands out and that is magnificence.²² Just as Sabadino's writings for Ercole I relate to his virtues and his wish for good government and superior leadership qualities, so too, the painting of Kairos expresses the wish for his son, Ercole II to act opportunely and justly. Of course, as Christian-Humanist rulers the virtues of both father and son came from God.

On January 26, 1544, Girolamo da Carpi received payment for a painting depicting Ganymede, made for Ercole II's palace. In the Greek myth, Ganymede was a prince and the most attractive of mortals. Zeus (or Jupiter), in the shape of an eagle, abducted him to the heights of Mount Olympus where he became the cup bearer to the Gods. In da Carpi's painting, the youth is borne aloft by the powerful eagle against a sky of storm clouds. Light strikes the muscular body of Ganymede, which is contrasted with the dark feathers of the eagle. The eagle's beak approaches the chin of Ganymede (Fig. 2).

Ganymede is a symbol of fertility and growth. His relationship to Zeus was, as early as the sixth century, also associated with homoerotic love, and here, in the Christian sense, it represents the spiritual love between man and God. The ambivalence of sexual love and the elevation of the soul was also formulated by Andrea Alciati, who lived in Ferrara from 1542 to 1546. In his earlier *emblemata* of 1531 discussing the motto "In Deo Laetandum" (Joy of God) Alciati negates the assumption that Zeus was consumed by love for Ganymede. Instead, he draws the conclusion that those who live in joy for God will strive for divine qualities. Perhaps his interpretation of Ganymede's story served as an impetus for the virtuous Ercole II to commission the painting of the theme from da Carpi. Thus, as in Greek times, when Zeus's love for Ganymede was a "spiritual love" which elevated the youth to immortality on Mount Olympus, in the late Renaissance, God's love for the Christian soul elevated it to immortality in heaven. In the context of weightlessness, one could say that it is the direct result of divine love overcoming nature.



Fig. 2. Girolamo da Carpi, *Ganymede*, 1544. Oil on canvas, 31 in. × 57 in. (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).

Returning to the *Kairos* picture, we see that many of the ideas expressed in it relate to the notion of idealized political leadership. Political power is granted through divine force. This divine force created immortality for the house of Este. The Este rulers perceived themselves as elevated beyond the confines of the natural world. In their view an earthbound globe-dweller could not illustrate his political aspirations. The Este court was trying to cement its own importance with regard to the overbearing Medici princes ruling over Florence. Ercole II even chose a subject — *Kairos* — represented in the Medici art collection and with this choice tried to rival his political opponent. The aspect of weightlessness seen in the work was essential to communicate these political aspirations to a courtly audience. In concert with the classical sources that served as inspiration for da Carpi's *Kairos*, several ideas were deployed to glorify Ferrara's illustrious sovereign: these include the concept of patience (one of Ercole's favorite ideas as seen in his *impres*), profit as a measure of economic prosperity, fortitude as a trait of a ruler who is unafraid to see things through, wisdom in making good decisions, and a spirit ready for action. Such leadership qualities would guarantee happiness in the here and now, magnificence in the eyes of Ferrara's subjects and a closeness with God as expressed in the *Ganymede* work that would elevate the prince and his descendants into heavenly spheres and grant them immortality.

NOTES

Prefatory Note: I would like to thank Mary Edwards and Elizabeth Bailey for their editorial efforts and continued mentorship. Many thanks go to Amy Sterling for her beautiful drawing.

1. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori nelle redazioni del 1550e 1568* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1881) 6: 476: "...e nel palazzo del duca (dipinse il medesimo Girolamo) un quadro grande con una figura quant oil vivo, finta per una Occasione, con bella vivezza, movenza, grazia e buon rilievo."

2. Venturi mentions a now lost receipt from October 21, 1541, referring to this painting: "Adì 21 de ottobre. A M. da Carpi picture per uno quadro a facto per el sig.r nostro dove ge suso la ocasion e la

pazientia." Adolfo Venturi, *La Reale Galleria Estense in Modena* (Modena: P. Toschi, 1882), 22 and 23n3; and also: Martina A. Pfleger, "Raffael inventit — Zur Entwicklung des Raffaelismo in Ferrara" (Doctoral Thesis, University of Vienna, 1998), Fig. 178; see also Gregor M. Weber, *Der Triumph des Bacchus — Meisterwerke Ferrareser Malerei in Dresden 1480–1620* (Turin: Umberto Allemandi & Co., 2003), 125., cat. no. 21.

3. Kristen Faber in: Weber, *Der Triumph des Bacchus*, p. 125ff., cat. no. 21.

4. Kathryn J. Gutzwiller, *The New Posidippus — A Hellenistic poetry book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), III.

