'The present disgusts me and the future frightens me.'

Marie Arconati Visconti (1840 - 1923)

Gaasbeek Castle

Introduction



Backpacks or bags larger than A4 size belong in a locker



No food or drinks in the castle



The objects in the castle are fragile, do not touch them



Taking photos is allowed, without flash

For security questions, contact our security officers. For all other questions, our reception staff and volunteers are also at your service.

Dear visitor,

You are about to wander through the corridors and rooms of Gaasbeek Castle. Here, there are 800 years of history intertwined with art, joy and sorrow, lives lived, and memories left behind.

The castle's new scenography is called *Rebel Echoes*, a nod to the former residents of the castle and their rebellious streaks. You will get an idea about who they were through these letters written from different perspectives: the proud marchioness, the vulnerable son, the concerned kitchen maid, and others. Most of these letters are poetic imaginings – stories that might well have happened. They touch the past and invite you to lose yourself in your own imagination. You may even discover that the dreams, reflections, and everyday worries of the castle's former inhabitants are not so very different from your own.

We now invite you to slow down and feel the heartbeat of what once was. As you walk, observe, and read, you become part of the meaning of Gaasbeek Castle itself.

We hope you enjoy your visit.

The Gaasbeek Castle team

Help us to protect this heritage

The castle is a historic home with a particularly diverse collection. To protect both the building and its objects, several conservation measures are in place. You may notice that some windows are darkened to reduce sunlight. You might also feel that one room is warmer than another. This is due to conservation heating, which helps lower the relative humidity in a room. Both sunlight and high humidity can damage objects and interiors. You can help us protect this valuable heritage by respecting the following rules: do not touch the objects, do not open windows or shutters (this disrupts the conservation heating), and do not sit on historic furniture. The freeze-dried plants will help guide you and indicate where seating is not allowed. Thanks!

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Getting acquainted

Welcome, visitor!
This is my domain.

I am Marie Arconati Visconti and I inherited this castle from my spouse Giammartino. I inherited some other castles from him (he was a rich man), but this castle won my heart and I made it my own.

Gaasbeek! 800 years old, maybe older. Difficult to reach. Surly in its architecture. Full of exciting stories.

My great passion is history. Thanks to history, you can see how society improves for example when a king is beheaded on a scaffold. But you can also see how precarious that progress is. Nothing is gained indefinitely. Two steps forward, one step back – this is the course of history in the best case.

The Middle Ages were a colourful time, with knights and minstrels. But the Renaissance interests me even more. When the people stood up against tyrants for the first time. Thanks to the invention of the printing press, new ideas were spread around more quickly. Humanism was born. People learned to think for themselves. They became critical …
The Counts of Egmond and Horne for example. They rose up against the Spanish King, Philip II, but they paid for it with their lives. They were beheaded in Brussels' Grand Place on 5 June 1568.

At the time, Gaasbeek Castle was the property of the Count of Egmond. I revere that man as a hero!

Walk along with me – I've honoured him in various castle rooms. If he were haunting the place, his spirit would find a home again here.
And maybe he has been haunting it for centuries, as he was by no means the last rebel who lived here. As if he inspired everyone who stayed here after him. Think! Dare! Do!
Every autumn, I travelled from Paris to this place, to see these beautiful avenues. Don't forget to admire our beech trees later too.

My castle, my strong fortress, my refuge!



Marie Arconati Visconti Room

Here I am.

This was what I looked like. The last lady of Gaasbeek Castle. In all of my glory, with lace and pearls, after I married Giammartino Arconati Visconti, my rich nobleman. I almost can't believe he chose me. Me! Marie Peyrat, the daughter of a penniless journalist from Paris.
I once had to come home from boarding school, because my father couldn't pay the bill anymore. After that, I had to stay indoors for four months, as I didn't have any shoes to go out in. When my mother died, my father had to sell his books – otherwise, there wouldn't have been any money for the funeral. Yes, we had hit rock bottom. We were idealists and the times were against us. Back then at least.

The Count of Egmond is my hero. My father is my demigod. Alphonse Peyrat, the revolutionary journalist. Friends with the literary crème de la crème in Paris: the defender of the people, Victor Hugo. You know – the one who wrote *Les Misérables*. 'Les misérables', A life I knew all too well!

My father was friends with everyone who was a revolutionary in France and beyond it. That was how I got to know Giammartino. His family got a taste for the revolution in Italy. A young woman like me – fierce, progressive, energetic – Giammartino didn't see that often. Only his mother had been the same. He fell madly in love with me. His father threatened to disown him if he married me. But his father died and Giammartino and I headed to the city hall, with Victor Hugo as my witness. The most famous writer in Europe witnessed for me! 29 November 1873. Giammartino was elated. And I could finally relieve my father of his money worries.

My good-hearted Giammartino died unexpectedly, as early as February 1876, and left me everything. 911 properties all across Europe, including this Gaasbeek Castle ...
I remained my father's daughter. I wanted to talk about politics and history and art, with the men who mattered.The best historians, the best politicians, the best art connoisseurs. I invited them to lunch at my home in Paris, to discuss the state of the world over risotto. After that light meal, they could return to their offices and calmly carry on working. I took a business-like approach to it: no heavy-duty receptions with concerts or hearty suppers with a ball. No – a healthy light lunch, an invigorating conversation, an active network. We continued the conversations by letter. I've written thousands of letters! And I invited my intellectuals here to Gaasbeek too. In that wonderful Brabant, in little Belgium.
Brave little Belgium. The country behaved so valiantly under the German occupation of 1914-1918 that I felt true admiration. For the soldier King too, Albert I. That was why I ultimately donated my fortress of Gaasbeek to Belgium – as a sign of my respect.



