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Charles Antoine Coypel (French, 1694–1752). *François de Jullienne and His Wife*, 1743. Pastel, 39 3/8 x 31 1/2 in. (100 x 80 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Mrs. Charles Wrightsman Gift, in honor of Annette de la Renta, 2011 (2011.84)

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Back cover illustration: Detail of El Greco, *A View of Toledo*, ca. 1599–1600. See fig. 1, p. 12.

Illustration on p. 2: Detail of *Mercury Changes Aglauros to Stone* from the *Story of Mercury and Herse*. Design, Italian, ca. 1540. Tapestry, Netherlandish, ca. 1570. See fig. 1, p. 148.

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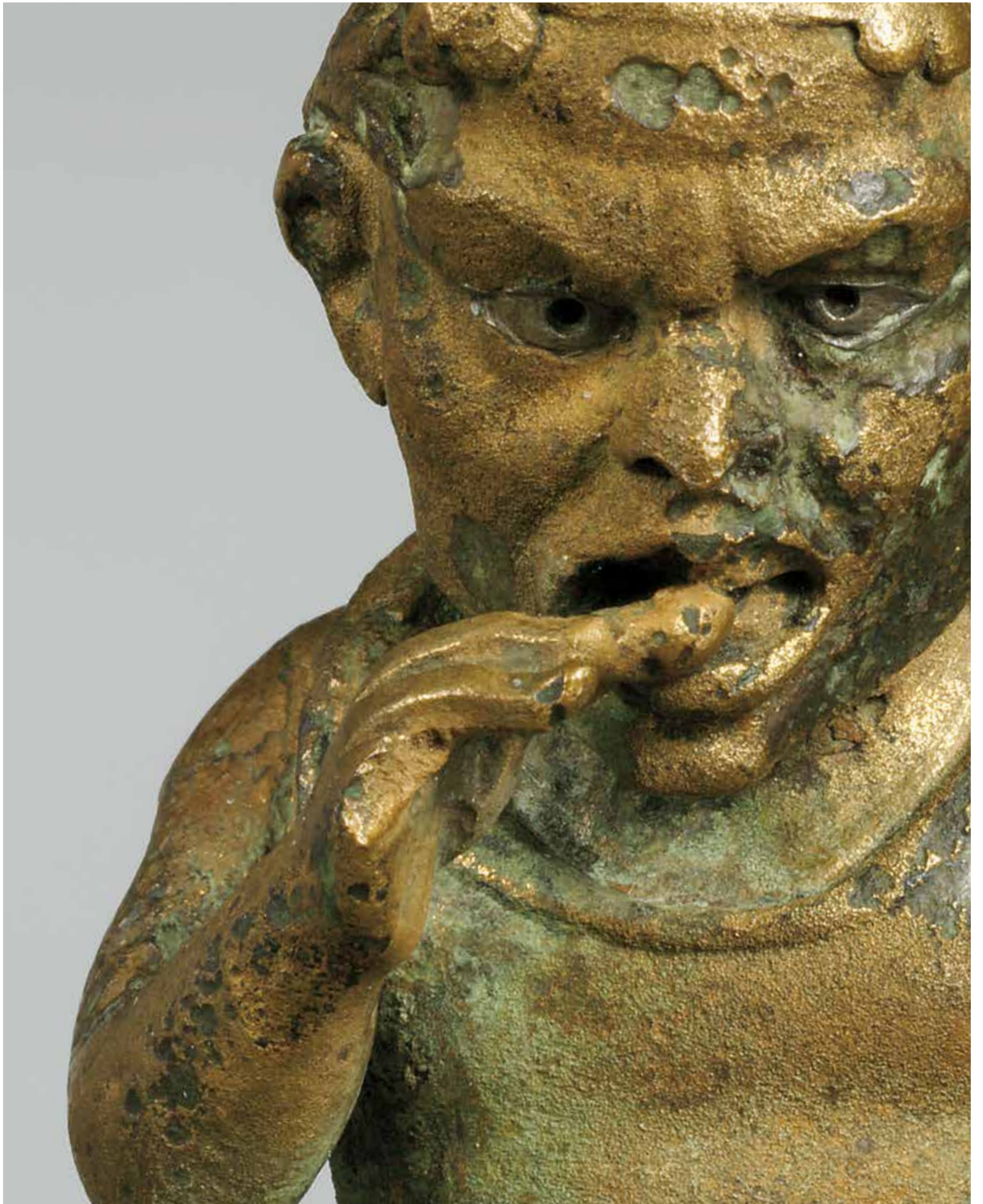
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
MMAB *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*  
MMJ *Metropolitan Museum Journal*

*Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.*



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LILLIAN BARTLETT STONER

## A Bronze Hellenistic Dwarf in the Metropolitan Museum

Representations of dwarfs in the Hellenistic world include a blending of realistic and imagined elements, and they are a fascinating subcategory of the “Hellenistic grotesque,” representations of the ill, destitute, or handicapped. Small-scale bronze statuettes of dwarfs, of which one in The Metropolitan Museum of Art is an important example (figs. 1a–c), were frequently displayed in Roman domestic settings and seem to have been particularly popular during the Late Republican and Early Imperial periods (ca. 100 B.C.–A.D. 100). In this context, images of dwarfs were emblematic of the mania for all things “Egyptian” that reached a fever pitch in the decades leading up to and following the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. This article explores the various associations that dwarfs came to embody through a long and complex process of appropriation (Egyptian to Greek to Roman), in an attempt to elucidate how the Metropolitan Museum’s



statuette was displayed and what it might have meant to the Roman viewer.

The small bronze dwarf is displayed in the Museum's Hellenistic gallery, in a case populated by other genre statuettes. Henry Gurdon Marquand, a discerning collector and well-known patron of the arts, gave the statuette to the Museum in 1897, the same year he became its second president. The donation of his fine collection of Roman bronzes, as well as a wealth of European paintings, transformed the Museum's collection before the turn of the century.<sup>1</sup>

The statuette, measuring  $3\frac{1}{8}$  inches in height, is solid cast in bronze and, despite surface damage and aggressive cleaning, is in remarkably good condition.<sup>2</sup> The green patina has been worn off in places, leaving blotches of a more golden color. The left side has sustained the most damage: the outer arm, hand, and shin are badly abraded. The face has also suffered, with a break at the left nostril and wear on the chin making those features appear respectively rather hooked and sharp. Areas of pitting are visible on the forehead, right knee and ankle, and the bottom of the tray. Two fingers are missing on the right hand. A shallow hole at the top of the head retains traces of lead solder, encircled by a worn, raised molding—this feature gives the most valuable clues to the statuette's ancient display context.

The dwarf stands on his left foot and steps forward in a toddling, bowlegged stride. The legs are chubby, with bulky, softly modeled calf and thigh muscles. The buttocks are prominent and boxy in shape, and the phallus is completely exposed and abnormally large,

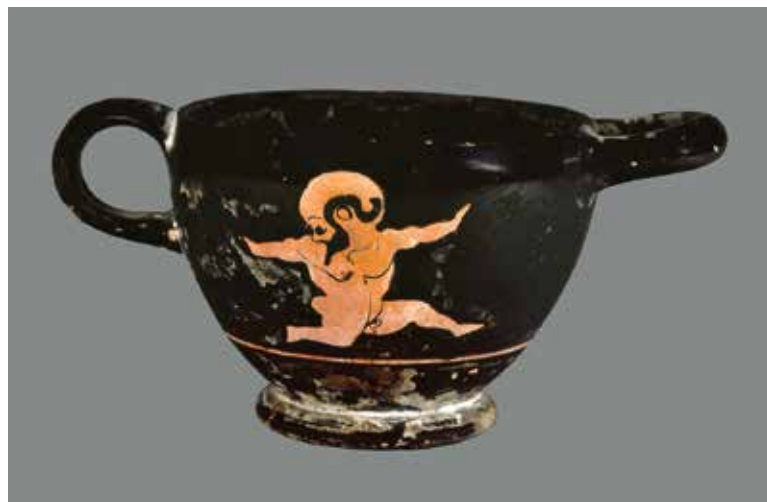
reaching to the soles of the feet. The feet themselves seem unlikely to have ever supported the figure, as they are somewhat curved. The protruding stomach and broad breast are covered by an apron of thick material, tied at the nape of the neck. A small, square pouch hangs from the belt on the left side, and the left wrist is encircled by what appears to be a blockish bracelet. He holds a large, deep dish laden with small, round edibles—perhaps fruits or cakes—and is sampling one with his right hand. Despite its small size, the statuette is full of a cheeky malevolence; the mouth is open to receive the treat he has pilfered, revealing both upper and lower rows of teeth. The brow is prominent and furrowed with dramatic, stylized eyebrows conveying a sinister effect. The eyes are inlaid in silver with deeply incised pupils, once likely filled with gemstones or glass-paste, now missing.<sup>3</sup> The use of a precious metal is a deliberate choice intended to draw focus to the eyes and additionally served to increase the expense and prestige of the statuette. The bald head is encircled by a crude wreath consisting of stylized leaves and clusters of grapes or berries.

