

Paintings on the edge. An Introduction to the Grotesque.

What is this talk about?

A word (grotesque). A word that has a popular familiar meaning that derives from a bizarre byway in art history. Although it is not immediately obvious how the two meanings relate, this talk will try and show how the word and the ideas behind it develop.

About something that starts on the edge of paintings and shows images that are in the process of changing from one thing into another. They are on the edge of one thing and another.

A talk about the subversive, about the relationship between the cultural and the countercultural.

About how an art historical idea in which objects are shown in a process of metamorphosis develops in different directions - the purely decorative and the disturbingly strange. It will show how art can use visual games to play with our minds and to delve into the depths of our perception and show us what is on the edge of our consciousness. It is about how an art of metamorphosis symbolises and stands for the process by which our minds also undergo metamorphosis from a place of comfort and safety to a place of danger and discomfort.

1.

Start with prints behind me.

2.

A set of coloured engravings from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What do they show? How do we describe them?

**Light, decorative, ornamental, imaginative, beautiful. Show images from nature - plants, vines, flowers, leaves creating swirling patterns.**

**Animals. Human figures.**

3.

But look a little closer and some of the images are impossible to describe. There are no words for them.

**Plants seem to sprout not flowers but animals which then turn into human beings.**

**Mixture of animals and humans, plants and animals, plants and humans. Disembodied faces appear to grow out of curling plants, or they pop up out of nowhere. Lions head grow out of the corners of ornamental cartouches, a**

**gazebo seems to float in mid-air supported very lightly by two winged figures whose legs have turned into leaves or is this a plant whose top half has turned into a human figure with wings? Who knows? And what are these with the head of a cat, the neck of a camel, a pair of wings and back legs that dissolve into a set of feathers and tendrils?**

4.

We are in a world where everything seems to be **shifting and changing**, a world of **make believe and vivid imagination**. A world of **transformation and metamorphosis** where what we see **seems to be both one thing and another, either one thing or another or perhaps nothing at all**. Everything appears to exist in a state of **confusion or suspension** between various different states of nature. What is going on with these pictures?

In the sixteenth century, these types of images were described as **“the dreams of painters”**. **What, if anything, are these dreams about?**

**Randle Cotgrave - 1611**. Dictionary of the French and English Tongues: **“Pictures wherein all kinds of odd things are represented without any particular sense or meaning, but only to feed the eye”**.

The word being defined in Cotgrave’s dictionary is **“the grotesque”** for this is what we are seeing in these prints. These **strange hybrid images are called grotesques**.

5.

Giorgio Vasari 16<sup>th</sup> century artist and writer wrote about the grotesque in his Lives of the Artists.

This is his description of the grotesque: **“it is a kind of free and humorous picture produced for the decoration of vacant spaces**. For this purpose, artists fashioned **monsters deformed by a freak of nature or by whim and fancy**, who in these **grotesque pictures** make things **outside any rule**. They attach to the finest thread a weight that it cannot support, they attach leaves to a horse’s legs, to a man they attach the legs of a crane, and similar follies and nonsense without end. He whose **imagination ran the most oddly**, was held to be the most able”.

**To us now, the word grotesque suggests the distorted, the deformed, the absurd, even the ugly and the horrific. The grotesque has a negative connotation**. But these pictures, although strange and absurd are amusing and charming, certainly very beautiful - **they do indeed “feed the eye”**.

**So why are these called grotesques?**

**And what is the connection between these charming little conceits and our negative understanding of the idea of the grotesque?**

We will look at the second question later but let's start by looking at why these images are called grotesques.

To answer this, we need to **discuss the history of these prints and the images that they represent. This means delving back from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and from there to the Rome of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.**

**6.**

Ottaviani prints. Copies of and imaginative reconstructions of Raphael's Vatican Loggia decorations. Very briefly, 1517-1519, Raphael was commissioned by Pope Leo X to decorate the lower Loggia of the Papal apartments at the Vatican (this is effectively next door to the Raphael Stanze which contain his famous set of frescos including the School of Athens - the loggie are not open to public).

