

## **“The world’s a stage...”: Some Observations on Four Hellenistic Terracotta Figurines of Popular Entertainers**

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### **Abstract**

*This article discusses four Hellenistic terracotta figurines that belong to a class commonly categorized as grotesques. It is demonstrated that physical deformities of the portrayed personages should be attributed to particular medical conditions, namely acromegaly, achondroplastic dwarfism, and emaciation due to atrophy of muscles. It is proposed that the figurines depict entertainers, a comic pyrrhic dancer, a buffoon of some kind, and two dwarf combatants, that capitalized on their physical appearance. These statuettes should be considered testimonies that alongside the ostentatious and often extravagant theatrical spectacles of Antiquity, there always existed another kind of entertainment of rather sordid nature that appealed to the ancient men in the streets and reflected the Hellenistic tastes. An attempt is made to contextualize such figurines and to comment on their possible meaning and function.*

**Keywords:** terracotta figurine, grotesque, popular culture, popular entertainment, Hellenism, Hellenistic art

### **Introduction**

“The world’s a stage, life an entrance: you came, you saw, you went away.”  
Democritus (*The Atomists*, 1999, p. 238, no. 115)

On a recent Tuesday afternoon the last car of a train in the New York City subway was practically empty, with no more than ten people spread throughout. Having entered the car, one immediately noticed a strange figure, aimlessly – or so it seemed – wondering back and forth along the car. An elderly man presented a curious sight: balding, with wisps of gray hair, dressed in old slacks and sweatshirt, he was followed by a large wolfish-looking dog on a leash which was tied to his waist. A closer look revealed that the man was blind and his furry companion must have been his guide dog that temporarily allowed the man to lead. In addition to a couple of bags, the man’s torso was hung with four plastic open boxes of bright red, yellow, and blue. Once every few moments the man almost mechanically ran his hands through the colorful boxes to check whether anything was deposited there. A larger black box on his side turned out to be a loudspeaker and there was a mike attached to his chest. In fact the old man was singing to accompany his bizarre dance moves as he made his way back and forth along the car, and was expecting to receive a reward for the entertainment he provided. The reaction of the man’s intended audience was very much alike: seemingly uncomfortable, people were looking away pretending not to notice the blind singing dancer.

However, we have plenty of evidence that in the Hellenistic and Roman times, in numerous cities and villages around the Mediterranean, the public would generally have had quite a different response. In fact, scenes such as the one just described (minus contemporary technological contraptions, of course), must have been a very familiar sight for the ancients. The Hellenistic period is characterized by extensive changes in the polis system, by rapid urbanization, and by continuous influx of population from the countryside into the newly founded cities (Graham et al., 2006, pp. 52-72). The latter presented vibrant atmosphere with an endless kaleidoscope of people of different races, nationalities, and classes, mixing and mingling on the crowded streets. Among them one would easily spot jugglers and acrobats, various dancers, animal trainers, street musicians and conjurers, trying to make some money in taverns, at dinner parties, and on the street corners.

Even the crippled beggars inadvertently provided some entertainment simply through their appearance (Uhlenbrock, 1990b, p. 77).<sup>1</sup> Visual arts of the period – bronze and terracotta figurines in particular – reveal fascination with people exhibiting various physical deformities: images of cripples, dwarfs, and hunchbacks abound, and realism is considered a particular feature of Hellenistic and later of Roman art (Hanfmann, 1963; Himmelmann, 1983; Pollitt, 1986, esp. pp. 127-149; Fowler, 1989, esp. pp. 44-78; Zanker, 2004, esp. pp. 124-143; Stewart, 2006, esp. pp. 172-175).<sup>2</sup>

### The Figurines

Four fragmented statuettes in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York belong to this category of realistic figures or, as they are more often referred to, grotesques. Grotesque is a convenient yet dangerous umbrella term that facilitates the tendency to group together representations of bizarre-looking individuals with unusual, exaggerated, or peculiar facial and/or bodily characteristics. These are not caricatures, which are generally understood to be representations of people with distorted or over-emphasized features and whose main *raison d'être* was to provide comic effects and to parody the individuals or types portrayed.<sup>3</sup> A term “pathological grotesque,” coined by William Stevenson in his study, and defined as “any distorted or deformed figure in an artistic representation of a disease or pathological disorder” (Stevenson, 1975, p. 28) seems to be a more appropriate one in relation to the figurines in question. It is proposed here that these grotesque-looking characters belong to a separate class within the wider ‘pathological grotesque’ category, and represent a particular group of the low[er]-class individuals that capitalized on their unusual and often bizarre looks and became entertainers (Garland, 1995, pp. 32-35).