In terms of physiognomy, it is clear that the artist was portraying disproportionate dwarfism (achondroplasia), the result of a genetic mutation that is characterized by short stature, stunted arms and legs, and “normal” sized trunk and head.<sup>4</sup> However, the oversized phallus and exaggerated facial features are figments of artistic imagination that impart the effect of caricature. Although more than two hundred bronze dwarf statuettes of this approximate scale have survived from

*figs. 1a–c* Statuette of a Dwarf. Late Hellenistic or Early Imperial, ca. 100 B.C.–A.D. 100. Bronze, with silver in the eyes, H.  $3\frac{1}{8}$  in. (7.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1897 (97.22.9)







*figs. 2a,b* Gamboling Dwarf on a Red-figure Skyphos. Attributed to the Manner of the Sotades Painter. Greek, from Capua, ca. 460 B.C. H. 3 in. (7.7 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris (G 617)

antiquity,<sup>5</sup> the silver eyes and impish animation of the Metropolitan's example make it especially compelling and deserving of a closer look.

Dwarfism was an acknowledged reality in ancient Mediterranean societies, and images of dwarfs were often depicted in the arts of New Kingdom Egypt and Classical Greece.<sup>6</sup> The different responses that the condition generated in these periods found partial reconciliation in Hellenistic and eventually Roman culture. Dwarfs featured prominently in Egyptian art and mythology, particularly in relation to scarab beetles and the dwarfish gods Ptah and Bes, their images circulating widely around the ancient Mediterranean, notably as symbols of apotropaic power.<sup>7</sup> These associations evidently influenced the treatment of dwarfs positively: they were frequently included in the retinue of elite households as special servants and enjoyed important roles in the religious sphere as ritual dancers and guards of temple precincts.<sup>8</sup>

In Archaic and Classical Greece dwarfs did not enjoy an elevated status such as they had in Egypt. Several popular Greek myths feature dwarfs; the most famous is the Battle of Pygmies versus Cranes, a tale from the *Iliad* in which a migrating flock of cranes wages war on a tribe of pygmies residing near the source of the Nile.<sup>9</sup> In general, no clear distinction between pygmies and dwarfs was made in Greek literature and art, an ambiguity that persisted through the Roman period. The words *pygmaios* and *nanos* (and their Latinized equivalents) were used interchangeably to describe both African pygmies<sup>10</sup> (in modern terms, a dark-skinned, sub-Saharan ethnic group characterized by their small size) and indigenous dwarfs, whose physical disproportion was caused by genetic mutation.<sup>11</sup> In one of the earliest artistic depictions of the Pygmies versus

Cranes episode, on the foot of the François Krater (ca. 570–560 B.C.), the pygmies (both cavalrymen and infantry) are small, proportionate humans.<sup>12</sup> In a later representation from ca. 480–470 B.C., now in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, and in the majority of cases, they are shown as disproportionate dwarfs, suggesting that dwarfs in the local population were used as visual inspiration.<sup>13</sup>

Another myth involving abnormally small characters is set during the life of Herakles. In this story the Kerkopes, diminutive, mischievous twin brigands, are caught red-handed while trying to steal from the hero.<sup>14</sup> Once they are hog-tied and slung over Herakles' shoulder, they earn their freedom by amusing him with their coarse jokes.<sup>15</sup> This myth can be read as an early precursor to the comedic, foulmouthed dwarfs described in Roman literature.

