

# Rediscovering Identity in the Past

## Inventories as Sources for the Memories of the Visconti-Sforza Families (Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries)

*Abstract:* Did European aristocratic families retain memories of their past? It would seem obvious to answer this question in the affirmative, and yet the Lombard case is less straightforward, as after entering the Habsburg system in 1535 Milanese aristocracy experienced memory issues. However, not all grand Lombard families forget their past, as shown by specific past-related objects recorded in the inventories of the Sforza of Caravaggio and some branches of the Visconti family. The quality of inventories as sources for the memories of families are at the centre of this chapter.

*Key Words:* Renaissance and Baroque Milan, Visconti, Sforza, European aristocracy, Memorial culture, History of collecting

### 1. Introduction

Giuseppe Rovani made a statement at the beginning of a chapter of his influential nineteenth-century novel *Cento anni (Hundred Years)*: he was not going to describe minutely and comprehensively the bedroom of “Count F,” as did novelists that were “led by general Walter Scott, or better, as it is common practice in inventories and delivery documents”, creating lists of words worthy of a vocabulary.<sup>1</sup> Rovani was

---

DOI: doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2021-32-3-8



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

Edoardo Rossetti, Scuola Universitaria della Svizzera Italiana (SUPSI), edoardo.rossetti@supsi.ch

1 The research of this essay is part of the project *In the mirror of the past: rediscovering identity and form in antiquity. The graphic corpus of Tito Vespasiano Paravicini between Renaissance and Neo-Renaissance* (<http://p3.snf.ch/project-185344>). I am grateful to Christina Antenhofer, Letizia Arcangeli, Corinna Gallori, Silvio Leydi, Roberta Martinis, Alessandro Morandotti, Marco Rossi, Rossana Sacchi, Giovanna Tonelli.

being unfairly dismissive, since almost obsessive enumeration of items had been a fundamental component in Medieval and Renaissance writings, and furthermore, it was about to be resurrected in the linguistic experimentations of another Milanese, Carlo Emilio Gadda. Yet his words recall the practice of writing long lists of items in inventories.

In this essay, I plan to investigate whether a large cache of inventories of the art collections belonging to the Milan elite families can reveal any patterns in the way these lineages commissioned, inherited, transmitted, used, and exhibited art related to their ancestry. I want to raise two questions: was the memory of the Visconti and Sforza period's splendour completely vanished for their descendants? Did it return, and when? If combined with other sources, inventories can answer these questions. To understand if the Visconti and Sforza remembered their past, and how, I will first search if they specifically looked for objects that indicate a certain degree of conservation of memory, such as portraits and history paintings. I will then discuss how the Visconti and Sforza acknowledged their familial history and argue that there was a reason why their interest resurfaced at a specific moment. I will focus in particular on the moment when the Duchy of Milan faced yet another institutional crisis, when, in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the weakening of the Habsburg monarchy of Spain became evident and new prospects opened up for the Duchy of Milan. This is a traditional way of dealing with inventories, but the interpretation of the documents in this historical context is innovative, especially for the peculiar historiographical framework of Milan.<sup>2</sup>

---

Giuseppe Rovani, *Cento anni*, 2 vols., Sesto San Giovanni, 1909, I, 233. On Rovani's cultural activities in Milan: Giulio Carnazzi, *Da Rovani ai "perduti"*. *Giornalismo e critica nella Scapigliatura*, Milano 1992; Silvana Tamiozzo Goldmann, *Lo scapigliato in archivio*, Milano 1994; Rosita Tordi, *Il Manto di Lindoro. Rovani e il teatro d'opera*, Roma 1995; Valentino Scrima, *Giuseppe Rovani critico d'arte*, Milano 2004.

- 2 For this use of inventories compare for example Gérard Labrot, *Peinture et société à Naples: commandes, collections, marches (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)*, Seyssel 2010; Jessica Keating/Lia Markey, Introduction: Captured objects. Inventories of early modern collections, in: *Journal of the History of Collections*, 23/2 (2011), 209–213 (and the entire volume); Jean-Philippe Genet, *Entre mémoire, droit et culture. Les écrits de gestion*, in: Xavier Hermand/Jean-François Nieus/Étienne Renard (eds.), *Décrire, inventorier, enregistrer entre Seine et Rhin au Moyen Âge. Formes, fonctions et usages des écrits de gestion*, Paris 2012, 415–427; Giorgio Riello, "Things seen and unseen". The material culture of early modern inventories and their representation of domestic interiors, in: Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, New York 2013, 126–150; Christina Antenhofer, *Inventories as Material and Textual Sources for Late Medieval and Early Modern Social, Gender and Cultural History (14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> Centuries)*, in: *MEMO. Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture Online*, 7 (2020). For an exemplary use of inventories to study the revival of a recent historical memory through patronage see David van der Linden, *Memorializing the Wars of Religion in Early Seventeenth-Century French Picture Galleries: Protestant and Catholics Painting the Contested Past*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, 70/1 (2017), 132–178.

Why choose the Sforza and Visconti families as a case study? Due to political, social, and economic events that took place between the third and fourth decades of the sixteenth century, the history of the Visconti-Sforza duchy, an imperial fief, suffered a deep caesura that impacted also on the arts and culture of Lombardy. Starting from 1535, when the duchy was devolved to the Empire, Milan was no longer the venue of an autonomous court. The Imperial and Spanish governors, who were, since the second half of the sixteenth century, always non-Italian, never created a cultural catalyst power comparable to that of the courts of the Visconti and Sforza. Furthermore, in 1524 Milan had been devastated by an epidemic that halved its population. Thus, the natural change between generations overlapped with a change in those who were holding the political and economic power in the city.<sup>3</sup>

During the remainder of the sixteenth century, families appeared on the Milanese stage who were not total 'newcomers', but had now started an aggressive social climb to the detriment of the ancient Lombard aristocracy. In two generations' time, the Archinto, Arese, Arrigoni, Clerici, Litta, Medici di Marignano, Taverna, and Serbelloni replaced the Carcano, Lampugnani, Landriani, Marliani, Pallavicini, Pusterla, and outstaged the still existing branches of the Visconti. This is an event that needs to be studied in-depth, as it had various repercussions, even in the artistic and cultural fields. As a result, in late Renaissance and Baroque Milan the historical memory of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seems to have been set aside. Even the traditional familial burial places were frequently abandoned.<sup>4</sup> But what happened to the old aristocratic families? Did they really forget their past?

Such a situation created research bias. With the exception of the Trivulzio family, historical and art historical research on the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries has generally privileged the emerging 'new' families of Milan.<sup>5</sup> As Alessandro Morandotti's studies on the Visconti Borromeo have highlighted, it is actually more fruitful to focus on the 'old' landed aristocracy of Milan, than the 'new' men and families of Spanish Lombardy. Because the 'old' families were still amongst the most relevant of

---

3 Carlo Dionisotti, *Scritti di Storia della Letteratura Italiana*, II (1963–1971), Roma 2009, 141–171: 143–144; Sacchi, *Il disegno*, 2005, (the first chapters). In general, on the history of the Duchy of Milan see Andrea Gamberini (ed.), *A Companion to Late Medieval and Early Modern Milan. The distinctive Features of an Italian State*, Leiden/Boston 2014.

4 Edoardo Rossetti, "Arca marmorea elevata a terra per brachia octo". Tra sepolture e spazi sacri: problemi di memoria per l'aristocrazia milanese tra Quattro e Cinquecento, in: Letizia Arcangeli/Giorgio Chittolini/Federico Del Tredici/Edoardo Rossetti (eds.), *Famiglie e spazi sacri nella Lombardia del Rinascimento*, Milano 2015, 169–227.

5 The Trivulzio family was studied by Letizia Arcangeli, Cinzia Cremonini, Gian Vittorio Signorotto, Marino Viganò and more recently by Séverin Duc. Research has been recently promoted by the Trivulzio Foundation, led by lawyer Gian Giacomo Attolico Trivulzio. On their inventories, see Alessandra Squizzato, *I Trivulzio e le arti. Vicende seicentesche*, Milano 2013.

