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Antonio Susini

*Braccio di Bartolo, The Medici Court-Dwarf known as
Morgante (ca. 1535 - 1594)*

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ANTONIO SUSINI

(Florence 1558 - 1624)

BRACCIO DI BARTOLO, THE MEDICI COURT-DWARF KNOWN AS MORGANTE (ca. 1535-1594)

Bronze, on a turned wooden socle.

12.5 cm (5in.) high, the figure

7.7 cm (3 in.) wide, the figure

20 cm (7 ¾ in.) high overall

Provenance

Private collection, France.

Related Literature

C. Avery & A. Radcliffe (eds), *Giambologna 1529 -1608: Sculptor to the Medici*, exhibition catalogue, London, Vienna and Edinburgh 1978, pp. 101-105.

C. Avery, 'Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Alexis Gregory Collection', *Harvard University Art Museums Bulletin IV*, no.1, 1995, pp. 54-65.

M. Leithe-Jasper & P. Wengraf, *European Bronzes from the Quentin Collection*, exhibition catalogue, New York, 2004, pp. 162-165

T. Ghadessi, *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies*, Michigan 2018, pp. 53-98

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‘... nano ducalis palatii nostri ac servitori nostro nobis dilectissimo’.

The present bronze is a charming statuette of the beloved Medici Court Dwarf Braccio di Bartolo (c. 1535- 1594), better known as the “Nano Morgante”. As favourite of the five dwarves in the service of Grand Duke Cosimo I (1519-1574), Morgante’s name was a satirical play on the figure of the legendary giant Morgante Maggiore of Luigi Pulci’s epic poem, first published in Florence in 1481. Morgante’s force of personality, particularly his wit and charm, awarded him a close personal relation with the first Duke which was reflected in his popularity in contemporaneous art and literature. Morgante’s amiable nature was recorded by the artist and writer Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), who described him as:

‘...ingegnoso, letterato e molto gentile, favorito del Duca nostro.’¹

The Grand Duke’s personal affinity for Morgante is apparent in the bestowal of a ducal privilege in 1555, which included the bequest of a farm in Arezzo. Within the document, Cosimo wrote:

‘Braccio (a) nuncupato Morgante Bartholi de Podio Fornionis et de Statu illustrissimi domini Cesaris Alydosii dom ini Castris nuncupati del Rio, nano ducalis palatii nostril ac servitori nostro nobis dilectissimo salutem et omne bonum .’²

As a central and valued member of the court, Morgante was portrayed prominently in important artistic compositions such as in the bronze relief on the base of Giambologna’s Equestrian monument to the Grand Duke in the Piazza della Signoria (fig. 1). Additionally, Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus (1523-1605) depicted Morgante prominently as a key figure in Cosimo’s retinue, positioning him in the foreground of the composition of his depiction of the Grand Duke’s coronation (fig. 2). The most recognisable artistic depiction of Morgante, however, is a double-sided painting by Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572) housed in the Pitti Palace, which belonged to and was likely commissioned by the Grand Duke before 1553 (fig. 3).

The Medici court sculptor Giambologna (1529-1608) was perhaps familiar with this painting, in addition to Valerio Cioli’s famous marble fountain in the Boboli gardens

¹ ‘...ingenious , well read and extremely polite , favourite of our Duke .’ G. Vasari, *Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi, 9 vols., Florence, 1878-1885, 7.639.

² ‘To Morgante, the dwarf of our ducal palace and our most beloved servitor, known as Braccio di Bartolo, from Poggio Fornione and from the state of the most noble lord Cesare Alidosi, the lord of the castle known as the Castel del Rio, I wish good health and every good thing ’. ASF, *Pratica Segreta* 186, ca. 126v, *Cosmus Medicus Dei gratia Florentie dux*.

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and possibly knew Morgante personally. Though the model itself was designed by Giambologna, the quality of the present bronze indicates that it was executed by Antonio Susini (1558-1624) whilst he was an assistant in Giambologna's workshop. Finely chased with beautiful details, the present statuette is characteristic of Susini's hand, with its refined finish, crisp folds of cloth, and precise attention to detail, particularly in the rendering of the hair and the beard. The treatment of the eyes, with their flattened incised pupils, typifies Antonio Susini's goldsmith-like qualities, which reached their zenith in his small-scale bronze sculptures.

Born in Florence, Antonio Susini is regarded as the most gifted of Giambologna's assistants. Working closely with his master in his workshop from 1580, Susini gained recognition for his remarkable ability to precisely realise Giambologna's artistic models. Giambologna's high regard for his assistant is indicated in documentation of payments made to Susini for the creation of bronzes which were part of a commission that was given to Giambologna.³

By 1600, Susini left Giambologna's workshop and set up his own in via de' Pilastrini, where he established himself as an independent bronze sculptor. Whilst he continued producing small bronzes after his former master's models, such as the present statuette, Susini also gained recognition for his own classically inspired works as well as bronze reproductions of ancient sculpture.

Susini maintained a close relationship with Giambologna, who in 1605, praised some of Susini's recently cast works.

Of the few extant statuettes of Morgante which survive, the present bronze is unique, blending elements from the two loosely identified 'types'. Notably, in the present statuette, the figure holds in his right hand a wine cup, similar to the bronze in the Metropolitan Museum, New York (fig. 4). However, whilst the figure in New York holds a circlet of grapes and vine leaves with his left hand against the top of his left thigh, the left hand of the present bronze rests atop of a rod-like stick and small cloth. Although the present stick is naturalistic, a bronze in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (fig. 5) wields a more artificial cane.

³ In 1596, the monastery of the Certosa at Galluzzo, located just outside Florence, commissioned Giambologna to produce figures for a sacramental tabernacle or ciborium. These include *The Risen Christ* (now Metropolitan Museum, New York), statuettes of the four Evangelists (St John and St Matthew, now also Metropolitan Museum, New York; and further versions in Braunschweig, Madrid and formerly in the collections of the Duchess of Lemos, Spain and the Charles Loeser collection, Florence), as well as six angels.

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Fig. 1. Giambologna, c. 1587-1594, *Relief Panel depicting the coronation of Grand Duke Cosimo I*, bronze, Florence, Piazza della Signoria.



Fig 2. Jan van der Straet, called Stradanus, c. 1582, *The Coronation of Cosimo I*, engraving, Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, inv. no. S. I 54395

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Fig. 3. Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of the Dwarf Nano Morgante*, c. 1552, oil on canvas, Florence, Palazzo Pitti.

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Fig. 4. Unknown artist, after a model by Giambologna, *The Dwarf Morgante as Bacchus*, 16th or 17th century, bronze, New York, Metropolitan Museum, inv. no. 64.101.1452

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Fig. 5. Antonio Susini, after a model by Giambologna, *Morgante Blowing a Cornetto*, c. 1580-1590, bronze, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 65-1865

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