

*1 – A detail of the Hall of the Four Winds today
showing two of the four lower-level niches in which the bronze figures originally stood*

Two figures of Aeolus at Powerscourt, county Wicklow

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THE RESTORATION OF THE GREAT GROTTO IN THE GARDEN OF THE VILLA LITTA AT Lainate, near Milan, in Italy has shed new light on two bronze figures representing Aeolus, the God of the Winds, in the garden at Powerscourt, county Wicklow. The construction of the grotto at Lainate was begun in 1580 and was only completed ten years later.¹ It was ordered by Pirro Borromeo-Visconti (who is known as Pirro I), in whose family the estate had been for many years. The university-educated Pirro became advisor to the Dukes of Mantua. He had already been ennobled by Philip II of Spain, when, at the age of 20, he began the grotto's construction.

Pirro employed the architect Martino Bassi (1541-1591), who had been involved with the reconstruction of the cathedral in Milan, to design the grotto, or *nymphaeum*, as it was sometimes called. Integral to the design of the grotto was a complex series of waterworks – fountains, pools, water jets and sprays, including water-jokes, called *giochi d'acqua*, in which visitors to the grotto would be squirted unexpectedly by jets and sprays at various points during their tour. The hydraulics engineer who was commissioned to design these water effects was Agostino Ramelli (1531-1608). He installed nearly a mile of pipes to carry water from a twenty-metre-high water-tower into the many different rooms which still make up the grotto.

The grotto rooms housed the great art treasures collected by Pirro, including Leonardo's *Madonna Litta*, together with paintings by Bronzino, Correggio, Bernardino Luini, and others. Also in the collection were sculptures such as the figure of Venus (now known as the Mellon Venus) and another of Bacchus (both in the National Gallery in Washington). Recent studies by the art historian Alessandro Morandotti attribute them to the sculptor Francesco Brambilla the Younger (1530-1599). In addition to the artworks, the rooms also contained a collection of fossils, minerals, archaeological fragments, coins, holy relics, and other curious items to make up what was to be known later as a 'cabinet of curiosities'.

The centrepiece of the grotto building is a rotunda called the Hall of the Four Winds (Plates 1, 2). It is actually an octagon, lit from open porches at its northern

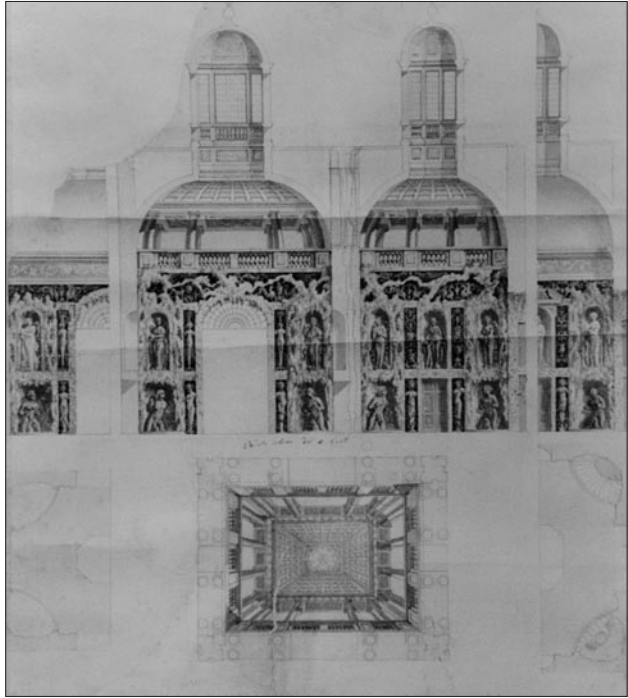
and southern ends and from a high-level lantern twenty metres above the floor level. Beneath this lantern extends a ceiling with a balustraded colonnade painted in *trompe l'oeil* against a blue sky. The lower or middle level of the rotunda (octagon) is decorated with *rocaille*, or ornamental rockwork, which is studded with decorative patterns of mother-of-pearl. Niches frame statues of the four seasons, as well as figures of Venus and Mercury. The rich and crowded effect is completed at ground level with a further series of rockwork niches. Four of these were originally filled by bronze figures representing the four winds, which gave the hall its name. (These figures were later referred to in some sources as figures of Aeolus, the God of the Winds.) In his recent studies, Morandotti has attributed all of the figures in the hall to Francesco Brambilla the Younger, who had previously worked on the reconstruction of Milan cathedral with Martino Bassi. The designs for the vault decorations, carried out in patterns of black and white pebbles which divide the rockwork niches, are attributed to the painter, Camillo Procacini (1550-1625), who is principally known as a painter, in his early days, of religious works.