Lombardy in terms of patrimony, historical past, and nobility.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore quite paradoxical that they are presently amongst the least studied lineages. Among this 'old' lineage, the various branches of the Visconti and the Sforza di Caravaggio continued to be among the leading families in Milan.

The present research is based on fifty inventories, preserved in the State Archives of Cremona, Mantua, and Milan, but also in some private or semi-public archives, which were drawn up for the Sforza di Caravaggio and some side branches of the Visconti, to either record the possessions of a deceased or because of a confiscation. Dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, these inventories offer a significant and comprehensive sample of three hundred years of Milanese history. Only a few of them have been partially published; most have been mentioned in passing or analysed in studies on the history of collecting. A large part of the material here presented is, however, unpublished (see the family tree with inventory records)..

## 2. Milanese inventories: why studying them, and how?

In *ancien régime* Milan inventories were usually drafted in three instances. It was mandatory to compile a *post mortem* inventory when the deceased left underage heir(s). The only exception was when the testator's children were under the tutelage of his spouse and the exemption from drawing up an inventory still had to be stated in his last will and testament. Such inventories can frequently be found in the *Fondo Notarile (Not.)* of Milan's State Archive and, as they often include movable and immovable properties, all revenues, credits, and debts pertaining to the inheritance, help us in assessing a family's patrimony or its social standing, gauge its lifestyle and expenditure on luxury goods.<sup>7</sup>

Inventories were also drawn up because of the confiscation of an individual's possessions under criminal charges. Such lists were necessary for creditors, family members, or affiliates (such as the wives, who required their dowry to be returned) to claim possession of objects or a consistent portion of assets. A little-studied but

---

6 Alessandro Morandotti, Pirro I Visconti Borromeo di Brebbia. Mecenate nella Milano del tardo Cinquecento, in: Archivio Storico Lombardo, 107 (1981 [but 1984]), 115–162; id., Nuove tracce per il tardo Rinascimento italiano: il ninfeo-museo della villa Borromeo, Visconti Borromeo, Litta, Toselli di Lainate, in: Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia, 15/1 (1985), 129–185; id., Milano profana nell'età dei Borromeo, Milano 2005.

7 For this use and Milanese contest: Giovanna Tonelli, "Inventario de' mobili, suppellettili, argenti, gioie et altro esistente nell'eredità del fu Illustrissimo Signor Marchese Questore Don Francesco Soppani" (1722), in: Edoardo Rossetti (ed.), Squarci d'interni. Inventari per il Rinascimento milanese, Milano 2012, 245–262; ead., Affari e lussuosa sobrietà. Traffici e stili di vita dei negozianti milanesi del XVIII secolo (1600–1659), Milano 2012, 153–188; ead., Investire con profitto e stile. Strategie imprenditoriali e familiari a Milano tra Sei e Settecento, Milano 2015, 137–157.

substantial number of such inventories are housed in fond *Atti di Governo, Finanza*, series *Apprensioni e Confische*, of Milan's State Archive. Usually they are not too detailed, especially those from the sixteenth century, but through their terseness it is possible to glimpse the protective role played by friends, *clienti*, neighbours, and relatives, who efficiently rescued objects from judicial officers.<sup>8</sup>

Lists of dotal goods rarely survive and might have been written off from the prenuptial agreements. Compared to successions, the surviving examples of dowries are more concise, however they almost always include an estimate or value of the bride's possessions. Since dresses and personal items are frequently recorded, dowries are frequently studied by historians of fashion. Particular attention has been devoted to the terminology used to define textiles, colours, and clothing items.<sup>9</sup>

Milanese inventories are typological and divide their items by categories (paintings, books, silverware, linen, furniture, chariots, etc.), although others feature a topographical approach and describe each room of the palace/castle/villa and each item inside it. It is not possible to determine why a specific system was chosen, although it could be argued that a typological inventory was more practical for a partition and that topographical inventories might have been the most basic form of cataloguing. After the existing goods were catalogued, it was possible to use the first list to create new ones with a different structure.

All types of Milanese inventories have been studied by scholars who focus on art collections.<sup>10</sup> And yet for years Milan has been deemed of little interest and even long excluded from the Getty Provenance Index (GPI), a website that aims to canvass inventories of aristocratic families and auctioned items to provide a solid documentary base for the history of collecting.<sup>11</sup>

---

8 On items missing from such inventories, see Edoardo Rossetti, *Introduzione*, in: Rossetti (ed.), Squarci, 2012, 11–18, 12; Germano Maifreda, *L'arte assente. Gli inventari di Scipione Balsamo (1578)*, in: Rossetti (ed.), Squarci, 2012, 155–164.

9 Chiara Buss (ed.), *Seta Oro Cremisi. Segreti e tecnologia alla corte dei Visconti e degli Sforza*, Ciniello Balsamo (Milano) 2009; id. (ed.), *Seta, Oro, Incarnadino. Lusso e devozione nella Lombardia spagnola*, Milano 2011.

10 For an overview see Alessandro Morandotti, *Il collezionismo in Lombardia. Studi e ricerche tra '600 e '800*, Milano 2008. Studies on this topic are so numerous that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive list. It suffices here to recall the many books and papers by Eugenia Bianchi, Beatrice Bolandrini, Marco Bona Castellotti, Davide Dozio, Cristina Geddo, Anna Elena Galli, Silvio Leydi, Antonio Mazzotta, Giulio Melzi d'Eril, Sergio Monferrini, Alessandro Morandotti, Vittoria Orlandi Balzari, Mauro Pavesi, Rossana Sacchi, Aurora Scotti, Alessandra Squizzato. On the use of inventories see also Giovanni Agosti/Jacopo Stoppa, *La sibilla di Panzù*, in: Giovanni Agosti/Jacopo Stoppa (eds.) *Un seminario sul manierismo in Lombardia*, Milano 2017, 8–48, 31–35.

11 Burton Fredericksen, *List of new Spanish and Italian inventories available at the Getty Provenance Index*, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 131/1031 (1989), 137–152; Morandotti, *Il collezionismo*, 2008, 45, note 51. Milanese inventories are still being included in the GPI with the collaboration of Giovanna Tonelli.

Inventories actually provide evidence for multiple types of research. For example, from the enormous inventories of Angela (1479–1529) and Ippolita (1481–1518) Sforza it is possible to infer the cost of printed and manuscript books: the former were evaluated from the eight *soldi* of the sermons of Roberto Caracciolo to the eight lire of a volume by Niccolò Manerbi, probably his translation of the Bible, versus the 50 lire of a breviary that was most likely illuminated, covered in velvet, and fastened with silver clasps.<sup>12</sup> In another case, the expertise of the Bernardo Zenale († 1526) paintings owned by the late Antonio Alfieri is intriguing because it assigned a low value to the works of art.<sup>13</sup> No comprehensive study has focused on art and economy in early Renaissance Milan,<sup>14</sup> therefore it is difficult to assess the average investment of Lombard patrons in the arts. Comparing Alfieri's inventory with the Sforza sisters', it seems that a book such as Manerbi's *Bible* was valued more, at eight *lire*, than a painting such as the "Paris and the three Goddesses" from Alfieri's collection, which was deemed worth of four *lire* only. While the *Judgement of Paris*' author and dimensions are not specified, and these two factors are variables in an estimate, no Alfieri painting surpasses six *lire*.<sup>15</sup>

Topographical inventories of palaces have been extremely useful to advancing the reconstruction of buildings and urban area, as my research on the so-called *insula viscontea*, or the district in the city centre of Milan, where the Visconti family resided in the fourteenth century, has shown.<sup>16</sup> They were particularly useful for the palaces that had belonged to Regina della Scala (and later to the Visconti of Pagnazzo-San Giorgio) and to her husband Bernabò Visconti (later the palace of the Sforza of Caravaggio), which were mostly destroyed between 1870 and 1910.<sup>17</sup> Some

12 ASMi, Not., 1880, notary Antonio Zunico, notebook 2, c. 38, 1493 September 12; Monica Pedralli, *Novo, grande, coperto e ferrato. Gli inventari di biblioteca e la cultura a Milano nel Quattrocento*, Milano 2002, 581–582, who believes that the price of books is underestimated. However, the evaluation of the Sforza's books seems to agree with the Aldine editions': Neil Harris, *Aldus and the making of the myth (or what did Aldus really do?)*, in: Mario Infelise (ed.), *Aldo Manuzio. La costruzione del mito*, 346–385, 363–369. For the contest see Angela Nuovo, *The Price of Books in Italy (XV–XVI Centuries)*, in: Paolo Malanima/Giampiero Nigro (eds.), *The Prices of Things in Pre-Industrial Times: Selection of Essays*, Florence 2017, 107–127.

