

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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book review of

The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity by Michael Camille

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010)

Citation: Laurinda S. Dixon, book review of *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity* by Michael Camille, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 9, no. 2 (Autumn 2010), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn10/the-gargoyles-of-notre-dame>.

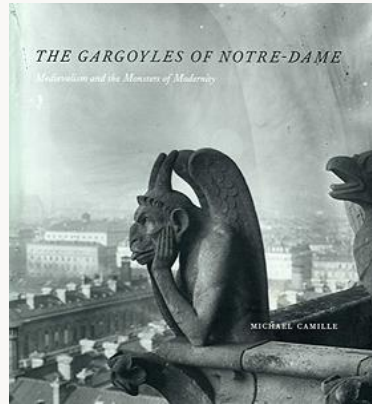
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity Michael Camille Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2009 439 pages, 378 b/w illustrations; bibliography; index ed \$49.00 (cloth) ISBN-13: 978-0-226-09245-4

The cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris is the epitome of the Gothic style, and its magnificent sculptural program is often lauded as representing the richness of the medieval imagination. However, most visitors to this historic site are not aware that the fascinating sculpted gargoyles and chimeras that adorn the façade are, in fact, nineteenth-century creations, products of the creative collaboration of the architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc and the sculptor Victor Pyanet. Michael Camille's (1958-2002) extraordinary book, published posthumously, is the first comprehensive study of these legendary monsters, which were part of the cathedral's restoration campaign of 1843-1864. Camille argues that the hundreds of monstrous figures, projecting from three levels of the building's façade and towers, cannot be studied in isolation, but are intimately connected to the rich cultural character of the nineteenth century. Drawing from vast documentary evidence, including never-before-published letters, sketches, and critical responses from every corner of the arts and society, Camille traces the fascinating monsters from their inception in 1843, through their rich afterlife in contemporary popular culture. By means of profound insight, boundless originality, and elegant prose, Camille brilliantly weaves the threads of nineteenth-century awareness into an engaging and engrossing narrative. His virtuosic interdisciplinary methodology demonstrates beyond a doubt that the Notre Dame gargoyles were conceived not as mere archaeological reconstructions, but as fresh creations, whose novelty was based in an imagined vision of a vanished past.

The book is divided into two large sections, titled "Restoration" (Part 1) and "Reproduction" (Part 2). The five chapters which comprise Part 1 chronicle the nuts-and-bolts of the cathedral restoration project in light of medieval precedent, the origins and character of nineteenth-century medievalism, the beliefs and sympathies of the architectural team of Eugène-Emmanuel Viollet-le-duc and his colleague, Jean-Baptiste Lassus (who died before completion of the project), and the cultural and scientific concerns of the nineteenth century. Part 2, "Reproduction," which includes four chapters, uncovers the rich afterlife of the gargoyles,

demonstrating how they have served as inspiration for artists, writers, and filmmakers, finally taking their twenty-first-century place as icons of "kitsch" and material culture.

The first two chapters provide an illuminating account of the genesis and progress of the cathedral's ambitious restoration. As members of a new, professional generation of architect-restorers, Viollet-le-Duc and Lassus entered the project with an acute awareness of the building's continued practical and symbolic liturgical function. Because Notre Dame had never been allowed to degenerate into a "ruin," it remained for the team to return the monument to its former glory. Its renewal, based on historic precedent, would eventually echo the secular nature of the nineteenth century, while also retaining the magnificence of France's grand medieval past. Camille emphasizes both the practical and aesthetic necessity of the gargoyles, which function as drains by which water is channeled to the street. He further makes an unequivocal case for the identity of the artist who carved the gargoyles as Joseph Pyanet, whose name has since sunk into obscurity. Looking at account books, letters, and articles in the popular press, Camille uncovers the formidable nature of the work, which was fraught with difficult labor conditions and dangerous obstacles. Though the perception of the skilled and valued craftsman in the period before mass production still persists, Camille's evidence, drawn from contemporary accounts, refutes this myth.

In the remaining chapters of Part 1, Camille sets the stage for the cathedral's restoration at a particular moment of extreme social, political, scientific, and artistic tension in France. Chapter 3 situates the work's inception against Victor Hugo's important novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) and the historian Jules Michelet's belief that the gargoyles held profound meaning. Succeeding chapters approach the monsters separately, defining each in reference to a larger concern of Parisian life, art, and scientific thought. Art historians are divided in their acceptance of science as a source for artists, tending to perceive scientific discourse as the elite province of professionals, whose knowledge and practice are inaccessible to the ordinary individual. However, in the nineteenth century, science was only beginning to become professionalized and delineated into specific areas of study. Though such doctrines as phrenology, which intuited character by noting bumps on the skull, have happily fallen into disrepute, they were once part of the fabric of common knowledge. Bearing this in mind, Camille demonstrates that the gargoyles' monstrous features did not arise from nightmares and opium reveries, but were inspired by current scientific debates.

The pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology were based on the Aristotelian belief that the features of the face and body reveal the nature of the soul. An individual's race, intuited by appearance, positioned him on a great hierarchy of being, with the Aryan male occupying the pinnacle. Camille demonstrates, with devastating clarity, that the exaggerated "Jewish" features of several of the gargoyles reflect newly fashionable nineteenth-century models of race, which justified social inequities. Citing such progressive thinkers as Charles le Brun, Johann Caspar Lavater, and Franz Josef Gall, and their parallel influence on artists such as J.-J. Grandville, Gustave Doré, and Viollet-le-Duc himself, Camille distinguishes two prevalent nineteenth-century views of the Semitic race among the gargoyles of Notre Dame: the Jew as dangerous cultural pathogen, and as wandering Promethean antihero.

Camille maintains that the integration of animal and human features among the gargoyles consciously echoes nineteenth-century evolutionary, medical, and paleontological debates.

What place do humans have on the great Platonic scale of being? Is humanity a branch of animality? Were fossil remains mythical creatures or the remains of extinct prehistoric creatures? Before Darwin, evolutionary theory was dominated by French figures, notably Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Geoffrey Saint-Hilaire, and Georges Cuvier. Camille's discussion of the medicalization of the gargoyles leads naturally to the related topic of degeneration, addressed by these thinkers, who believed that the human race was being weakened as a result of the evils of modern civilization. Alcoholism, crime, sterility, and insanity, conditions rife among the urban working classes, were seen as scourges of the modern world, based as they were on the natural animality of the human species and the base materiality of consumer society. Visual references among the gargoyles to these afflictions mark a change in the understanding of the concept of evil and its concomitant monstrosity. Do the delicate hands and pleasing facial features of certain gargoyles suggest the possibility of true evil residing within a beautiful body? In response, Camille notes several notorious criminal cases, covered extensively in the press, involving culprits whose outward appearance gave no hint of their depravity. Contemporary theorists, authors, and artists approached these questions, and the cultural uneasiness that they reinforced and instigated, in scientific terms.

Chapter 5, "Monsters of Revolution: The Gargoyles of Politics," interprets the gargoyles' bestial animality as an embodiment of the ever-present, volatile, urban masses. Fear of the terrifying and uncontrollable lower classes, believed to be infected with signs of social and biological degeneration, was especially virulent during the years of the cathedral's restoration. Camille demonstrates that, in political thought as in scientific theory, the boundaries between human and animal had become less distinct. Just as animals, such as the great apes exhibited in the Jardin des Plantes, gained stature by their similarities to humans, so humans were relegated to a lower rung by behaviors perceived as animalistic. Camille notes references to workers' unrest in the Daybook, kept during the years of the cathedral's restoration. These notations, which repeatedly describe the laborers as "bestial," are paralleled in brutal caricatures of the working classes by Daumier, Grandville, and others. In addition, these years witnessed repeated waves of deadly cholera, which virulently infected the population of Paris. The bloated bodies and agonized twisting of several gargoyles bear the marks of this terrible affliction. Camille reminds us that the square before the cathedral, presided over by the gargoyles, served as an open clinic and morgue for the vast numbers of dying and dead during this time.

The chapter concludes with discussion of the gargoyles as reflecting intense conflict about the role of the Church and State in French national life. Camille notes references among certain hooded and cowed gargoyles to caricatures of the clergy as predatory crows and vultures. What was Viollet-le-Duc's attitude toward being entrusted with remaking what was arguably the Church's greatest monument? His letters and writings reveal that his political leanings were distinctly anticlerical, witness to the fact that the Church in this time was no less conflicted than were the discontented urban masses. Similar ambivalence surrounds representations of the imperial eagle on the cathedral façade. Were these intended as positive references to the emperor Napoleon III, patron of the cathedral's restoration? Or were they sly caricatures of the imperial ideal? Camille presents the multivalent imagery of these figures, foregrounded against Viollet-le-Duc's own uneasy history of mistreatment by religious and governmental authorities. Having assessed the many contexts surrounding Notre Dame's restoration, the "Epilogue" to Part I chronicles the ambivalent public response to the newly restored cathedral. Even as the work continued apace, Paris's medieval streets were being destroyed to make way for the wide boulevards of Baron Haussmann. The restoration of Notre Dame, once a brilliant

example of a new bourgeois neo-Gothic style, had come to be perceived as an obstacle to progress and a stodgy reminder of oppression by Church and State.

