

Name:

Hour:

Gargoyles & Grotesques

Over 800 years ago **gargoyles** were a common feature on **gothic** churches and buildings in medieval Europe. Gargoyles are carved sculptures that serve as **rainspouts**. When translated in various European languages, the function of the gargoyle is directly reflected in its name. In German gargoyle means “water spitter,” in French and Spanish it is “gullet” or “throat,” and in Dutch it means “water vomiter.”



Gargoyles are **functional art**. Functional art serves a physical purpose. Gargoyle-like decorations that do not drain water are called **grotesques**. Unlike gargoyles, which can only be found on the outsides of buildings, grotesques can be found outside or inside.

The Beginning

Since very little, if anything, is written about specific gargoyles or carvers during medieval Europe, we cannot fully understand their symbolic meaning. Instead we have to try and interpret them based on what we see. We have to let the sculpture tell the story!

A popular explanation is that medieval gargoyles were used to **ward off evil**. The grotesque-looking gargoyles were meant to keep evil from entering the churches so the church-goers were safe inside. They may also have been a warning of the evils of sinning.

A second explanation is that Christians used the gargoyles to **lure non-Christians into the church**. There is a legend that Celtic people in medieval Europe hung animal heads on their houses because they believed it brought them luck. Christians imitated this tradition by carving animal-like faces onto the churches. They hoped this would attract the Celts, bringing them into the church where they could be converted to Christianity.

A third explanation is a myth that describes how **a dragon named “La Gargouille” terrorized a French town**. A visiting priest promised to rid the town of the dragon if the townspeople promised to help build a church and be baptized. The priest saw this as a great opportunity to recruit members since very few people were Christian at the time. After the townspeople promised, the priest went out and tamed the dragon. When he brought it back to the town, the people tried to burn the dragon. The only part that would not burn was the head because it was used to fire and heat. The priest hung the head on the outside of the church as a reminder of the good religion could do.



American Gargoyles

Gargoyles continue to stare down at us from many buildings. You can visit the millions of medieval gargoyles in many parts of Europe. You can also see modern gargoyles in many parts of the United States. Big cities are the best places to hunt for gargoyles; keep your eyes tilted upward!

For the most part, modern gargoyles are easier to interpret because there is more documentation we can read. In general, we know that modern gargoyles are more **secular** (less religious), and tend to have more human characteristics.

We also know that American gargoyles frequently **reflect the activities that take place inside** the buildings they decorate. For example, on the Princeton campus, living animals are depicted on the Biology building and extinct animals are depicted on the Geology building. The gymnasium at Princeton has athletic gargoyles on it, including a football player and a weightlifter.

Process

Before a carver begins creating the actual gargoyle, a sculptor designs a **model** of the gargoyle out of clay. (On occasion the carver and the sculptor are the same person, but frequently they are two different artists!) The picture on the right is of Walter Arnold, an artist from Chicago who designs and carves gargoyles all over the world.

⇒ You will be designing and creating your own model of a **gargoyle** or **grotesque**.

Think About:

- What kind of person does your gargoyle represent?
- What is your gargoyles personality (is it playful, serious, mischeivious, etc?)
- What expression will your gargoyle wear?
- Which feature will you exaggerate?
- What is your gargoyles name?



Brainstorm ideas in the box below.

⇒ Draw 3 thumbnail sketches of gargoyles you might create. Keep in mind that you want to concentrate on:

- exaggerating one feature
- adding texture
- making it dynamic (what will stand out or create shadows?)
- using animal and human features
- making your gargoyle unique

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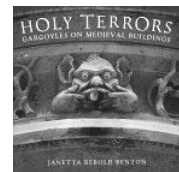
⇒ Choose your favorite gargoyle or grotesque sketch and circle it. Transform your sketch into a 3D gargoyle model! (Ms. W will have guidelines how to work with the clay.)

Resources

I read two books about gargoyles to get ready for this project. They are:



American Gargoyles: Spirits in Stone by Darlene Trew Crist, Photography by Robert Llewellyn



Holy Terrors: Gargoyles on Medieval Buildings by Janetta Rebold Benton

Some stories and poems about Gargoyles are:

- Night of the Gargoyles by Eve Bunting, Illustrated by David Wiesner
- The Gargoyle on the Roof by Jack Prelutsky, Illustrated by Peter Sis

Some websites about Gargoyles are:

- <http://www.stonecarver.com>
- <http://www.stratis.demon.co.uk/gargoyles/gargoyle.htm>