

# THE TREASURES OF VILLA ARCONATI-FAR

## #2 – la Sala di Fetonte

Waiting to open again the doors of our little Versailles to welcome visitors who love it so much, we take this opportunity to let you know better the "treasures" that Villa Arconati-FAR preserves and that still few know.

It is one of the flagships of Villa Arconati-FAR, the most impressive and spectacular room, the one that generates amazement and admiration in anyone who enters it.

It is the room that, even if Villa Arconati-FAR is a palace, you do not expect to find, because it exceeds the imagination of any visitor.

And these are the feelings that Giuseppe Antonio Arconati in the eighteenth century wanted to arouse, when he had it realized, in the dream of glory of his "little Versailles"... and we can say that he did it great!

### THE RECEPTION HALL

The room is in a strategic position, on the main floor of the Villa, just up the stairs of honour and acts as a link between the different wings of the building.

Its imposing decoration has led to the hypothesis that banquets and parties were hosted here for the most distinguished visiting personalities, however we haven't found any document attesting this type of use of the room, even if we consider it plausible.

The creation of a room (or hall) richly decorated and therefore "parade" was used in the noble residences of the time, as it was specifically used for the self-celebration of one's family.

### THE MYTH OF FETONTE

The love for classical art has been alive in the Arconati since the seventeenth century, just as it was customary in the eighteenth century to decorate the halls of their residences with scenes taken from classical myths.

The myth of Phaeton is narrated in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and certainly at the time it was very well known, therefore immediately recognizable, by the guests visiting the royal villa Arconati.

The myth tells the story of the young Phaeton, presumptuous son of the god of the Sun, Apollo, who to demonstrate to everyone that he is the son of a divinity of Olympus, asks his father for one day to be him to lead the chariot of the Sun in his heavenly ride within the day.

The father, although very worried about the crazy request of his son, agrees to let him drive the cart, after many recommendations about the danger of the act.

In his presumption, Phaethon gets on the chariot and runs towards the celestial vault, where he is frightened to death by the terrible constellations. Terrified by the dizzying altitude of the sky, the wretched tries to bring the cart down, but the Earth begins to dry up due to the proximity of the heat of the Sun, terrible fires flare up, so much so that Mother Earth turns to Zeus for help.

The father of the gods, therefore, is forced to intervene to stop the destruction put in place by the wickedness of Phaeton: he throws a lightning bolt against the chariot of the Sun.

Phaethon falls and dies miserably.

The myth of Phaeton is certainly not a story with a happy ending!

What an oddity to choose such a bitter myth, with such a sad ending, for the salon that was to celebrate the greatness of the Arconati family ...

Oddity, or maybe not!

The choice of this myth is by no means casual, as nothing else is in our little Versailles: by choosing a myth that stigmatizes the capital sin of Pride, the Arconati aim to affirm their nobility even more forcefully.

Their message for the Guests is clear, especially for those who upon entering the precious Villa of the Arconati could think that what was found was a mere ostentation: the Arconati are aware that whoever is superb, that is, demonstrates with his own existence that he is different from what he shows of himself (a false, false, only external nobility), at the end of his days he will suffer the fall, just like Phaeton. This, however, will not happen to the Arconati! They are aware of the risks of pride; therefore they strongly affirm that their "nobility" is real.

### **The MEMENTO MORI and the DETAILS of the iconography of the Hall**

The imposing painting, created with the technique of the fresh medium, is an authentic masterpiece not only from the aesthetic point of view, but also for the minuteness of the iconographic details present in the myth, which are reproduced in it.

The two main scenes painted on the south and north sides of the room reproduce the salient moments of the myth: the beginning of the story, in which Phaeton gets on the chariot of the Sun, ready to start his day "like a god"; and the final scene of the fall.



*Phaethon, seated on the carriage, and next to him his father, Apollo, who tells him how to drive it (south wall)*



*Phaeton falls from the carriage, struck by the lightning of Zeus (north wall)*

On the vault of the room, we see Zeus reproduced with the eagle, his classic emblem, in the act of throwing lightning at Phaeton, to stop his mad destructive race.



*Zeus throws his lightning bolt against the ill-fated Phaeton to stop his mad rush (vault of the hall)*

In addition to these scenes, however, there are other details that enrich the scene and are present within the narration of the myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: on the east wall - and this is not absolutely accidental - we find the Aurora, with the torch lit and the rose in hand, preceded by Lucifer, the morning star, which indicates to Phaethon the way to follow in its path.