13 Janice Shell, *Pittori in bottega. Milano nel Rinascimento*, Torino 1995, 171–172.

14 Early Renaissance Milan hardly appears in Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Ricchezza e domanda nel mercato dell'arte in Italia dal Trecento al Seicento. La cultura materiale e le origini del consumismo*, Milano 2001.

15 Shell, *Pittori*, 1995, 171.

16 See <https://www.insulaviscontea.mobartech.org/>; Edoardo Rossetti, In "contrata de Vicecomitibus". Il problema dei palazzi viscontei nel Trecento tra esercizio del potere e occupazione dello spazio urbano, in: Pier Nicola Pagliara/Serena Romano (eds.) "Modernamente antichi". Modelli, identità, nella Lombardia del Tre e Quattrocento, Roma 2014, 11–43.

17 See Jessica Gritti, in: Maria Teresa Fiorio (ed.), *Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco. Scultura lapidea*, III, Milano 2014, 162–166 no. 1014; Edoardo Rossetti, I capitelli del palazzo dei Visconti di Brignano in San Giovanni in Conca a Milano, in: Fiorio (ed.), *Museo*, 2014, 428–429, nos. 1383, 1384.

inventories were so detailed that they even specified which parts of these palaces were the oldest and which ones more recent.<sup>18</sup> While inventories must be analysed with other available sources (estimates by architects and engineers; agreements with neighbours for the construction of buildings; purchase and sale documents),<sup>19</sup> the research on the *insula viscontea* highlighted how they can also be relevant sources for accurately reconstructing the buildings and their development.

### 3. Works of art from the past or the perils of sources

Starting with the first query, namely the presence of Renaissance works of art in early modern inventories, even the inventories of two old Milanese families such as the Visconti and Sforza usually lack prestigious items created before 1535, the year of the devolution of the duchy of Milan. The dearth of old masters' paintings can be justified through the typically Lombard inheritance system: families did not only bind their heirloom to the firstborn, and all successions divided the property in even shares between siblings, without excluding the ladies. Such a system inevitably caused a near complete dispersal of patrimony and art collections.<sup>20</sup> There are, however, a few significant exceptions to the dearth of old masters' works.

An unpublished 1638 inventory of the collection of Giovanni Maria Visconti (1583–1638), lord of Agnadello and Somma Lombardo, and marquis della Motta, records forty-two paintings that were then housed in his Milanese palace (now Clerici Palace).<sup>21</sup> Thirty-six attest the triumph of two contemporary artists, Giulio Cesare Procaccini (1574–1625) and Giovanni Battista Crespi, nicknamed *il Cerano* (1573–1632), further reinforcing something that can be glimpsed through other evi-

---

18 For example, news rooms and apartments are mentioned in: ASMi, *Not.*, 38590, notary Giovanni Carati, 23 September 1712 (but 4 September 1710); ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, notary Teodoro Cavalieri, 1 October 1718.

19 The architectural modifications to the palace of Regina della Scala can be reconstructed only by comparing the inventories drafted in 1635 and 1710, a sale document written in 1449 (ASMi, *Not.*, 514, notary Ambrogio Cagnola, c. 727, 1449 June 19), two estimate documents drafted in 1629 and 1776 (ASMi, *Fondo di Religione*, b. 1281, 15 January 1626; ASMi, *Not.*, b. 45057, notary Carlo Negri, 11 and 12 July 1776 July), and some maps of the adjacent convent (ASMi, *Fondo di Religione*, b. 1282).

20 Letizia Arcangeli, *Ragioni di stato e ragioni di famiglia. Strategie successorie dell'aristocrazia milanese tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Visconti, Trivulzio, Borromeo), in: Paola Lanaro/Jean-François Chauvard/Anna Bellavitis (eds.), *Fidécummissis. Procédés juridiques et pratiques sociales* (Italie-Europe, Bas Moyen Âge–XVIIIe siècle), MEFIM, 124/II (2012), 447–469.

21 ASMi, *Not.*, 26149, notary Giovanni Francesco Rodello, 18 November 1638. On this branch of the Visconti family see Isabella Superti Furga, *Le fortune dei Visconti di Somma in età moderna*, in: *Studi in memoria di Cesare Mozzarelli*, Milano 2008, 463–486; Katia Visconti, *La percezione dell'Impero come fonte di legittimazione dell'autorità: i Visconti compradori della Signoria di Somma*, in: Cinzia Cremonini/Riccardo Musso (eds.), *I feudi imperiali in Italia tra XV e XVIII secolo*, Roma 2010, 415–432.

dence: the two painters' ties to Giovanni Maria Visconti.<sup>22</sup> None of the remaining paintings dated from the fifteenth century and only three were from the early sixteenth-century. However, two pictures were copies of early sixteenth-century works of art, namely the *Salome* by Cesare da Sesto ("A large Herodias derived from Cesare da Sesto") and a raphaellesque *Flight into Egypt*, that back then was housed in the church of San Celso and was considered a work of the master himself ("A copy of the Virgin of S. Celso derived from Raphael").<sup>23</sup> These two paintings were not chosen because they were tied to the Visconti, but because their repute made copies after them almost mandatory in local art collections.<sup>24</sup> Every guide and book dealing with art in Milan mentioned the *Salome* by Cesare da Sesto and the *Flight into Egypt* – as did the painter Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, Milanese historiographer Paolo Morigia, and Girolamo Borsieri, who was a dear friend of Giovanni Maria Visconti and even dedicated a poem to him.

The three Renaissance paintings are an unidentified *Virgin* by Bernardino Luini († 1534) or his workshop, an endemic item in Milanese collections, and, finally, the works of art that are relevant for my argument, two large altarpieces thus described: "A large painting with our lady and the twelve apostles derived from Bramante and has been retouched by sir Giulio Cesare Procaccino; A large painting with Our Lord dead derived from Bramante and has many figures".<sup>25</sup> The 1638 inventory recorded the *Pentecost* and a *Mourning over the dead Christ* by Bartolomeo Suardi called Bramantino (documented from 1480 to 1530), two panels that even nowadays are housed in Santo Stefano at Mezzana of Somma Lombardo, a Visconti-related church from their main fief.<sup>26</sup> The branch of the Visconti Giovanni Maria

22 Procaccini and Cerano were mentioned in relation to him in some poems by Girolamo Borsieri. In the workshop inventory of the former the portraits of Giovanni Maria Visconti and his father Francesco were prominently featured. And, finally, Giovanni Maria Visconti is mentioned in an autograph writing by Cerano placed behind a *St Peter repenting* that was sold in 2008. See Paolo Vanoli, Il "Libro di lettere" di Girolamo Borsieri: Arte Antica e Moderna nella Lombardia di primo Seicento, Milano 2015, 69–70, 73, 224.

23 "Una Herodiade grande che viene da Cesare da Sesto" and "Una copia della Madonna di S. Celso che viene da Raffaello": ASMi, *Not.*, 26149, notary Giovanni Francesco Rodello, 18 November 1638. Both Visconti copies are missing, and the originals are now in Vienna.

