

# Chicago Street People

An Architectural Survey

By

Joseph and Sandra Korom

*Chicago Hidden in Plain Sight Series (CHIPS):*

Volume One of Five

---

The complete *CHIPS (Chicago Hidden in Plain Sight) Series* in Five Volumes:

Volume One: Chicago Street People  
Volume Two: Twelfth Century Chicago  
Volume Three: Chicago Street Zoo  
Volume Four: Chicago Gargoyles, Grotesques, and Dragons  
Volume Five: Chicago Bits and Pieces

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

## Introduction

### *Chicago Street People*

Books on Chicago architecture often feature large sweeping vistas of its skyline and lakefront. There are the obligatory views of iconic skyscrapers and stunning aerial images of the Loop, Navy Pier, and the towers of the Magnificent Mile. This book has none of these.

*Chicago Street People* is a book about the sculptures of *people*, viewable from the street, which are found on the *exterior walls* of Chicago's buildings. Hundreds of buildings were photographed over a four-year period, but *only in Chicago*.

*Chicago Street People* is unique. Until now, no book has been produced to display and document Chicago's public *architectural* sculpture depicting *only representations of the human form*. Figures of the deceased and people of many time periods, professions, cultures, and races—adorned in all their various permutations, costumes, pretenses, and exotic disguises—were surveyed and included. Gathered, too, were images of human-based figures that played a role in the fears and superstitions of earlier generations and of those scary figures dreaded by various cultures but placed upon building façades for a variety of reasons, rational or otherwise. Devils, demons, and frightening ghouls were discovered throughout the city, and, although disquieting, these could not be dismissed from this survey.

Figures allegorical, mythological, or historical were noted, but any overtly religious figures were not recognized here. Chicago's cemeteries are replete with sumptuous carvings of people—figures and faces—but these places were also not surveyed. Though many carvings in cemeteries are beautiful, headstones, monuments, and tombs do not count here; their inclusion would constitute an entirely different project and result in a wholly different product. No solitary or grouped figures like those found in parks, on boulevards, or in prominent plazas were included. *This is not a book about statues.*

This book is about architectural people—in stone, clay, and metal—that yet may be viewed on a leisure stroll. Unfortunately too many are frustratingly hard to see by most pedestrians, especially in the Loop. All too often it has become a true exercise in futility to spot these carved artworks, some of which were placed hundreds of feet above the sidewalk. A few figures are so distant, and some streets so narrow, that viewing these sculptures becomes quite difficult. Paraphrasing the observation of Lewis Mumford, one of the most influential art and architecture critics of the twentieth century, these sculptures are “not for men, but for angels and aviators.”<sup>1</sup>

In that sense, these carvings are not populist art; they are not democratic, as they can only and easily be enjoyed by relatively few—only by those who occupy the very tops of other

nearby towers. The ultimate paradox is that too many carvings are condemned to a life of obscurity, and once the building is pulled down only the *wreckers* will discover these hidden treasures. There is a small degree of insanity in all of this, although it is generally understood that architectural decoration should not be limited to only the first few floors of any building.

It is also important to note that some sculptures have not seen the light of day since they were installed, and they continue to reside in a state of perpetual shade or shadow. Certain carvings deemed artistically or historically worthwhile were captured by camera despite a host of challenging circumstances. The lack of direct sunlight was one, and, when unavailable, borrowed light from nearby reflective glass walls was employed.<sup>2</sup> For some sculptures, the images in this book represent the *only time* they were ever recorded by camera. For these decades-old virgins, this book represents their coming-out party.

The conditions of many of the “people sculptures,” otherwise known as “Street People” are in less than pristine shape. Acid rain, vandalism, and general neglect have destroyed much. A limestone carving’s crispness, once enjoyed by a satisfied client, was sadly lost forever after suffering decades of acid rain; fuzzy faces and rounded details are the tragic results. Crumbling carvings executed in sandstone, limestone, and marble were routinely encountered. The incidences of spalling—the chipping, flaking or fragmenting of stone—was perhaps the most disturbing and seemed to be occurring on sculptures and whole façades throughout Chicago.

The discoloration of stone due to a century of belching coal dust and smoke from the chimneys of houses, factories, and buildings of every type has blackened many sculptural elements; a large number have been cleaned, but some deserving pieces have not. Rusty water and the drippings of a variety of exterior metals and surrounding materials have also contributed to surface discolorations. The painting of stone inflicts more surface damage by well-meaning, but misguided, building owners. Examples of terra cotta cracking and chipping and loosened misaligned pieces were encountered everywhere. Many were green with moss. All these, too, were photographed and documented; honest urban archeology must faithfully record all deserving artifacts despite obvious condition problems.

Disheartening as this damage may be, some of Chicago’s finest “Street People buildings” have indeed been sensitively restored and are expected to endure the hardships of urban life for centuries to come. That is the good news.

The bad news is that throughout the last few decades much in the way of public architectural art was irrevocably lost—on purpose. Hundreds of significant buildings, special for

their style, craftsmanship, and historical associations, were demolished. And along with their demolition went tons of sculpture executed in stone, clay, and metal.

The wrecking ball and bulldozer smashed, ground, and pulverized a plentiful supply of this city's collective memory into little pieces. Busts of the famous and faces of the forgotten were summarily reduced to rubble. Other structures were the victims of fires, intentional or otherwise, or they succumbed to other natural disasters. Over the last few decades, buildings both significant and ordinary disappeared by the thousands with a few succumbing during this book's writing.

Real estate people—land investors and building speculators—played with lots and plats, and toyed with buildings and properties where real people lived...on real parcels...in real homes. Speculators threw the dice, moved their tokens, and bought and sold properties all over the board, often to the detriment of residents and neighborhoods alike. Much architectural art was lost to ill-conceived “modernization,” unfounded hopes of profit, and unbridled greed. It was a game where some prospered, but few went “directly to jail.”

Despite these facts, Chicago's shear abundance and diversity of architectural “people images” remains noteworthy. What is suspected is that there are yet more sculpted people—heads, faces, and bodies—still resting upon the walls of Chicago's buildings and patiently waiting to be *re-discovered*. *Chicago Street People* reveals some of the most potent examples ever created by our urban ancestors. Notice them now, and consider each of these sculptures a talisman, a gift to the street presented to us and to future generations, by those who went before us.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Mumford, Sticks & Stones (1924; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Natural sunlight, whether direct and harsh, or diffused and mellow, was always a valued commodity. A low-angled sun was preferred but was all-too-often fleeting. Still, Chicago's climate provided for an average maximum of some 180 sun-filled days per year, and many were used to maximum advantage.