

A Wax Miniature of Joseph Boruwlaski

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DURING THE EIGHTEENTH century as in earlier times, dwarfs were treated very much as collectors' items, objects of luxury and ostentation acquired by the rich and royal houses of Europe. Like the court jesters, they contributed to the amusement of society, bringing a carnival spirit to their surroundings. In addition, there was increased scientific interest in dwarfs as a phenomenon of nature, and with giants, their opposite number, they were studied closely by physicians as well as scholars in an attempt to learn the reasons for their unusual size.

Two of the most famous dwarfs of the period were Count Boruwlaski (1739–1837)¹ and Nicolas Ferry (1741–64). They appear in contemporary works of reference, memoirs, and medical journals,² paintings of them were commissioned by well-known artists for interested patrons, and their portraits circulated in engravings.³ In France they aroused so much interest that casts were molded of their entire figures from

life, then not an unknown practice, as this was the time of the automaton, the traveling show, and the wax museum. Philippe Curtius (1737–94), for one, exhibited in his famous Cabinet, which opened in 1785 on the boulevard du Temple in Paris, life-size figures of the dwarf Ferry and a giant called Butterbrodt who weighed 476 lbs.⁴

In 1950 The Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired an unusual wax profile of Joseph Boruwlaski (Figure 1).⁵ This polychrome portrait is mounted on a glass support on which is inscribed in the lower left corner: *S. Percy / 1798*. The inscription on the frame—*Count Borowleski, the Polish dwarf*.—identifies the sitter, whose own memoirs, published in three languages and as many editions in English, have left us an account of his life.⁶ In spite of its evident appeal, this Percy miniature has never been exhibited and until now has remained unknown and unpublished.

Although Samuel Percy was one of the leading wax

1. There are a number of variations on the spelling of Boruwlaski. I follow the one he used in his memoirs (see note 6 below).

2. See, e.g., Denis Diderot's *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Neuchâtel, 1765) XI, pp. 7–8; Claude-Joseph Geoffroi, *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Sciences* (Paris, 1746) pp. 44–45; Louis-Elisabeth de La Vergne, comte de Tressan, "Mémoire sur un nain, envoyé à l'Académie des Sciences par M. le comte de Tressan, associé" (Paris, 1760), cited by Jean Avalon, see below: Sauveur-François Morand, "Sur les nains," *Histoire de l'Académie royale des Sciences* (Paris, 1764) pp. 62–71; Jean Avalon, "Nicolas Ferry dit 'Bébé,' nain du roi Stanislas Leczinski, duc de Lorraine," *Aesculape* 29 (1939) pp. 107–113.

3. Paul Richer, *L'Art et la médecine* (Paris, 1903) p. 205, refers to an engraving of Boruwlaski by Van Assen, and portraits of Ferry in the museums of Versailles and Nancy, as well as a statuette of Ferry in wax in the Ecole de Médecine in Paris.

4. Jean Adhémar, "Les Musées de cire en France, Curtius, le 'Banquet Royal,' les têtes coupées," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, ser. 6, 92 (1978) pp. 203–214.

5. Part of the bequest of Glenn Tilley Morse (1870–1950), clergyman, author, and scholar of Newburyport, Mass. Morse had a large collection of silhouettes, numerous wax portraits, seals, and medallions, a number of which he bequeathed to the Museum. The Samuel Percy portrait was "purchased from Miss Hannah Falcke, London, July 1927," as revealed by the Morse papers now in the Print Department of the Museum, kindly made available to me by Janet Byrne.

6. *The Memoirs of the Celebrated Dwarf Joseph Boruwlaski, A Polish Gentleman; Containing a Faithful and Curious Account of His Birth, Education, Marriage, Travels and Voyages; Written by Himself*, translated from the French by Mr. [Jean Thomas Hérissant] des Carrières, and dedicated to the duchess of Devonshire (London, 1788). English and French editions were published simultaneously, and a German translation appeared in Leipzig in 1789. A second English edition was printed at Birmingham in 1792. The third and last edition, *Memoirs of Count Boruwlaski: Containing a Sketch of His Travels with an Account of His Reception at the Different Courts of Europe, &c. &c. Written by Himself*, was printed at Durham in 1820. See also *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1908) II, pp. 872–873.



