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**Rome, Italy. The collection of Roman statuary in the Villa Wolkonsky, the British (and former German) ambassador's seat in Rome, made available online on iDAI.objects/  
Arachne**

aus / from

## e-Forschungsberichte

Ausgabe / Issue **2 • 2020**

Seite / Page **53–60**

Umfang / Length **§ 1–14**

urn:nbn:de:0048-efb.v0i2.1009.8 • 10.34780/efb.v0i2.1009

Verantwortliche Redaktion / Publishing editor

**Redaktion e-Jahresberichte und e-Forschungsberichte | Deutsches Archäologisches Institut**

Weitere Informationen unter / For further information see <https://publications.dainst.org/journals/efb>

ISSN der Online-Ausgabe / ISSN of the online edition **2198-7734**

ISSN der gedruckten Ausgabe / ISSN of the printed edition

Redaktion und Satz / **Janina Rücker (jahresbericht@dainst.de)**

**Gestalterisches Konzept: Hawemann & Mosch**

**Länderkarten: © 2014 www.mapbox.com**

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## ROME, ITALY

The collection of Roman statuary in the Villa Wolkonsky, the British (and former German) ambassador's seat in Rome, made available online on iDAI.objects/Arachne



### Rome Department of the DAI

by Ralf Bockmann and Raffaella Bucolo



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*The Villa Wolkonsky is a former aristocratic residence in the centre of Rome built in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a storied and important, but for a long time not easily accessible collection of antiquities. The collection has recently been systematically restored for better preservation and presentation on the premises of the residence, which today serves the British ambassador to Italy. After the restoration was completed, the Photo Library of the German Archaeological Institute at Rome was able to acquire the documentary photographic collection of the project and to conduct a new photographic mission. The academic part of the project has been carried out by Raffaella Bucolo. The collection is available online in the Arachne database.*

**Cooperation partner:** British Embassy at Rome; British School at Rome; Università ›La Sapienza‹ Rome.

**Head of project:** R. Bockmann (2015–2018, 2020), K. Meinecke (2018/2019).

**Team:** R. Bucolo, H. Behrens, D. Gauss.

### History of the Villa and the Wolkonsky family

- 1 The Villa Wolkonsky is located in the Esquiline part of [Rome](#)<sup>1</sup>, between the old city gate of the Porta Maggiore and the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, inside the ancient city walls. Still today it commands a vast garden



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1 Antique sculpture in a 19<sup>th</sup> century temple in the garden. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2018.0705)

2 Access to the garden from the villa. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.1020)

including ancient monuments. The story of the residence has its origins with the Wolkonsky family, who founded and shaped the building and its surroundings in the first 100 years of its existence. Their vision forms the backbone of the design and apparition of the house, gardens and the antiquities collection to this day (Fig. 1. Fig. 2).

2 In 1829, the Russian princess Zinaida Wolkonsky, a woman of great culture who had a prominent role in Russia under Tsar Alexander I, decided, mainly for political reasons, to leave her country and move to Rome. The princess purchased a large vineyard in 1830, close to the basilica of San Giovanni in Laterano, which included 36 arches of the Nero branch of the Aqua Claudia aqueduct. Zinaida built a summerhouse there and transformed the vineyard into an English garden, with fragments of Roman marbles scattered throughout the vegetation. The antiquities collection in the Villa Wolkonsky was started by the princess herself, although some ancient fragments were undoubtedly already in the vineyard when she purchased it. Many marbles were accidentally found in the soil of the property, but Zinaida wanted to collect marble antiquities and bought some of them on the antiques market or from other collections in the city. The garden became an attraction for visiting artists and writers, who were also guests at the princess's famous salons in her city apartments in the Palazzo Poli, the backdrop of the Trevi fountain (Fig. 3. Fig. 4).

3 When Zinaida died (1862), her son Alexander inherited the property. Alexander was a Russian diplomat, who served in [Dresden](#) <sup>↗</sup> and later in [Madrid](#) <sup>↗</sup>, but continued to consider Rome his home and to look after the villa. He commissioned the architect Gioacchino Ersoch to embellish the garden and during this work (1866), the well-preserved Columbarium of the freedman Tiberius Claudius Vitalis (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) was discovered by chance, then restored and opened for visits. The same Alexander probably bought some antiquities, in particular inscriptions, to enrich the collection.

4 After Alexander's death (1878), his adopted daughter Nadeide, inherited the property and married Marchese Wladimiro Campanari. The Campanari family built a new mansion, but, massive urbanisation began around the





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3 The aqueduct in the villa's garden. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0562)

4 Sculpture and inscriptions presented in a grotto in one of the aqueduct's arches. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0559)

property (ca. 1881–1919). Significant excavations preceded this work, bringing to light funerary monuments – such as the tomb reliefs with portraits of the Servilii family (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) – mosaics and marbles, which only in some cases became part of the Wolkonsky collection.