24 On the fame of the *Erodiade*: Piera Giovanna Tordella, Un disegno di Ambrogio Figino per l'*Erodiade* da Cesare da Sesto, in: *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, 39 (1995), 409–425. For the painting attributed to Raphael in San Celso and its copy by Antonio Campi in 1566 for the Sfondrati, who were relatives of the Visconti: Barbara Agosti, "Raphael" and Salaino in S. Maria presso S. Celso, Milan, in: *The Burlington Magazine*, 135 (1993), 563–565, 564, note 4; Marco Tanzi, Il crepuscolo degli eccentrici a Cremona, in: *Prospettiva*, 134/135 (2009), 24–51, 40.

25 "Un quadro grande con nostra signora et li dodici apostoli che viene da Bramante ritoccato dal signor Giulio Cesare Procaccino; un quadro grande con Nostro Signore morto che viene da Bramante con diverse figure": ASMi, *Not.*, 26149, notary Giovanni Francesco Rodello, 18 November 1638.

26 The most recent catalogue entry on the paintings is Mauro Natale/Edoardo Rossetti, nos. 39–40, Bartolomeo Suardi, known as Bramantino, Lamentation over the Dead Christ with Saint Sebastian, Saint Roch and Other Figures, *Pentecost*, in: Mauro Natale (ed.), *Bramantino. The Renaissance in*

belonged to was labelled “of Somma”, after this small town. Placing the panels in Giovanni Maria’s possession, the inventory thus confirms what scholars had already suggested, that the paintings were originally housed in the Visconti of Somma chapels in Sant’Angelo Vecchio, a Milanese church destroyed in 1550. In 1638, in the Milanese palace of the Visconti, there still echoed the memory of Battista Visconti († 1516) the elder, Bramantino’s patron and Giovanni Maria’s great-grandfather, who through these panels celebrated his glory, his family, and his friends, who were leaders of the Ghibelline faction of Milan.<sup>27</sup> Even the retouching of the panels by Procaccini, apart from attesting that in 1638 they must have already been in a precarious state of conservation, suggests that the paintings were carefully handled and cared for, implicitly because they were important for the family’s tradition of their owner. How Procaccini had been artistically impressed, or shocked, by his intervention on two paintings as exquisite as Bramantino’s is to be discussed by scholars of early seventeenth century Milanese art. It is also interesting to consider how these altarpieces are recorded in Giovanni Maria’s inventory and to thus ponder on the methodology in approaching inventories and related documents.

The inventory used the phrasing “che viene da” (literally “that comes after”, but more properly “derived from”) that is usually reserved for copies. These paintings were, however, not copies and the expression actually meant to convey an uncertainty in the attribution. In 1638, Bramantino was a well-known painter, but his catalogue was mystified due to a series of misunderstandings derived from Giorgio Vasari’s writings. It was only at the beginning of the eighteenth century that his artistic persona began to be identified amongst supposed Bramante works, but we had to wait for Willem Suida’s work for a definitive and reliable reconstruction. For this reason, the author of the inventory assigns the work to Bramante’s sphere.

The case of Bramantino’s painted panels also highlights the perils awaiting those who try to interpret inventories and records of diocesan visits in order to identify a specific painting. Until now it was believed that, by 1636, the *Pentecost* and the *Mourning* were housed in Santo Stefano at Mezzana, when documentary sources attest that the church housed two “beautiful altarpieces by an excellent master, that

---

Lombardy, exhibition catalogue (Lugano, Museo Cantonale d’Arte, 28 September 2014 – 11 January 2015), Milano 2014, 238–248; see Marco Tanzi, nos. 28–29, *Compianto su Cristo morto con i Santi Sebastiano e Lazzaro; Pentecoste*, in: Giovanni Agosti/Jacopo Stoppa/Marco Tanzi (eds.), *Bramantino a Milano* (Milano, Castello Sforzesco, 16 May – 25 September 2012), 278–287.

27 See Edoardo Rossetti, *Una questione di famiglie. Lo sviluppo dell’osservanza francescana e l’aristocrazia milanese*, in: Letizia Pellegrini/Gian Maria Varanini (eds.), *Fratres de familia. Gli insediamenti dell’Osservanza minoritica nella penisola italiana (sec. XIV– XV)*, *Quaderni di storia religiosa*, 2011, 101–165; id., *Sotto il segno della vipera. L’agnazione viscontea nel Rinascimento: episodi di una committenza di famiglie (1480–1520)*, Milano 2013, 50–74.

were not damaged in the least” during the battle of Tornavento.<sup>28</sup> Only in 1899, the *Pentecost* and the *Mourning* appeared at Mezzana in another Visconti-related church, Santa Maria della Ghianda.<sup>29</sup> Since Bramantino’s paintings were in Milan in 1638 and must have been there before 1625, when their restorer Procaccini died, the two “beautiful altarpieces by an excellent master” housed in Santo Stefano in 1636 were most certainly not our panels, but other paintings. It seems, therefore, that the history of Bramantino panels between 1638 and 1899 has to be rewritten. The paintings must have reached Somma before 1682, as in this year Francesco Maria, son of Giovanni Maria, no longer had them in his Milanese palace.<sup>30</sup>

The case of Bramantino’s painted tables is quite unique. Even if other inventories mention paintings on panel (that is, likely to be older) or ascribed to some artist, usually it is impossible to identify these works of art. Relics of a fifteenth- or sixteenth-century family patronage that were recovered from their original location to become part of the art collection of that same family are even harder to find. Apart from Bramantino’s panels, yet another case is provided by the 1701 inventory of the collection of Giovanni Battista Visconti of Crenna († 1722), in contact with the important connoisseur Sebastiano Resta.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. History paintings, ancestor portraits and the fame of Giovio’s *Twelve Visconti* set

In Giovanni Maria Visconti’s 1638 inventory one portrait recorded the likeness of a member of the previous generations, “a large portrait of sir Battista the eldest”, which was copied by Giuliano Pozzobonelli, a late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century painter, from an unidentified prototype.<sup>32</sup> The portrait likely featured the above-discussed Battista, Bramantino’s patron, and Giovanni Maria’s great-grandfather, therefore created to record the genealogy of its owner. Pozzobonelli’s painting belongs to

---

28 “Due belle ancone fatte per mano di pittore eccellente, che non hanno patito danno alcuno”: ASDMi, *Sezione X*, Somma Lombardo, 13, notebook 6, 22 June 1636.

29 ASDMi, *Visite Ferrari*, I, 30, 19 and 20 November 1899; Willem Suida, Die Jugendwerke des Bartolommeo Suardi genannt Bramantino, in: Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchstens Kaiserhauses, 25/I (1905), 1–71, 62.

30 ASMi, *Not.*, 30105, notary Carlo Antonio Crivelli, 21 February 1682.

31 Marco Bona Castellotti, *Collezionisti a Milano nel ‘700*. Giovanni Battista Visconti, Gian Matteo Pertusati, Giuseppe Pozzobonelli, Firenze, 1991; Maria Rosa Pizzoni, “Il cuore va al gusto del Correggio”. Episodi della fortuna dell’Allegri nelle raccolte di padre Sebastiano Resta, in: *Paragone* 11/12 (2010/2011, but 2015), 69–91, 70.

32 “Un ritratto grande del signor Battista vecchio”: ASMi, *Not.*, 26149, notary Giovanni Francesco Rodello, 18 November 1638.

a type of portrait that could be either old or newly made, but was featuring family ancestors, presumed or actual.