1. Samuel Percy (1750–1820), *Count Joseph Boruwlaski*, 1798. Colored wax, $7\frac{3}{8} \times 6\frac{3}{8}$ in. (18.7 × 16.2 cm.) with frame, actual size. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Glenn Tilley Morse, 50.187.30

modelers of his day and a number of his portraits have survived, surprisingly little is known about his life. He was born in Dublin, trained at the Dublin Societies' Schools, and first exhibited there in 1772. About 1785 he went to London where he remained (except for an occasional trip back to Ireland) for the rest of his life, exhibiting from time to time at the Royal Academy between 1786 and 1804.⁷

The ancient art of wax portraiture had flourished for more than two thousand years. Its fascinating history encompasses funerary ritual, belief in votive offerings, and magic, a direct link with heathen antiquity. The basic urge to recreate important subjects with vivid naturalism culminated in the use of wax for life and death masks, which were often ceremoniously displayed to the public. During the sixteenth century, such established artists as Jean Fouquet, Jean Perréal, and François Clouet were commissioned to paint the wax effigies or masks of the deceased French kings.⁸ Also in the sixteenth century, portraits in relief, busts, and genre scenes became popular, particularly in Italy and Germany. Antoine Benoist, a Frenchman, was commissioned to visit England to model a colored portrait in wax of James II in 1684. Wax portraiture in England reached its height in the following century in the work of such artists as Samuel Percy and his contemporaries Isaac Gosset, James Tassie, T. R. Poole, and Peter Rouw.

Most examples of wax sculpture are hidden away in museum storage owing to their fragility and their often imperfect condition, and to a general disregard for this so-called minor art.⁹ The Victoria and Albert Museum and the Wallace Collection in London are two exceptions, as they both have permanent displays. Percy is especially well represented in the Victoria and Albert as well as in the queen's collection at Windsor.

His portraits included members of the royal houses of England (Figure 2), France, and Russia, besides a varied assortment of celebrities, living and dead statesmen and poets among them. A typical advertisement reads: "Mr. Percy is now in town and will take likenesses in colored wax at 1 guinea and a half"; and in *Saunders' Newsletter* of August 2, 1780, he announced: "Masks taken from the dead face on the shortest notice, and likenesses finished from them."¹⁰

The material and texture of wax allowed a lifelike appearance, and wax miniatures cost far less than those in oil or enamel. Percy's technique, when mak-



2. Percy, *Princess Charlotte, Daughter of the Prince Regent*, 1817. Colored wax. London, Collection E. J. Pyke (photo: courtesy E. J. Pyke)

ing these small sculptures, was to carve a portrait in hard wax from which he made a plaster of Paris mold. Then thin sheets of various pigmented waxes representing flesh, hair, and so on were pressed one at a time into the mold, which was subsequently filled with liquid wax. When this had solidified the mold was removed, leaving the colored portrait ready for

7. Rupert Gunnis, *A Dictionary of British Sculptors, 1660-1851* (London, 1968) pp. 299-300. See also E. J. Pyke, *A Biographical Dictionary of Wax Modellers* (London, 1973) pp. 103-105.

8. Julius von Schlosser, "Geschichte der Porträtbildnerie in Wachs; Ein Versuch," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 29, pt. 3 (1911) pp. 171-258. I am indebted to Dr. Peter Cannon Brooks for sending me a copy of his translation of this important article.

9. In the last decade, however, there have been two international congresses on wax modeling: the first at the Museo Zoologico "La Specola" of Florence University in 1975, and the second in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1978.