- 5 After the Campanari family moved to Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the villa was rented out; in 1915 the Campanari returned, but sold the property in 1922 – with its full collection of antiquities – to the German government, for use as the new German Embassy.
- 6 At the end of the Second World War, the villa was placed under the Allied Control Commission. In 1947, the Italian government made it available to the British government to use as a temporary embassy, after the former embassy at Rome's Porta Pia (Villa Bracciano) was destroyed in a terrorist attack. The United Kingdom purchased the Villa in 1951.
- 7 When the new UK Embassy Chancery was reopened at its original location in 1971, the villa reverted to its role as Her Majesty's Ambassador's residence.

#### *The restoration and documentation project*

- 8 In 2011 the British Embassy, supported by a private sponsorship (Shell Italia), launched a project to upgrade the gardens and the marbles displayed in them, which were in need of conservation. Also, on the advice of scholars of the British Museum and the British School at Rome, who immediately highlighted the importance of the Wolkonsky collection, 352 ancient marbles were restored by Archérestauri, under the supervision of the architect Valentina Puglisi. In the course of these works some of the marbles were relocated in the garden, along the aqueduct, but for reasons of conservation, most of the antiquities have been placed in two 19<sup>th</sup> century greenhouses, named the »Wolkonsky Greenhouses Museum« (Fig. 5).
- 9 The photo library of the German Archaeological Institute already had a small collection of photographs of objects from the Wolkonsky collection before this project was put into place. The first photograph from the Villa Wolkonsky collection entered the photo library as early as 1912, but remained the sole example until the 1930s, when another twelve photos of



5 A view of the »Wolkonsky Greenhouses Museum«. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2018.0707)

various origins were added, taken by the Institute's photographer Johannes Felbermeyer, the archaeologist Margarete Gütschow and the independent professional photographer Romualdo Moscioni, showing funerary relief portraits, the known copy of the statue of Athena Parthenos and some elements re-used as decoration in the villa's building itself, attached to the walls. The interest of this time, though still limited, already highlights the structure of the collection and probably resulted from the fact that the building had become the seat of the German embassy in Rome in 1922. In 1973, two years after the British embassy was moved back to the Porta Pia neighbourhood and the Villa Wolkonsky remained solely the residence of the ambassador, the Institute's photographer Gerhard Singer took a series of 34 photographs in the villa, producing a broad documentation of some of the highlights among the statuary and funerary reliefs. After another five photos were added in 1975, the collection of the German Archaeological Institute's photo library of the Villa Wolkonsky objects now comprised a total of 55 photos. This small number remained unchanged until the current project was initiated, illustrating the limited accessibility of the Wolkonsky collection, which had been known mainly to specialists.

- 10 In 2015, it was possible to form an agreement with the head restorer Valentina Puglisi and the British Embassy at Rome for the DAI photo library to host the images of the 352 recently restored marble objects of the collection in its online database [iDAI.objects/Arachne](https://idai.objects/arachne)<sup>7</sup>. Apart from the fact that the addition of the restorer's documentation immediately increased the photo library's collection on a large scale, the fact that the collection contained photos from before, during, and after the restoration process makes it a very valuable piece of documentation of the restoration process. Although the importance of the Wolkonsky collection, with its important pieces of sculpture, funerary reliefs, inscriptions and architectural decoration, had been recognised before, no catalogue exists. In the aftermath of the restoration process, Raffaella Bucolo of the Sapienza University in Rome started to identify, inventory and study the collection systematically. Together with her, the photo library of the DAI planned and executed a photographic mission to photograph the most important pieces in addition to the existing





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6 Fragments of a sarcophagus presented in the garden. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0561)

7 Athena Parthenos statue in the collection. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0896)

8 Detail of the Medusa's head on Athena's aegis. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0903)

documentation, and to add photos of objects that were not part of the restoration programme and therefore had not been documented at all before. The photographic mission was carried out by the Institute's photographer Heide Behrens, who took 985 photos between July and December 2018 and another 934 photos between April and August 2019. The photo collection of Valentina Puglisi and her restorer colleagues was inventoried by Raffaella Bucolo and Daniela Gauss, who also took an additional 85 photos in the Villa Wolkonsky in September 2019 and January 2020 (Fig. 6).

- 11 Currently, the photographic documentation of the Villa Wolkonsky collection in the DAI Rome photo library online comprises 2285 photos of a total of 518 objects ([Villa Wolkonsky](#)<sup>7</sup>). The majority of the photos show the objects after restoration. Important object groups include: funerary portraits, of which the collection contains a small number but important examples; a small number of funerary altars; over 60 sarcophagi; a collection of over 100 pieces of sculpture; and almost 200 pieces of architectural decoration and a large number of inscriptions.

