

Court dwarfs: an overview of European paintings from fifteenth to eighteenth century

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Abstract Since antique times, dwarfs have been commonly employed at court, mostly as servants, entertainers, or personal attendants upon noble women and noblemen. Their presence at European Renaissance courts was very common, as demonstrated by their presence alongside to their masters or mistress in several artworks of that period. Aim of our paper is to derive clinical information regarding the type of dwarfism affecting people living and acting at European courts from an overview of paintings dating fifteenth to the eighteenth century.

Keywords Court dwarfs · Dwarfs in art · Renaissance courts

Introduction

From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, corresponding to Renaissance and Baroque period, dwarfs were ordinarily employed at European courts, mostly as servants, entertainers, playmates or animal trainers, personal attendants upon women and noblemen, less frequently were appointed for military or public offices [1]. Their active participation to daily court life is demonstrated by their ubiquitous

appearance in group settings or alongside to their masters or mistress in several artworks of that time.

Spain and Spanish Netherlands

Chronicles of the seventeenth century report the presence of more than 100 dwarfs in the entourage of Philip IV of Spain (1605–1665), for whom the King had a special predilection. Spanish court dwarfs inspired some masterpieces of the court painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) including: *The Dwarf Francisco Lezcano*, *The Dwarf Sebastian de Morra* and *The Dwarf Don Juan Calabazas called Calabacillas* representing achondroplastic court buffoons; *The Dwarf Don Diego de Acedo*, portrait of the King's Undersecretary and Keeper of the Seal, suffering from diastrophic dysplasia; *Court Dwarf Don Antonio el Ingles*, portrait of a pituitary dwarf with a dog; and *Maids of Honor*, showing the young pituitary dwarf Nicolasito Pertusato that rests his foot on a large dog, and the achondroplastic dwarf Maria Barbola in the background (all dating between 1640 and 1657, and exhibited at Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain); and, finally, *Prince Balthasar Charles with a dwarf*, showing the future heir to the throne with a female achondroplastic dwarf (ca.1631; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA).

Court dwarfs also captured the attention of Juan van der Hamen (1596–1631), who depicted *Portrait of a Dwarf*, in which a sumptuously dressed and armed achondroplastic dwarf holds a ruler's staff; and Rodrigo de Villandrando (1588–1623), who painted the *Portrait of infante Felipe (future Phillip IV) with dwarf Soplillo*, representing the future heir to the throne and his personal attendant, affected by a proportionate dwarfism (both dating ca. 1620, and exhibited at Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain).

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Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle (1517–1586), a leading minister of the Spanish Habsburgs, had his servant dwarf, Stanislaus, a proportionate (likely pituitary) dwarf, portrayed by Antonis Mor (1517–1576) while handling the Cardinal's dog (ca. 1549; Louvre Museum, Paris, France).

The daughter of King Philip II of Spain, the Infanta Isabella Clara Eugenia (1566–1633), sovereign of Spanish Netherlands, also had her dwarf servants, like Magdalena Ruiz and another unknown young pituitary dwarf with whom she was portrayed by Alonso Sanchez Coello (1531–1588) (ca. 1586; Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain) and Frans Pourbous the younger (1569–1622) (ca. 1599; Hampton Court Palace, London, UK), respectively.

England

In 1632, Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641) portrayed the wife of King Charles I of England, *Queen Henrietta Maria with Jeffrey Hudson* (ca. 1633; National Gallery of Art, Washington, USA) her famous dwarf [3]. Sir Hudson was born in Rutlandshire in 1619, son of a butcher. He was a gracefully proportioned (presumably a pituitary) dwarf. At age nine, when he measured about 18 inches (46 cm) in tall, his father gave him to the Duchess of Buckingham, who made him a page to the Duke. He was then adopted by Queen Henrietta Maria and appointed captain of Horse in the Royalist army (1642). He accompanied the Queen into exile in France and returned with her in England when the monarchy was restored (1660). He was then accused of being involved in a plot to overthrow the government and imprisoned. He was released but died shortly after, in 1683, aged 63.