'So, am I a gentleman now?'

Carletto Arconati Visconti (1819-1839)

Charle-Albert Room

‘Marquise Arconati Visconti (about whom so much gossip is spread in Brussels) came to see our home in Watermael-Bosvoorde and she was impressed, she said, by my historical insight into Renaissance construction and the “effortless effect of historical growth”. When a Frenchwoman says that, I am naturally honoured, as for years I’ve been admiring the great French architects, such as Eugène Viollet-le-Duc up front, and their magnificent restoration work on historic buildings … I have even better news: the marquise has asked me to restore and furnish her Gaasbeek Castle. The emphasis is to be on the Renaissance aspects of that important building. A wonderful task! Do you not think, cousin, that the times are good when a labourer’s child like me is entrusted with major projects and can use all his talents? Yes, I count myself lucky – although it will be a lot of work, and the marquise will undoubtedly be a demanding client. But still, my fingers are itching. I can put my mark on Gaasbeek! What a windfall! Should you know of any young artists in your circle of friends who appreciate the way I work, do pass me their names, as I’ll be needing some assistants.’

Fictitious letter from architect and decorator Albert Charles, ps. Charle-Albert, to a cousin, 1887

Art Cabinet

'... Raoul, settle your affairs in Paris quickly and follow me to Gaasbeek. The weather is mild, the beech avenues are in their full autumn glory. Soon, there will be an auction in Brussels that I would like to visit together. In anticipation of your arrival, I have rearranged my art cabinet a bit. I am curious as to whether it will please you. I like to sit here alone to soak up all the details of the paintings. I pick up the small statues and view them from all angles, preferably by candlelight. The emphasis is now on festivities. The painting of the wedding of the Duke of Joyeuse, the painting of the winter festival on the frozen-over Scheldt and the painting of Archduchess Isabella shooting the popinjay at Sablon in Brussels – all three are now hanging here in the same room. They give me a zest for life. And the last two are of interest to our Belgian guests. I was recently telling the Belgian historian, Professor Henri Pirenne – you met him here – about our great *Tower of Babel*. I told him how that painting probably originates from the estate of the Rubens family and he got very enthusiastic. I then showed him Rubens' marriage contract in the Archive Room. He thanked me and said I was leading him like Clio, the muse of history ...'

Fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Raoul Duseigneur, Gaasbeek, 15 October 1902

Kitchen

November 17, 1917

'Dear Victorine,

We are writing to share some news with you. Jozef will hand you this letter. Give him a healthy shot of gin for his trouble. Joanna and I are sitting in the castle's kitchen, where it is still a bit warm. We have little coal or wood to burn in the fire. When the marquise left for Paris in November 1913, we did not know that we would not see her again for so long. And certainly nor did you. She has not been here for four years! Her special china with the lion of Brabant has lain unused in the cupboard for four years. Can you believe that? Do you remember all those times you had to cook rice with chanterelles for her guests here? She sometimes sends letters from Paris. The new mayor is keeping an eye on the estate, but he still had to give two German officers a tour around here last week. They wanted to see the portrait of Egmond, the library and the tapestries. They did not stay long. They spoke of returning to take some photos. We will see what happens with that. Are you still able to get hold of any potatoes? People are saying there is now a revolution in Russia. What is the world coming to? Greetings from Joanna. I will end it here. Everything in good time, eh?

Your affectionate friend, Maria Wijns, Gaasbeek Castle'

Fictitious letter from Maria Wijns, a servant at Gaasbeek Castle, to her former colleague Victorine (Maria Victorina) Mertens, 1917

Dining Room

'Did I ever tell you that marquise Arconati Visconti asked me to make some paintings for the dining room? I am working on them with pleasure, as her idea is so good. They involve the depiction of a French play from 1507 – the *Moralité du Banquet*, written by one Nicolas de la Chesnaye. This *Morality of the Banque*t is a major plea against gluttony and drunkenness – an exaltation of moderation. I portray the marquise herself on the canvas to the right of the mantelpiece, as the character 'Bonne Santé' – good health. Sitting beside her is her beloved father, Senator Peyrat, as the 'Diner'. To the left of the mantelpiece, you can read a golden rule of thumb on a banderole: "There need to be six hours between lunch and dinner for proper digestion." I am now trying to stick to that rule myself. We all know that the marquise prefers to think and discuss rather than stuffing herself with delicacies. In this dining room, her guests will see why too. According to the *Moralité*, you can avoid illnesses like jaundice, strokes, kidney stones, epilepsy, gut issues and gout through a frugal lifestyle. Every illness is a character in the great scene with the *Extravagant Banquet*. They are standing there as a group of "Maladies fallatrices" and I find it amusing to make them as ashen, tired and ugly as possible. One of them is even carrying some enormous kidney stones in his hands. The marquise provided me with a model to work with, a series of tapestries from the sixteenth century in which the *Moralité* had already been depicted. I am glad to do it. But I can use my imagination too: next to the right-hand window, I depict Nicolas de la Chesnaye himself, walking his dog; above that, an amused observer known simply as the 'Spectator', with, in the background … Gaasbeek Castle. And you will not need to look too long, I hope, to recognise your good uncle as 'Remède' in the scene with the *Banquet* either. In such a setting, there never needs to be an annoying silence, as my canvases will always offer some witty talking points. I hope the marquise will be satisfied and, yes, that I will often be invited at her frugal table myself …'