#### *Some examples from the collection*

- 12 Among the many notable pieces of the collection are, for example, a well-known copy of the statue type of the Athena Parthenos, preserved at a height of 140 cm, with head and arms missing. The type, copying the famous cult statue of Athena on the Parthenon in Athens, was popular in Antiquity and is preserved in many copies. Few, however, are as excellent as the Wolkonsky statue, with its detailed depiction of Athena's flowing *peplos* dress and the *Gorgoneion*, the head of Medusa, on the *aegis* Athena wears over her *peplos*. The snakes around the edge of the *aegis* are very prominently worked and also masterfully reflected in the girdle, creating a very dynamic impression of an originally rather static statue type. Without doubt, this large scale copy had originally been placed in an exquisite, aristocratic or even imperial context in Rome. It is very likely that the Wolkonsky family chose the statue of Athena Parthenos, equally representing strength and warlike features as well as the classical Athenian trait of wisdom, as one of the centrepieces of their collection (Fig. 7. Fig. 8).



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9 Altar of Cassius Olympius, inscription. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0643)

10 Altar of Cassius Olympius, sailing ship. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0644)

13 Among the altars, the Greek dedication of Cassius Olympius is notable, showing maritime motifs on both sides next to the central inscription (IG XIV, 1042; IGVR 201): a sailing ship and a wheel (Fig. 9. Fig. 10). Among the funerary reliefs, the one of Apuleius Carpus and his wife Apuleia Rufina is exceptional. The relief, part of a tomb probably constructed around the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century CE according to the portrait styles, shows both husband and wife, though not directly next to each other, as usually is the case, but separated by the inscription (CIL VI, 12194 <sup>7</sup>). On the wife's side, though the head is less well preserved, the gesture of the *dextrarum iunctio*, the handshake symbolising the marital bond between the two, is clearly visible. The head of Apuleius Carpus is better preserved, showing an elderly man in a military cloak fixed over one shoulder, with a severe expression on his face. The inscription declares that Apuleius was still alive when his wife was buried and commemorated in the inscription. Perhaps the unusual distance in the portrait relief between husband and wife, who is called »incomparable« in the inscription, refers to the fact that both were temporarily separated by her death, but to be reunited again (Fig. 11. Fig. 12).

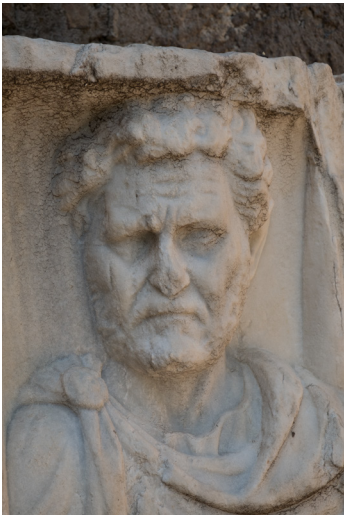
#### *An important collection made more accessible*

14 Before the start of the project, the Villa Wolkonsky collection was largely unexplored territory, with only a very limited number of marbles published, therefore lacking complete documentation. Today we can say with certainty that the embassy garden houses a remarkable historical and artistic heritage, representing various periods of ancient art, from the late Roman Republican period to the early middle ages. The collection can be visited in the Villa Wolkonsky's garden and Greenhouse Museum on appointment and with special tours. Given the limited access within the Ambassador's residence, the online hosting of the collection is a useful tool to make this important collection more accessible to the public and specialists alike. Apart from the pieces themselves, the work in recent years by Raffaella Bucolo also has put into focus the story of the villa and of collecting in 19<sup>th</sup> century Rome. The circles of the Princess Wolkonsky and her salons were an important part of intellectual life in Rome in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Wolkonsky collection





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11 Funerary relief of Apuleius Carpus and Apuleia Rufina. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0670)

12 Portrait of Apuleius Carpus on the funerary relief. (Photo: H. Behrens, D-DAI-ROM-2019.0677)

deserves to have light shed on it from different angles, looking at the collection as well as its formation and context in different times. A full catalogue, coordinated by Raffaella Bucolo, is in preparation. Until then, the online database provides access and possibilities to study individual objects as well as appreciate the collection as a whole.

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## Metadata

Title/*title*: Rome, Italy – The collection of Roman statuary in the Villa Wolkonsky, the British (and former German) ambassador's seat in Rome, made available online on iDAI.objects/Arachne

Band/*issue*: e-Forschungsberichte 2020-2

Bitte zitieren Sie diesen Beitrag folgenderweise/*Please cite the article as follows*: R. Bockmann – R. Bucolo, Rome, Italy – The collection of Roman statuary in the Villa Wolkonsky, the British (and former German) ambassador's seat in Rome, made available online on iDAI.objects/Arachne, eDAI-F 2020-2, § 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.34780/efb.v0i2.1009>

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Online veröffentlicht am/*Online published on*: 12.10.2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/efb.v0i2.1009>

URN: <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0048-efb.v0i2.1009.8>

Bibliographischer Datensatz/*Bibliographic reference*: <https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/002002243>