Our first figurine represents an emaciated older man with accentuated rib cage (Figures 1-3).<sup>4</sup> He is nude save for a kind of shorts. He has a large bald head with prominent ears, high lined forehead and furrowed brow. Although the figurine is almost complete – only right hand and left foot are missing – the old man’s actions are not immediately apparent. Possible clues to his identity are provided by his shorts, a rather unusual type of dress, and by a small shield held in his right arm. This item of clothing, known as *subligaculum*, was often worn by actors, dancers, and acrobats.<sup>5</sup> The shield, oval with an elongated umbo in the center, seems to be of Gallic type.<sup>6</sup> Its size, however, is worth a closer inspection. Let us note that in numerous terracotta figurines representing Galatians, armed Erotes, and other individuals armed with this type of shield,<sup>7</sup> it is usually tall enough to reach up to one’s waist. In the case of our figurine, the shield is much smaller, and therefore, is probably a stage prop. As a performer, the old man could have been taking part in a mock battle;<sup>8</sup> he might have held a weapon (a spear?) in his right hand (which seems unlikely) and could have been part of a group. Since the base of the statuette is missing, it is impossible to know whether it was accompanied by an additional figure or figures. Another possibility would be to identify the figurine as a performer of a pyrrhic dance<sup>9</sup> – obviously, of its comic version. A pyrrhic dance typically imitates movements of warriors either defending themselves with a shield or attacking an enemy. Manipulation of the shield in defense was considered one of the most characteristic features of the pyrrhic dance.<sup>10</sup> An emaciated old man who seems to be moving with great difficulty while performing his dance, with a shield literally slipping out of his hand, mimicking the movements that would have been normally performed by a young and fit pyrrhic dancer, would have been considered a rather amusing sight by the ancients. Parodies of similar kind were always popular with the crowds, as testified by the numerous figurines, such as the bronze dwarfs dancing with shields.<sup>11</sup>

But what about the physical condition of the old man? Numerous figurines from Asia Minor, in particularly from Smyrna, show emaciated bodies with the accentuated bones of the rib cage and pelvis.<sup>12</sup> This condition is usually attributed to the atrophy of the muscles, often caused by advanced tuberculosis. This pathetic figure of an old man, brings to mind the famous “living skeletons,” Isaac W. Spargue and Pete Robinson. Both of them worked at some point for P.T. Barnum, lived relatively long lives, married, and made decent living by capitalizing on their appearance as circus performers.<sup>13</sup> Our next figurine is a head of a bizarre-looking man (Figures 4-5) – it was once attached to a body.<sup>14</sup> He seems to be balding or completely bald, with bulging forehead and contorted brows that give his face a severe expression. This face is better appreciated if looked at in profile view that brings into prominence his enormous hooked nose, thick lips around a half-open mouth, and a protruding lower jaw. The separate head belongs to a very extensive group of similar heads that exhibit apparent features of acromegaly.<sup>15</sup> Such heads are certainly not portraits but perhaps generic representations of individuals with this particular condition who “probably exploited their deformity in respect to public amusement” (Stevenson, 1975, p. 192).

A scholarly tradition of identifying the characters with bald heads, large protruding ears, and exaggerated facial features as mime actors in particular is connected to a discovery on the West slope of the Athenian Acropolis of a Hellenistic terracotta oil-lamp decorated with figures of three men. The one in the center is bald, with large nose and protruding ears. A unique inscription on the lamp identifies these characters as mime actors (*'mimologoi'*) from a mime *Hekyra* (Watzinger, 1901, pl. I; Bieber, 1961, p. 107, fig. 415).<sup>16</sup> As Katherine Dunbabin noted, “the heterogeneous nature of the genre, and the extraordinarily mixed assortment of performances that went under the name of mime, make it impossible to generalize or look for common criteria valid across the whole range” (Dunbabin, 2004, p. 162). On the other hand, based on some written and visual evidence, it is believed that mimes performed without masks and thus individuals with bizarre appearance were highly sought after as mime performers (Richter, 1913, pp. 149-156; Bieber, 1961, p. 107; Stevenson, 1975, pp. 58-64; Uhlenbrock, 1990a, p. 149; Csapo & Slater, 1994, p. 370). Those with grotesque features, bold heads, large ears, and hooked nose seem to have been particular favorites of the genre (Dunbabin, 2004, p. 162).