Much of the original collection of art works has been dispersed, although the history of the dispersal has not yet been studied in detail. However, it is known that the figures representing the Four Winds were purchased by Prince Jerome Napoleon, a first cousin of the emperor Napoleon III of France, and, like him, a nephew of the emperor Napoleon I. Prince Jerome Napoleon placed two of the figures in the great greenhouse at his country chateau of Prangins. The other two he placed as indoor fountain figures in the Palais Royal in Paris. One of the latter two figures was located in one of the state rooms, and the other on a staircase.² Prince Jerome Napoleon wrote of his purchase of the figures, his placement of them at Prangins and in the Palais Royal, and his later disposal of them, in a letter dated 2 July 1874:

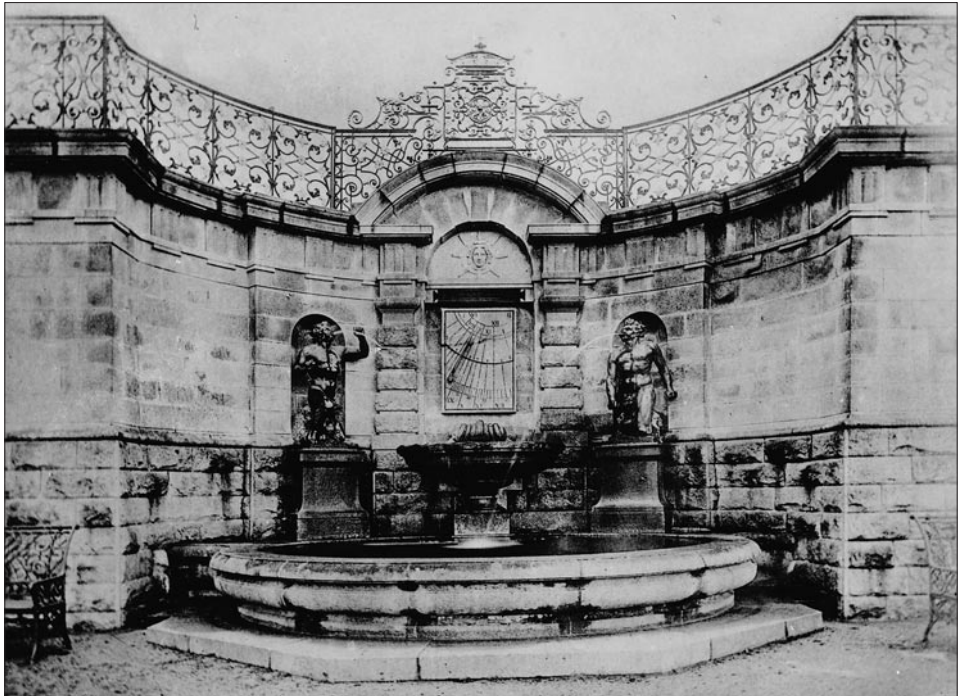
The two statues come from the property of the Duke of Litta at Milan, where they were placed in the country at Lainate. I bought four there, two belong to Mr. Lucas, to whom I sold my chateau here. They are in a great greenhouse. The figures should be placed against a wall, I cannot do a drawing, not having the dimensions. At the Palais Royal, the figures of Aeolus spewed gas from their mouths and water from under their arms, it was original and beautiful. The statues are from the 17th century, a little baroque, but, well placed in a garden, in a greenhouse or on a staircase, they would have a good effect.³

After the Franco-German War of 1870-71, the Palais Royal was burned by the Communards, in May 1871.⁴ The two figures of Aeolus were saved from the conflagration. Subsequently, the whole of Prince Napoleon's collections were sent to London and sold at Christie's on Thursday 9 May 1872 and following days. The two figures of Aeolus were purchased by Lord Powerscourt through Mr Agnew.⁵

2 – A cross-section of the Hall of the Four Winds from a preliminary drawing by the Milanese architect and furniture designer Giuseppe Levati. He was responsible at the end of the eighteenth century for the restoration / reconstruction of the grotto or nymphaeum. The figures of the Four Winds are still in position in their ground-floor niches at that time.