Fictitious letter from architect and decorator Charle-Albert to a cousin, 27 July 1887

Guard Room

'... Gaasbeek is swallowing me up. I am tired, but the work is gradually progressing. Visitors for the lady marquise enter the castle through the Guardroom. There, they should quickly understand what this place means to her. She asked me to design a mantelpiece with three portraits of her heroes above it: William of Orange, the Count of Horne and, of course, the Count of Egmond. Noblemen who rose up against the bigoted Catholic rule of Philip II. *Les Gueux*, the Beggars, they called themselves. To round it all off, I had a banderole embroidered for the mantelpiece with the text "the Beggars keep fighting with bread and a beggar's pouch, to the remorse of those who envy it". The lady was delighted with this. I myself am captivated by the suits of armour and weapons – all from the sixteenth century – that she has collected here. You will not find a much more militant woman in Belgium, I suspect. My new assistant has now settled in nicely.'

Fictitious letter from Charle-Albert to a cousin, May 1888

Gallery

Visitor, do you see that wondrous canopy in the corner there? This is a *lit de justice*, a bed of justice. The French kings from before sat on such a bed to attend meetings of their parliaments and ratify international treaties. Edmond Foulc, a friend of mine in Paris, was the owner of a real *lit de justice* and I had it recreated very accurately, by some good carpenters. It fits here! Do note that I was no great admirer of the French kings or of the way they governed. But still, in our beloved France, there were enough critical minds alive from the fifteenth century to keep things interesting. Ultimately, this resulted in our great French Revolution in 1789, in which the whole shebang was cleared out.

I received my learned friends in this room in the afternoons. We discussed everything under the sun here – but mainly, of course, how we could get society going in the right direction. That was my passion.

My late husband, Giammartino, looks on from the wall, in a sixteenth-century costume. The portrait busts of Isabella the Catholic, Queen of Spain, and of her grandson Emperor Charles V in the Guard Room, stand here as historical witnesses. Not because I admire those two. Not at all – in my eyes, they were superstitious tyrants. And I only tolerate that statue of Saint Gertrude for the *couleur locale*, as the Chapel of Gertrude comes with the territory. I'm really not going to start believing that this woman could always stop plagues of mice. Although that could come in handy!

The conversations I had with my friends here … I sometimes think you can still hear their echo. When the weather was fine, we carried on the discussion in the avenues of beeches, which were then just showing off their autumn colours. We could have thought we were in an enchanted place then. But the enchantment did not work on everyone. A very famous actor from Paris came to visit once: Mr Coquelin. He missed the city life at once and said he could only "get spectacularly bored" here. He departed for Paris once more at full tilt. You wouldn't do that, would you, visitor?



Egmond Room

Welcome to the Egmond Room. This was the heart of this fortress for me – of my project to make the past visible. The rebellious Count of Egmond was the owner of this castle. His widow lived here. You can almost touch history here.
Egmond could have meant so much to the Low Countries, but he was executed as a traitor in 1568, by order of King Philip II and his envoy, the Duke of Alva. Egmond was beheaded at Brussels' Grand Place – not far from here – on the day before Whitsun.
To me, Egmond was a man who resisted King Philip II's cruelty. He was a man who supported the Protestants against the age-old Catholic dominance. I really can't stand Catholics! Egmond was realistic and progressive. He probably thought: if the King is living so far away in Spain, could my buddy William of Orange not govern here in Philip's name? As William is a better leader than Philip. Is that treachery? No! It is progress.
It is said that the Duke of Alva shed floods of tears when Egmond was beheaded, as they had known each other for a very long time. Yet he still let the execution go ahead, to set an example and scare off other rebels. Not long afterwards, a civil war broke out that would last for eighty years. So much for the success of Alva's tactic!



'... Since Alva arrived in Brussels to punish the rebels, the Count of Egmond has not been eating, and has been heard pacing back and forth feverishly in his room at night. Then he gets another bout of fury, in which he says he will retreat to Gaasbeek Castle and pull up the drawbridge. Then, he would be safe. But he is a man with a foggy mind, cannot determine any clear line of behaviour, did not and does not know what to do – a dead man walking.'

Fictitious letter from Cardinal Granvelle to King Philip II, based on his real letters, September 1567

'... Since the death of my good man and husband, I have fought for our children's share of the inheritance. The King remains largely deaf to my pleas. All our silverware has been confiscated, as well as the lovely gilded silver crown shaped like lilies, set with pearls and precious gems – a showpiece from my dowry. I could not have anticipated this on our wedding day – this hardship, this poverty ... Ever your servant, Sabine Palatine, Countess and widow to Egmond, from our Gaesbeque home, 11 January 1575'

Fictitious letter from Sabina of Bavaria, spouse of the Count of Egmond, based on several existing letters

'I'm not complaining about my lot in life.'