**7. Raphael's Bible.** The principal works of art are a series of ceiling frescoes of scenes from the Bible but the walls and pilasters on the arches which run along the length of the space are decorated with these beautiful images and grotesques. i.e. **a kind of free and humorous picture produced for the decoration of vacant spaces. (Vasari).**

**8. Details from Raphael's grotesque decorations.**

**9. Domus Aurea.** The designs were based on wall decorations found in archaeological excavations of the Domus Aurea (the Golden House) built for Emperor Nero after the fire that destroyed much of Rome in 64AD. The Domus Aurea was a vast and lavish palace structure that covered a great swathe of central Rome. When Nero died in 68AD, the palace which was seen as a symbol of Nero's tyrannical rule, was partially destroyed and built over. Over the years, the Golden House became buried and hidden underground.

**10. Domus Aurea.** In 1480 it was rediscovered (although it was many years before archaeologists and historians realised that it was part of Nero's palace) with its almost perfectly preserved painted wall decorations still intact. **The discovery of these strange hybrid painted figures that appeared to bend, twist and subvert the natural order opened up a whole new way of viewing Roman and classical art.**

Of course, Renaissance artists knew about classical sculpture and architecture and the rules and the styles of the Roman and Greek ideal had already been absorbed by the artists and architects of the earlier 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Some of the decoration we see on these painting appeared in relief sculptures (esp on funeral stones and altars - ie swirling plants and flower decorations and tendrils or animals that looked like real animals). But not seen in painted form in a domestic setting. Until 1480, they knew very little of Roman interior decoration and wall painting.

**11.** The images on the walls of the **Domus Aurea were a revelation. Winged putti sprouting out of branches. Fantasy creatures.** Based on real plants but the first time these hybrid, mixed creatures were seen or animals growing out of plants.

But these weird pictures needed to be given a name. And because they were found underground, the people that found them thought that these had always been underground rooms. They thought they were lavishly decorated domestic caves or grottoes and so the paintings on the walls were described as paintings from the grotto - or grotesques. And that is how the grotesque gets its name.

But there is a further bit of **linguistic game playing** going on here. The Italian **grotto (meaning cave) derives from the Latin crypta from which we get the word crypt.** A crypt is the underground part of a church where the **dead are buried** and relics stored. It is a place which stands between this world and another world, the world of the living and the dead. And the **Latin word crypta derives from the same word in Greek which means “to hide” or something hidden - hence our word “cryptic”.**

Things are hidden in crypts and in grottoes and caves and when we think about the **grotesque image, we think about how one object is hidden inside another.** Is this a man hidden in a flower, or a flower hidden in a man? When faced with the grotesque, we are in the strange hidden half-world of pictorial cryptic clues where nothing is what it seems. We are never quite sure what we are looking at.

**12.**

Once the Domus Aurea was opened up, artists began to visit the site. They were lowered down by ropes into the bowels of the underground complex where they were led by guides carrying torches so that they could see these extraordinary images. One of these artists was Giovanni da Udine who worked in the studio of Raphael. Vasari, describes how Udine took Raphael into the grottoes to see these decorations. In common with many other artists, Udine left behind his name, scratched into the wall. Sadly, Raphael did not - he was perhaps a bit too grand and important for that.

Parties in the grottoes: “the aim was to be more bizarre than the grotesques themselves”. (1496-98)

Although the Raphael and Udine decorations for Leo X at the Vatican Loggia are the most celebrated and the finest and largest scale examples of Renaissance grotesque, they were far from the first. Almost as soon as the paintings in the Domus Aurea were found, artists in Rome started to use grotesque ornamentation.