10. Walter George Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists* (Dublin/London, 1913) II, pp. 227-228.



3. Thomas Rowlandson (1756–1827), *The Polish Dwarf Performing Before the Grand Seignior*, 1786. Etching. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, 56.567.10

hand-finishing. The costume was added by building up and carving rather than casting. Some of Percy's portraits had tiny glass eyes as well as jeweled accessories.¹¹ This procedure enabled the artist to make any number of copies, or if he wished, he could use the mold at the finishing stage as the basic model for different portraits, the individual's characteristics simply being added.

Percy was a very prolific artist. After modeling his 8ooth profile in 1786, he switched to full-face work in high relief.¹² It has been said that his portraits were not as successful as his genre scenes, which consisted of figures modeled in the round, arranged in a landscape or interior done in the manner of Gaetano Zumbo.¹³ In the Boruwlaski portrait, however, the little man's character and alertness are conveyed with great sensitivity and skill, which shows that upon occasion Percy was able to catch the very essence of a sitter.

Joseph Boruwlaski (he had no legal right to the title of count) was born in 1739 in Chaliez, in Polish Russia, of genteel but impoverished parents. Joseph was the second of six children, three of whom were exceptionally short, while the others were above average size—one brother reached the height of 6 feet 4 inches. As was not unusual in those days, his parents, who were unable to provide for Joseph properly, entrusted him to the care of a widow, Lady de Caroliz.

When she remarried she passed him on to the Countess Humieska, a well-connected lady with the entrée to many of the great houses of Europe. According to Boruwlaski's memoirs, he was fifteen years old when he joined the countess's establishment at Rychty, her estate in Podovia.¹⁴ At this time he was 2 feet high and affectionately known to his intimates as Joujou. Endowed with natural intelligence, a regularly proportioned body (highly unusual in a dwarf), good looks, and excellent manners, this no doubt thoroughly delightful, diminutive young man was a good companion and a welcome addition to the countess's entourage. His new life gave Boruwlaski the opportunity to travel and also to acquire a basic education. As a result of learning the fundamentals of mathematics and history, as well as of speaking German and French, he became something of a scholar; on the lighter side he was "an excellent wit and humorist," thus able to entertain and amuse the countess and her friends.¹⁵

The description of their travels offers diverting reading. The first trip Boruwlaski records was at the invitation of a neighboring pasha of Hocim, a Turkish city near Rychty. Never oblivious to the charms of the opposite sex, he found the sight of a seraglio most entertaining, describing the ladies and observing that some were natives of Circassia, well-known for its

11. G. Bernard Hughes, "Wax Portraits by Samuel Percy," *Country Life* 117 (1955) pp. 1255 and 1257; idem, "Portraits Modelled in Wax," *Country Life* 131 (1962) pp. 658–659. For an excellent guide to the techniques of wax sculpture and problems of preservation, see Vernon J. Murrell, "Some Aspects of the Conservation of Wax Models," *Studies in Conservation* 16 (1971) pp. 95–109.

12. Hughes, "Portraits Modelled in Wax," p. 659. A number of Percy's works were auctioned by Christie's at two sales, the first in 1800 when more than 63 were sold, the second in 1857 at Alton Towers, family seat of the earls of Shrewsbury, where over 100 were sold. The 15th earl had been a particular patron of Percy's. See Hughes, "Wax Portraits," p. 1257 and Gunnis, *Dictionary*, p. 300.

13. E. G. Elwyn, "Samuel Percy's Rustic Scenes in Wax," *Connoisseur* 90 (1934) pp. 320–324. See also Henry Staples Marlowe, "Pictorial Panels in Wax," *Antiquarian* 10 (1928) pp. 37–42.

14. Probably Podolia, a province of southern Russia between Bessarabia and Volhynia. Podolia was annexed to Poland until 1793, when it was taken by Russia.