3 – A plate from *THE HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF POWERSCOURT*, written by the 7th Viscount Powerscourt, showing the Triton Fountain, with the bronze figures of Aeolus in their new position.



Lord Powerscourt wrote of the figures in his *History and Description of Powerscourt*, published in 1903:

I was anxious that works of art of such importance should be placed in a prominent position, and made inquiries from various friends, among others from Mr. Brinsley Marlay, well known as a connoisseur of Italian art, as to who should be consulted. He mentioned that there was no better authority than Mr. Francis Cranmer Penrose, at that time architect to the Chapter of St. Paul's Cathedral, London. I therefore asked Mr. Penrose to come over and view the site, and suggested to him the idea of a classical composition, such as may be seen in several country places in England, and notably at Versailles, at La Granja, near Madrid, and elsewhere, with a perron with a central recess or alcove, in which the figures of Aeolus should be the salient features. I had seen many examples of a similar character at Rome and other places. Mr. Penrose took up the idea with his characteristic zest. And the result was a design which he carried out, placing these grand statues in the centre, spouting water into a stone basin, with a pediment surmounting them, in the arch of which is placed a head of Apollo, the God of the Sun, with a sundial beneath it, between the two statues, the gnomon of which is constructed of bronze, like the figures, with the well-known motto, *Horas non numero nisi serenas*.⁶

In his book, Lord Powerscourt continues his description of the perron and its immediate setting (Plate 3). He states that it was his intention to arrange that all the garden urns and statuary in that section of the garden would be in bronze to reflect the bronze materials of which the Aeolus figures (which he sometimes describes as 'Triton' figures) were made (Plate 4).⁷

4 – A late nineteenth-century photograph showing the bronze figures and their then new setting in the overall context of the garden at Powerscourt (courtesy National Library of Ireland)



For the first time, it is now possible not only to view the figures of Aeolus in their setting in the garden at Powerscourt, but also to envision them in the setting for which they were originally executed – the Hall of the Four Winds in the grotto of the Villa Litta at Lainate.⁸

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Georgina Masson, *Italian Gardens* (London and New York 1961); Associazione Amici di Villa Litta di Lainate, *Villa Borromeo Visconti Litta Lainate* (Lainate, n.d.).
- ² That the other two figures were placed as ornaments in the greenhouse at the Chateau de Prangins can be assumed from a letter written by Prince Jerome Napoleon from the Chateau of Prangins and quoted later in the article. The author has not been able to ascertain if they are still in position there.
- ³ The letter was written by the prince to Emile Ollivier, who was President of the Chambre des Deputies under the emperor Napoleon III. A copy was passed to Mr Delane, the editor of *The Times*, who passed it on to his acquaintance, Lord Powerscourt. See 7th Viscount Powerscourt, *A History and Description of Powerscourt* (1903) 83.
- ⁴ The Communards were the adherents of the Commune, which was a government established on communistic principles in Paris during 1871.
- ⁵ Mr Agnew was presumably a principal of the London-based fine-art dealership today known as Agnews.
- ⁶ Powerscourt, *History and Description*, 85. Brinsley Marlay was the owner of Belvedere House, county Westmeath, where he constructed a series of garden terraces with balustrades based on those in the Old English style at Haddon Hall, Derbyshire. The term ‘perron’, used by Lord Powerscourt to refer to the architectural setting constructed for the Aeolus figures, is normally used to refer to a platform, ascended by steps in front of a church or mansion and upon which the doors open. It is sometimes applied to a double flight of steps ascending to such a door.
- ⁷ For example, Powerscourt describes his acquisition, for nearby locations in the garden, of two fine bronze groups representing children, by Morin, a contemporary of Clodion. He also describes his purchase in St Petersburg of two bronze vases belonging to the architect of St Isaac’s cathedral in that city.
- ⁸ The grotto was restored in the eighteenth century by a descendant of Pirro Borromeo-Visconti, called Pompeo Litta, after which the villa became known as the Villa Borromeo Visconti Litta. The architect employed by Litta was Giuseppe Levati. In 1970 the villa and its grotto came into the hands of the municipality of Lainate. Now, with the assistance of the Association of the Friends of the Villa Litta Lainate, a new and handsome restoration has been carried out.