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Carlo Beretta

Four Allegorical Male Portraits



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Carlo Beretta
(Milan, 1687-1764)

Four Allegorical Male Portraits

Terracotta, 60 cm

PROVENANCE: Private
collection, Italy.

These four busts find close parallels in the works of Carlo Beretta (Milan 1687-1764), a Milanese artist active in the first half of the 18th century who sculpted numerous statues for the cathedral of his home city during his long career. However, his finest pieces were perhaps executed for other worksites, from the church of San Gaudenzio in Novara to the Castle of Belgioioso, where he succeeded in demonstrating his consum-

mate skill as a modeller in wax and terracotta. The busts under discussion here merely confirm that Beretta's most interesting pieces are connected to the use of plastic materials, a propensity also recently corroborated when it became possible to attribute to him the series of terracotta busts, consisting of portraits, imaginative recreations of historical figures and allegorical busts, commissioned by the Visconti di Brignano family in around 1720.





1. Carlo Beretta, *Sale Catalogue of the "Ancient Visconti" busts*, 1898, Brignano d'Adda

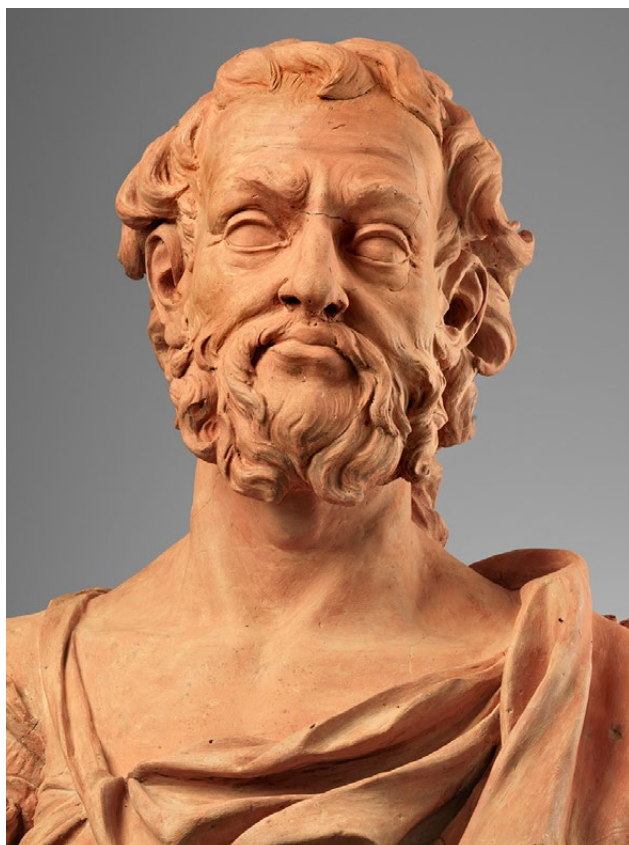
Some of these are still known only through the old images published in the sale catalogue of works of art and furniture of the Visconti castle at Brignano d'Adda in 1898 (figs. 1-3)¹, while others have been traced in public and private collections.

The reappearance on the antique market of two busts of "Ancient Visconti" (fig. 2) (presumably Guido and Ottone Visconti), among the six ancestors of the family who lived between the 10th and 13th centuries, offered an opportunity to reconsider Beretta's career as a whole and thus to reattribute to him the entire Visconti series, pre-

viously ascribed by the scholarship to the Florentine artist Giovacchino Fortini, together with the vast sculptural decoration of the gardens at the castle of Brignano which arrived at Villa Sciarra in Rome at the beginning of the 20th century. The persuasive comparisons with known works by Beretta has been accompanied by the discovery of a series of documents attesting that, between 1717 and 1719, he was in the service of the brothers Annibale, Pirro and Luigi Visconti, just when the major "reform" of the Brignano property later concluded in around 1726 was taking shape².

1 *Catalogue des objets et d'ameublement du Chateau royal de Govone et du Chateau de Brignano (ancien maison Visconti) et d'une collection ayant appartenu à Napoléon... sous la direction de M. M. le Chevalier G. Sangiorgi de Rome*, 30 mai - 2 Juin 1898.

2 A. Bacchi e S. Zanuso, *Carlo Beretta e i Visconti di Brignano*, Trento 2011, to which we refer for the works by Beretta mentioned below unless otherwise indicated. On Beretta see also S. Zanuso, "Scuola del Bernini" in *Lombardia: l'esordio di Carlo Beretta e nuove opere per Carlo Francesco Mellone*, in "Nuovi studi", 24, 2018 - 2019, pp. 141 - 145.