15. In Vienna he was taught dancing by Mr. Angelini, ballet master to the court, and later at Versailles learned from the celebrated Gaviniès to play the guitar, an invaluable asset for his future livelihood (Boruwlaski, *Memoirs* [1788]).

beauties. He must have recounted this incident to Thomas Rowlandson, inspiring an illustration done at a much later date when Boruwlaski had settled in England (Figure 3).¹⁶

Visits with the countess to the Austrian and German courts followed, and in 1755–56 he accompanied her to Lunéville, near Nancy in Lorraine, where Stanislas Leszczynski, former king of Poland, had his court. Stanislas, to whom the countess was related, was then an old man of about eighty years and after a turbulent career was content to devote the rest of his life to science and philanthropy. His court dwarf was the celebrated Nicolas Ferry, born in 1741 and nicknamed Bébé, whose deformity had been published by Geoffroi, the French chemist, in 1746.¹⁷ Bébé was one of three dwarf children born to peasant parents in the Vosges. At birth he was 9 inches long and weighed about 12 ounces. A sabot was his cradle. He had a “perfectly proportioned shape, and most pleasing features” (Figure 4) but, unlike Boruwlaski,

he was dull-witted and given to uncontrollable bursts of passion and temper.

On the arrival of the countess, it was inevitable that the two dwarfs should meet. Their contrasting personalities led to an alarming episode, which sets Boruwlaski’s wit and resourcefulness in relief. The king took a natural liking to Boruwlaski, whose intelligent conversation impressed him. So one day he said, not very kindly, to his dwarf Ferry, “Voyez Bébé, quelle différence il y a entre vous et Joujou; il est aimable, gai, amusant et instruit, tandis que vous, vous n’êtes qu’une petite machine.” This threw Bébé into a jealous rage. A few minutes later when the king left the room, he furtively approached his rival, grabbed him round the waist, and tried to throw him into the fire.

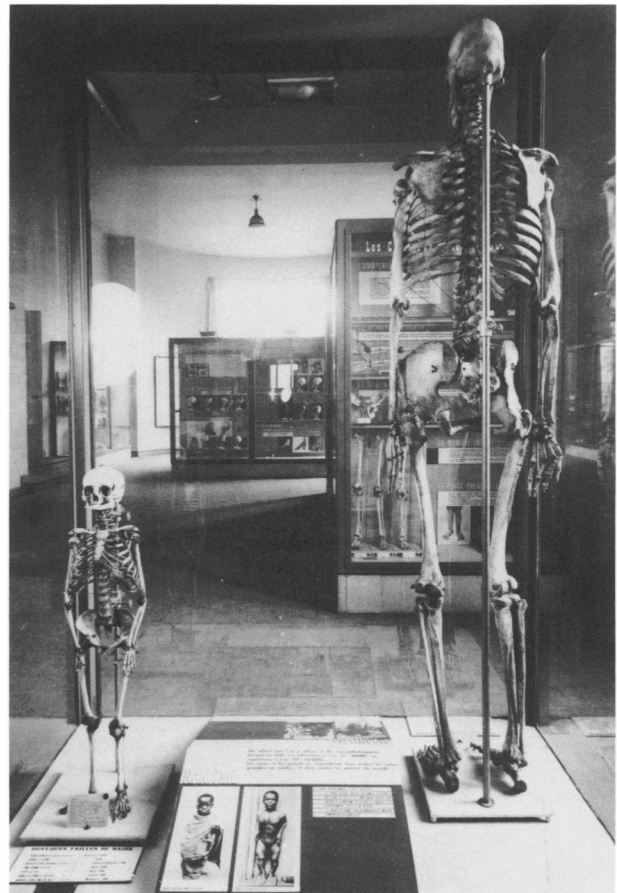
16. Joseph Grego, *Rowlandson the Caricaturist* (London, 1880) 1, pp. 186–187, ill. p. 187.