**13. How grotesque is used to frame and decorate serious paintings.**

**14. Hector and Andromache. Classical order surrounded by the disorder and fantasy of grotesque decoration.**

**Gave Renaissance artists a new way of looking at classical art.**

**The traditional theory of classical art was about imitation of nature (i.e. the artist recreates the world around him in sculpture, paint etc). And it was about serious subject matters (stories from mythology, religion, history, war, tales of great individuals. The idea was that art on this high level would say something more and deeper about the subject matter that was being imitated.**

**The grotesque turned this on its head and offered a different view of ancient art and showed that classical art was not just about rules and order and restraint and the pursuit of dignified beauty. It could also involve strangeness, weirdness and wild dreamlike imaginings.**

**But, of course, not everyone was comfortable with strangeness, weirdness and wild dreamlike imaginings.**

In fact, what became known as the grotesque had a fairly short life in classical Rome. It seems to have appeared in the first century BC particularly during the time of Augustus and then reached a high point under Nero in the 60s AD and seems to have petered out after that. It was still found, but not to the extent of this short period.

**And, as we will see later, it was heavily criticised by serious minded classical writers from this period.**

But, as I say, once the Domus Aurea was unearthed, Renaissance artists quickly adopted the images and the styles that they found there and a whole new artistic vocabulary was born.

Look at some of the examples of the grotesque pre-Raphael.

**15.**

**1489-91. Filippino Lippi in the Carafa Chapel of S. Maria sopra Minerva. Grotesque decorations painted in fresco or sculpted in stucco. Used on the frames of the pictures or the arches (which are designed as frames). The pilasters lend themselves to what is called the “candelabra” style of decoration where candlesticks and urns are piled up on top of each other with animals and human faces and forms linked around them.**

The candlesticks and urns are from earlier forms of classical decoration (particularly low relief sculpture) but **adding the animals and human images was the invention of grotesque decoration.**

The grotesques are lightweight, charming, easy images **designed to set off the main picture.** They also provide a **contrast with the conventional seriousness of the main pictures. Triumph of Thomas Aquinas over the Heretics. And the Assumption.**

And so **grotesque design is subversive, disordered, unconventional and playful. If religious orthodoxy is the main cultural event in these paintings, then the grotesque frames are countercultural.**

It is, **artistically, on the edge of numerous states** (faces emerging out of plants, animals changing into human beings) and **as a result, grotesques are placed quite literally, on the edge.** And, as we will see when we look at how the grotesque develops as a genre and the word takes on different meanings, **it also represents what is on the edge of the ordered mind.**

16.

**Luca Signorelli in the San Brizio Chapel at Orvieto** adopts a more exaggerated relationship between the margin and the centre with this fresco which is, on the face of it, a portrait of the Greek philosopher Empedocles. But the frame or border is larger than the portrait and the philosopher is peering out over the writhing monsters who seem to be encroaching on the centre of the picture. Here we see the **beginnings of the grotesque as threatening and monstrous.**

Also, the **theme of the decoration in the chapel is the relationship between the classical world and the Christian world and between this world and the underworld - i.e. existence in between different states which is what the grotesque is.**

17.

The **first recorded instance of the word “grotesque”** being used is in the contract for **Pinturicchio to decorate the Piccolomini Library** in the Duomo in Siena which shows that both the style and the new word used to describe it was in common currency very soon after the discovery of Nero’s Palace. It also shows how quickly the fashion for grotesque ornamentation became established among the finest artists and the most prestigious patrons of the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Worth quoting the words of the contract: asked for **“fantasies and colours that shall be judged the most graceful, beautiful and vivid: fine, delicate and richly charged colours, for the decoration and design of what are now called grotesques”.**

The Library at Siena is a particularly **rich and lavish example of early grotesque**. Looking at the work of Signorelli and Pinturicchio, we can see that in the early years, grotesque design moved away from the delicate filigree style of the paintings at the Golden House. **The ornaments of Signorelli and Pinturicchio are set against a dark or heavily gilded background. There is an airless density to their work. It is all about colour and wild imagination.**

**18. Monte Oliveto.** Grotesques are much more **monstrous. Imaginary beasts** from other parts of the world - more medieval than classical.

Cynocephalus (dog-head), Cyclops, acephalous Blemmyae (face in his chest), Abarimon (feet turned backwards), Anthopophagus (man eater - mouth obscures face), Pandae (long ears down to his elbows).

Influence for this image is from a German book printed in Nuremberg in 1493 where similar figures are found.