Costanza Arconati Visconti (1800-1871)

Blue Room

‘It is not enough for me to study history. I want to immerse myself in it, experience my beloved centuries as a great actress would. When I was growing up in Paris, I got to know and admire actresses as a matter of course. Did I tell you how Sarah Bernhardt, who at the time was stunning in male and female roles, was among my soulmates? She agreed, if well-paid, to play the hostess during my cultural meetings, which raised their prestige even further, as you’ll understand… Suddenly, everyone wanted an invitation from me, but I remained as discerning as ever. And then there was Réjane – the ultimate Parisienne – with her impish eyes and her snub nose, a free-and-easy woman with an indescribable charm. Actresses work, actresses bring texts to life, actresses have supple minds. That spoke to me. Sarah Bernhardt played the role of Hamlet. The male costume suited her so well. It was a revelation to me to see her on the stage like that. I had the same sixteenth-century page costume made for myself and now wander through the lanes and corridors of Gaasbeek wearing it.

In order to understand a different time, you need to wear that time’s clothing once in a while. Only then will you understand how people moved, suffered from cold, or experienced comfort or discomfort. And isn’t it delightful to dress up too – to play someone else?

I have all the dresses I could want: in satin, velvet or lace. But it feels good to be liberated from all those skirts, corsets and high heels, to be able to walk and stride freely instead of shuffling and tripping. And I am making this tower room with its glorious view the ideal room for my time travels. The blue silk for the walls was specially woven for me in Paris. The effect is beautiful, if I do say so myself. I don’t invite just anyone here, but I will say to you: come and see it soon, my dear Laure.’

From a fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Laure Lorthioir, daughter of the liberal Mayor of Brussels, Émile de Mot, around September 1900

Egmond Staircase

You'll find me right at the top – a woman in a blue coat. I know, my portrait doesn't really stand out among all these princely likenesses. Yet I was the last Baroness of Gaasbeek from 1778, in full possession of all my family's noble titles and domains. I, Brigitta-Josepha Scockaert, the last of the Scockaerts. And then the world changed … revolution broke out in France. And then in our Low Countries too. I did my duty: during the Brabant Revolution, I sent sixteen cannons from Gaasbeek (which were just lying around here) and a company of soldiers to our provisional revolutionary government of The United Dutch States. It could have worked. We could have become independent. But our revolution was smothered in its infancy, the French soon trampled us underfoot … luckily, we are now a sovereign country again. And the castle belonging to my father and all those people who came before him is still here to this day. I look at you – visitor from a wondrous time – with curiosity from my frame.

Alabaster Cabinet

‘In fact, my change in taste over the years is largely down to Raoul. When I was a young girl, everyone wanted to buy Eastern art – I had a friend, an actress, Gisette (alias Madame Clémence Dennery), who now owns one of the most beautiful collections of Japanese art in Paris. But I was not very interested in material matters in those days; I preferred to take lessons in history. Sometimes, I could not even afford to pay for the omnibus – dad and I were so poor back then. Heroic times!

Raoul really made an art lover out of me, largely because he knew so much about it. He taught me how to look. And he put me on the trail of an amazing collection of alabasters that turned up for sale in Paris. Miracle of miracles, almost all of those alabasters turned out to be Flemish – a speciality from Mechelen, in fact. A few years ago, I sent them all to Gaasbeek – this is their home. I like to see the Flemish light playing upon that alabaster. I bought my most beautiful item separately, and it is truly romantic: a relief portrait of Emperor Charles V and Isabella of Portugal on the occasion of their wedding in 1526. He is putting his left arm protectively around her shoulder, she is extending her heart to him, and they are holding each other’s right hands. It moves me sometimes when I look at it. It expresses love. She, Isabella, died in childbirth, alas.’

Fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Laure Lorthioir, daughter of the liberal Mayor of Brussels, Émile de Mot, circa 1901

Gothic Room

‘My dear Raoul, I am glad that in a few weeks you will come to Gaasbeek for the first time. I have no doubt that the castle will enchant you, with your knowledge and your taste. And you will be able to hunt to your heart’s content here too. But I don’t want to talk about that now. I have already had the tapestries hung up. I couldn’t wait to see them, now they have been so well restored and the fabric has been strengthened. They are a surprise for dad and will decorate and warm up his room. I walk into that Gothic room and it surprises me again every time. When the staff had affixed them to the walls, I couldn’t believe my eyes – really, I couldn’t. The soothsayer who predicts a man’s future by reading his hand, tents and children eating gruel – the whole camp seemed to come alive. Just like that wonderful village fair with stalls, pickpockets, musicians and a skimpily dressed dancer. I was surprised once more by the Renaissance man’s capacity for observation and his interest in daily life. So many details in fabrics whose main purpose was merely to keep the cold out! The noblewoman’s little red shoe – even just that. I am curious as to what you will think of the tapestries. I am already delighted to be able to show you around here, at my dearest castle. I will tell you much about the history of the building and its inhabitants, you see – I will be a true connoisseur. It is usually the other way round with us…’

Fragment from a fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Raoul Duseigneur, written in the autumn of 1893, not long after their introduction during an auction of the major Spitzer art collection in the spring

Louis XIV Room

'Today, I studied great-uncle Paul Arconati's Chinese pagoda. What a dreamer that man was. Ivory cut as finely as lace, a decorative temple in a park with little trees full of fruit, and a bridge, and lanterns, and deer, and little ivory people. A toy bought for a rich, well-travelled man. He bought this pagoda while my grandparents were traipsing around with vegetables in the province and had never seen Paris or the sea. Two completely different worlds. Still, his pleasure in the pagoda is now my pleasure.'