Two other figurines seem to have been identical (Figures 6-11) and probably came from the same set of molds.<sup>17</sup> By examining both figurines, one gets a clearer picture about their original appearance – for they complete each other: one statuette is missing the arms, whereas the other is missing a head and a phallus. They depict a nude dwarf with outstretched arms and with both fists held in front of his face. An original figurine, reconstructed from both statuettes, depicts a character most probably suffering from achondroplasia, the most clinically common type of dwarfism. He has a normal size trunk, small arms, short bent legs, and an enlarged phallus. Lumbar lordosis, excessive inward curvature of the lower part of the spine, as well as an enlarged stomach, which accentuates the belly, both evident in these figurines, are also typical of the achondroplastic dwarfs (Stevenson, 1975, p. 213). The figures do not seem to stand steadily on their bow-like legs and this might have been done on purpose. In fact, it has been noted that many dwarfs have a “broad and waddling gait,” “which lends to the figure a somewhat clownish aspect and exaggerates their general disproportion” (Stevenson, 1975, p. 213). A large head also exhibits features of this particular medical condition: a bulging protruding forehead, wide flattened nose, widely set eyes, and protruding chin and jaw (Stevenson, 1975, p. 212).

Hellenistic and Roman figurines of dwarfs represent by far the largest group compared to other types. It is a well-attested fact that dwarfs were widely popular as entertainers at various Hellenistic (and later Roman) courts and households. In fact, the demand or want for dwarfs was such that it has been assumed that children sometimes were being subjected to some physical abuse so they would remain dwarf-like.<sup>18</sup> The majority of dwarf figures depict male dwarfs, although several women-dwarfs are also known. Moreover, many (although not all) Hellenistic and Roman figurines representing male dwarfs, including the ones in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, seem to possess an oversized phallus. In fact, an assumed ability of these figures to protect from the evil eye is often proposed as an explanation for the figures' phallic appearance and existence in large quantities.<sup>19</sup> A following question might be asked: do such figurines provide accurate depictions of dwarfism or are they grotesque exaggerations? There could be several possible explanations. First of all, as the genitals in male dwarfs are believed to be of normal size, the wrong impression could often be a result of the effect produced when a normal size trunk is juxtaposed with abnormally short (and often bent) legs (Stevenson, 1975, p. 214, with overview of medical literature). On the other hand, an over-sized phallus could be a result of some type of spinal damage, and the achondroplastic dwarfs are particularly prone to spinal damages (Wace, 1903/1904, p. 110, n. 1, and Vogl, 1962, pp. 108-117). It has also been suggested that exaggerations of this sort (and in some cases they clearly ARE exaggerations), could have been done for additional comic and apotropaic effect, as obscenity and humor were closely linked and were believed to ward off evil (Shapiro, 1964, p. 392; McNiven, 1995, pp. 10-16; Foley, 2000, pp. 275-311). This seems to be a good explanation for large artificial phalli that were also often worn by some popular entertainers, including the mime actors (Arnobius, *Adversus Gentes* 7.33; Garmaise, 1996, pp. 129-130; 135-138).

So, what kind of entertainers do these dwarfs represent and what are they doing? They seem to be involved in some sort of strenuous physical activity, as conveyed through the facial expression seen on the preserved head – notice a tongue that is falling out in the left corner of the open mouth. Unfortunately, it is impossible to know what particular objects they once held in their clenched fists. They could have been holding batons or rattles, as many dancing dwarfs do (Garmaise, 1996, pp. 61-65, nos. 22-24, 28-30). On the other hand, the position of the dwarfs' feet does not suggest dancing, but rather seems to imply a fighting stance.

If the statuettes indeed depicted the combatants, then they were holding some sort of weapon, perhaps sticks, as this seems to be the only type of object that small perforations in the fists could have accommodated.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, popularity of comic entertainers that imitated boxers and wrestlers is attested by numerous terracotta and bronze figurines, as well as by literary sources (Garmaise, 1996, pp. 94-113, nos. 96-129, 150-175; Athenaeus, I.19f).