Shows the flexibility of grotesque and the **interplay between classical and medieval** that is important when we think about the word “**grotesque**” in its **negative connotation which, we will see, owes much to medieval monsters with a north European and German connection.**

**19.**

**So, early examples of grotesque decoration are full of wild imagination, some monstrous elements, colour, a dense slightly claustrophobic atmosphere.**

When we come to **Raphael** the classical Italian Renaissance style of grotesque emerges and becomes established when he and his colleagues take their subterranean tour of Nero's palace.

Raphael was probably the most enthusiastically antiquarian of all the great Renaissance artists. He was keen to capture, record and recreate every aspect of classical artistic practice. And he adopted this **scholarly and precise approach** with his work on the grotesque and encouraged his students and his workshop to do the same. As we can see here with **Udine's drawings taken from his study of the Golden House. For Raphael, grotesque decoration was another aspect of classicism to study and bring into the modern age.**

**His style of the grotesque is therefore much purer, more classical, less “monstrous”, more attractively decorative, less disturbing and really sets the tone for the classical decorative style of the grotesque from which takes us from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Vatican to the 18<sup>th</sup> century English country house.**

20.

First example of Raphael's studio producing grotesque works. **Loggetta of Cardinal Bibbiena**, Vatican. **Pale background, clear images, classical architectural elements such as arches and gazebos and decorative devices such as swags and festoons and with the familiar pictures of animals and humans, plants and fruit dotted around.**

21.

We can see here how much this owes to the Golden House.

This is the style of grotesque we see in the **Loggia of Leo X which became the most influential example of the grotesque and the model for Italian grotesque design** throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

22.

**Luzio Luzi** (also Romano) at Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome.

23.

**Perino del Vaga.** Perino had been one of the assistants to Raphael and Udine at Leo X's Loggia and Luzio Luzi worked with Perino in Genoa. So we can construct a sort of family tree of decorative artists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century working on the grotesque. Indeed, so close were these relationships between the various decorative artists who specialised in the grotesque that over the years, experts have often found it difficult to differentiate their work.

24.

One of the reasons we know so much about these artists who specialised in the grotesque is that **Vasari**, whose definition of the grotesque we saw earlier, was enthusiastic about the style and, indeed, produced his own grotesque designs with members of his workshop.

25. 26.

**Little development during 16<sup>th</sup> century. Alessandro Allori at Uffizi.** This has much the **same visual vocabulary and grammar as we see in the Raphael loggia.** It is an inherently conservative artform produced mainly for an elite audience with politics and the church. That is not a criticism. It is simply what happens when artists and patrons **adopt a style with the express intention of using it as a deliberate historic reference point, as a way of tying their artistic or architectural or interior design project to a specific past style.** In art history, this

is called historicism. It is an idea to which the grotesque seems to lend itself quite readily.

## 27.

Which takes us back to the **18<sup>th</sup> century prints** we began with. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was the age of the **great neo-classical revival**, the age of the aristocratic grand tour, the building of Palladian houses in England and the adoption of the classical style across Europe.

Artists flocked to Rome to study classical architecture and design. A new wave of archaeological excavations were being carried out including further digs and discoveries at Nero's Golden House.

Artists travelled south down the coast to visit the recently discovered remains at Herculaneum which had been uncovered in 1738 and at Pompeii (found in 1748). They were also interested in how classical forms and styles were used by Renaissance artists. A double looking back - 18<sup>th</sup> century looking back to the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries.

This was especially so with the decorative arts and particularly the grotesque and, as Raphael's grotesque designs at the Vatican were the most celebrated examples of that style, they became the model for 18<sup>th</sup> century artists incorporating the grotesque into their work. The project by Giovanni Ottaviani (and his colleague Giovanni Volpato) to produce a set of large engravings of Raphael's loggia was enormously influential.

## 28.

**Catherine the Great** was so struck by the engravings that she had them copied onto canvas and mounted at the **Winter Palace** where they remain. Recreation of Raphael's Vatican Loggia.

