

“A Gifted Dwarf” in the court of Cosimo I de’Medici’

Research Project Outline

My doctoral research project, provisionally titled ‘A Visible Difference: Dwarfs in Early Modern Italian Court Culture’, examines the role of court dwarfs in Italy and aims to develop new perspectives on their position both in public as renowned entertainers, and in private as valued members of personal retinues. The project will focus particularly on the Medici and Florence in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, analysing visual and archival material to explore contemporary attitudes towards dwarfism, as well as seeking evidence to establish the identity of individuals, in order to revise current perceptions of dwarfs in the Renaissance courts.

Perceptions of Dwarfism in sixteenth-century Italy: Research Questions

- ✧ What particular qualities were associated with dwarfism, which may explain the ubiquity of dwarfs as members of the courts?
- ✧ How was dwarfism perceived in comparison with other types of physical disorder?
- ✧ What special status was conferred on dwarf entertainers by virtue of their condition and its ‘otherness’?
- ✧ How were dwarfs represented in artworks and what does this indicate about their role in contemporary court culture?

This paper takes a mid-sixteenth century bronze statuette of a dwarf in the Victoria & Albert Museum as a case study, to examine the function of court dwarfs as entertainers and what this may reveal about contemporary perceptions of dwarfism.

Case Study: Aesop, V&A

The statuette of a dwarf astride an owl entered the V&A collection in 1855 and is currently titled *Aesop*.

Analysis of its iconography suggests that rather than a generic figure, it may have been intended as a recognisable portrait of Cosimo I de’Medici’s court dwarf, Pietro Barbino, and designed to reflect his role within Cosimo’s retinue.

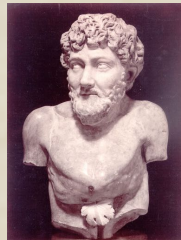


- ✧ *Aesop* statuette, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.
- ✧ Florentine, attributed to Niccolò Tribolo, c.1550.
- ✧ Material: bronze.
- ✧ Dimensions: height, 31.62cm, width, 11.30cm.

“Pietro, called Barbino, a gifted dwarf, well-lettered, a very gentle spirit and a favourite of our Duke”

Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, 1568

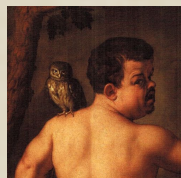
Wit, Wisdom and a Weapon



- ✧ Barbino’s depiction in the guise of the famously deformed Greek storyteller, *Aesop*, recalls Vasari’s description of him as ‘well-lettered’ and reflects the complex function of dwarfs as a group of erudite performers able to deploy powerful intellect, while seemingly exempt from the usual social constraints by their physical difference.



- ✧ Along with Aesopian connotations, the owl has other iconographic interpretations. The long-eared owl is a traditional attribute of the Fool, however the little owl is associated with Wisdom as the companion of Athena, a double meaning also exploited by Bronzino in his double-sided portrait of Cosimo’s dwarf, *Morgante* (Braccio di Bartolo) c.1553.



- ✧ The dwarf appears to carry a scourge-like verge, a weapon traditionally brandished by dwarfs as knightly attendants in chivalric narrative images. Suitably armed, rather than a passive object of ridicule, his representation launches a satirical attack on contemporary ideals of physical beauty celebrated in the Florentine heroic male nude.

Images: Unknown artist, *Aesop*, 2/3rd C.C.E., Villa Albani, Rome. Agnolo Bronzino, *Il Nano Morgante* (details), c.1553, Uffizi, Florence. Donatello, *David*, c.1440?, Bargello, Florence.

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