

Implausible beings and the sleep of reason: the grotesqueness of the grotesque.

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During renovations to the Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome in 1480, a set of underground rooms were unearthed. They were decorated with an array of imaginary figures later described by Vasari as ‘fantasies so varied and bizarre’.

Painted on the walls and ceilings were dozens of strange hybrid creatures: plants sprouting, not flowers, but animals turning into human beings; disembodied faces growing out of curling stalks or popping up out of nowhere and beasts with the head of a horse and wings and legs dissolving into fins. (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Wall decoration from the Domus Aurea, Rome, c65AD.

These images conjured up an atmosphere of make believe and vivid imagination, transformation and metamorphosis. They were both one thing and another, either one thing or another or perhaps nothing at all. Everything existed in a state of confusion or suspension.

Almost as soon as these underground rooms were discovered, artists began to visit them. Lowered down by ropes, they were led by guides holding torches so that they could view and copy these extraordinary images. But these bizarre fantasies needed a name. How could the indescribable be described?

As they were found beneath the Baths of Titus, the rooms were thought to be part of this complex. Much later, they were identified as belonging to the Emperor Nero's lavish palace, the Domus Aurea (the Golden House). After Nero's death in 68AD, this was partially destroyed and built over. Being hidden underground, it was assumed that the rooms were decorated caves or grottoes and so the designs on the walls were described as paintings from the grotto - or grotesques. By the end of the

fifteenth century the word “grotesque” was being used to describe these hybrid fantasies. A new category and vocabulary of art had been born.

The grotesques of the Domus Aurea are among the most important artistic and archaeological discoveries of the Renaissance. They offered fresh, radical ways of looking at antiquity and showed that artists could work in the classical tradition without necessarily being confined to the higher aesthetic ideals of order, restraint and dignified beauty. Instead, classicism could incorporate strangeness, weirdness and wild dreamlike imaginings. Indeed, the sixteenth-century architect and scholar, Daniele Barbaro, described grotesques as ‘the dreams of painting’. But dreams are slippery things, often shifting into nightmares: the grotesque, as we shall see, operates in multiple modes.

Within ten years of the unearthing of the Domus Aurea, grotesque designs were being adopted by artists across Italy. In Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome (1489-91), Filippino Lippi used grotesque decorations in the “candelabra” style where candlesticks and urns are piled on top of each other with animal and human forms linked around them. These grotesques are lightweight and charming, providing an unconventional and playful contrast with the classical purity and seriousness of the main pictures.

A darker and more exaggerated grotesque appeared in the San Brizio Chapel at Orvieto between 1499 and 1502. Luca Signorelli’s decorations show a portrait of the Greek philosopher Empedocles peering out across a frame constructed from a sea of writhing monsters. Grotesque decoration had metamorphosed into threatening monstrosity. It would not be until the seventeenth century that “grotesque” acquired its adjectival use and expanded its meaning to suggest the physically and ethically repulsive, but it took only the tiniest verbal and mental leap to move from the unsettling image to the unsettling idea.

The most celebrated artist to descend into the grotto was Raphael, accompanied by a member of his workshop, Giovanni da Udine who made extensive drawings based on the Roman designs. Their response to what they encountered was to have a lasting impact. In 1515, Raphael was commissioned by Pope Leo X to decorate the lower Loggia of the Papal apartments at the Vatican. The principal paintings are a series of ceiling frescoes of biblical scenes (known as Raphael’s Bible) but the walls and pilasters are decorated with grotesques executed by Udine from designs based on the images in the Domus Aurea. Raphael and Udine retained the unsettling strangeness of the original hybrid creatures but beautified them, transforming them into masterpieces of High Renaissance gracefulness. These Raphaelian grotesques became the model for one of the central strands in the decorative arts of the Italian classicizing tradition, which reached its apogee in the eighteenth-century neo-classical revival.

The most explicit homage to Raphael's Loggia grotesques was the set of engravings by Giovanni Ottaviani and Giovanni Volpato copied directly from the Vatican originals. (Fig. 2) So influential were these prints that Catherine the Great had the designs painted onto canvas and mounted at the Hermitage where they remain.



