

Dimitrios Zikos

The Arconati Visconti Apollo



TRINITY FINE ART

THE ARCONATI VISCONTI APOLLO
(North Italian, late XVI or early XVII century)

Bronze, height 137 cm, 54 in
Marble base dating back to the 17th century

Provenance*

Luigi Maria Arconati Visconti,
1671; thence by descent to:
Galeazzo III Arconati Visconti
(died 1772); thence by descent
to his nephew:
Carlo Busca (died 1780);
Galleria of the Villa Arconati
Visconti at Castellazzo di Bollate,
1774; thence by descent to:
Luisa Busca Arconati Visconti
Sormani Verri, thence by descent to:
Marchesi Crivelli.

* For detailed Provenance, see
p. 20

The bronze *Apollo* from the Arconati Visconti collection is a major discovery.

With a distinguished provenance, the monumental statue is expertly cast in a single pour.

The God of Light is here represented in classic *contrapposto*, raising and bending his left arm in order to hold arrows (according to an old inventory) or a bow (as can be seen in a 19th-century photograph, fig. 7), both attributes referring to Apollo as the god of archery.

This bronze is not yet another copy after a famous ancient work, but an original invention inspired by representations of Apollo and Bacchus designed in the style of Praxiteles. This eclectic approach speaks of an artist well acquainted with ancient art. Nevertheless, one cannot but be reminded of the most famous *Apollo Belvedere* in the Vatican (fig. 1).

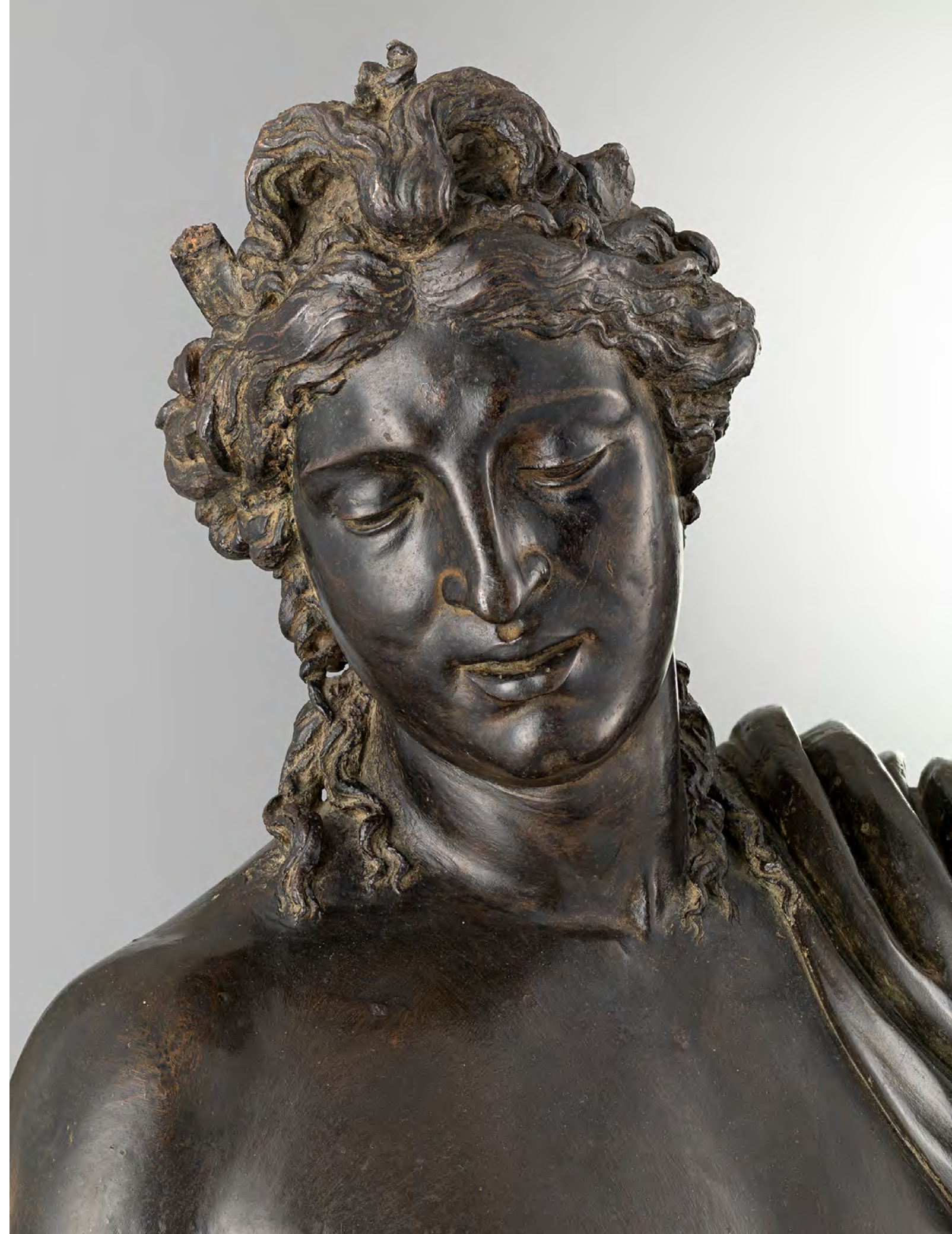




Fig. 1: Apollo Belvedere,
Musei Vaticani, Rome





The *Apollo* is a work of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century at the latest.