### Production

Although grotesque terracotta figurines have been found in many Hellenistic cities around the Mediterranean, the coroplasts of Smyrna and Alexandria are usually credited with inventions of numerous types of “physically deformed... often producing compelling social documents”.<sup>21</sup> Whereas it is difficult to suggest with any certainty the origin of manufacture for the emaciated pyrrhic dancer,<sup>22</sup> the acromegalic head and the dwarfs most probably originated from Smyrna.<sup>23</sup> This provenance is supported by several technical details: as most Smyrna figurines, they are carefully modeled in the back and in the front, and have no vent. Moreover, there are visible traces of red slip (as opposed to white) preserved on their surface – a feature typical of terracottas produced in the coroplastic workshops of Smyrna (Uhlenbrock, 1990b, p. 76).

### Meaning and Use

Due to the continuous habitation of the site of Smyrna (modern Izmir) from the Hellenistic period onward, no regular official excavations of the ancient city of Smyrna were ever conducted. Most of the Smyrna figurines that are currently housed in the public and private collections came from looting that occurred in 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that these clandestine excavations took place in the area identified as domestic quarter of the Hellenistic Smyrna (Uhlenbrock, 1990b, p. 76; Burn & Higgins, 2001, pp. 127-128). If such figurines were found in domestic contexts,<sup>24</sup> how were they used? Were they considered apotropaic or were they simply decorations of the homes of the wealthy as sign of prestige and status-symbols, as has been suggested?<sup>25</sup> Their function must have been at least two-fold. Most probably believed to possess apotropaic qualities, the four figurines of the buffoons from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are also important testimonies that alongside the ostentatious and often extravagant theatrical spectacles of Antiquity, there always existed another kind, that of a sordid nature that undoubtedly appealed to the ancient men in the streets.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On a variety of attitudes towards the physically disabled/deformed in the Roman times, see Stahl, 2011, pp. 715-731, esp. pp. 722-723.

<sup>2</sup> Despite numerous terracotta and bronze figurines that are often believed to depict popular entertainers, literary sources are, for the most part, silent about such performers. On marginality of status of Roman performers in general, see Leppin, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See Hemingway, 2005. For more general notions of comic in antiquity, see Drühl, 2008 and Mitchell, 2009, esp. Ch. 5 where the author argues that the Kabirion imagery should be understood in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival and in fact are caricatures that parody a wide range of ritual, daily activity, and myth.

<sup>4</sup> Greek, Hellenistic, 2<sup>nd</sup> – 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. Terracotta, H. 5 ¼ in. (13.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 2000.305.2. The figurine is made out of dark buff clay and is solid; head and trunk are mold-made, arms and legs modeled by hand, and the figurines are retouched with a modeling stick. On the surface there are traces of dark reddish pigment. No immediate analogy was found, the figurines closest in technique and type of head are: Sotheby’s New York, *Antiquities*, December 7, 2001, lot 139; Christie’s New York, Wednesday 12 June 2002, lot 74.

<sup>5</sup> See Daremberg & Saglio, 1918, vol. 4, part 2, s.v. “*subligaculum*” (E. Saglio), p. 1550; for description and history of its Greek equivalent, *perizoma*, see Bonfante, 1989, pp. 543-570.

<sup>6</sup> Following the Gallic invasion into the Balkans in 279 BC, some of Gauls settled in the highlands of central Anatolia and became a conspicuous presence in that part of the Mediterranean. See Darbyshire, Mitchell & Vardar, 2000. Images of Galatians themselves and their arms (shields in particular) become very popular and are often represented in Hellenistic and Roman coroplastic production.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Kekulé & von Rohden, 1903, p. 384, nos. 1-4, 6-7, 11; p. 385, no. 1; Eros with a Galatian shield: Besques, 1992, pl. 64a, D 4501.

<sup>8</sup> The mock fights were well known and a much loved type of entertainment in Hellenistic and Roman times: see, for example, Déchelette, 1904.

<sup>9</sup> Pyrrhic dance was thought to have been invented either by Achilles or by his son Neoptolemus: see Borthwick, 1967. For numerous other versions of the origin of this dance, see Borthwick, 1970. See also Kaltsatou, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Euripides, *Andromache* 1131. Although first and foremost regarded as a great way of military training, it was also a highly popular type of entertainment at various dinner parties: Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 6.1.1-13. See, in particular 6.1.12, where a special kind of light shield is used by a girl performing the pyrrhic dance.

<sup>11</sup> For bronze figures of dwarfs dancing with shields, see Münzen und Medaillen A. G., Auktion XVIII, November 1958, p. 13, no. 30, pl. 10; Ars Antiqua Sale, Lucerne, 14 May 1960, p. 40, under no. 96.