The issue at stake is not the creation of a family tree, but the arranging of a dynastic succession that legitimized the present. By the early fifteenth century, the Visconti had already created an imaginative genealogy that tied their ancestry to the exiles of Troy, the Lombards' kings, and the more recent crusaders. Such a genealogy illustrated the manuscript of the *oratio* written by Pietro da Castelletto for Duke Gian Galeazzo in 1402, but also decorated the walls of the castle of Angera.<sup>33</sup>

In 1549, the erudite Paolo Giovio published *Le Vite de i dodici visconti principi di Milano* (*The life of the Twelve Visconti princes of Milan*). Based on the work of Suetonius (*The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*), the text was published in several versions, some of which were illustrated by a series of portraits. Therefore, the portraits derived from the mediaeval “incredible genealogies” are added to the new set of twelve portraits created by Giovio: the *Twelve Visconti*<sup>34</sup>. Tellingly the Venetian edition in vernacular of Giovio's book was part of the library of the Visconti of Pagazzano-San Giorgio in 1635 and 1710<sup>35</sup>. The Venetian edition did not include engraved portraits before each biography, which began being included in the Parisian Latin edition of the same year.<sup>36</sup> A few decades later, Giovio's book had at least two other editions: the 1630 one was dedicated to the above-mentioned Giovanni Maria Visconti and included a frontispiece by Cerano (a true “family painter”, as can be seen from the inventory of 1638); the 1645 edition was dedicated to Onorato Visconti and included engraved portraits.<sup>37</sup> The portraits of the twelve Visconti had also begun to circulate in Milan before 1635, their diffusion probably amplified thanks to the effi-

33 Rossetti, *Sotto il segno della vipera*, 2013, 13–16.

34 On Giovio see: Barbara Agosti, Paolo Giovio. Uno storico lombardo nella cultura artistica del Cinquecento, Firenze 2008; T. C. Prince Zimmermann, Paolo Giovio. Uno storico e la crisi italiana del XVI secolo (Franco Minonzio [ed.]), Milano-Lecco 2012.

35 The imposing library of this branch of the Visconti requires an independent study: ASMi, *Not.*, 22087, 28 June 1635; ASMi, *Not.*, 38590, 23 September 1712 (but 1710). It is interesting that it also had a copy of the *Sforziade* by Giovanni Simonetta in the Italian translation by Cristoforo Landino discussed in Carlo Dionisotti, Leonardo uomo di lettere, in: *Italia medioevale e umanistica*, 5 (1962), 183–216. Other works by Giovio but apparently not the *Twelve Visconti* were in the library of Prospero Raimondo Visconti, see ASMi, *Fondo di Religione*, b. 1616, 12 May 1728.

36 Paolo Giovio, *Le vite de i dodici Visconti principi di Milano*, tradotte per messer Lodouico Domenichi, Venetia, Gabriel Giolito Di Ferrari, 1549, an edition dedicated to Giovanni Battista Visconti known as *L'Erede*; Paolo Giovio, *Vitae duodecim Vicecomitum Mediolani principum*, Paris, Robert Estienne, 1549, with ten portraits and missing only the effigies of Matteo II and the Duke Giovanni Maria.

37 Both were printed by Giovanni Battista Bidelli. The frontispiece of the 1630 edition even features the *impresa* of the buckets (*le secchie*) used by this branch of the Visconti. See Giulio Bora, *Oltre il disegno*, in: Marco Rosci (ed.), *Il Cerano (1573–1632). Protagonista del Seicento lombardo*, exhibition catalogue (Milano, Palazzo Reale, 24 February – 5 June 2005), Milano 2005, 213–223, 219. Evidently the “Giovio set” was esteemed not only by the Visconti, as these portraits appear also in the inventory of Giuseppe Giacomo Filippo Botteri recorded in the GPI: “carte dodici sopra cartoni con leffigie de Visconti” (ASMi, *Not.*, 36074, notary Giovanni Battista Ferrario, 16 January 1697).

gies of the Dukes of Milan in the 1585 *Cremona fedelissima città* by painter Antonio Campi (1524–1587).<sup>38</sup>

In the 1580s, Prospero Visconti († 1592), who definitely owned a copy of Campi's book, chose the portraits of the twelve Visconti to top the tympana of the windows of his Milanese palace, and in 1592 his inventory attests that he also owned portraits of multiple family members: Azzone, Archbishop Giovanni, an unspecified Gaspare, and his own great-grandfather, Gaspare Ambrogio.<sup>39</sup> His heirs were intending only to preserve the portraits of Azzone and Giovanni, and placed them near a "History of the origin of the Visconti coat of arms", with the addition of the portrait of Bernabò and ten portraits of emperors.<sup>40</sup>

In 1629, Prospero's grandnephews placed nine large battle scenes and unspecified "histories", plus a series of the *Twelve Visconti* presented as "small paintings in the number of twelve, on which there are the effigies of the archbishops of Milan", possibly emphasizing ecclesiastics due to the presence of bishops Ottone and Giovanni, in the ground floor hall of the castle of Cassano Magnago.<sup>41</sup> The Visconti of Albizzate-Carbonara in 1632 owned "portraits of the dukes of Milano, without frames, n. 18", namely Giovio's set of *Twelve Visconti* expanded via the other portraits of the six Sforza dukes.<sup>42</sup> Similar series of eighteen portraits (twelve Visconti and six Sforza) were also owned by the Visconti of Pagazzano-San Giorgio in 1710.<sup>43</sup> In the palace of Francesco Maria Visconti, son of Giovanni Maria, in the hall opposite the main staircase were fifteen marble medallions featuring the heads, probably in profile, of Visconti family members. Some scattered portraits that probably belonged to a series of *Twelve Visconti* that had been pulled apart were housed in the palace of the Visconti of Albizzate-Fontaneto, as shown by their 1633 inventory.<sup>44</sup> We can deduce from this that, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was mandatory for a

---

38 Antonio Campi, *Cremona fedelissima città*, Cremona, Hippolito Tromba and Hercoliano Bartoli, 1585, 89–107.

39 For the palace: Mauro Pavesi, *L'orgoglio di un nobile 'internazionale': Prospero Visconti*, in: Spiriti (ed.), *La nobiltà*, 2008, 81–103; Laura Giacomini, *Privata Commoditas et Publica Elegantia. Case da nobile seu palatij nella Milano borromaica (1560–1631)*, Lewiston (NY) 2017, 51 and *ad indicem*. On the portraits, see Mauro Pavesi, *Musica, arte e scienza nelle raccolte di Prospero Visconti. L'inventario del 1592*, in: Rossetti (ed.), *Squarci*, 2012, 193–225, 201, 210. On Prospero's book, see Giulia Bologna (ed.), *Le cinquecentine della Biblioteca Trivulziana, II, Le edizioni lombarde*, Milano 1966, 74.

40 ASMi, *Fondo di Religione*, b. 1616, 7 July 1664 (for the "quadro dell'Origine dell'arma Vesconte"); 12 May 1728.

41 "Quadri piccoli numero dodici sopra quali sono l'effigie et arcivescovi di Milano": ASMi, *Archivio Taverna*, Eredità Arconati, Lunati, Visconti, serie I, 65, 6 August 1629.

42 "Ritratti delli duchi di Milano senza cornice n. 18": ASMi, *Archivio Taverna*, Eredità Arconati, Lunati, Visconti, Serie I, 53, 9 February 1632.

43 Davide Dozio, "Gallerie di preziose pitture": quadreria di Ercole Visconti (1710), in: Rossetti (ed.), *Squarci*, 2012, 227–243, 243.

44 ASMi, *Not.*, 22918, notary Zanotto Pusterla, 6 March 1633.

Visconti to own the *Giovio Twelve Visconti* set. The series of portraits had evidently acquired a symbolic value similar to those that years earlier, in a wider geographical and cultural context, had been attributed to the series of the *Twelve Caesars*.

In 1675 the Visconti of Brignano had frescoed the *Twelve Visconti* in the so called “painted salon” of the wing labelled “old palace” of their namesake castle, but even before they had anticipated this fresco cycle in a room furnished with family portraits and one large “tree of the house of the Visconti”.<sup>45</sup> Around the same period, circa 1670, and once more slightly later, around 1720, the Visconti of Saliceto placed a number of terracottas in a gallery near the trench and in the neighbouring rooms of their new palace of Brignano featuring the *Giovio Twelve Visconti* series, but they also recovered a different genealogy, and included six other family members (only males) from the eleventh century.<sup>46</sup> All these terracotta busts were crafted by Carlo Beretta († 1752) and are mentioned in all inventories of the family goods, starting from 1734 up to the auction sale of 1898. Two busts, showing Ottone and his supposed son Giulio, recently resurfaced on the art market.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Rediscovering identity in the past at a time of crisis?