*On the left Lucifer, the morning star, with the torch lit. On the right the Aurora, with the rose and the torch lit. (East wall)*

Positioned under the fall of Phaeton, the Four Seasons appear, shocked by what happened.



*From left, Winter wrapped in an ochre cloak, Summer holding the crown of ears with his hand, behind Spring with the wreath of flowers on his head, and finally the young Autumn with the purple cloak and vine branches on the head*

In addition to the iconography linked to the Myth of Phaeton, within the fresco some references also appear to the memento mori, the "remember that you must die", another usual element in

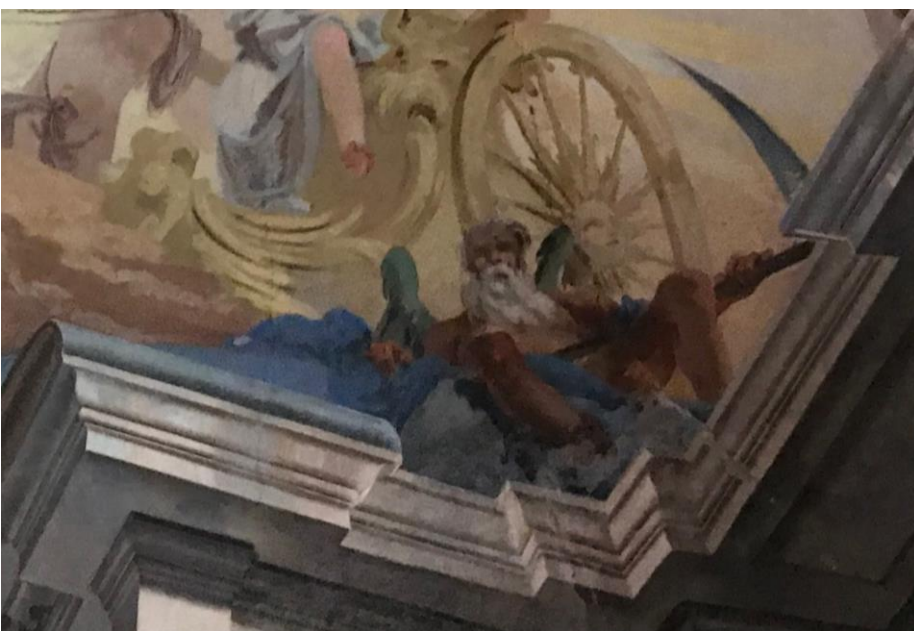
the iconography of the time and which is linked to the fear of the nobility of being accused of pride.

The warning recalls the transience of human life and in art it is usually characterized by allegorical elements such as skulls, candles consumed by the flame, bruised fruits, withered flowers, hourglasses and other elements that symbolize the inexorable passage of time.

In the iconography of the room there are three elements related to the passage of time: a winged woman holding an hourglass, a putto holding a sundial and above all the elderly figure, positioned under the wheel of the chariot of the Sun: here is Saturn with the relentless sickle in hand, ready to sever men's lives at the end of their days.



*The hourglass and the sundial, symbols of the passage of time*



*Saturn with a scythe in his hand, ready to sever the lives of men at the end of their days*

### **THE GALLIARI BROTHERS: from Villa Arconati to the La Scala in Milan**

Count Giuseppe Antonio Arconati, who commissioned the decoration of the room, was a great lover of theatre (among others, he was also patron of Carlo Goldoni, who dedicated his pièce *La putta onorata* to him) and his passion is also found in the choice of the artists who made the fresco. In fact, the brothers Bernardino, Fabrizio and Giovanni Antonio Galliari were called by the Arconati, who were among the most appreciated scenographers at the time: their scenography of Europe recognized by Antonio Salieri inaugurated the La Scala in Milan in 1778.

Since the works of the Galliari brothers are mostly sets for the theatre, today the Sala di Fetonte of Villa Arconati-FAR is one of the very few still visible examples of their magnificent art.

The Galliari brothers managed in a wonderful way to "conceal" the message of the Arconati for their Guests within such a laughing, majestic and opulent setting that the first impact with the room is certainly of amazement and even of envy ...

It really makes you think that the Arconati were a bit superb after all!

Entering, however, deep into the meaning of painting, going beyond the first impression, the final message forces us to bow to the hosts.

The surprise effect is assured and once again to the Arconati you can only say chapeau!