17. Geoffroi, *Histoire de l’Académie royale des Sciences*, pp. 44–45.

4. The figure of “Bébé,” Nicolas Ferry (1741–64). Colored wax in contemporary dress, H. 3 1/2 in. (about 80 cm.). Brunswick, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum (photo: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum)



5. The skeleton of Nicolas Ferry beside that of a giant. Paris, Musée de l’Homme (photo: Musée de l’Homme)



Fortunately, Joseph was strong and fought back. At the sound of the scuffle, the king returned and seeing what had happened, separated the two combatants. He then called his servants, put Bébé in their hands, and bade them inflict a corporal punishment relative to his offense. Boruwłaski interceded and the king finally agreed to revoke the punishment but demanded that Bébé apologize in their presence. This humiliating experience no doubt made a lasting impression on the poor spoiled Bébé, for with his limited intelligence he was virtually incapable of controlling his feelings. In effect he fell sick and did not long outlive this event. When he died at the age of twenty-three, it was with the physical appearance of an old man.

About the time of this disastrous meeting the comte de Tressan, formerly in the armies of Louis

6. Philip Reinagle, R.A. (1749–1833), *Joseph Boruwłaski*, ca. 1785. Oil on canvas, 53³/₈ × 42³/₈ in. (136 × 108 cm.). London, Royal College of Surgeons (photo: Royal College of Surgeons)



XV, was called to the court at Lunéville by King Stanislas and given the title of Grand-Maréchal. De Tressan was a scholar best known for adapting and publishing a unique collection of medieval romances which he discovered in the Vatican Library. He had a strong influence on literary and artistic taste in Lorraine and was instrumental in the establishment of an academy of science that King Stanislas founded at Nancy. His position at court gave him the opportunity of knowing and observing Bébé and he wrote a report which he addressed in 1760 to the Academy of Sciences in Paris,¹⁸ fourteen years after Geoffroi's paper. Four years later, a Dr. Sauveur Morand, who had attended Countess Humieska in Paris and had had an opportunity of studying Boruwłaski, wrote in conjunction with de Tressan's report on Bébé a comparison of the two, which he addressed to the Academy. The report was accompanied by a life-size statue of Ferry in wax that had been molded on his person by a surgeon Jeanet of Lunéville.¹⁹ Scientific interest in the anatomy and appearance of these famous dwarfs led to Bébé's skeleton being preserved after his death; it is today in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris (Figure 5).

In 1759 the countess and Boruwłaski, now aged twenty, continued their travels to Munich, where he was painted in a life-size portrait by Georg Desmarées.²⁰ From Munich they went to France. In an article dating from 1760 published in Diderot's *Encyclopédie* of 1765, the dwarf was described as measuring 28 *pouces* or inches. The countess and her entourage stayed in France a year, long enough to meet the royal family at Versailles, as well as Voltaire and the Abbé Raynal in Paris. Bouret, a *fermier général* famous for his great fortune and extravagances, gave Boruwłaski a dinner at which the guests dined on tiny game birds served on miniature platters. Everything at the party, including the porcelain and plate, was reduced in scale.

With the exception of a few incidental episodes before 1764, literally nothing is recorded in Boruwłaski's memoirs for the next twenty years. When the account resumes in 1780, Boruwłaski describes himself as forty-one years old, 10 inches taller and living in Poland. He fell in love with Isalina Barboutan, a young

18. Avalon, "Nicolas Ferry," p. 108.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Among the waxes in storage in the museum at Kassel, there is a figure that appears to me identical with the one in Brunswick (Figure 4).

“girl of beauty and merit” who had been taken into the household of the countess as a companion or lady-in-waiting. Her parents were French, long settled in Warsaw. Efforts were made to break up the romance and the countess demanded that Boruwlaski renounce his passion or leave her household immediately. Choosing the latter course, he married Isalina Barboutan in 1779 and was banished by the countess after twenty-five years of constant attendance.