## 29.

Catherine the Great's enthusiasm for neo-Classicism extended to her appointing the **Scottish architect Charles Cameron** to redesign the interior of her **Catherine Palace near St Petersburg**. Cameron used influences from Raphael, classical Roman interiors (including his own drawings made at the Golden House) and designs inspired by his compatriot Robert Adam.

30.

For us today, **Robert Adam** is the figure most obviously associated with the 18<sup>th</sup> century neo-classical revival in interior design. He too visited Rome and made his studies of the classical grotesques and the work of the Renaissance artists inspired by them. Adam brought these designs back to England where they became a distinctive element in country house interior design. Adam's finest work and the work most obviously inspired by the grotesque is at **Osterley Park** on the outskirts of London. This is light and very beautiful, whether painted directly on the wall or moulded in plaster on the ceiling. It feels simultaneously frivolous and archaeologically correct. It is also, unlike some of the earlier Italian grotesque work, very clear. We can see exactly what is going on - it is easy to read.

It is also highly symmetrical in a way that the Renaissance grotesque is not. The Renaissance grotesques may look symmetrical with mirror designs but if you look carefully, you will see subtle differences on either side of a panel or print. As a result, we might find these 18<sup>th</sup> century designs a little too pure, a little too classical. They seem to lack a certain inventive energy. They seem to be simply a matter of style. In short, they don't seem to be particularly grotesque.

In fact, you are probably thinking that very little we have seen so far qualifies as grotesque as we understand the word. It has all been very **charming, absurd, slightly ridiculous, pretty and clever. We can understand the connection between these images and the grottoes which gave them their name but how does this fit with the sense of fear, revulsion, surprise, fantasy and disgust that we associate with the grotesque.**

How do these feelings relate to the decorations and ornaments we have been looking at? **What is the connection between grotesque decoration and ornamentation and the emotions we call grotesque?**

To discover this, we need to turn the grotesque on its head, and look at it with a different eye. So, I am going to turn this talk around by 180 degrees and give you this.

31.32.

**Fuseli. The Nightmare. 1781.** Later version and many prints. Fuseli spent eight years in Rome studying Classical and Renaissance art, particularly Michelangelo. He visited Herculaneum and Pompeii and produced drawings and studies in the neo classical manner. And yet, shortly after his return to England in 1778 and at exactly the same time that other artists who had made the journey to Rome (such as Adam and Charles Cameron) were producing the sort of designs we have seen, Fuseli produced The Nightmare. This famous painting is thought to have been the result of a failed love affair and the horrible images conjured up by Fuseli as manifestations of the young woman's dreams, do seem to suggest that Fuseli had what we would now

call “issues” with women. But how does Fuseli generate this overwhelming atmosphere of terror? It is done by means of a horse that seems to be transforming into a wild-eyed monster (a literal night-mare - although the origins of the word nightmare derive from the monster sitting on the woman - a demonic spirit from Scandanavian myth called a mare which becomes the English word) and a creature that defies description - part man, part ape, with the ears of a bat - save to say that it has already turned into something we would describe as grotesque, in the sense of horrible and monstrous. This creature is the nightmare?

**How does this link with grotesque decoration? What do they have in common? Animals in the grotesque. Metamorphic creatures - part animal, part human - altered physical states.**

Charming images we saw earlier were described as the **dreams of painters - but an animal can be wild as well as friendly, hybrid creatures can be amusing and light-hearted or they can be terrifying monsters.**

**Dreams can be sweet or they can be nightmares.** The grotesque can be light and frivolous, or dark and dangerous. It can be in good taste or it can be in very bad taste. It can go either way and, as we will now see, the darkness and the danger were always there. The grotesque was always grotesque.

**But how do we get from Raphael’s dreams to Fuseli’s nightmare.**

33.

When what we call grotesques first appeared in classical Rome, they met with some criticism - they were regarded by some writers and artists as objects of disgust. The poet **Horace** describes how painters “join a horse’s neck to a human head” and then clothe the limbs with feather or how what “starts out at the top as a beautiful woman ended in a hideously ugly fish”. **Horace calls these images the sign of a “sick man’s dreams”.**

Grotesques subverting the ordered classical ideal. Dangerous.