It is first recorded in 1671 in the posthumous inventory of count Luigi Maria Arconati Visconti, scion of one of Lombardy's most illustrious families. Then described as representing Bacchus, it was located in the palace in San Paolo alla Vigna (today the Via Brisa) in Milan. How it came into Luigi Maria's possession is impossible to know in the absence of records, but it was clearly of great importance to him as it was displayed in his bedroom. As the *Apollo* is not recorded in the posthumous inventory of Luigi Maria's father Luigi drawn up in 1623, it was probably acquired by Luigi Maria himself, who appears to have had a general interest in bronze sculpture. However, another provenance is also possible. Luigi Maria's wife and first cousin Maria was the heir of her father (and Luigi Maria's uncle) Galeazzo Arconati Visconti (died 1649), a prominent art collector with an interest in sculpture, who may have acquired the *Apollo* himself or inherited it from his paternal grandmother Anna Visconti (1557–1617). A patron of sculpture, she commissioned Marcantonio Prestinari's *Hercules and the Nemean Lion*¹. This statue is still in Galeazzo Arconati Visconti's most important artistic achievement, the villa and garden at Castellazzo di Bollate near Milan, which he acquired in 1610 and decorated lavishly with sculpture. The villa at Castellazzo was a magical place that was highly important for the history of sculpture.

A cousin of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, Galeazzo Arconati Visconti was a most distinguished art collector, known among other things for having acquired Leonardo da Vinci's *Codice Atlantico* and having corresponded with Cassiano dal Pozzo about Leonardo². Galeazzo

¹ ZANUSO 2008.

² CARUSI 1929-1930, pp. 503-518;
FERRARIO 2000, pp. 168-172.

was particularly interested in sculpture. At Castellazzo he displayed (by 1627) an antique statue of Tiberius, then thought to be of Pompey in front of which the murder of Caesar had occurred, and a series of



Fig. 2: *Bacchus and a Faun*, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington

³CADARIO 2008, pp. 319-364.

impressive plaster casts after the reliefs of Trajan's Column and after Michelangelo's *Day* and *Night*, which he acquired from the estate of the sculptor Leone Leoni³.





In the early eighteenth century, the villa and its gardens were refurbished by Galeazzo's grandson Giuseppe Maria Arconati (died 1715) and later by Giuseppe Maria's grandson and heir Giuseppe



Antonio Arconati (died 1763) who derived inspiration from gardens he saw during his extensive travels in Europe, in particular from Versailles. It was he who commissioned a series of engravings by Marcantonio

Fig. 3: *Venus*, bronze, National Gallery of Art, Washington

⁴FERRARIO 2000, pp. 63-65, 90-97.

Del Re representing the now-lost splendour of the villa and its garden⁴.

The next time the *Apollo* is recorded is in a 1772 inventory of Castellazzo, where it was somehow implausibly described as Cupid, probably because he was shown holding arrows, as the inventory specifies. The *Apollo* remained in Castellazzo thereafter, following the vicissitudes of



Figs. 4-6: *Sleeping Ariadne* (or *Cleopatra*), bronze, Galerie des Cerfs, Fontainebleau,

the Arconati Visconti family and their heirs, until the villa was sold in 1966 by the Crivelli family, who had come into its possession through inheritance.

Clearly an ambitious work, the *Apollo* defies art historical assessment due to its exceptionality. In its first 1671 mention it is described with





a definite article as '*La statua di Bacco*', '*the statue of Bacchus*', which suggests that it was of special importance to the Arconati Visconti. Nevertheless, in the various inventories in which it is recorded over the years, its author is never mentioned. In the 20th century, the art dealer Pietro Accorsi (1891-1982) attributed it to Giambologna but this proposal can be refuted without any hesitation.

Owing to the statue's origin from the Arconati Visconti, it is logical to look for comparable works in the large bronze sculptures made for a nearby villa, the Villa Litta Visconti Borromeo at Lainate. This architectural complex was famous for its Nymphaeum, commissioned by Pirro I Visconti Borromeo (1560–1604) and completed by 1589. A kind of *Wunderkammer*, the Nymphaeum was decorated with two large bronze statues, a *Venus* and a *Bacchus with Satyr* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, figs. 2,3), which were attributed to the circle of Francesco Brambilla by Giancarlo Gentilini and Alessandro Morandotti (who first confirmed Anthony Radcliffe's intuition of their relation to Lainate)⁵ and more recently to Marcantonio Prestinari (the *Bacchus and Satyr* only, by Susanna Zanuso)⁶. Both Brambilla and Prestinari worked for Pirro I Visconti Borromeo at Lainate, though at different periods. From another area in the same complex, the Atrium of the Four Winds, two bronze statues of Winds were identified in 2003 by Charles Avery with an attribution to Prestinari⁷.