<sup>12</sup> For a description of possible medical conditions of the represented characters, see Stevenson, 1975, p. 220, with literature.

<sup>13</sup> On “human skeletons” or “living skeletons,” see Bogdan, 1988, pp. 7, 211, 231, fig. 60. It is interesting to note that Isaac W. Spargue attempted to work as a cobbler and as a grocer but that proved to be very strenuous in his condition, so he became an entertainer, a “living skeleton.”

<sup>14</sup> Greek, Hellenistic, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. Terracotta, H. 1 ¾ in. (4.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. no. 2000.667.2b. Made out of brown clay, it is mold-made and touched up with a modeling stick. There are traces of white coating and red pigment preserved on the surface.

<sup>15</sup> Acromegaly is a result of dysfunctional (over active) pituitary gland. The typical facial features of those suffering from this condition are as follows: enlarged head with deeply set eyes, protruding lower jaw, severe thickening of the lips and thickening and enlargement of the tongue and nose. See Regnault, 1889, esp. p. 271, col. 2; Perdrizet, 1921, pp. 160ff; Stevenson, 1975, pp. 192-194.

<sup>16</sup> On mime in general, see Csapo & Slater, 1994, pp. 369-378. On graffiti representations of possible mime actors, see Roueché, 2002, pp. 254-281.

<sup>17</sup> Greek, Hellenistic, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. Terracotta, H. 3 7/8 in. (9.8 cm) and H. 3 3/8 in. (8.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc. nos. 2000.667.1 and 2000.667.2a. Both figurines are mold-made from dark-buff clay with mica; the trunk is hollow. There are traces of red pigment all over the surface.

<sup>18</sup> See Longinus, *De subl.* 44.5, who repeats a second-hand information about ‘man-made’ dwarfs. See also Dobrzensky, 1670. It should be noted that because of surviving literary sources by authors such as Suetonius, Martial, and Juvenal, our knowledge about dwarfs in Roman society is more complete. Garmaise, 1996, pp. 17-18: for a good discussion of the known ancient literary and epigraphic sources on the dwarfs, see in particular pp. 17-47. On dwarfs as entertainers in Greece, see Dasen, 1993, pp. 230-233.

<sup>19</sup> In his seminal article Alan J. B. Wace claimed that all images that could be classified as grotesques, were apotropaic in nature: Wace, 1903/1904, pp. 103-114. It was followed by Doro Levi’s article that presented similar arguments: Levi, 1941, pp. 220-232. Moreover, Doro Levi presents a unique mosaic from Antioch where the Evil Eye, placed in the center, is being attacked by a spear, a trident, a snake, a scorpion, a centipede, a dog, and by a large phallus of a dwarf who is standing with his back to the Eye.

<sup>20</sup> For images of fighting dwarfs, see Garmaise, 1996, Chapter 4, nos. 96-119.

<sup>21</sup> Uhlenbrock, 1990a, cat. no. 36, p. 149. It is also worth noting that artistic links between the terracotta workshops of Smyrna and Alexandria have been recognized. See Uhlenbrock, 1990b, p. 78; Leyenaar-Plaisier, 1984, pp. 69-80, esp. p. 79.

<sup>22</sup> The clay is not easily identifiable and we have not found so far any *comparanda* with securely known origin. There is some possibility that this figurine was manufactured either in Asia Minor (possibly Smyrna) or in North Africa (Alexandria).

<sup>23</sup> The type of clay with high admixture of mica is characteristic of Smyrna. Moreover, similar heads/bodies in other collections are thought to have come from Smyrna. *Comparanda* for the acromegalic head: Besques, 1972, pl. 309 a-f (from Smyrna). *Comparanda* for the head of a dwarf: Besques, 1972, pl. 311 l (from Smyrna). *Comparanda* for the bodies of the dwarfs: Leyenaar-Plaisier, 1979, pl. 57, no. 343 (from Smyrna).

<sup>24</sup> See Laugier, 2009, p. 171 and note 7 where he cites Rathmayr, forthcoming, who demonstrated that a group of grotesques has been uncovered in a triclinium of a house in Ephesos.

<sup>25</sup> See Giuliani, 1987, with literature.