Fictitious note in a diary of marquise Marie Arconati Visconti, 6 November 1913

'Forgive the prodigal son for his long absence.'

Giammartino Arconati Visconti (1839 - 1876)

Archive Room

‘How cold it is, my dear Laure! So early in October too. I am writing in the library tonight, with a fur coat around my shoulders and a warm hot-water bottle at my feet. And every so often, I stimulate my circulation by standing up and walking to the archive room. There are candles burning in seven candle-stands there now, which really brings out the colours and the shine of the tapestries. They gleam with gold thread and I revel in their details. What excellent craftsmen those Brussels weavers were. I am pleased I was able to buy this series. An outside chance, and Raoul immediately saw where they would best be hung. It is cold outside, but here, I am, looking at the borders with flowers and fruit. It is stormy outside, but I can see irises and roses. And… camels! The whole series depicts the biblical story of Tobias. Quite an exciting story. Because everything plays out in the Middle East, you can also see some camels, with red bridles and striped saddle-cloths. My late spouse, marquis Giammartino Arconati Visconti, could tell some amusing stories about these animals. He came to know them when he was travelling through Sinai to Petra, and became a skilled camel-rider. Is it not quite strange how tapestries from the sixteenth century now suddenly make me think of him again? Do come for a visit one evening – then you can enjoy that exceptional sight. Brussels tapestries by candlelight. This is what they were made for. There is also a large devil on them. Asmodeus – a truly revolting showpiece!’

Fragment from a fictitious letter from the marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Laure Lorthioir, daughter of liberal Mayor Émile de Mot of Brussels, s.d.

Library

‘How wonderful it is to be back at Gaasbeek, Laure – certainly now, with this mild weather. My cold is quickly getting better here too. When will you come along? I am writing to you in my beloved library, sitting in the regal armchair in crocodile leather… My steward, Van Cromphout, once made a full inventory of the library, with all the books from all the generations past and those of my good father. Over seven thousand volumes! Among them, several of my favourites: Voltaire, Villon, Rabelais. I could not live without them. By the way, Van Cromphout also provided an inventory of all the archive items. Did you know we are storing the last marriage contract and will of Rubens here, alongside other family papers of his? A descendant of Rubens’ eldest son married one of my husband’s forefathers, which was how the documents ended up here. I studied Rubens’ will yesterday – Van Cromphout and his wife translated it into French for me. That painter was so rich! This little country of yours has evidently always been prosperous. That has astonished a Frenchwoman like me every so often.’

Fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Laure Lorthioir, daughter of the liberal Mayor of Brussels, Émile de Mot, suspected to be written in October 1899

Knights' Hall

'Madame la Marquise,

Victor Lagye has declared he is prepared to paint the pictures in the Knights' Hall. I have already gone over the series of topics with him. He is a specialist in historical costumes and in Renaissance scenes. I went with him to view his work at Antwerp city hall. His response was enthusiastic when I told him that Gaasbeek once belonged to the Count of Egmond and he immediately made a sketch on an envelope of the Count leading and winning the Battle of Grevelingen. He told me he had lived in Rome for five years himself, and had fought for the unity and freedom of your second homeland, by Garibaldi's side. What a happy coincidence! He will come to visit the castle and measure up the Knights' Room soon.'

Fragment from a fictitious letter from Charle-Albert to marquise Marie Arconati Visconti, spring 1887

Carletto's Room

Bordeaux, 4 July 1839

'My dear Marietta,

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your letter filled with such genuine affection.

This is a catastrophe that has withered and embittered my life. You must understand that I am not only a mother who has lost her only son - that son was also a true friend to me. Someone who knew all my thoughts and feelings. Someone who gave meaning and colour to everything that now feels broken.

I had never before seen anyone die, and now the very first person I saw die was my own son. To comfort you, I can tell you that he received the last sacraments. He died in the room where you and I so often slept. It is still my room. I had Carletto brought there during the first days of his illness. Around seven in the evening, when the sunlight streamed through the windows and the forest was illuminated with an even greater brilliance than usual, his poor soul left this world. He died in the place he loved most. He is buried near uncle, in the cemetery beside the church to which he loved to walk.

I thought I would come to hate Gaasbeek, yet the image of Carletto is more alive there than anywhere else. I enter his room and see him sitting at his little table, in the window embrasure, in so many different ways. In the inner courtyard, I see him sitting on the bench, or half lying on the low wall that surrounds it. Even seeing the place where he is buried brings me comfort. Gaasbeek has therefore become a sacred place.

Embrace your dear little boys for me.
Write to me here and in Biarritz via Bayonne. We are going to the sea.
Your deeply grieving
Costanza'

Excerpts from an authentic letter written by Costanza Arconati Visconti to her sister Marietta Bassi, shortly after the death of Costanza's son Carletto Arconati Visconti on 9 June 1839 in Gaasbeek. Translated into Dutch and selected by L. Huet. The original letter is preserved in the Bassi family archive in Trezzo sull'Adda and was transcribed by Ms L. Winsemann.