In Greek representations unrelated to these specific myths, dwarfs are nearly always shown balding or bearded, perhaps in an effort to distinguish them from children.<sup>16</sup> A charming red-figure skyphos in Paris shows a male dwarf gamboling on each side and displaying all of the iconographic conventions typical of the period: mostly bald, bearded, with prominent forehead and snub nose (figs. 2a, b). These stylized facial features and those of satyrs are markedly similar, and perhaps because of this contrived resemblance, dwarfs began to be associated with Dionysos—a tendency that intensified through the Roman period.<sup>17</sup>

The burgeoning popularity of dwarfs in the art and literature of the Hellenistic period builds upon their earlier roles in dynastic Egypt and Classical Greece. While older associations (as servants, attendants of Dionysos, and mischievous foreigners) remain, for the first time dwarfs become the subject of heavy-handed



*fig. 3* Dwarf Boxer. Greek, 150 B.C.–A.D. 10. Bronze, 4 3/8 in. (11.1 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (RES.08.32k)

*fig. 4* Dwarf Gladiator. Bronze, 2 3/8 in. (6 cm). British Museum, London (1922.0712.4)



humor: their smallness, combined with surprising and distinctly adult characteristics, is the butt of the joke.

Dwarfs are often referred to in literature as entertainers and servants in elite households. Athenaeus writes of Ptolemy IV processing publicly in Alexandria, followed by a retinue of dancing dwarfs in an enactment of a Dionysiac procession.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the practice of keeping dwarfs for amusement is a continuation of the much older Pharaonic tradition, but with a distinctly Greek twist. In such a grandiose display, Ptolemy IV presented himself as the new Dionysos, and the cavorting dwarfs filled in as real-life satyrs. Dwarfs were assimilated into Ptolemaic court ideology of luxury and hedonistic excess, which in Roman times was recalled (sometimes with admiration) as an example of excessive moral decadence. Not only did dwarfs preserve their function as novelty servants, but their humorous size and cultivated exoticism were transformed into symbols of godlike luxury. They were soon viewed this way throughout the Roman world.

In the Roman period, dwarfs were strongly associated with Egyptian culture, more so than they had been in Classical Greece. Special interest in Egypt developed in the second century B.C., as Rome became a major international force and found itself increasingly in

contact (and at odds) with the powerful Hellenistic kingdoms of the East. Egyptian cults became fashionable in Rome, and interior spaces were decorated with Egyptian ethnological scenes, one of the most famous and earliest examples coming from Palestrina.<sup>19</sup> As Rome confronted Egypt's captivating history, images of dwarfs entered Roman culture as part of the newly adopted "Egyptianizing" repertoire.

Mark Antony is the first notable Roman known to have adopted the tradition of keeping dwarfs in his home.<sup>20</sup> Given Antony's reported enjoyment of luxuries typically associated with the decadent "East," his ownership of dwarfs likely deliberately echoed the Ptolemaic practice.<sup>21</sup> Retaining dwarfs quickly became popular, even in the highest levels of Roman society, as a status symbol. Augustus's renegade daughter, Julia, kept two, although Suetonius writes of the emperor's personal dislike of the fashion.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Mark Antony and Julia were characterized as owning dwarfs is highly significant, given how well known they were in literature as intemperate consumers of wine, sex, and other excesses associated in the Roman mind with the "East." Dwarfs had come to represent the extravagances of Hellenistic despots that the most conservative fringe of Roman society—with the emperor Augustus at

its forefront—disdained as utterly un-Roman. His endorsement of traditional Roman mores could not stop the spread of a culture of “Eastern” luxury, and the popularity of dwarf-attendants in Rome persisted.