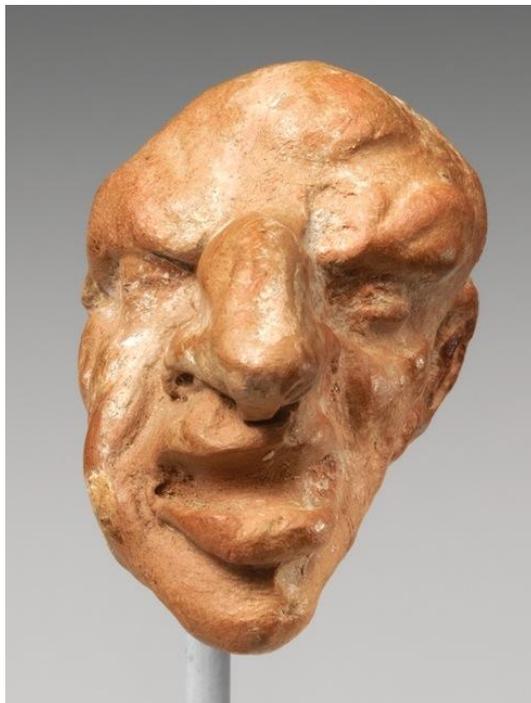
**Figure 1.** Terracotta statuette of an old man with shield, 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. H.: 13.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Gordian Weber, 2000 (2000.305.2). Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



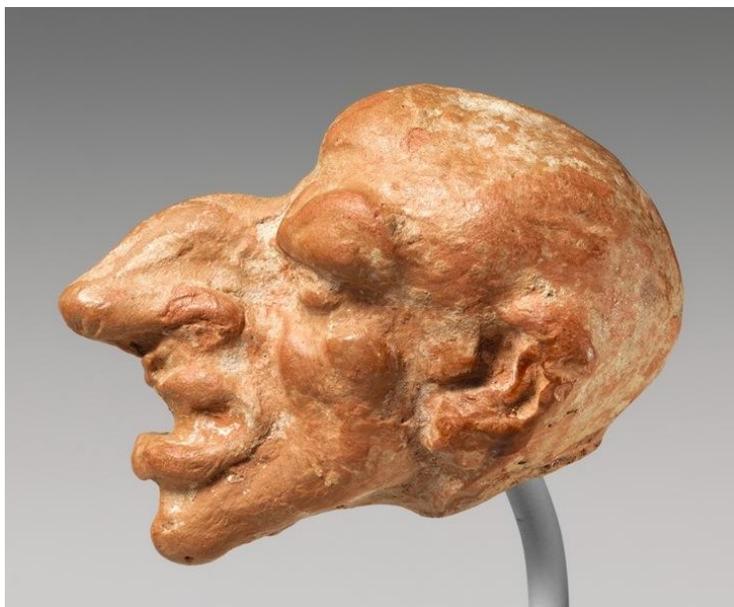
**Figure 2.** Side view of Fig. 1. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 3.** Back view of Fig. 1. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 4.** Terracotta head of an acromegalic man, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.  
H.: 4.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Peter Sharrer, 2000 (2000.667.2b). Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 5.** Side view of Fig. 4. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 6.** Terracotta statuette of a male dwarf, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. H.: 9.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Peter Sharrer, 2000 (2000.667.1). Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



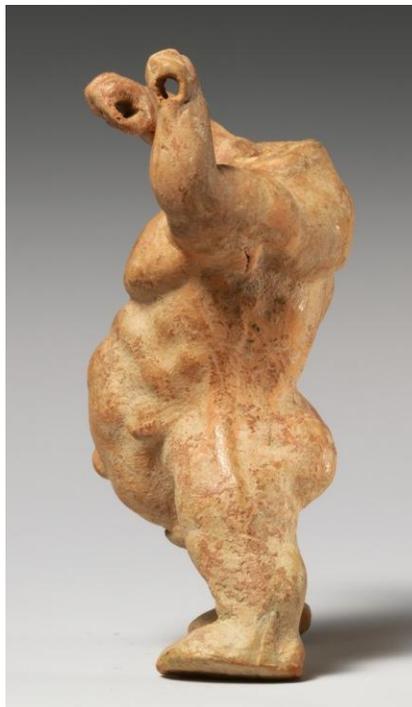
**Figure 7.** Side view of Fig. 6. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 8.** Back view of Fig. 6. Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 9.** Terracotta statuette of a male dwarf, 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. H.: 8.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Peter Sharrer, 2000 (2000.667.2a).  
Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



**Figure 10.** Side view of Fig. 9.



**Figure 11.** Back view of Fig. 9.  
Photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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