Paul Arconati Studio

‘Memories. I grew up in a cruel world. Everything was about possessions, status and retaining the eternal status quo. Well, I did inherit status and possessions. And this made me feel uncomfortable. As children, we were nothing – merely names in a family tree. I became a lieutenant in the Austrian army and then my career stalled, as I never minced my words. In 1789, the year of the French Revolution, my only child, Sophie, was born in Liège. I never married her mother, Barbe – that was not possible. But I did cherish my Sophie. Marrying a woman of my own standing? Then I would need to disinherit Sophie. And women of my own standing, ah well, one gets attached to his freedom.

Napoleon Bonaparte was a hero to me. A man (from an Italian bloodline, like me) who came along from nowhere, a conqueror and a reformer. He abolished centuries-old laws and customs to free us and reinvent society in a suitable, modern way. All across Europe. God, how I admired that man – how happy I was when he also ruled over the Low Countries. By then, I had already inherited Gaasbeek Castle from my good aunt, Brigitte Scockaert. I decided to place myself at Napoleon’s service in Brussels. He appointed me Mayor. But even as Mayor of Brussels, people found me too stubborn. I stepped down after only two months. So much intrigue, opposition, fellow officials who did not understand my fiery nature! But my admiration remained constant, my faith intact. I built a triumphal arch for Napoleon in my park at Gaasbeek – in eternal memory of this grand revolutionary. He never saw the construction work… in ungrateful Brussels, I bought the old Breadhouse and saved it from demolition. I then travelled to the east, to Armenia and the Ottoman Empire. Here at Gaasbeek, I wore Ottoman clothing. I also rode in my carriage through Brussels, waving genially to the population.

I was called eccentric. Perhaps I had too many possessions and too much status? I was unable to choose. Deeply religious, Freemason, I was both. At one point a wild benefactor, at another a sombre recluse. I married off Sophie to a French soldier and that went wrong. He was only out for her money. Now, my nephew Giuseppe will inherit everything. He is another passionate, revolutionary young man – he had to flee Milan in March owing to his involvement in the uprising.

I look at my ivory *Vision of Saul on the way to Damascus* and I know: I had a vision myself, but maybe I did not change my life thoroughly enough. Saul became the Apostle Paul and I became nothing more than “un original”.

Will Sophie support me in my final days?
I have already put together my epitaph. “Request to the God-fearing parishioners of Gaasbeek not to forget me in their fiery prayers…”
It may well be good to come to rest at the churchyard in my familiar Gaasbeek, where I have lived with so little peace.’

From a fictitious manuscript left behind by Paul Arconati,

suspected to be written not long before his death in the summer of 1821

Salon Giuseppe and Costanza 1/2

July 6, 1836,

'Dear Margherita,

How is married life treating you, my little sister? It must be good – you and Giacinto were so happy on your wedding day. I am pleased that your love and perseverance have borne fruit and that we have been able to mollify our parents into finally giving their blessing, even though their political views differ from Giacinto's. Oh, they will get used to him, certainly when they learn to perceive his qualities better.

Here in Gaasbeek, everything is going on as normal. Our friends come over. When they can't, I write to them. I am going to Brussels to see what new books have arrived that may interest them. I am looking after the affairs of our dear Arrivabene and Berchet (he recently had me copy out a few lovely poems neatly again – they truly moved me). When I walk through the garden, I think of the months you spent here: away from our parents for the first time, free, in new company, full of plans. And of course, you had the chance to meet Giacinto here, to talk to him...

Just like you, Margherita, I love our parents. But we cannot live like them, good and obedient, while Italy is divided and subjugated. Had I stayed with Giuseppe in Milan, my life could only have consisted of taking care of the kitchen and the washing. I shudder to think about it. I learnt much in our exile.
Carletto is getting ready to go and study in Heidelberg. He sends a kiss on the cheek and the hand to Aunt Margherita.

Till soon, brand-new marquise Provana di Collegno, and send your spouse both our greetings,

C.'

Salon Giuseppe en Costanza 2/2

July 6, 1839,

'Dear Margherita,

I hope everything is going well with you and with Giacinto. We will see each other again soon. This is the last time I will write to you from Gaasbeek. We are only here briefly to collect several of Carletto's valued possessions. After that, I never want to see this place again. It took so much effort for me to go into his room – his beloved tower room where he could look far out over the Brabant landscape. We have ordered the staff never to open that room again once we depart. How could he die here, unexpectedly, while Giuseppe and I were staying abroad? Carletto, the apple of our eye.

I am writing to you from my old sitting room, under the watchful eye of Rubens' *Madonna with the Parrot*. Her lovely little child reminds me of my son when we had only just arrived here, after fleeing from Milan. He had just turned three. In the rooms and halls of Gaasbeek, I can see him at every age, as a boy of eight, of eleven, of fifteen, of eighteen ...