2. Carlo Beretta, "Ancient Visconti" busts (details), compared with busts 4 and 3 of the *Four Allegorical Male Busts*





3. Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts* (Bust 4, detail) and Carlo Beretta, “Ancient Visconti” bust (detail)

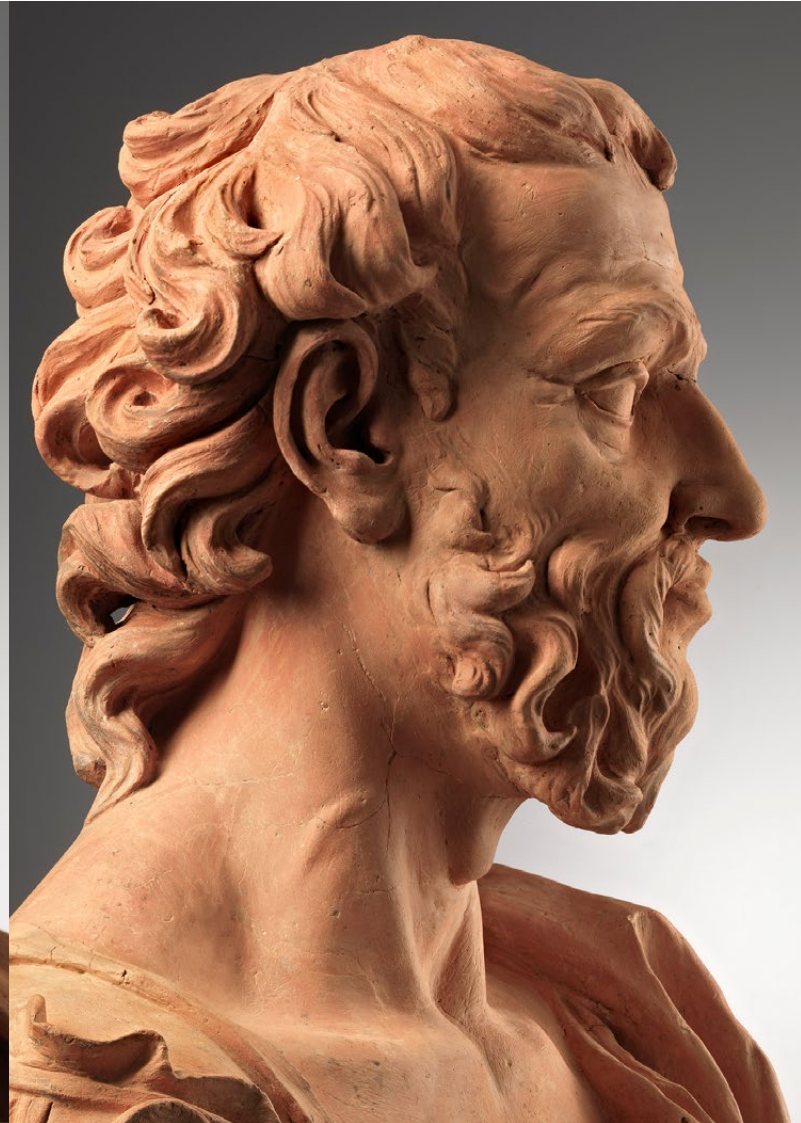
Returning to our busts, we should immediately observe that it is not easy to identify the subjects, devoid as they are of any specific attribute. The two figures with their heads covered by a mantle and wearing a grave and pensive expression, one with a beard and the other completely hairless (*Bust 1* and *Bust 2*), may be two works inspired by classical antiquity. The third figure (*Bust 3*), whose expression is intense and ecstatic, wears a loose headdress that droops at the sides, reminiscent of the “Phrygian cap” of the ancient Persians; this might therefore identify it as an eastern figure. Finally, the fourth figure (*Bust 4*) is dressed in old-fashioned armour and a cloak. These are thus four imaginary portraits that do not overtly form a coherent set, but that, for precisely this reason,

should be understood as genre figures, each intended to illustrate a human type that likely also held an implicit allegorical meaning that now escapes us. Such works are in some ways reminiscent of the so-called “character heads” produced in large numbers by the sculptors of Venice from the second half of the 17th century onwards. In the Lombardy area, sculptors also executed works of this type - such as the four marble busts that the eccentric Siro Zanelli carved for the Borromeo palace on Isola Bella between 1678 and 1682³ -, but without the more exaggerated and grotesque

3 S. Zanuso in *Vitaliano VI Borromeo. L'invenzione dell'Isola Bella*, catalogue of the exhibition (20 March - 2 September 2020, Palazzo Borromeo, Isola Bella), ed. by A. Morandotti and M. Natale, Milan 2020, pp. 170-173, cat. no. 26 - 27.



4. Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts* (details)







5. Carlo Beretta, *Annibale Visconti and Eugene of Savoy*
Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts (Bust 4, detail)*

overtones of which their Venetian counterparts were so fond.

In any case, their shared origin from the same collection suggests that they originated together; likewise, it is undoubtedly true that, beyond the singularities of each figure, the group is stylistically coherent. To be persuaded of this, it suffices to compare the upper part of the faces, where the manner of modelling the eyes with raised eyebrows and furrowed forehead is identical, as is the highly peculiar shape of the nose, presenting a depression at the tip (fig. 4).

Having established this, the most notable difference between the four is in the cloaks: more rounded and enveloping in *Busts 1, 2 and 3*, more asymmetrical and angular in *Bust 4*. This in no way calls into question the attribution to Carlo





6. Carlo Beretta, *Pirro Visconti*

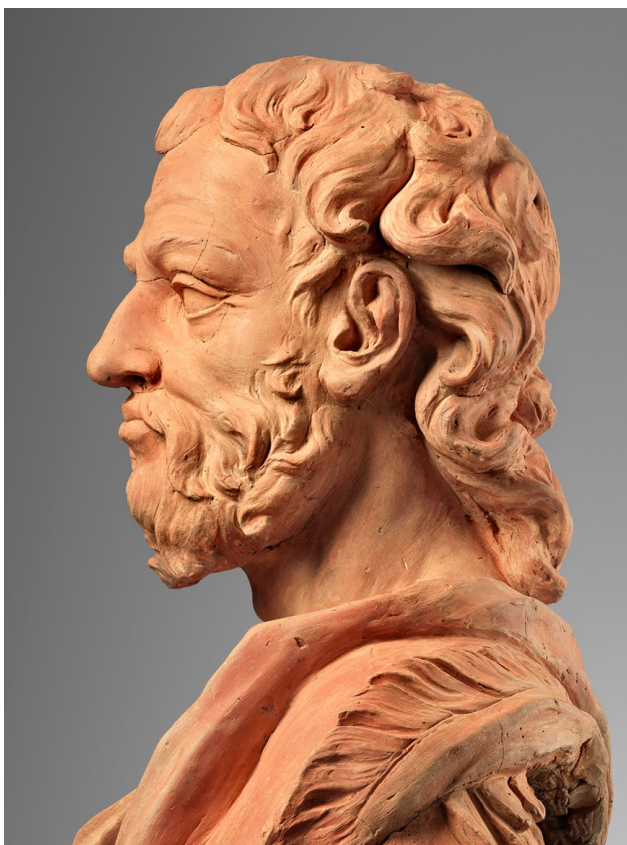
Beretta proposed here as both manners of working draperies coexist in his works. The difference may also be connected to the fact that others were active in Beretta's workshop: his brother Giovan Domenico (1694-1757), a faithful collaborator throughout his life, and his cousin Angelo Maria Beretta (15 April 1686 -1766) prior to his definitive move north of the Alps in mid-century, from Saxony to the Palatinate. We also know of a nephew who worked in Venice, perhaps as a stucco artist, in around 1744. Within this group of Beretta sculptors, one of the many Lombard dynasties in which artistic skill was nourished by family ties, Carlo was nonetheless acknowledged as the undisputed head of the workshop. He was also the only member of the family to gain repute in the local literature, to the extent that he was remembered, a little over a decade after his death, as "the most



Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts (Bust 1, detail)*

famous sculptor in the city of Milan at the time". Within the series modelled for the Visconti, the draperies of *Bust 4* seem very similar to those of the portraits of *Annibale Visconti*, now in Edinburgh, and of *Eugene of Savoy*⁴ (**fig. 5**), recently re-discovered. By contrast, those of the other three busts discussed here seem more in tune with the draperies of the portrait of *Pirro Visconti* (**fig. 6**), now known only through the old photograph in the auction catalogue of 1898, and of some garden statues currently in Villa Sciarra. Alongside the numerous points of contact between the latter and the Visconti series, for

4 After the 2011 essay (cited in note 2), Maichol Clemente reported the appearance on the antique market of the *Portrait of Eugene of Savoy*, formerly part of the Visconti di Brignano series (Sotheby's, *Important Furniture, Sculptures and Works of Art*, 22 October 2008, Paris, lot 22).