5. C. d'Onofrio, "Inventario dei Dipinti del Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini compilato da G. B. Agucchi nel 1603," *Palatino* 8 (1964): 162.

6. Karin Zeleny, *Die Göttin Hekate in den Historiae Deorum Gentilium des Lilius Gregorius Gyraldus (Basel, 1548)* (Master's thesis, Vienna: 1999).

7. Kerkhoff, Manfred, "Occasio Christiana," 33 (*Diálogos: Revista del Departamento de Filosofía, Universidad de Puerto Rico*, 1998): 94.

8. Arthur Fairbanks, trans., *Elder Philostratus, Imagines; Callistratus; Descriptions*, in Loeb Classical Library, vol. 256 (London: Heineman and New York: G. P. Putnum Sons, 1931), accessed 12 June 2009, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Callistratus.html#n22>.

9. We know that Isabella d'Este owned a version of the *Eikones* by the Elder Philostratus, as mentioned by Michael Koortbojian and Ruth Webb, "Isabella d'Este's Philostratus," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 260–7. There are several translations of the work of the Elder Philostratus around. Few include the second book and even fewer include the work of the Younger Philostratus. Isabella d'Este had lent her now lost translation by Mario Equicola to her brother Alfonso d'Este and had asked for it back in two letters, one from December 1515, one from March 1516. Some authors suggest that Alfonso had his own copy made; see Koortbojian and Webb, "Isabella d'Este's Philostratus," 267.

10. Koortbojian and Webb, "Isabella d'Este's Philostratus," 261

11. Stewart, A. F., "Lysippan Studies. I. The Only Creator of Beauty." *American Journal of Archaeology* 82, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 163–71; see especially 168; Stewart compares the Kairos to the Apoxyomenos to demonstrate the two successive movements.

12. The Palazzo Medici-Riccardi used to own a relief similar to the one in Turin which was lost after 1878. It has been suggested that it might have been a copy from Renaissance times: "Palazzo Medici," accessed 2 January 2011, http://www.palazzo-medici.it/mediateca/en/Scheda_Kairos.

13. It was later in the Dudley collection and after that in the Lamponi Leopardi collection. In 1878 Raffaello Lamponi Leppardi offered it for sale to the Louvre museum and to the Italian government. Its whereabouts are unknown after this date.

14. David R. Coffin, "Pirro Ligorio and Decoration of the Late Sixteenth Century at Ferrara," *The Art Bulletin* 37, no. 3 (Sept. 1955): 167–185; see especially 174.

15. "sum dea quae rara et paucis occasio nota." Ausonius, "XXXIII. — In Simulacrum Occasionis et Paenitentiae," accessed 15 January 2011, http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:6Kn3tNCdKIUJ:www.archive.org/stream/ausoniuswithengl02ausouoft/ausoniuswithengl02ausouoft_djvu.txt+opportunity+ausonius+gallus&ccd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&source=www.google.com.

16. Girolamo Ruscelli, *Le Imprese Illustri* (Venice: Francesco de Franceschi, Senese, 1580), 156; Rudolf Wittkower, "Patience and Chance: The Story of a Political Emblem," in *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, ed. Rudolf Wittkower (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 107–12; see especially III.

17. The Italian text reads: "La Pazienza, e la Fortezza sono veramente più tosto due formi di voci, che due cose, essendo in effetto il medesimo la Pazienza, che la Fortezza, e la Portezza, che la Pazzienza." Ruscelli, *Le imprese Illustri*, 156; also: Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, 210n31.

18. The Italian text reads: "Fortezza dell'animo: comprendo in se la Giustizia et essendo veramente la prima, e la principale di tutte l'altre." Ruscelli, *Le imprese Illustri*, 156; see also Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, III.

19. Aegidius Sadeler, *Symbola Divina Et Humana* (Prague, 1601), 3:63; Giovanni Ferro, *Teatro d'Imprese* (Venice: Giacomo Sarzina, 1623), 2:285. Both sources also combine Justice with a religious meaning: "Qui iudicatis terram diligite Justitiam." See Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, 210, note 35.

20. The Italian text reads: "Cosi facendo, tu vincerai, ò condurrà à Fine tutte le cose ... con la Patientia si governano, e si guidano ad ottimo fine, nè è cosa tanto travagliosa, ò difficile, e impossibile, che con la Patientia si vinca..." Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols*, 210n34.

21. David Cast, "Art and Life at the Court of Ercole d'Este," *The Art Bulletin* 57, no. 2 (June 1975): 279.

22. Ironically, although Ercole I was concerned with expanding and improving Ferrara, during his reign the gap between rich and poor widened steadily; see Cast, "Art and Life at the Court of Ercole d'Este," 281.

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