Having established the rich iconological pedigree of the Notre Dame gargoyles and chimeras, PART II: "Reproduction" chronicles their immediate and continuing impact on the artistic imagination of the later nineteenth century. Chapter 6 "Monsters of Melancholy: The Gargoyles of Charles Méryon" investigates the meaning inherent in Charles Méryon's influential etching *Le Stryge*, which features perhaps the most familiar of the monsters. Usually translated as "the vampire," *Le Stryge* was intended as a highly sexualized image. Redolent of the fin-de-siècle obsession with sexually transmitted disease, this gargoyle exhibits parallels with Baudelaire's "Satan of Spleen" as well as Edgar Allen Poe's popular "Murders in the Rue Morgue." Camille demonstrates that it also served as a profoundly personal icon of the artist's own melancholic insanity.

Chapter 7 "Monsters of Light. Gargoyles of Photographers" presents photographic images of the cathedral gargoyles as popular vehicles for a new urban form of self-presentation. Camille interprets these dramatic images of solitary observers above the urban fray as part of an evolving archetypal mode of subjectivity, paralleled in current literature. In answer to the question of why early photographers were so attracted to medieval monuments, Camille cites the attitude of the disillusioned *flâneur*, who viewed life from a unique perspective apart and above the inhabited world. These early photographic images of the gargoyles always confront the sculptures with a human presence, stressing the difference between modern and ancient, and positioning mortal movement against stone stillness. The result is the momentary capturing of a timeless presence confronted by melancholy reverie.

In Chapter 8 "Monsters of Sex: Gargoyles of Gender," Camille notes that the gargoyles are not only racially distinctive, but also gendered, some them displaying breasts and female genitalia. He views these figures in light of the fin-de-siècle obsession with sex, epitomized by the theories of Sigmund Freud. The juxtaposition of monster and woman reflects the widespread misogyny of an age that viewed female empowerment, embodied in the figure of the "new woman," as degenerate and detrimental to the social order. This chapter, stunning in its insights, considers the dichotomous historical construction of the feminine represented by the cathedral itself, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, opposed by the personification of Paris as a depraved and diseased woman. Freud's concept of female hysteria, derived from Jean-Martin Charcot's investigations at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, scientifically authorized the antifeminist rhetoric at the root of the burgeoning and emerging science of psychology.

Camille accompanies his insights with medical illustrations that compare the spasms and gross sexual movements of female hysterics with those of the hideous female gargoyles. He then traces this current of thought in literary examples. The novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans personify the cathedral's darkening, crumbling stones as belonging to a putrefying prostitute. Similarly, the anti-heroine of Félicien Champsaur's novel *Lulu: Roman clownesque* is described as resembling a gargoyle in her lewd contortions and aerial gyrations, projected high above a fascinated audience. The chapter further presents several gargoyles of indeterminate gender as embodying another feared monster, the homosexual invert. The lolling tongues, sunken eyes, and suggestive poses of these figures reflect society's concern with degeneration of the male sex through feminization. This cultural panic was paralleled by medical attempts to develop a

system for recognizing and stigmatizing sexual perversion. Blatant allusions among the gargoyles to masturbation as the cause of imbecility, madness, and other bodily changes are applied to the emergence of the so-called "gay Gothic" among English aesthetes. This type was notoriously embodied in figures such as Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, and Bram Stoker's vampire, Count Dracula. In this context, the gargoyles emblemize the image of the invert as a newly invented medical and social persona.

The book's final chapter, "Monsters of the Media: The Gargoyles in the Twentieth Century," ends the book much like a delectable dessert, crowning an eight-course gourmet feast. With wry wit and a bemused sense of the ridiculous, Camille begins by chronicling the gargoyles as carriers of meaning serving surrealism, fascism, and the occult at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ambiguously lodged between the medieval and the modern, all three movements were united by their need to resurrect a submerged past in these historic monsters. But it is Camille's examination of gargoyles in American culture that proves most insightful. The fact that the western hemisphere lacks medieval monuments of its own has not prevented the Gothic revival from exerting a powerful impact on popular culture. From the human Hollywood gargoyles of Lon Chaney and Charles Laughton to the "girlgoyles" of current television, they permeate contemporary American life. They are amplified and multiplied on the internet, where gargoyles appear sedated and defanged for popular consumption. Made of plastic, stone, cement, and degradable denatured cow-manure, gargoyles can be had as dolls, lamp finials, and even pasta noodles. Contemporary popular culture has identified these monsters of modernity, and proceeds to domesticate and commodify them.

Michael Camille's stature as a medievalist suited him uniquely to the pursuit of this magisterial study, allowing him to view Notre Dame's restoration through a multi-faceted, historically sophisticated lens. Written in a clear, engaging style, the book is a page-turner from beginning to end, lacking any hint of the vague, theoretical ruminations and pompous, tortured prose that typify recent trends in art historical scholarship. *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame* is a humbling reminder of what art history can, and should be. The fact that such a book is rare in the discourse of academe is a tragedy equal to the untimely passing of its author.

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