Marquise Marie Arconati Visconti, née Marie Peyrat (1840-1923)

Marquise Marie Arconati Visconti, the last Marquise of Gaasbeek Castle was born in 1840 as Marie Peyrat. She was the daughter of the French radical socialist Alphonse Peyrat (1812-1890), a progressive journalist and member of the French National Assembly. He had republican ideals and was fervently anti-clerical. Marie adored her father.

In 1873, at the age of 33, Marie married Giammartino Arconati Visconti (1839-1875), a tremendously rich Italian who she met in Paris. Marie and Giammartino lived alternately in the family's rural properties in Italy, Paris and in Gaasbeek Castle. Gaasbeek Castle was just one of the many properties of the family in the Southern Low Countries. While Giammartino spent most of his time in Milan, Marie studied in Padua. She ignored social obligations and refused to behave as a woman of her standing. She rolled her own cigarettes, sometimes wore men's clothes and used rough language.

Three years after their marriage, Giammartino died and Marie inherited a gigantic fortune. Marie lived alternately in Paris or in Gaasbeek. In Paris, Marie held political and literary Salons, at which the liberal socialist Léon Gambetta was a key figure. He gave her the nickname 'the angel of liberalism'. Like her father she abhorred religion, collected art and donated fortunes to scientific research. She punctuated her busy intellectual and urbane life in Paris with long holidays in Gaasbeek Castle. She had a love of history and archives and at times dressed up in page outfits. Together with her adviser, the antiquarian Raoul Duseigneur, she purchased a great many works of art. Duseigneur, who was also Marie's lover, often stayed with her in Gaasbeek.

Her favourite period was the Renaissance. At the end of the 19th century, she commissioned the restoration of Gaasbeek Castle, which had fallen into a state of great disrepair, in neo-renaissance style. The Brussels architect and interior designer Charle Albert (pseudonym of Albert Joseph Charles, 1821-1889) was responsible for the restoration works. Albert was a supporter of the restoration principles of the French Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, which were very popular at that time but are out of date today. He thought it completely legitimate therefore to rebuild a ruin, often more beautifully than the original building had been. He took into consideration the desire of the Marquise to turn Gaasbeek into a prestigious and comfortable castle. The rugged character of the outside of the castle was retained, but the inside was rebuilt in an attractive renaissance style. Albert was an all-round expert when it came to the decoration of the rooms and the furniture, with particular experience in French castles and museums.

In 1913, Marie left Gaasbeek, not realising that she would never return. A year later war broke out and she fled with Duseigneur from Paris to live in a hotel in Angers. Duseigneur became ill and died the same year. As the Marquise was childless, she wanted to be sure of distributing her fortune wisely. She prepared to bequeath all her belongings on her death. Marie Peyrat was mad about art and history, but did not forget her progressive social leanings. She wanted her fortune to be put to the good of society. The Louvre received her complete collection of mediaeval and renaissance works of art. And thanks to the efforts of her steward Jules Van Cromphout and his wife and son, the works of art survived the sojourn of the German soldiers in the castle. They brought a great deal of them to a safe place in Brussels. After the war she bequeathed Gaasbeek Castle to the Belgian state. The act of donation was signed on 18 August 1922. Marie Peyrat died in her Paris apartment on 3 May 1923. She was 83.