Horace’s contemporary, the architect and writer **Vitruvius** who **did more than anyone to define the classical style** wrote fiercely against what he called **“paintings of monstrosities”**. In fact, his criticism of the style that came to be called grotesque serves as a very good definition of it.

For Vitruvius these hybrid ornaments are **decadent, the sign of “poor art” and “ought not to be approved”**. So, from the beginning (from 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome when these forms were invented) and even before the forms of hybrid, metamorphic creatures were given the name grotesque, there was **a feeling that they**

**represented something dangerous emanating from the dark side of the imagination.**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the sculptor and writer **Benvenuto Cellini** made this link explicit stating in his famous autobiography that the proper name for these “chimerical hybrids” as he called them, was “monsters”, not grotesques. And remember that “monsters” was a word that Vasari used to describe them.

34.

Figure from **Cosimo I's armour**. Combines, **a man, a lion and the horns of a ram**. It conforms to the definition of a “grotesque” but conjures up feelings of horror, **fear and aggression**.

Similarly the wild conceit on the back of Perseus' helmet which defies description and definition. Although these works were done at the same time as many of the highly imaginative, small scale, modest interior decoration and they can all be called “grotesques”, it is clear that we are entering a different world of feeling and expression, one where the **grotesque tends towards the monstrous and the exaggerated, the more serious and the harder edged**.

35.

We can see this in the context of **interior and garden design**. Palazzo Thiene in Vicenza and the **fireplaces** designed by the Venetian sculptor Alessandro Vittoria.

36.

And the extraordinary monstrous figures in the gardens at the **Villa Orsini at Bomarzo**. These are clearly grotesques in the sense of **combining incongruous elements and transforming one thing, a monstrous human face, into another, a cave or a fireplace**.

This shifting between two worlds that we define as the grotesque is heightened in the case of the **Orcus sculpture**. This takes on a more macabre twist when we reflect that it was used as an **outdoor dining room**. Guests would walk in through the mouth and sit down to eat, the nightmarish conceit being that they were **simultaneously eating and being eaten**. The designer and inventor of the Sacro Bosco, Pirro Ligurio claimed that **“the grotesque should transcend decoration and virtuosity for its own sake but should aim to reveal deeper truths”**.

37.

An example of this is the well-known work of **Arcimboldo**, the court painter to the Habsburgs in Vienna and Prague. The forming of a man's head from a sprawling mass of animals - **a combination grotesque, a monstrous illusion - a grossly**

**exaggerated version of the half plant/half humans that we saw in Raphael's grotesques.** [And that is certainly what they are. But they also about something more. By combining animals of the air and the earth into an abstract portrait of a man, Arcimboldo was making the point that the emperor Maximilian II was the ruler not just of people and empires but the very elements that make up nature].

38.

The world that we have entered with Cellini, Arcimboldo and the Villa Orsini is “**mannerism**”. This isn't a talk on mannerism so I do not want to go too deeply into its history but essentially, **mannerism is the development of and a reaction against the purity, order, and classicism of the high Renaissance.** It is generally thought to begin following the death of Raphael in 1520. Mannerism is about **invention, distortion, elongation, exaggeration of the human form, high ornamentation, pure style and artistic virtuosity.** Examples of these characteristics here.

Now, mannerism and the grotesque are not the same thing although **mannerism can contain elements of the grotesque**, such as the **horses with webbed feet on Cellini's salt cellar with.** But I think it is correct to say that mannerism would not have happened without the broadening of artistic possibilities created by the grotesque. Similar criticism was applied to mannerism as was applied to the grotesque. **El Greco's work, for instance was described as “the distorted fancies of a morbid brain”.**

*The grotesque gave artists the freedom to break from the classical rules and to play with form structure and line.*

*Mannerism was part of the growing challenge in 16<sup>th</sup> century to the classical idea that art is meant to represent an ordered way of seeing the world. Mannerism showed that artistic creation can arise out of disorder, distortion, exaggeration.*

39. 40.