The new set of Visconti predecessors adopted by the Visconti of Saliceto did not follow the genealogy presented in Pietro da Castelletto’s sermon, and developed in a peculiar context. Around 1650 and independently from each other, both Vercellino Maria Visconti (1603–1679) and Tebaldo Visconti (1601–1674) used documents forged by Carlo Galluzzi (1616–1672) for their children’s enrolment in the *Collegio dei Giureconsulti* of Milan, an institution that required applicants to present evidence of their nobility.<sup>48</sup> However, the actual Visconti peerage was more than sufficient to grant admittance to the *Collegio*, and evidently Vercellino and Tebaldo created false documents and imaginary genealogies for other purposes.

---

45 Beatrice Bolandrini, *I Visconti di Brignano Gera d’Adda dalla Repubblica de las parentelas a Maria Teresa*, in: Andrea Spiriti (ed.), *La nobiltà*, 47–70, 48–51.

46 The Visconti portrayed in the busts, Ottone, Guido, Ottone, Oberto, Andrea, and Tebaldo, result by crossing the data of the inventory of 1734 with the sales catalogue of 1898, see Beatrice Bolandrini, *I Palazzi Visconti a Brignano Gera d’Adda*, in: Andrea Spiriti (ed.), *Lo spazio del collezionismo nello Stato di Milano (secoli XVII–XVIII)*, Roma 2013, 247–302. For these six Visconti in the family tree commissioned by Tebaldo: *Stemma gentilium Theobaldi Vicecomitis Mediolanensis, Mediolani, Ioannem Ambrosium Sirturum haredes Pontii et Piccalae, 1654, 25–50; Gerolamo Biffi, Gloriosa nobilitas illustrissimae familiae Vicecomitum, Mediolani, Ludovici Montaie, 1671, 8–11.*

47 Andrea Bacchi/Susanna Zanuso, *Carlo Beretta e i Visconti di Brignano*, Trento 2011, 10–14.

48 See Alfio Rosario Natale, *Falsari milanesi del Seicento*, in: *Contributi dell’Istituto di Storia Medievale, II, Raccolta di studi in memoria di Sergio Mochi Onory*, Milano 1972, 459–506.

Tebaldo was engaged in a number of complex genealogical recognitions. Starting from a family tree that began from Uberto Visconti, brother of Matteo Magno (1250–1322), which had already been approved by the Senate of Milan in 1562, he crafted a new genealogy that dated back to an imaginary Eriprando Visconti and had it approved by the Senate in 1654.<sup>49</sup> Subsequently, as in the genealogy from 1402, Tebaldo continued to add predecessors, until he reached the king of the Lombards Desiderio († 786). A dispute with Vercellino over the use of documents and some family emblems and coats of arms followed.<sup>50</sup> The event deserves to be further studied, but probably reflected the uneasiness of a landed aristocracy with international contacts (the Visconti) in bending with the claustrophobic logic of the urban patriariate. It highlights the need to also take into account the complex social differences within the Milanese nobility in the context of the seventeenth century.<sup>51</sup> Tebaldo, who towards the end of his life was claiming royal origins, probably aimed to give his family a role on an international scene that was becoming more and more complicated. It is interesting that at the same time Tebaldo and his son Cesare (1643–1716) started rebuilding the castles of Cislago and Somma Lombardo in neo-Medieval or neo-Renaissance style. In 1689, Cesare commissioned a *Historical glory of the Visconti family* to painter Agostino Santagostino (1635–1706) for the castle of Somma. Shortly before, between 1673 and 1678, even Tebaldo's son-in-law, Antonio Renato Borromeo, had commissioned the *Borromeo Pomp*, a series that alternated mythical and actual stories of the Borromeo family, to Filippo Abbiati (1640–1715) and another painter.<sup>52</sup>

Tebaldo was reacting or even anticipating a growing trend of genealogies that raged through European aristocracy and acknowledged King Desiderio as a common ancestor, aiming to prepare for the Habsburg's government in Italy. The culmination of this trend were the volumes of Jacob Wilhelm von Imhof (1684–1710), that devoted a large section to the Visconti and included Pirro II Visconti (1674–1711) of

49 The inventory of the Visconti di Modrone archive attests that the two documents started all family documentation: Archivio Visconti di Modrone (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano), Register 36, number 1 and 2; see also Biffi, Gloriosa, 1671, 25–26.

50 See Vercellino Maria Visconti, *Paraenetica Appendix ad Hieronymi Biffii librum, Mediolani, Ludovici Montiae*, 1673.

51 These considerations deserve *longue durée* work, starting from the considerations of the changes in Milanese nobility between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as indicated in Federico Del Tredici, *Un'altra nobiltà. Storie di (in)distinzione a Milano. Secoli XIV–XV*, Milano 2017.

52 To confirm the desire for a link with the imperial environment, in this series of paintings particular attention was dedicated to a mythical marriage between an ancestor Borromeo and the daughter of Emperor Henry IV, see Anna Elena Galli/Sergio Monferrini, *I Borromeo d'Angera. Collezionisti e mecenati nella Milano del Seicento*, Milano 2012, 45–49. The theme of history paintings for Milan is practically not studied. On the topic in Italy see Julian Kliemann, *Gesta dipinte. La grande decorazione nelle dimore italiane dal Quattrocento al Seicento*, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano), 1993.

Borgoratto-Brignano.<sup>53</sup> On the Visconti side, the last act was the volume by Giuseppe Volpi (1680–1756) on a branch that settled in Bari at the end of the fifteenth century, a book that should have been published at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but appeared only when the hopes of unifying the Habsburg's dominions in Italy were abandoned.<sup>54</sup> Considering that Tebaldo's family branch died out in the Castelbarco house, a family from the Habsburg chessboard, the Visconti of Brignano benefited by using the materials he collected for their decorative campaigns.

If creating a cycle of their ancestors had a cultural background for the Visconti that was different from all other Milanese families – the same applied to the Sforza of Caravaggio, who descended from Giovanni Paolo (1497–1535), son of the Duke Ludovico *il Moro* (1452–1508) and Lucrezia Crivelli – their ancestry was laden with meaning.<sup>55</sup>

A series of nine inventories survive for these Sforzas, spanning from 1536 to 1780, thus documenting almost all the successions. Identifying all the paintings mentioned is yet again quite arduous, however since I am focusing on the issue of the memory of the family past, here it suffices to remark that in the inventories a series of equestrian portraits of the Dukes of Milan is recorded that already existed in 1583, when it was housed in the main salon of the palace, and was still in the same room in 1718. The patron of the cycle should be an aged Violante Bentivoglio (1505–1572), the daughter of Ippolita Sforza (1481–1518) and widow of Giovanni Paolo Sforza who had managed to guarantee the survival of her family through her negotiations with Emperor Charles V.<sup>56</sup> The creation of the equestrian cycle is tied to the acquisition of a new family abode, as after 1550 Violante intentionally elected to reside in the historic palace of Bernabò Visconti, who was already lord of Milan from 1354 to 1385.<sup>57</sup> This is a significant choice because it shows that Violante wanted to connect the new family of the marquises of Caravaggio to their predecessors' history.

---

53 Roberto Bizzocchi, *Genealogie incredibili. Scritti di storia nell'Europa moderna*, Bologna 1995, 22–24, 57–61; Claudio Donati, *Tra urgenza politica e memoria storica: la ricomparsa dei ghibellini (e dei guelfi) nell'Italia del primo Settecento*, in: Marco Gentile (ed.), *Guelfi e ghibellini nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, Roma 2005, 109–128, 117–119. On Pirro II see Cinzia Cremonini, *Pirro Visconti di Brignano-Borgoratto, al servizio degli Asburgo, in nome dell'Impero*, in: Carlos José Hernando Sanchez/Gianvittorio Signorotto (eds.), *Italiani e spagnoli al servizio della Monarchia*, Cheiron, 53–54 (2010), 198–264.