However, none of these large bronzes resemble the *Apollo*. The work is an almost hieratic image compared to the Mannerist postures of the *Venus* and the *Bacchus with Satyr* in Washington, which are both indebted

⁵ GENTILINI – MORANDOTTI 1990, pp. 135-171.

⁶ ZANUSO 1998, pp. 85-109: pp. 94-97.

⁷ AVERY 2003, pp. 191-201.

to the style of Giambologna. Moreover, the treatment of the surface of the bronzes from Lainate remains consistently smooth, whereas the *Apollo* displays areas of *non finito* in the hair and the little rock on which the left foot rests.

the alloy of the *Venus* and the *Bacchus with Satyr* in Washington contains a smaller amount of lead and only traces of antimony⁸.

⁸ OZONE – STURMAN 2003, pp. 203-213.

In my opinion the origin of the Arconati Visconti *Apollo* has to be sought



This stylistic difference is corroborated by the composition of the alloy (which is homogeneous in all parts). This is leaded bronze with approximately 2% of antimony in the Arconati Visconti *Apollo*, whereas

for elsewhere. At the current state of research I am inclined to believe that it could predate the Lainate statues. Among the large bronzes of the Cinquecento I have turned to for comparison, there is so far

Fig. 7: 19th century photograph taken at Castellazzo, Arconate: the *Apollo* on the left

⁹ PRESSOUYRE 1969, pp. 223-239; HASKELL – PENNY 1981, cat. 24, pp. 184-187: 186; BRESCH-BAUTIER 2008, pp. 49-63: pp. 58-59, and cat. 1, pp. 64-69: pp. 66-68.

one, which bears some comparable elements. I mean the bronze cast of the Belvedere *Sleeping Ariadne* or *Cleopatra*, one of the bronzes after the Antique cast by 1543 in a foundry at Fontainebleau after moulds taken by Primaticcio in Rome (figs. 4-6). The *Ariadne* is still preserved at Fontainebleau, in the Galerie des Cerfs, together with some other bronzes made at the same occasion and belonging to one of the most remarkable sets of large bronzes of the 16th century, commissioned by King Francis I of France⁹. In particular the *non finito* of the rock on which the figure rests is reminiscent of that on the Arconati Visconti *Apollo* whose drapery is rather thick as is that of the female figure. Not all Fontainebleau bronzes compare well to the *Apollo* but there are closer in spirit to it than the Lainate bronzes and it is worth pursuing this avenue of research in order to establish the authorship of what is one of the most exciting new bronzes that have appeared recently on the market.



Provenance

1671

Luigi Maria Arconati Visconti; Milan, Palazzo Arconati Visconti in San Paolo alla Vigna (today: Via Brisa), described as ‘The statue of Bacchus and its pedestal in in white and black wood’ (‘La statua di bronzo di Bacco con suo piedestallo di legno bianco e nero’);¹⁰

Thence by descent to Galeazzo III Arconati Visconti (died 1772);

Thence by descent to his nephew Carlo Busca (died 1780), son of Luigia Arconati Visconti and Ludovico Busca);

1774 in the Galleria of the Villa Arconati Visconti at Castellazzo di Bollate, described: ‘a pilaster of white and black marble, on top a life-size statue in bronze holding arrows, representing Cupido’ (‘Un pilastro di marmo bianco e nero sopra cui una statua al naturale di bronzo con dardo e stralle rappresentante Cupido’);¹¹

Thence by descent to Luisa Busca Arconati Visconti Sormani Verri, described in 1906 in the ‘salone di conversazione’ (or ‘sala rossa’) of the Villa Arconati-Visconti in Castellazzo di Bollate: ‘Large statue in bronze representing Apollo, atop a marble base, of great value’.¹²

Thence by descent to the Marchesi Crivelli.

¹⁰ Posthumous inventory of Luigi Maria Arconati Visconti; Milan, State Archives, *Notarile*, Atti, 31474, notaio Gaspare Fagnani, 1648-1684, n. 2070 (9-15 February 1671).

¹¹ Milan, State Archives, *Notarile*, Nuovi versamenti, 537, notaio Antonio Calvi, 19 January – 22 August 1774, n. 825, 19 January 1774.

¹² Private Archive, Castellazzo: *inventario compilato per cura del conte Pietro Sormani Verri, senatore del Regno*. 17 September 1906.





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