To get a real sense of how the grotesque turns from light to dark, we need to look at how it changes as it **moves north from Italy.** Grotesque designs spread through Europe through prints and drawings and Italian artists worked outside Italy taking the new style with them and developing it most famously at the **palace of King Francis I of France at Fontainebleau** where it is used in this extraordinary three-dimensional way to create chimney pieces and picture surrounds with their distinctive ornamental structures known as **strapwork** resembling interlaced bands forming a geometric pattern.

But it was as the grotesque moved into the **Netherlands and Germany that it took on a more demonic, mocking, satirical and, frankly, ugly character.**

41.

**Netherlands grotesque. Cornelis Bos - from Antwerp.** One of the most important figures in the development of Netherlands grotesque design. Use of **strapwork** which gives structure but a **much heavier feel than the leaves and tendrils of classical grotesque**. Instead of allowing the figures freedom to grow and transform, **strapwork seems to lock them in. It has a threatening claustrophobic quality** - see the female figure at the centre of the print. And the **grotesque creatures are much more macabre - eyes with legs sticking out of them.**

42.

Even when Bos adopts the Italian renaissance style, it is much darker with its **grinning skulls.**

43.

Bos worked closely with **Cornelis Floris** who also created **nightmare visions where the figures seem to be consumed by the decorations and ornamentation which have metamorphosed into octopus-like invertebrates.**

It is one thing having the branches of a plant wind themselves around you, it is quite another to be tied up in tentacles and body parts.

44.

This very weird use of bits of bodies as a form of decoration is most explicit in the form of **grotesque ornament from Germany known as Knorpelgroteske which translates as cartilage grotesque.**

**Faces become part of the decoration** - not separated from it. The patterns of decoration are the heads and faces. Decoration is the human form. **Complete breakdown of distinctions. Everything is absorbed into this strange dream world.**

**This is a long way from Udine and the classical decorative tradition that culminates in Robert Adam and the classical revival. Both are forms of the grotesque but they are moving in very different directions.**

45. 46.

There is a good art historical reason why these Netherlandish prints summon up a much more monstrous form of imagery than those from contemporary grotesque designs in Italy. Northern Europe already had, long before the discovery of Nero's house in Rome, its own tradition of creating strange, dreamlike creatures. These are

known as **Gothic drolleries** and are the sort of images we find in the margins of medieval religious manuscripts such as **Books of Psalms** and **Books of Hours**. Like Italian grotesques, these are paintings on the edge of something much more serious and, again like grotesques they are imaginative monsters that shift between one type of creature and another.

The origins of these are quite complex and not entirely clear. They came from local folk traditions, and it is possible that there was a continuation of some sort of Roman tradition in those parts of northern Europe that had been under the Roman empire. And there was a mini-classical revival in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the Roman Catholic church but really these sorts of images are only very loosely linked with Nero's grotesque.

**Medieval grotesques do not resemble or attempt to resemble any realistic animal or creature. Classical grotesques do aim at some sort of imitation even if they then combine it with another imitation of an animal so you can point to the elements of the classical grotesque and say what they are - you cannot do that with these gothic monsters or the northern European grotesques.**

47.

Such drolleries were often intended to be playful and satirical or to convey a moral message - in other words they had a hard-edged point to them and were more than just decoration.

Accordingly, a **dark, mocking, somewhat vicious** tone enters Northern European grotesque through the gothic. **Erhard Schon - Devil with bagpipes**. From a pamphlet showing a demonic figure that is impossible to describe playing bagpipes. The bagpipes have mutated into the head of a monk the message being, of course, that the monk is singing or dancing to the devil's tune. This monstrous imagery is a clear example the grotesque transcending decoration and carrying a deeper message.

48. 49.

**Hieronymous Bosch** - takes the marginal drollery and brings it into the centre of the picture. He has **created a menacing hellish world filled with strange bizarre hybrid monstrous figures and objects who have stepped from the weirdest dreams and nightmares. We are firmly in the chaotic world of the dreamlike grotesque.**

It is no coincidence that Bosch's younger, German contemporary **Durer** when writing about the art genre he called "traumwerk" or dreamwork said "**whoever wants to make dreamworks must mix all things together**".