Fig. 2. Giovanni Ottaviani (after drawings by Pietro Camporesi and Gaetano Savorelli). "Loggie di Raffaello nel Vaticano". Copper engraving with hand colouring, printed on paper. c1776-1782. From the author's collection.

In Britain Robert Adam brought the grotesque from Rome to England where it became a distinctive element in country house interior design. Adam's finest grotesque work is at Osterley Park: light and beautiful, it feels simultaneously frivolous and archaeologically correct. It also has a striking clarity and symmetry. As a result, we might find these eighteenth-century designs a little too pure and classical. They lack inventive energy. They don't seem to be particularly grotesque. But in what way is the grotesque grotesque?

Writing in the century before the decoration of the Domus Aurea, the poet Horace, in his *Ars Poetica* describes how painters 'join a horse's neck to a human head' or how what 'starts out at the top as a beautiful woman ended in a hideously ugly fish'. These images, he says, are a 'sick man's dreams'. For Vitruvius they were 'paintings of monstrosities' and 'ought not to be approved'. So, from the beginning there was a feeling that these hybrid, metamorphic creatures represented something dangerous from the dark side of the imagination. In the sixteenth century, Benvenuto Cellini argued that the proper name for these 'chimerical hybrids', was 'monsters', not grotesques. And 'monsters' was how Vasari described them. Beautiful though grotesques could be, their significance lay in the darkness beneath the surface.

As the grotesque spread north from Italy through prints and drawings it turned from light to dark, from the decorative to the monstrous, taking on a more demonic and ugly character. As we see in this characteristically nightmarish print by the Flemish artist Cornelis Bos (Fig. 3) there is a threatening claustrophobia in the northern grotesque. The male term figure in the centre is imprisoned by the decorative strapwork while the dog-vomiting flowers and the tongue-pecking bird have tipped us firmly into the macabre. But the most bizarre use of ornamental body parts is found in the German tradition of *Knorpelgroteske* or 'cartilage grotesque' where the decorative structure dissolves into bones, gristle and knobby flesh.



Fig. 3. Cornelis Bos, Grotesque panel. 1555. Engraving printed on paper. 19.9x16.2cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

These more monstrous elements in Netherlandish and German grotesque reflect the Northern Europe tradition of Gothic drolleries and gargoyles, those strange, dreamlike creatures often intended to be satirical or moralistic. This darker, more serious tone that feeds into the Northern tradition finds expression in Bosch's menacing, hellish *Garden of Earthly Delights* (c1500). Filled with bizarre monstrous figures and objects it abandons us to the chaotic world of the nightmare grotesque. It could have been of Bosch that Durer was thinking when he wrote of the genre he called *traumwerk*: 'whoever wants to make dreamworks must mix all things together'. And nightmarish chaos pervades Martin Schongauer's *Temptations of St Anthony* (c1480) as it conjures up imaginary monsters to create feelings of fear and revulsion, to darken the mood and nudge us into the spiritual abyss.

Schongauer's St Anthony clearly lies behind *The Sleep of Reason produces monsters*, the most celebrated of Goya's *Caprichos*, his dark, satirical images showing a world turned upside down, beset by fear and disorder. And perhaps this is the best way to define the grotesque: the sleep of reason.

The 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 begins as decoration but develops into the creation of images from the edges of our mind. The grotesque therefore gives us that entire modern tradition of the artist as an outsider with an insight into the unconscious, subconscious, hidden side of the human mind.

Delving beneath the surface of the mind to make what Odilon Redon called "a living humanness out of implausible beings" allows us to draw clear aesthetic links from first century Rome, through the Renaissance into the modern world. The dreams and metamorphoses that define the grotesque lie behind the Symbolist reaction against late 19th century realism: Fernand Knopff's "cheetah-woman" in *The Caress* (Fig. 4) is hard to imagine without Raphael's Loggia decorations.



Fig. 4. Fernand Knopff, *Des Caress*. 1896. Oil on canvas, 50.5x151 cm. Musees royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

Many of the important art movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries such as Symbolism, Surrealism and Expressionism, seek to express the improbable and the impossible by opening our minds into unexplored and inexplicable worlds. In doing so, they present us with the same aesthetic and psychological experiences as those enjoyed by the Renaissance artists who crawled underground to gaze upon the grotesques of the Domus Aurea.