In spite of the countess’s disapproval, Boruwlaski appealed to King Stanislas II of Poland, who sanctioned the marriage and granted the couple an annuity of 100 ducats.²¹ This was not enough to live on so Boruwlaski decided to support himself by giving concerts to friends and patrons in the houses where he had been so welcome before. To start him in his new life the king “ordered the master of the horse to supply [him] with a convenient coach” and provided letters of recommendation. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, he traveled all over Europe from Lapland to Damascus; his memoirs state that he left Warsaw for Cracow, and arrived in Vienna in 1781. There he resumed acquaintance with his former friends. One evening in the town house where Emperor Joseph II frequently held court, Boruwlaski met the British ambassador Sir Robert Murry Keith. He was promised letters of recommendation to the greatest personages at the British court and was persuaded to travel to England, where he arrived in 1782. Through his introductions, Boruwlaski became acquainted with the duke and duchess of Devonshire and other members of society, and was able to support himself by playing the violin and guitar. The duke of Marlborough even added his shoes to the cabinet of curiosities at Blenheim. In 1782 Boruwlaski met King George III and the royal family, and came under their patronage. Starting in Soho in 1783, his concerts took place all over the British Isles, where he was to spend the rest of his life except for a brief trip to France in 1790.

Boruwlaski was undoubtedly well known and sought after when he first arrived in his country of adoption. John Hunter (1728–93), the illustrious physiologist, surgeon, and anatomist, had the dwarf’s portrait painted by Philip Reinagle (Figure 6) for his anatomical museum. This was a mixed collection that included plants, fossils, paintings, drawings, abnormalities, and racial specimens, showing the variety of the surgeon’s scientific interests. It was designed “to illus-

trate the entire phenomena of life in all organisms, in health and disease,”²² and its most expensive specimen was a skeleton of O’Brien the Irish Giant, 7 feet 7 inches tall. The collection was acquired in 1800 by the Royal College of Surgeons, London—yet another example of the contemporary interest in rare physiognomies.²³

But adverse times set in for Boruwlaski. “His servant had eloped with trinkets and valuables to a large amount”²⁴ and the king of Poland cancelled his annuity under the misapprehension that he was making a fortune in Britain. His present way of life was inadequate to support him, so along with giving concerts he adopted “the resolution of exhibiting himself” for one guinea, then for five shillings, and afterwards for half-a-crown. A typical notice in an Edinburgh paper went as follows:

Dun’s Hotel, St. Andrew’s Square. On Saturday next, the 1st of August (1788), at twelve o’clock, there will be a public breakfast, for the benefit of Count Boruwlaski; in the course of which the Count will perform some select pieces on the guitar. Tickets (at 3s.6d each) may be had at the hotel, or at the Count’s lodging, No. 4 St. Andrew’s Street, where he continues to receive company every day from ten in the morning till three, and from five till nine.²⁵

When Samuel Percy modeled the Metropolitan Museum’s wax in 1798, he was faced with a task very different from the usual one in order to suggest the dwarf’s tiny stature (Figure 1). Boruwlaski, now fifty-eight years old, is dressed in a high-collared red coat and white waistcoat with gold buttons, the suggestion

20. Carl Hernmarck, *Georg Desmarées: Studien über die Rokokomalerei in Schweden und Deutschland* (Uppsala, 1933) pp. 101–102, pl. 14, cat. no. 6, p. 181, inscribed on the portrait: “. . . peint a Munic dans la grandeur naturelle a l’age de 22 ans le 8 Novembre 1759.” The year does not jibe with Boruwlaski’s birth date. This portrait is said to be in Schloss Ansbach, Triesdorf, SW Germany.

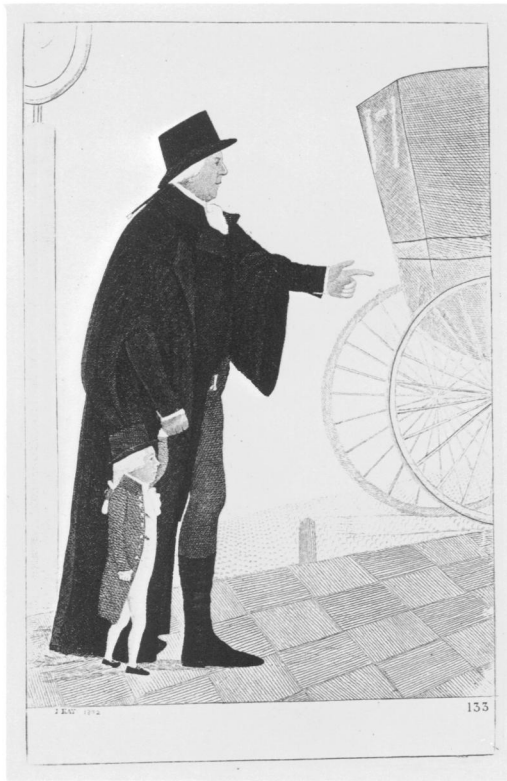
21. A daughter was born in Cracow in 1780. As the parents were unable to care for her, she was left with the margrave of Anspach. Other children of normal size were later born of this marriage, but what became of them is unrecorded.