Roman authors refer to dwarfs as entertainers, performing in public and private spheres. Statius describes with admiration a display of pugilist dwarfs in the Roman arena: “They give wounds fighting hand to hand and threaten each other with death—what fists!”<sup>23</sup> Their aggressive demeanor and unexpected power are emphasized as a counterpoint to their smallness, eliciting amusement and amazement in a cosmopolitan audience constantly seeking novel forms of diversion. Other descriptions indicate that dwarfs reenacted the Battle of Pygmies versus Cranes, in an appealing mix of drama, comedy, and brute violence.<sup>24</sup> An even more outlandish combination, in the Colosseum during Saturnalia, featured dwarf gladiators fighting against armed, full-size women, perhaps impersonating Amazons.<sup>25</sup> The uncertain outcome of this bizarre match must have increased the highly valued suspense factor.<sup>26</sup>

Many representations of fighting dwarfs in bronze survive, including a particularly fine boxer now in Boston (fig. 3).<sup>27</sup> The figure’s compact, muscular body is poised for action as he grasps the ancient equivalent of brass knuckles in his fists—reminiscent of the class of

fighter that so impressed Statius. Dwarfs are also shown wearing gladiatorial costume, as in a British Museum figure equipped with a crested helmet cuirass and small circular shield (fig. 4). Presumably the spectacle here was intended to be more comic than menacing.

Ancient authors also write of dwarf entertainers in the private sphere. Propertius tells of a dwarf dancing in flickering lamplight to the accompaniment of a flute, and characterizes the troupe as specializing in “Egyptian-style” entertainment.<sup>28</sup> Lucian describes a dinner-party guest who is the target of a rude-mouthed dwarf belonging to the host family, referring to the dwarf as a “tiny Alexandrian man.” In another passage, a dwarf recites salacious verses in an Egyptian accent to the delight of his audience.<sup>29</sup> Whether or not these dwarfs were Egyptian by birth or ethnicity, it seems clear that their distinct modes of entertainment—dancing and rehearsing ribald poems—linked them in the Roman mind with Alexandria by the first century B.C.<sup>30</sup>

A large corpus of dancing dwarf statuettes provides clues of what these performances might have looked like. Dancers, alone or in troupes, specialized in performance genres and employed an assortment of costumes and musical instruments. The famous late second-century B.C. dancing dwarfs from the Mahdia shipwreck, clearly a pair, twirl around and play castanets (figs. 5, 6).<sup>31</sup>

*fig. 5* Dancing Female Dwarf. Late 2nd century B.C. Bronze, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (31.5 cm). From the Mahdia shipwreck, ca. 80s B.C. The National Bardo Museum, Tunis (F213)

*fig. 6* Dancing Male Dwarf. Late 2nd century B.C. Bronze, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (32 cm). From the Mahdia shipwreck, ca. 80s B.C. The National Bardo Museum, Tunis (F215)





The female figure caricatures the veiled dancer type, which had strong associations with Alexandria.<sup>32</sup> The so-called Baker Dancer<sup>33</sup> is a particularly beautiful example in the Metropolitan Museum, and the parallels between the two figures in their whirling motion and costume are apparent.

The bronze dwarf in the Museum belongs to a smaller category of surviving dwarf figures that neither fight nor dance, and it should be considered one of the finest existing representations of dwarfs as household attendants. His Dionysian wreath locates him in a symposium or festival context, and the heavily laden tray suggests that he is serving refreshments at such an event. The closest parallel, and perhaps the only other dwarf of this type, is a statuette now in Florence with a similar costume and disposition (fig. 7).<sup>34</sup> Instead of a tray, he clutches a wickerwork basket of fruits or breads and appears to be singing or calling out. Both works may be interpreted as servants misbehaving to the delight of both host and guests, of the sort described by Suetonius, Propertius, and Lucian.

The conspicuously large phallus of the Museum's figure, and so many other surviving dwarf statuettes from the Roman period, can be interpreted in a number of ways. In Greco-Roman art, the male body was frequently represented nude, and across a variety of media, the genitalia of beautiful youths and mature warriors alike were typically rather small. Because of this association, modestly sized penises have regularly been considered a hallmark of the ideal male form.<sup>35</sup> In

contrast, the grotesquely large phallus was reserved for unheroic characters, including comic actors (who wore large strap-ons) and the congenitally misshapen bodies that so captured the artistic imagination in the Hellenistic period.<sup>36</sup> In these contexts, the preposterously outsized phallus was likely used to reinforce an already unattractive aspect, while at the same time providing a humorous gloss. Ancient religion provides another index for understanding the phallus, which is sometimes interpreted as a symbol to repel the evil eye in the Roman period.<sup>37</sup> The phallus reinforces readings of dwarf statuettes as ugly, humorous, and even apotropaic, but also provides a visual manifestation of the paradox between small stature and loud voice, prodigious strength, or sharp wit that is underscored in ancient descriptions.