The painter Richard Gibson was another eminent dwarf at Charles I's court, portrayed by Sir Lely (ca. 1658; National Portrait Gallery, London, UK). He was led to painting by his original mistress of Mortlake, becoming later the King's page of the back-stairs and instructing in drawing the Princesses Mary and Anne. He married the dwarf Mrs. Shepherd and had nine children. He died at age 75.

Dwarfs were loved and hosted not only by the King, but also by noble families, as shown in the painting *Alatheia Talbot, Countess Arundel* of Paul Rubens (1577–1640), portraying the proportionate, young dwarf Robin dressed with luxuriously clothes together with Countess Aletheia Talbot and Sir Dudley Carleton (ca. 1620; Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany).

France

Stanisław Leszczyński, Duke of Lorraine (previously King of Poland), was renowned throughout Europe for his favorite servant dwarf Nicolas Ferry (1741–1764),

nicknamed Bébé. He was born in a farmer family in Plaine, Bas-Rhin, France, unusually small (24 cm), and continued to grow slowly but proportionately, reaching the final height of 86 cm. He entered the duke's court in 1746 where he spent his entire life. He was of poor intelligence and health, and died at age 22. His skeleton was kept at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, France [4].

Italy

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Italy was divided into a number of city-states or communes, duchys, and marquisates, the most powerful being Milan, Florence, Pisa, Siena, Genoa, Ferrara, Mantua, Verona, and Venice. Dwarfs were commonly found at the court of noble Italian Renaissance families, as shown by the presence of achondroplastic servants on the side of the noble couple in the famous scene of the bridal chamber (*Camera degli Sposi*) of Palazzo Ducale in Mantua (dating 1465–1474) by Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506), and in the Vasari's (1511–1574) painting *Marriage of Catherine de Medici to Henry of Orleans* (Palazzo Vecchio, Florence, Italy). Dwarfs were portrayed also with young crown prince or princesses, as in Giacomo Vighi's (1510–1573) *Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy as a child accompanied by a dwarf*



Fig. 1 Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy as a child accompanied by a dwarf. Oil on canvas, ca. 1573. Giacomo Vighi. National Gallery, Turin, Italy



Fig. 2 The giant Giovanni Bona and the dwarf Thomerle. Unknown author. Ca. 1621. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria

(ca. 1573; National Gallery, Turin, Italy) (Fig. 1) and *Girl with a Dwarf Thought to be a Portrait of Margarita of Savoy*, by Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625) (ca. 1595).

Germany

The portrait of *Emperor Ferdinand II with a court dwarf* by Joseph Heinz the Elder (1564–1609) (ca. 1604), in which Ferdinand II (1578–1637), Holy Roman Emperor from 1619 to 1637, is portrayed with a proportionate, well-dressed dwarf holding a dog, and *The giant Giovanni Bona and the dwarf Thomerle* (unknown artist; ca. 1621; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Austria) (Fig. 2) representing a very small pituitary dwarf at the side of an acromegalic subject, testimonies the presence of people with physical deformities, including dwarfs and giants, also at German courts.

The court touring dwarf

Józef Boruwlaski was born in Poland in 1739 from a poor family, in which five of his siblings (including his sister)

were also short. He was a proportionate (likely pituitary) dwarf, measuring 43 cm at six, and 99 cm as an adult, with a great wit and intelligence. He was initially adopted by the Countess Humiecka who took him to Vienna to meet Empress Maria Theresa, to Luneville (where he met and fought with Leszczyński's dwarf Nicolas Ferry) and to Paris, before coming back to Poland under the protection of Stanislaw II and marrying. From 1781 he toured Austria, Germany, Turkey, England, and Ireland with his wife playing music and dancing, and spent the last years of his life in Durham, where he died in 1837. Philip Reinagle (1749–1833) painted his portrait in 1782 [5].

Conclusions

The examination of artworks may provide important social and historical information (i.e., the role of people with deformities, including dwarfs, in the different historical periods) [1–3, 6], and could also be intriguing for physicians trying to attempt the diagnosis of certain syndromes affecting artistic subjects, derived from general physical appearance and specific anatomical details [7, 8].

Conflict of interest The authors have nothing to disclose.

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