



# SACRED MONSTERS



Peering down from medieval churches and town halls, gargoyles were originally created as architectural necessities: ornate stone water spouts. But, as Francisco Calle reveals, there is much more to these grotesque carvings of bawdy beings and mythical beasts

**There are hundreds of thousands** of them. We see them perched on castles and palaces. They appear on the walls and flying buttresses of churches and cathedrals – especially those from the Gothic period – lined up in repetitive rows that seem to stretch into infinity. It is as if they are watching, even threatening us from on high. With their monstrous bodies, half-man, half-beast, they look as if they have sprung from a medieval stonemason's worst nightmare. They are gargoyles: water spouts carved in stone with the same loving care as a sculptor's masterpiece.

Like any water spout, the gargoyle is designed to deflect rainwater from the walls of a building, a function reflected in its given name in different European languages. The Italian term is *doccione* (from the Latin *ductus*, meaning duct) and in German *Wasserspeier* (water-spitter). In English, the word is gargoyle, in Spanish *gárgola*, and in Portuguese *gárgula*. All are derived from the French *gargouille* whose Latin root *gar-*, evoking the sound of liquid being swallowed, coupled with the Old French *goule* (throat), seems to refer to the gurgling of the water as it flows through the spout.

Although the French term was only used for the first time in the late thirteenth century, the origins of decorative water spouts date back much further. The Egyptians, Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans all carved stone and terracotta gutters in the form of animals or grotesques, which, like medieval gargoyles, did more than channel rain away from walls. They served not only as adornments but also as symbolic protection. The lion's head gargoyles on the Parthenon, for example, stood for the forces guarding the city from its enemies and evil spirits. These three functions – physical preservation from the rain,

Left: a half-man, half-beast stone gargoyle looms out from the southern façade of the Gothic Notre-Dame Cathedral in Rouen, France.  
Above right: these two three-clawed anteaters on Quito's Basilica of the National Vow sit alongside gargoyles of monkeys, jaguars, and other Ecuadorean fauna



Above: one of the many dragon-shaped gargoyles gracing the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the figure of Lucifer, captured in stone changing from angel to devil, on Coria's cathedral in Cáceres, Spain; an eagle on the cathedral at Palencia, Spain; two stone chimeras watch over Paris from a rooftop gallery on Notre-Dame. Some chimeras were not designed to spout rainwater and were added simply as decorative elements on buildings

symbolic protection, and decoration – are present to a greater or lesser degree in all gargoyles, regardless of the culture, geographical location, or period to which they belong. This is particularly evident in the stonework spouts gracing the Temple of Heaven in Beijing, the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, or the neo-Gothic Basilica of the National Vow in Quito, Ecuador. Interestingly, the basilica features gargoyles that are typical of European religious architecture, alongside quintessential examples of Ecuadorean fauna, such as alligators, armadillos, and turtles.

Despite all this, in our collective subconscious gargoyles are inseparably linked with the medieval age, perhaps because they became popular in the late Romanesque and early Gothic periods, when great feats of architecture happened to coincide with the rapid spread of the Christian faith.

Christianity has always attached great importance to images of evil, so it is hardly surprising that for centuries there should be a close connection between gargoyles and the world of wrongdoing. This is demonstrated especially well in the legend of St. Romain, Bishop of Rouen, and the Gargoyle. It tells how on the banks of the Seine, near Rouen in northern France, there lived a monster known as the Gargouille, shaped like a dragon and breathing fire from its mouth. The people of the city had tried to appease the creature by

offering human sacrifices, but to no avail. Some time around A.D. 600, a priest named Romanus arrived in Rouen, promising the citizens he would get rid of the dragon if they converted to Christianity and built a church. After exorcising the evil spirit of the monster, he captured it and handed it over to the newly converted Christians, who killed it and burned the body.

However, the beast's head and neck, hardened by its fiery breath, refused to burn, so they displayed it on the city walls, a forerunner of future gargoyles. As well as offering a simple explanation of how gargoyles came to be, the Gargoyle of Rouen is also a metaphor for the triumph of good over evil, of Christianity over paganism, which at the beginning of the Middle Ages was still rife across most of Europe.

The association of gargoyles with evil may well explain why so many resemble devils, some of them exquisitely wrought. The stone figure of Lucifer, for example, on Coria's cathedral in the Spanish province of Cáceres, is depicted at the moment of his transformation from angel to demon. It is far more common to find hideously ugly demons with horns, claws, or batwings, their bodies covered with scales, nightmarish creatures intent on terrifying us with their menacing gestures and silent screams.

As well as these devilish gargoyles, we find many others in the shape of beings with equally intimidating





Above: a gargoyle on the cathedral in Plasencia, in Cáceres, Spain, of a savage-looking monkey wielding a club, with his enemy's severed head at his feet. Right: an anachronistic figure of a frock-coated

man holding a bellows camera on the 14th-century Palencia Cathedral. The gargoyle was added (legend has it) around 1910 by the architect Jerónimo Arroyo, while restoring the building, in honor of a late friend

connotations, such as dragons, griffins, or other monstrous beasts impossible to name – hybrids straight out of the hallucinatory paintings of Hieronymus Bosch or Bruegel.

Evil in its infinite forms is also represented by more familiar, everyday animals which, in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, were often laden with negative associations. For example, pigs and monkeys might symbolize gluttony or lust, while the donkey was often used to represent sloth. From the fifteenth century onward, the many kinds of human iniquity were depicted in a more direct way. The vice of drunkenness might be symbolized by a drunkard singing and clutching a wineskin. The dangerous combination of lust and non-religious music was represented in stone by a bagpiper whose music was capable of literally turning a married women into a sow, seen sitting at her spinning wheel as the piper plays his tantalizing tunes.

Renaissance thought further influenced the shape of gargoyles. The sin of lust and its penalties, for instance, have been represented by Laocoön, the Trojan priest crushed to death by sea serpents, sent by Apollo as punishment for having lain with his wife before a divine image of the god. Vices in general were often depicted as a satyr that, in turning around to display its backside, symbolized a topsy-turvy world in which the established order had been overturned.

Some gargoyles, however, stood for more positive values. Diabolical beings were replaced by lions or dogs powerful enough to scare demons away or by other benign figures whose example the faithful were encouraged to follow in their constant battle against the forces of evil that existed beyond the safety of the church or the castle. We can also find gargoyles representing scenes of confrontation, symbolizing the struggle between good and evil. One of the most bizarre examples of this found in Spain is the fierce-looking monkey in Plasencia Cathedral (again in the province of Cáceres), who has at his feet the severed head of a defeated enemy.

There are also other gargoyles that seemingly have nothing to do with the battle against the influences of evil. These oddities include figures of oxen, acknowledging the work of the beasts of burden that carried the stones used in the construction of the building to which they are attached. Palencia Cathedral in northern Spain is home to a curious, more contemporary, gargoyle – the figure of a photographer with an old-fashioned bellows camera, a restorer's tribute to a friend. Other characters appear to have been intended simply to amuse onlookers, with their mouth-pulling antics and hearty grins.

These are only a handful of examples among many thousands, but they serve to draw attention to a fantasy world of immense artistic and iconographic value, well within reach of anyone who takes the trouble to look upward.✦

*Translated by Isabel Varea*

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