He sat at my feet playing or reading here when I was writing letters. How familiar that felt. His bowed head, his curls ... and now he lies buried in Gaasbeek churchyard, by the grave of Uncle Paul. It tears me apart that I will not be able to visit his grave. My pregnancy will soon come to term and we want to raise the new child in Italy, God-willing. Giuseppe says I need to rest and should not be constantly reminded of what happened. From now on, we need to look to the future – that is the only thing bearable. All the rest feels unreal, absurd. Farewell, Gaasbeek, which took care of us when we were exiles and where we could help companions in misfortune. Italy is now doing less badly. There is hope. Our country will be whole and independent again at some point. And perhaps I will have a son again.

Your broken

C.'

Fictitious letters from marquise Costanza Arconati Visconti to her younger sister, Margherita

Studiolo Giammartino

‘To my Mother,

How often have I, in the Arabian deserts, in charming and melancholy Palestine, longed to have you with me, dear Mother, to study with you and admire things, to relive the thousands of memories prompted by the beautiful regions I was passing through?
Do you remember the clear evenings by the Nile? The most beautiful moments, the most lively impressions of the East, are things I have you to thank for – I experienced them with you. My urge to wander did not then demand the sacrifice of the distance from my paternal home, the absence of the persons most dear to me in the world!

Forgive the prodigal son his long absence and receive these pages in kindness, written in countries you have known and loved.

The protective power of your name will bring me happiness. And if other readers will condemn me, then you, because you are my mother, will forgive me.

Your loving son.’

Dedication from Giammartino Arconati Visconti to Costanza Arconati Visconti in his book *Diario di un viaggio in Arabia Petrea* (1865), Turin, 1872

‘Our retinue consists of fifteen camels, two dromedaries and eight camel-drivers from various clans in the Arabian peninsula; their leader is Sheikh Mdahhar from the Aulad Said clan. My *hejin* is a wonderful animal with a slender shape and a light pelt; a *ligam* serves as a camel-skin bridle adorned with shells, attached to a ring through the right nostril; there are two bags – known as *khori* – of white wool with red and black stripes on the sides of the saddle, better known as the packsaddle, with long tassels decorated with kauri shells. The driver is a great lad aged 10 or 12, Nassar.

Surur rides with me on the *hejin*, on the camel’s hump and with a belt fastened to the rearmost peg of the saddle. Beside Surur are the gun, the scientific instruments and the Algerian blankets that enhance my dromedary’s picturesque effect.’

Giammartino Arconati Visconti, *Diario di un viaggio in Arabia Petrea* (1865), Turin, 1872, p. 202

Marquise's Apartment

'It pleases me, Laure, to keep a small part of the castle for myself. Behind the great Brabant lion above the entrance gate are my private rooms. No more than three. Here is where I rest, dream and discuss with Raoul the plans for the day. My father and mother are here with me. Yes, I own a portrait of my mother, the seamstress. She was pretty, which I remember and the painter recorded that. She died thirty years ago. She sewed the few dresses I owned as a young woman.

You asked me why I have never written a book on history, given that history is my passion. My father was the writer in our family. Gaasbeek is my book on history. A castle from the Renaissance, full of references and footnotes! I really would have liked to live in the time of the Renaissance: to crack jokes with Rabelais at his Abbey of Theleme It is hard not to love a man whose rule in life is: "Do What You Want". Or to have discussions with Erasmus – and naturally to get one over on that sanctimonious old fellow! The sixteenth century was the first century of freedom. I have turned Gaasbeek into a monument to that freedom. But I will not give up my more modern bathroom.'

Fragment from a fictitious letter from marquise Marie Arconati Visconti to Laure Lorthioir, daughter of the liberal Mayor of Brussels, Émile de Mot, 1 October 1898

Outro

You have reached the end of your wanderings through Gaasbeek Castle. After your visit, you are warmly invited to enjoy the Inner Garden, take a stroll through the park, have a drink at Caffè Carletto, or eat a fine meal at Graaf. Do not miss the Cast Collection, where you can admire the restored plaster casts and recognise interior elements from the castle itself.
Please feel welcome to make a return visit, there is a rich programme of activities throughout the year. There is never a bad reason to return to Gaasbeek. Marquise Marie Arconati Visconti knew that:

« Quelle belle journée, le parc était magnifique, je quitte toujours Gaesbeek avec regret. »

[What a wonderful day, the park was beautiful, I always leave Gaasbeek in anguish.]

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Film Clips

Marie Peyrat was born and raised in Paris. Two short documentaries from 1900 and 1912 present to the visitor the Paris as Marie must have known it. As a politically engaged salonnière, she witnessed the breakthrough of cinematography, which was especially popular in France. In 1899, French film maker Georges Méliès produced the drama *L'Affaire Dreyfus*. Like Peyrat, Méliès took up the defence of the wrongly convicted Jewish captain Albert Dreyfus in the film.

Il Gattopardo (1963) by Luchino Visconti is a flamboyant fresco about the risorgimento, the downfall of the nobility and the rise of the bourgeoisie.

The film clips have been carefully selected by Wouter Hessels, novelist, film historian (RITCS & INSAS) and film curator of Gaasbeek Castle.