22. *Dictionary of National Biography*, X, p. 292.

23. William Le Fanu, *A Catalogue of the Portraits, Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture in the Royal College of Surgeons of England* (London, 1960) cat. no. 248, p. 83, fig. 248.

24. John Kay, *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings* (Edinburgh, 1878) I, pt. II, p. 329.

25. *Ibid.*



7. John Kay (1742–1862), *Fergusson and Boruwlaski*, 1802. Etching, no. 133 in Kay's *A Series of Original Portraits and Caricature Etchings* (Edinburgh, 1878) I, part II. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Prints and Photographs, Bequest of Glenn Tilley Morse, 50.602.1435(2)

of a pristine white cravat and ruffled shirt underlining his concern for his appearance. His face in left profile is pale, his wig is silvered white and has slipped far back on his head, which appears to be bald. These details are to Percy's credit, showing his effort to create an accurate, detailed portrait that does not flatter. The use of empty space surrounding the sitter successfully demonstrates his unusual size. The dwarf appears at the bottom of the oval frame, which is swathed along the right and lower edge by a dark green curtain.²⁶ Percy frequently used this device in his portraits (see Figure 2), not only to hide the truncation of the figure but also to give a theatrical emphasis. In this case Boruwlaski might be sitting in an opera box and observing the scene.

At the close of the eighteenth century the prebendaries of Durham Cathedral offered Boruwlaski a house for the rest of his life and he retired peacefully

to Banks Cottage on the river Wear. About this time he became friends with a Mr. Neil Fergusson, described as "a gentleman in considerable practice as a lawyer"²⁷ and the tallest man in Edinburgh. Fergusson is shown in a print by John Kay of 1802 (Figure 7) "returning to his carriage, in company with the little Polish count, from the Parliament House, where he had been showing him the court of Session, the Advocates' Library, and other objects of interest." Boruwlaski was jokingly known about Edinburgh as "Barrel of Whisky."²⁸

The last thirty years of his life are unrecorded, and his memoirs end in 1791 with no mention of what had become of his wife and children. A full cast (presumably of plaster or wax) of Boruwlaski was taken by Joseph Bonomi shortly before his death in 1837 at the extraordinary age of ninety-eight,²⁹ and he is buried in the chapel of the Nine Altars of Durham Cathedral.³⁰

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26. The draperies in Percy's portraits being so fragile are often broken. In this case the curtain has been partially repaired on the lower right and parts are missing. In May 1981 the portrait was disassembled by Richard Stone, Objects Conservation Department, for cleaning prior to new photography. At that time fragments of newspaper dated 1865 were found to have been used as backing during an earlier restoration. Mr. Stone repositioned the fourth gilt button of Boruwlaski's waistcoat, which had slipped out of place, provided a new cover glass, and replaced the paper behind the glass support on which the wax is mounted. The appearance of the original background is not known.

27. Kay, *Original Portraits*, I, pt. II, p. 326.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

29. Obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (Oct. 1837) pp. 435–436: "Mr. Bonomi, the architect, recently took a full cast of him." As the famous neoclassical architect Joseph Bonomi died in 1808, this must have been his son, a sculptor of the same name (1796–1878).

30. James Wall, *Durham Cathedral* (London, 1930). The name derives from nine altars which stood against the east wall, in front of each of the lancet windows.