

T O M A S S O



Antonio Susini (1558-1624)

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

Bronze, on a turned wooden socle

12.5 cm (5in.) high, the figure / 20 cm (7 ¾ in.) high overall

‘... 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.’

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 domini Castri nuncupati del Rio, nano ducalis palatii nostri ac servitori nostro nobis dilectissimo salutem et omne bonum.'

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. 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. 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. 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 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. By 1600, Susini left Giambologna's workshop and set up his own in via de' Pilastrì, 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. 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 wields a more artificial cane.

Literature:

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