54 Giuseppe Volpi, *Dell'Istoria de' Visconti*, 2 vols., Napoli, Felice Carlo Mosca, 1737–1748.

55 On the Sforza of Caravaggio see Giacomo Berra, *Il giovane Caravaggio in Lombardia. Ricerche documentarie sui Merisi, gli Aratori, i marchesi di Caravaggio*, Firenze 2005, 16–107; Edoardo Rossetti, *Sforza, Giovanni Paolo*, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 92, Roma 2018, 437–439.

56 On Violante Bentivoglio Sforza and her patronage: Sacchi, *Il disegno*, 2005, I, 316–355; for the portraits see especially 353–355.

57 ASMi, *Not.*, 14133, notary Pietro Maria Rancati, 18 September 1564; Berra, *Il giovane*, 2005, 26–27.

Aside from the equestrian cycle, in this building her descendants installed a gallery of circa forty portraits of family members on the first floor that focused on women who married into royal families.<sup>58</sup> Portraits of Sforzas were obsessively present in every room, so much that in no other known Milanese inventory family portraiture plays such an important part.

As late as 1697, one room was decorated with “two stories of Francesco Sforza, of when he married Bianca Maria and of when he was crowned duke of Milan, original painting by Cesare Fiore”.<sup>59</sup> The subject matter is almost unprecedented, with the exception, perhaps, of the frescoes commissioned two centuries before by Ludovico *il Moro* for the palace of Cecilia Gallerani and Cesare Sforza, his mistress and their son respectively.<sup>60</sup> The paintings in the Sforza of Caravaggio palace are crucial to the legitimization of the family, because Francesco and Bianca Maria’s wedding provided the ground to their claim of the duchy of Milan. Electing these historical scenes to decorate the family residence was therefore significant.

The importance of these past events was also reflected in how, according to the inventories, the family archive was organized. The first document recorded in the archive’s inventories is always the investiture of the duchy granted in 1494 by Emperor Maximilian I to Ludovico *il Moro*.<sup>61</sup> This document also contemplated the possibility of a succession through Ludovico’s legitimized, ‘natural’ line (namely children not born of his legitimate wife), guaranteeing to his son Giovanni Paolo Sforza, the originator of the Sforza of Caravaggio line, a claim to the duchy.

The portrait of Ludovico Maria Sforza is central in the self-representation of the Sforza of Caravaggio, no other ancestor having as many. His effigy was positioned in the main rooms of the building and associated with those of his parents Francesco Sforza and Bianca Maria, who was the heir of the Visconti dukes. The effigy is found in the salon, in the equestrian cycle; in the first anteroom, with portraits of popes; in the third anteroom, in a Carrara marble bust that was a pendant to Francesco Sforza’s; in the room between the chapel and the gallery, a painting that was ascribed to

---

58 At the centre of the gallery were the portraits of Ippolita Sforza, Queen of Naples, Bianca Maria Sforza, wife of Emperor Maximilian I, and Bona Sforza, Queen of Poland, combined with the effigies of Beatrice d’Este wife of Ludovico *il Moro*: ASMi, *Not.*, b. 34864, notary Carlo Antonio Marino, 1697 September 20, cc. 13–14; ASMi, *Atti di Governo, Finanze apprensioni*, 501, 1712 March 16, cc. 27v–28r; ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, 1718 October 1, cc. 49v–50r.

59 “Due istorie di Francesco Sforza del spozalizio di Bianca Maria ed altro quando fu coronato duca di Milano, originale di Cesare Fiore”: ASMi, *Not.*, b. 34864, notary Carlo Antonio Marino, 20 September 1697, c. 16; ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, 1 October 1718, c. 52r.

60 For the palace of Cecilia Gallerani that Violante Bentivoglio Sforza try to claim, see now Edoardo Rossetti, Sebastiano Ferrero a Milano: un finanziere sabaudo nel segno della continuità, in: Mauro Natale (ed.), *Il Rinascimento a Biella. Sebastiano Ferrero e i suoi figli (1519–2019)*, exhibition catalogue (Biella, 18 April–18 August 2019), Biella-Milano 2019, 120–133, 123–127.

61 ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, 1 October 1718, c. 155v.

Leonardo da Vinci and might be the ‘ancient’ portrait featured in the 1583 and 1631 inventories, associated to the portrait of Bianca Maria Visconti; and, finally in the gallery with the other Dukes of Milan.<sup>62</sup> The name of Ludovico obsessively recurs in the inventories, because the portraits of his descendants always bear the indication “son of Ludovico duke of Milan” or “wife of Ludovico duke of Milan”. Such specifics are given only in the case of the *Moro*.

The inventories of the Sforza of Caravaggio highlight another interesting historical moment. Cesare Fiori († 1702), the author of the “stories of Francesco Sforza”, was a painter, architect, and scenographer who was involved in other operations of recovery of past memories.<sup>63</sup> In 1674 engravings based on his design illustrated a most unusual publication, the *Lives and actions of military and political personalities* of Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato (1606–1678), an erudite from Vicenza active at the imperial court.<sup>64</sup> The volume offered a set of biographies of military men up to the publication’s own times and featured a remarkable number of illustrious Milanese from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Fiori most likely based his designs on medals and paintings housed in the palaces of these men’s descendants. Amongst the military men are included Battista Visconti († 1516), Bramantino’s patron, his father Francesco († 1477), and his uncle Guido († 1484), but also Gasparino († 1436), the plenipotentiary of Duke Filippo Maria Visconti.<sup>65</sup>

The engravings therefore attest that, beyond what was recorded in the inventories, the memory of these ancestors survived amongst their descendants – through documents, but also visually. It is possible that the effigies of Battista and Francesco, derived from a medal or a marble *tondo*, were included amongst the fifteen portraits

---

62 ASMi, *Not.*, b. 34864, notary Carlo Antonio Marino, 20 September 1697, cc. 1, 10, 19; ASMi, *Atti di Governo, Finanze apprensioni*, 501, 16 March 1712, cc.4r, 4v, 9v, 25v, 28v; ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, 1 October 1718, cc. 36r, 46v, 55v. In the 1780 inventory, the portrait attributed to Leonardo da Vinci is number 575 and together with two portraits of Bianca Maria Visconti and Francesco I Sforza was valued only 90 *lire*, see ASMn, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, Reg. 474, b. 93, 7 January 1780.

63 Vittorio Caprara, Fiori, Cesare, in: *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 48, Roma 1997, 175–177; Marina Dell’Olmio, Per i Montalto. Novità dai documenti tra Soncino, Milano e Treviglio, in: Odette d’Albo (ed.), *Giovanni Stefano e Giuseppe Montalto: due pittori trevigliesi nella Lombardia barocca*, Milano 2015, 71–81, 74–75; Confirming this context Cesare Fiori created the medals of Tebaldo and Vercellino Maria Visconti: Franco Arese, *Nove schede per Cesare Fiori medaglista*, in: *Arte Lombarda*, 42–43 (1975), 182–194, 187–189, 191–192; Paolo Bellini, *Le incisioni tratte da soggetti di Cesare Fiori*, in: *Rassegna di Studi e di Notizie*, 16 (1987/1988), 19–152, 80–81, n. 28. Cesare Fiore created other paintings for the Sforza of Caravaggio. The inventories report two portraits, one of which was Marquis Bianca Maria Imperiali’s, and an unusual allegory with Christ and Justice, see ASCr, *Archivio Casati Stampa di Soncino*, 7, 1 October 1718, cc. 47v, 52r, 55r.

64 Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato, *Vite et azioni di personaggi militari e politici*, Vienna, Michele Thurnmayer, 1674.