Neither the provenance nor original display context of the Museum's dwarf statuette is known, but works with secure provenance provide clues as to how it might have been used in antiquity. Bronze dwarfs of similar size and craftsmanship were found by the dozens in ruined houses of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and the surrounding areas.<sup>38</sup> Because the socioeconomic situation of these households is now fairly well understood, it seems reasonable to suggest that objects of this type were used to adorn the homes of prosperous, middle-class owners.<sup>39</sup> They were displayed as decorative objects, independently, in groups, or incorporated in furniture and utensils. Six bronze dwarfs cunningly shaped as oil lamps have been recovered from Herculaneum and Pompeii, the phalluses serving as nozzles from which the wicks and flames would emerge (fig. 8).

The soldered feature on the head of the Museum's statuette may indicate that it was originally part of some type of ornament or utensil. Because the feet are curved to the extent that the figure cannot stand on its own, it seems probable that it was hung by means of a suspension ring fixed to the head. The bronze boxer from Boston (see fig. 3), too, has remains of a soldered-on attachment at the top of the head; given its tripod-like lower body, it most likely supported a candelabrum or some other fitting. Not all examples were functional objects: a female dwarf from the Mahdia shipwreck still has a suspension ring on its back and presumably floated among the proceedings (fig. 9). Such ornaments intended for suspension were often fitted with small bells that would have chimed in the wind or at the passage of a visitor.<sup>40</sup>

Dwarfs attracted many associations in the ancient world. They were alternately revered or ridiculed, or valued as servants or dancers, but always forced into

*fig. 7* Dwarf Carrying a Basket. 1st century B.C.–1st century A.D. Bronze, 3¼ in. (8.2 cm). Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence (2300)





*fig. 8* Oil Lamp in the Shape of a Phallic Dwarf. 1st century A.D. From Pompeii. Bronze, 8% in. (22 cm). Museo Archeologico Nazionale (27871)

*fig. 9* Female Dwarf with Suspension Ring. Late 2nd century B.C. Bronze, 11% in. (29.5 cm). From the Mahdia shipwreck, ca. 80s B.C. The National Bardo Museum, Tunis (F214).

the entertaining fringes by way of myth and occupation. Hellenistic representations of dwarfs fall into the grotesque category but ultimately surpass it by retaining older associations as attendants of Dionysos and by embodying Ptolemaic luxury and excess. In the home of a wealthy Roman, the Museum's dwarf would have served as a charming decoration; indeed, as a royal household might surround itself with live dwarf entertainers, so might a middle-class Roman *dominus* populate his house with whimsical statuettes of the same. When displayed in a dining room, the statuette would blend unobtrusively into the lavish decoration perhaps until an inebriated guest spotted it. After a closer look, the diner would recognize the figure as a misbehaving dwarf—he might think of satyrs, lavish festivals, or Eastern despots. Most importantly, he would be caught off guard and enjoy the dwarf's intense gaze and surprising phallus. The diminutive statuette would successfully entertain the room, as its living counterpart might have done in a royal household.