50.

Durer might have been speaking of another contemporary Martin Schongauer and his "**Temptations of St Anthony**". **This print was enormously influential in developing the tradition of the demonic grotesque.** It conjures up impossible imaginary monsters to create feelings of fear and revulsion, to darken the mood and move us from dream to nightmare.

There is a sense with this northern grotesque that it teeters on the edge of many various modes of thought and emotion.

51.

As we see here with **Christoph Jamnitzer** - yes, these are works of **ornamental decoration, but they also shift between humour, satire, violence, bad taste and bad dreams.** It is hard to pin down but this feeling of the ground shifting under our feet as we look at these images and think about them is part of the dangerous and unsettling nature of the grotesque.

52.

**Arent van Bolten.** A good example of how one artist **shifts between the decorative and the monstrous mode.**

**Grotesque designs for domestic use** - this is pure ornament but also produces **images of monsters which clearly fall into the category of grotesque - have a nightmarish quality.**

And when we think of strange grotesques as monsters and how they influence later art, it brings us back to Fuseli and to work such as this.

53.

**Goya. Caprichos** - dark, sometimes satirical images showing a world turned upside down.

**The Sleep of Reason.** Goya is showing what happens when we lose ideas of reason and order. **Monsters appear - we are in the realm of the grotesque.**

## **And perhaps this is the best way to define the grotesque: The Sleep of Reason.**

We have seen how one strand of the grotesque develops and then rather runs of steam in the world of neo-classical interior design, grotesques becoming safe and beautiful and fit for grand drawing rooms.

**But the other strand of the grotesque, the strand from which we get our modern understanding of the grotesque as a source of revulsion, fear and uncertainty, contains, I would argue the foundations of many of the most unsettling of later art movements and genres.**

*The grotesque way of seeing things becomes a significant strand in the artistic and creative process.*

*The grotesque offers a ready-made idea of distortion and transformation, and metamorphosis. It gives artists the language they need to transform their work into something new and disturbing.*

*Grotesque shows what can be done when the imagination is given free rein, when the artist delves into the deeper realms of the subconscious and learns how to break the rules.*

*It suggests a new way for artists to see the world and our place in it. The grotesque gives us a whole modern tradition of the artist as an outsider with a special insight into the unconscious, subconscious, dark and hidden side of the human mind.*

*The grotesque begins by giving us paintings on the edge of other pictures - on frames and in margins. The grotesque then develops into the creation of images from the edges of our mind.*

*And perhaps the grotesque captures our human condition better than any other mode of art. Human condition is about states of paradox, we are a mixture of feelings and emotions and physical states in the same way that the grotesque image is.*

*Much of what makes us human is uncertain and marginal and hidden. Freud and the uncanny (unheimlich) - feeling when we cannot determine our relation to something. This is all captured in the grotesque and the art forms that are influenced by its ideas.*

54. 55.

**Surrealism. Explicit reference to the world of dreams and transformation. Borrowing from grotesque** - particularly the gruesome “knorpelgroteske”.

**Miro. Disembodied parts of the human face attached to a tree.** Strange monstrous creations and a fish growing out of the ground.

56.

**Symbolism. A reaction against the realism of late 19<sup>th</sup> century art.**

Symbolists were less interested in capturing nature and the world around us (as the realists and impressionists had) but in **delving under the surface and trying to capture the feelings generated by fantasy and imagination**. The vocabulary of the grotesque is the perfect way to capture these ideas.

57.

And, of course, **ideas of fusion and metamorphosis lie at the heart of the grotesque - objects, animals and nature changing from one form to another**.

Once we recognise the essential characteristics of the grotesque, we can start to see it as a vital mode of artistic creation.

58.

The visual language of the grotesque allows us to make all sorts of connections that you might regard as valid and sensible

59. or you might, on the other hand, regard as...well, a little bit grotesque.