7, 10. Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts* (Bust 4, detail)



8, 9. Carlo Beretta, *Bust of a Commander* (detail)



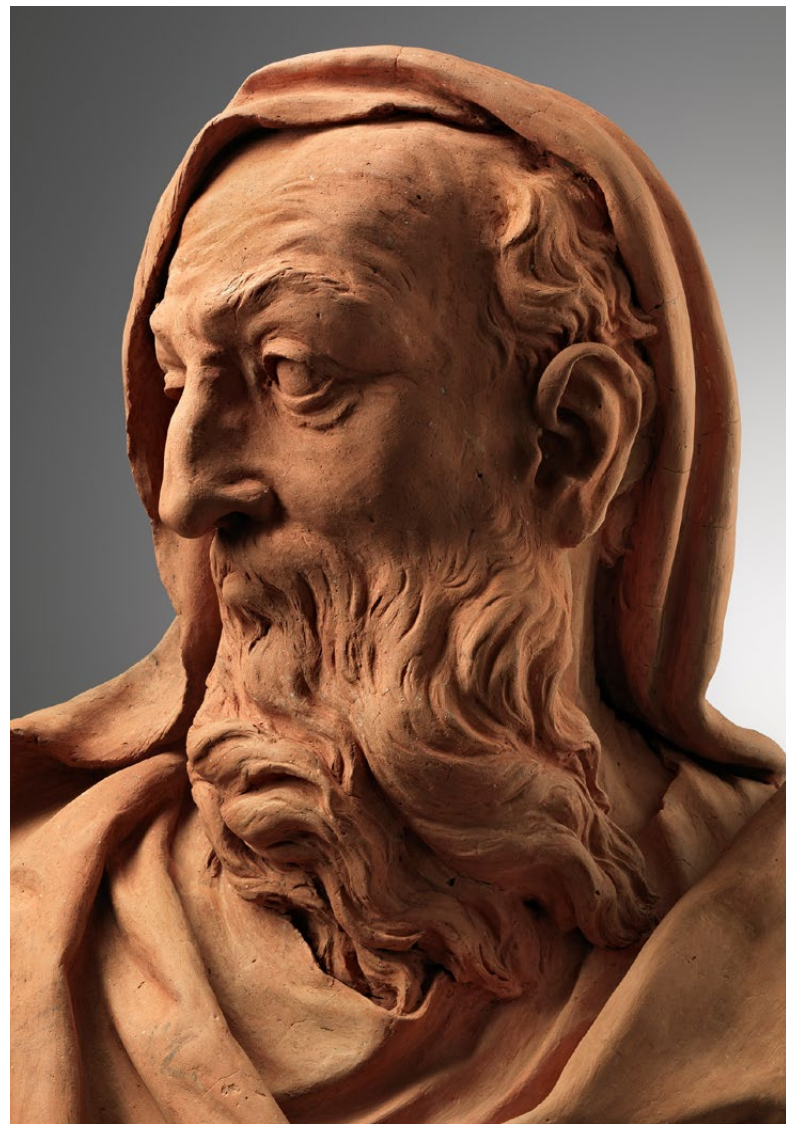
which we refer to the eloquent parallels visible in the images accompanying this text, a double of *Bust 4* can be seen in the *Condottiere en Hercule* (figs. 7-10) that recently appeared on the Parisian antique market, attributed to the “École italienne du XVIII siècle”⁵ but easily identified as a work by Beretta, who here tackles an imaginative reinterpretation of a famous work of ancient Rome, the *Bust of Commodus as Hercules* in the Capitoline Museums.

⁵ Artcurial, *Terres cuites et autres sculptures*, vente n. 3200 (23 mars 2017), Paris, lot 20.

Although the close dialogue with the Brignano corpus suggests that those pieces too were executed in around the 1720s, this proposal cannot be considered definitive because, in the absence of any information about their early provenance, we must also consider the remarkable stylistic homogeneity of Beretta’s oeuvre. This was a sculptor who worked tirelessly for forty years, proposing the same types on several occasions many years apart. We thus find an identical depiction of the fluttering ornaments on the shoulder strap of *Bust 4* and in the *Portrait of Alberico II* in the Castle of Belgioioso near Pavia (fig. 12), where in the 1740s



II. Carlo Beretta, *A Saint*, Novara (detail)



Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts* (Bust 1, detail)





Beretta created a programme of sculptural decorations that is among the most original of late Baroque Lombardy. Similarly, the physiognomy of *Bust 1*, with the flowing beard, laterally off-centre with respect to the face, reappears with minimal variations throughout his career: from the *St Ignatius* in Milan Cathedral of 1718-1720 to the bronzes of Novara mounted in 1754 (fig. II), and the statues of the XIVth chapel of the Sacro Monte di Orta on which he was at work in 1756 (fig. I3).

Susanna Zanuso

12. Carlo Beretta, *Four Allegorical Male Busts (Bust 4, detail)*, Carlo Beretta, *Portrait of Alberico II*, Belgioioso Castle, Pavia

13. Carlo Beretta, *Chapel of the Sacro Monte di Orta*, Varese





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