» *Paris à vol d'oiseau* (1912) / Collection Lobster Films, Paris / Marie Arconati Visconti Room
» *Vues de Paris* (1900) / Étienne-Jules Marey / Marie Arconati Visconti Room
» *L'Affaire Dreyfus* (1899) / Georges Méliès / Marie Arconati Visconti Room
» *Il Gattopardo* (1963) / Luchino Visconti / Pathé Films, Paris / Salon Giuseppe and Costanza

Contemporary Artworks

Gaasbeek Castle collection

» François de Coninck / *Le fil prodigue* (2018) / Marie Arconati Visconti Room
» Cindy Wright / *Scarlet Fever* (2020) / Art Cabinet
» Maurizio Nannucci / *Everything Might Be Different* (1988 – 2024) / Emperor Charles Staircase
» Jorik Dzobava / *Victor Hugo* (2021) / Egmond Staircase
» Erwin Olaf / Serie *Exquisite Corpses* (2012) / Egmond Room, Egmond Staircase, Blue Room
» Jan De Vliegher / *Hofburg 1 en 3* (2011) / Salon Giuseppe and Costanza

Credits

Marie Arconati Visconti Room
» Raoul Duseigneur?, *Petit Salon Barbet, apartment of marquise Arconati Visconti in Paris*, s.d., photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Alexis Brandt
» Reproductions collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

Charle-Albert Room
» Charle-Albert, *Charle-Albert Castle or Flemish House*, 1869-1887, photo Auguste Van Gele, 1906, ©KIK-IRPA, Brussels
» Charle-Albert, *Charle-Albert Castle or Flemish House*, 1869-1887, photo Emile Henri t'Serstevens, 1900, ©KIK-IRPA, Brussels
» Charle-Albert, *Charle-Albert Castle or Flemish House*, 1869-1887, photo © Serge Marteaux for Ma²
» Charle-Albert, *The Flemish House at Boitsfort*, 1869-1887, photo c. 1887, The Archives of the City of Brussels, I.F Album VIII- 20
» Charle-Albert, *The Flemish House at Boitsfort*, 1869-1887, photo c. 1887, ©KIK-IRPA, Brussels
» Atelier Nadar, *Portrait of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc*, 1900, © L'Atelier Nadar, Bibliothèque nationale de France
» *Pierrefonds Castle*, photo © Ministère de la Culture - Médiathèque du patrimoine et de la photographie, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Alfred-Nicolas Normand, 1889
» Reproductions collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael, Jo Exelmans and Meemoo

Dining Room
» Anonymous, *'Milieu de table'*, 19th century, France, Collection Saffelberg Investments NV
» Anonymous, *Box with lid*, c. 1880, France, Collection Saffelberg Investments NV

Egmond Room
» Jules Messiaen after Louis Gallait, *The Last Tribute to the Counts of Egmond and Horn*, 1908, Collection of the Flemish Community

Blue Room
» *Lafayette, Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet*, 1899, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie
» Atelier Nadar, *Portrait of Gabrielle Réjane ('Réjane dans La Parisienne')*, © L'Atelier Nadar, 1893-1894, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie
» Erwin Olaf, *Exquisite Corpses*, Interpretation Marquise Arconati Visconti as a page (capelet in fur Ann Demeulemeester, ring Isabelle Lenfant, necklaces Wouters & Hendrix, stockings by Cette), 2012, commissioned by Gaasbeek Castle.
» Alphonse Mucha, *Sarah Bernhardt as Lorenzaccio*, 1896, © Bibliothèque nationale de France
» Alphonse Mucha, *Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet*, 1899, © Bibliothèque nationale de France
» Lafayette, *Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet*, 1899, © Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Estampes et Photographie
» Raoul Duseigneur ?, *Marquise Arconati Visconti as page*, s.d., photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Alexis Brandt

Gothic Room
» Reproduction collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

Louis XIV-kamer
» Boin-Taburet, *Surtout de table à la Pagode*, last quarter of the 19th century, Paris, Saffelberg Investments PLC Collection

Archive Room
» *Testament of Pieter Paul Rubens and Helena Fourment*, 27 May 1640, Old Archive Gaasbeek Castle (Inv. Van Cromphout), Ad 37, reproduction courtesy of Jim Van Raemdonck, Soon

Treasure Attic
» Reproductions courtesy of De Rijksstudio of Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Carletto's Room
» Reproductions collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

Paul Arconati Studio
» Reproductions collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

Salon Giuseppe and Costanza
» Anonymous, *Portrait of Giuseppe Arconati Visconti*, s.d., Archive Bassi, Trezzo sull'Adda, Italy
» Anonymous, *Portrait of Costanza Trotti Bentivoglio Arconati Visconti*, s.d., Archive Bassi, Trezzo sull'Adda, Italy
» Attributed to Palagi, *Boudoir furniture*, 1818-1834, Italië, Saffelberg Investments PLC Collection

Studiolo Giammartino
» Reproduction collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

Red Room (Marquise's Apartment)
» Anonymous, *Game table*, ca. 1750, Parijs, Saffelberg Investments PLC Collection
» Anonymous, *Portrait of Marquise Arconati Visconti in Renaissance costume in a rocking chair*, s.d., photo © Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Alexis Brandt
» David Claerbout, *Wildfire (Firerapids)*, 2022-2024, courtesy Collection Wacondah Ventures
» Reproduction collection Gaasbeek Castle Simon Vanboterdael

The original drawings, prints and photographs were replaced by facsimiles for conservation purposes. Some objects from the collection may not be on display due to loans, exhibitions, or restoration.

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