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## NOTES

- 1 Tomkins 1989, pp. 73–75.
- 2 Casting technique and condition were summarily addressed by Gisela Richter (1915, p. 126). Further analysis is based on my observation and the suggestions of Deborah Schorsch.
- 3 This is assumed to be the case for another small bronze grotesque with silver eyes and similarly deeply incised pupils at the Metropolitan Museum (12.229.6). See Richter 1913, p. 150.
- 4 For an extensive description of achondroplasia, see Dasen 1993, pp. 7–10.
- 5 For a nearly comprehensive catalogue and discussion of surviving bronze dwarf statuettes (although it does not include MMA 97.22.9), see Garmaise 1996.
- 6 The work of Véronique Dasen is the most thorough for the Egyptian and Classical Greek periods; see Dasen 1988, 1990, and 1993. For further erudite observations on the iconography of dwarfs in the Classical period, see Shapiro 1984.
- 7 Dasen 1993, pp. 55–103; Meyboom and Versluys 2007, pp. 175–77.
- 8 Dasen 1993, pp. 156–59.
- 9 Homer, *Iliad* 3.4–9. After the conquests of Alexander, as the known world expanded, the “little people” of myth were placed farther afield and became associated with Caria, India, and Thule. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 10 For the modern definition of “pygmy,” see Cavalli-Sforza 1986, pp. 81–93. Michael Garmaise points out, “Homer may have conceived them as ‘tiny’ or ‘fist-sized men’ (from the Greek *pygme*).” Garmaise 1996, pp. 21–23.
- 11 Dasen believes that stories of pygmies may have emerged to account for the presence of pathologically short people in Greek cities; this supposition explains the absence of descriptions of ethnic characteristics, such as skin color. Dasen 1993, p. 179.
- 12 Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence (4209). *ABV* 76.1 (682).
- 13 The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (b 1818). *ARV* 382.188 (1649).
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 189–93.
- 15 The oldest surviving literary narrative of the myth of Herakles and the twin brigands is recounted by Nonnos (6th century A.D.) and presumably was born out of a longer literary tradition. For a succinct survey of the myth’s literary and iconographic development, as well as its significance in the western colonies, see Marconi 2007, pp. 150–59.
- 16 The perceived similarities between children and dwarfs owing to their size and proportions persisted in both comedic and scientific texts. Most famously, Aristotle (*De partibus animalium* 4.10.686, 1–20) noted that “all children are dwarfs. . . .”
- 17 For instance, dwarfs are often shown with thyrsos, garlands, and wine. See, for example, a stamnos fragment attributed to the Peleus Painter at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität in Erlangen (1707) (*ARV* 1039.6). In representations of the Kerkopes harassing a sleeping Herakles, the Kerkopes were occasionally replaced by satyrs, underscoring the connection between these groups of comical and otherworldly beings. See McPhee 1979, pp. 38–40, pl. 15.1–3.
- 18 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 5.201e; 6.246c.
- 19 Meyboom 1995, app. 13, pp. 150–54; Meyboom and Versluys 2007, p. 176. See also De Vos 1980.
- 20 Philodemus, *De signis* 4.
- 21 Horace, *Satirae* 1.3.46–47.
- 22 Suetonius, *Divus Augustus* 83. That Augustus presented himself as a true Roman in opposition to Antony (who had been corrupted by the luxury and effeminacy of the East) is another way to interpret his dislike of the practice of keeping dwarfs in the home.
- 23 Statius, *Silvae* 1.6.57–64.
- 24 Duke 1955, pp. 223–24; Brunet 2004, pp. 145–70.
- 25 Carcopino 1940, p. 240.
- 26 I thank Katherine E. Welch for this suggestion.
- 27 Comstock and Vermeule 1971, p. 129, no. 145.
- 28 Propertius, 4.8.39–42.
- 29 Lucian, *Symposium* 18–19.
- 30 Garmaise 1996, p. 46.
- 31 Pfisterer-Haas 1994, pp. 483–88.
- 32 Thompson 1950.
- 33 MMA 1972.118.95.
- 34 Arbeid and Iozzo 2015, pp. 186–87, no. 165.
- 35 Dover 1989, pp. 126–27; McNiven 1995.
- 36 For excellent discussions of the “Hellenistic grotesque” as a type, see Himmelmann 1983; Giuliani 1987; and Fischer 1998.
- 37 See, for example, Stewart 1997, pp. 225–27.
- 38 Garmaise 1996, pp. 148–64.
- 39 See, for example, Jongman 1988.
- 40 These tintinnabula are known from many works. Even the bronze oil lamp shown in fig. 8 is fitted with small rings from which small bells were presumably attached. More complete examples abound; see, for instance, Cantarella 1998, pp. 66, 88, 104, 116–17.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ABV Beazley 1956

ARV Beazley 1963

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