65 Guido’s portrait was also successful as an independent engraving: Bellini, *Le incisioni*, 1987/1988, 19–152, 78–79, n. 27.





of the upper atrium in the palace of Francesco Maria, Marquis della Motta.<sup>66</sup> Gualdo Priorato's portrait of Gasparino could be derived from the painting in the Visconti Borromeo collection.<sup>67</sup>

Leafing through the list of the military men who were granted a biography by Gualdo Priorato it is impossible to miss a proximity to the Austrian Habsburgs, so noticeable that the volume can be labelled as neo-Ghibelline. Amongst the old Milanese no member of the Guelph party has been included, explaining why the above-mentioned Visconti are celebrated and not their contemporary Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, nicknamed the Great (1440–1518), nor any of his descendants.<sup>68</sup>

The results of Tebaldo Visconti's genealogical experiments were published in 1672, Gualdo Priorato's book appeared in 1674, and in 1675 the frescos of the Visconti of Brignano were painted. Fiori's paintings depicting stories of Francesco Sforza in the palace of the Sforza of Caravaggio were probably from the early 1670s too. Tebaldo's son and son-in-law commissioned representations of the family glories in the 1670s and 1680s. Only the terracotta portraits from the Visconti of Brignano should be dated to the second decade of the eighteenth century, but were evidently derived from Tebaldo's genealogy.

The chronological coincidence is intriguing and also extends to other families.<sup>69</sup> What propelled some of the main Milanese clans to rediscover their history and to show it off between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries?

One possibility that could be further researched is linking the Milanese revival to the crisis of the Spanish Hapsburg monarchy: the critical health of the descendants of Philip IV had been evident since the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>70</sup> In a moment of institutional difficulty related to the succession problem that was to

---

66 ASMi, *Not.*, 30105, notary Carlo Antonio Crivelli, 21 February 1682.

67 ASOMi, Archivio Litta, 32, doc. 491, 17 September 1676, c. 140v.

68 See Lepold Auer, *Zur Rolle Italiens in der österreichischen Politik um das spanische Erbe*, in: *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchiv*, 31 (1978), 52–72; Donati, *Tra urgenza*, 2005.

69 It is interesting that during the same period the Belgioioso (another Ghibelline family) started a decorative campaign similar to that of the Visconti of Brignano with the collaboration of Beretta, and based on the book by Gualdo Priorato. See Bacchi/Zanuso, Carlo Beretta, 2011, 65–71. In the 1670s, the Pusterla had a cycle of predecessors painted in the castle of Tradate. See Mario Comincini (ed.), *Dai Pusterla ai Melzi. Il palazzo di Tradate e la quadreria di Legnano*, Legnano 2020.

70 On the historical context see Marcello Verga, *Il "sogno spagnolo" di Carlo VI. Alcune considerazioni sulla monarchia asburgica e i domini italiani nella prima metà del Settecento*, in: Cesare Mozzarelli/Giuseppe Olmi (eds.), *Il Trentino fra Sacro Romano Impero e antichi stati italiani*, Bologna 1985, 203–261; Karl Otmar von Aretin, *Das Alte Reich 1648–1806*, vol. 1: *Föderalistische und hierarchische Ordnung (1648–1684)*, Stuttgart 1993; vol. 2: *Kaisertradition und österreichische Großmachtspolitik (1648–1745)*, Stuttgart 1997; Antonio Álvarez-Ossorio Alvaríno, *La República de las Parentelas: el Estado de Milán en la monarquía de Carlos II*, Mantova 2002; id., *The State of Milan and the Spanish Monarchy*, in: Thomas J. Dandeleit/John Marino (eds.), *Spain in Italy. Politics, society and religion, 1500–1700*, Leiden/Boston 2007, 99–132.

led to the war between Austria and France, the most important Milanese families seem to have rediscovered their past as a way of legitimizing themselves while facing the potential new lords of Milan, the Austrian Habsburgs, but also as a way to reclaim an anachronistic power. It is possible that the imperial side encouraged this climate, fuelling the expectations of the Lombard aristocracy, especially considering the role of Gualdo Priorato at the court of Vienna.<sup>71</sup> These books, paintings, and sculptures I have mentioned recalled to the new rulers that the Visconti and Sforza ancestors were the previous rulers of Milan. The loyalist careers of the Visconti of Brignano in the imperial party and the marriage strategies in the Habsburgs horizon of both the Visconti of Cislago and the last Sforza of Caravaggio seem to confirm this interpretation.<sup>72</sup> These families had probably never stopped, even during the Spanish government, to consider themselves as being a part of Imperial feudality.<sup>73</sup> Even after 150 years Milan was still waiting for the emperor. As preparation for this event, family history had to be recovered and only the Visconti and Sforza could do so, not the 'new' families who had their ascent tied to the beginning of the Spanish rule on Milan.

## 6. Conclusion

The inventories of the two grandest Milanese families therefore reveal that the remembrance of past glories was played in a low-key fashion between the changes in the government of Milan, particularly during the Spanish period, and that in only a moment of crisis the long sleeping memory resurfaced with new vigour and significance.

---

71 Katia Visconti, *Da militanza filofrancese ad allineamento asburgico? Note sulla produzione storiografica di Galeazzo Gualdo Priorato*, in: Cinzia Cremonini/Elena Riva (eds.), *Il Seicento allo specchio. Le forme del potere dell'Italia spagnola: uomini, libri strutture*, Roma 2011, 253–267.

72 After approaching the French party, the last Sforza of Caravaggio, Bianca Maria, married Johann Wilhelm Edmund von Sinzendorf-Neuburg in 1716. For the careers Pirro II and Annibale Visconti of Brignano in the Austrian Habsburg area during the wars of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714) and the Polish Succession (1733–1738), see Alessandra Dattero, *Il governo militare dello Stato di Milano nel primo Settecento. Saggio storico e inventario della serie Alte Feldakten del Kriegsarchiv di Vienna*, Milano 2001, 21–23; Bolandrini, *I Palazzi*, 255–258; Gabriele Coltorti, *Via Filodrammatici prima di Mediobanca*, Milano 2015, 94–99.

73 As an example, consider the relationship that Prospero Visconti († 1592) and his relatives had with the German nobility and with the Prince Elector of the Holy Roman Empire. The cousins of Prospero explicitly claimed blood ties with his house through the marriages of Bernabò's daughters. See Pavesi, *Lorgoglio di un nobile*, 2008, 100–101. When the genealogical works commissioned by Tebaldo Visconti were published, the imperial eagle appeared at the centre of the Visconti coat of arms in the printed frontispiece, and Tebaldo was labelled "sacri romani imperii marchio", see *supra* on note 46. His son Cesare made explicit reference to his role as feudal lord in relation to the imperial dignity, see Visconti, *La percezione dell'impero*, 2010, 426–428.

The memory of their glorious past was never entirely forgotten by the Visconti and Sforza.

Since most of the works of art discussed here are lost for us, their existence is attested for only by inventories. The loss of the actual items, however, does not lessen their importance: knowing that these works of art existed still allows us to study them and try understanding the significance they had for those who commissioned them and those that choose to keep them. When the information provided by inventories is connected to a larger historical panorama and cross-checked with a variety of other sources, these 'lists' provide us a litmus test that captures the recovery of memories from the past through the patronage of these families.

Inventories are not only useful documents for the history of collecting. Actually, approaching them with the intent of identifying still existing works of art is the most difficult, due to the terseness of the descriptions and the possibility of a misleading attribution. The inventories here presented contain only one unquestionable case of 'matching', that of Bramantino's panels, which can be proved thanks to the existence of further evidence, both historical and art historical.

Yet hidden in inventories are actually other research topics, and especially those related to cultural history. Scholars should read these documents and ask questions that do not only focus on the conservation history of the listed works of art. Inventories would then allow us to glimpse domestic tools and their diffusion, and on their price and value, as shown by books. They could provide us with information about a building's history or, like the Visconti and Sforza inventories studied here, relevant sources for the history of European aristocracy, its lifestyle, and even its memory and self-representation.