

Chicago Gargoyles, Grotesques, and Dragons

An Architectural Survey of Fantasy Animals

By

Joseph and Sandra Korom

Chicago Hidden in Plain Sight Series (CHIPS):

Volume Four 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
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Volume Five: Chicago Bits and Pieces

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Introduction

Apart from the simple items, it was the representational world of sculptures that was full of symbolism, and could contain unambiguous or many-layered references....Medieval man was constantly creating links in his understanding between the appearance of an object and the supernatural world and the higher reality.¹

Rolf Toman

Chicago: Gargoyles, Grotosques, and Dragons is a book that explores select small architectural carvings found on the outsides of buildings: images of dragons, gargoyles, strange animals, and frightening beasts of all types. Ancient mythology, medieval folklore, superstitions, and various religious beliefs all played a role in their development; winged serpents, distorted sea creatures, and an assortment of fire-breathers and Hell-residing scary guys were spawned by these. This is an exploration of the imagination, of the power of myth before the turn of the twentieth century and shortly thereafter.

Chicago prides itself on being this nation's birthplace of modern architecture. Boasts of something called "organic architecture" and the design mantra of "form follows function" still reverberate between the cheek-by-jowl-positioned skyscrapers of steel and glass. Ideas of modern architecture spawned a century ago are still with us. But not everyone bought into the new ideas.

An architect's adoption of modern architecture meant a renunciation of historical forms for his or her new buildings. The elimination of Greek temple fronts, Renaissance domes, naked statuary, and a whole dictionary of designs from old Europe was enthusiastically promoted by modernists. Still, the norm included designs of new buildings that looked like old-fashioned buildings covered with weird images, silly doodads, and lots of carvings.

Not every architect practicing then had an epiphany. Not every architect experienced a personal aesthetic conversion to the "innovations" that were espoused by a few high priests of modern design. And certainly not every client became a convert. Simply put, some people liked old fashioned buildings covered with weird images, silly doodads, and carvings of made-up

animals, real or imagined. They—some architects, clients, and the public—liked the look of old European buildings.

The infant-city Chicago that emerged after the Civil War had traditional looking buildings. There were arcades and colonnades and domes and all the usual Renaissance-based finery. There stood some Gothic-inspired buildings too, but that was about it. Department stores, hotels, churches, factories, mills, and lots of houses formed the city. Much of it was brick and stone. The majority of it, though, was wood, very dry wood.

The Chicago Fire of 1871 changed everything. It was rumored that one of Mrs. O’Leary’s “tenants”, a lantern-kicking cow, was the culprit that started the “Great Conflagration.” That little event staged in her barn was reported to have wiped out almost three square miles of Chicago, and with it some 17,450 structures and the lives of over 300 people. It was just after this great calamity, in this prairie-hugging city, that the greatest pool of talented architects—probably ever informally assembled—mingled among makeshift shanties and rubble-strewn streets. The city staggered, but it did not fall. When much of Chicago still smelled of black and acrid smoke and for three decades afterward, a select few were inventing a new and special city, a modern metropolis. It was amazing what one hoof, some hay, and a lit lantern could do.

The urban slate was wiped clean. The city of Chicago could start again, new and different, more modern looking.

During the turn of the twentieth century, Chicagoans were confronted by a whole new set of architectural aesthetics. Some buildings were startling—they were modern looking—and they appeared downright challenging to accepted norms, to the tastes of most Chicagoans. These glassy mavericks had much less decoration, and what details were featured ignored the prevalent Victorian fussiness.

Modern architecture had arrived. Still, by an overwhelming margin, building designs were based upon historical styles. Of some 400,000 buildings in Chicago at the turn of the century, only a handful were considered modern. Houses were traditional—they had lots of fussiness—and the designs of larger buildings often obeyed Renaissance propriety.

Old-looking buildings, those based upon historic designs, often had carved monsters on their walls. So a century ago, when it was fashionable to copy the look of medieval and Renaissance buildings, whole families of dragons and invented animals appeared seemingly everywhere. Ugly monsters made their homes on the façades of big buildings and small. The walls of religious buildings, stone mansions, and substantial brick houses had scary beasts

perched on them. Dragons peered from behind limestone hedgerows. “Perversions” some said, while writing about the architecture of the Prairie School.² Others just enjoyed the fright factor.

Tradition and the *accurate* borrowing of historic building forms, like Gothic-inspired churches, demanded the inclusion of dragons and strange and scary animals. These new ones were supposed to look just like those old romantic buildings in Europe. And many of them did.

Chicago’s *modern architecture* took a back seat to scaly bodies, poisoned fangs, and spikey tails. Many of the newly-completed buildings had walls embellished with strange creepy crawlers, slithery swimmers, and pointy-winged beak screamers. Building designs based upon Europe’s Middle Ages and the ensuing Renaissance held sway with the public, developers, and architects alike. Historic architecture was fashionable in Chicago.

Chicago: Gargoyles, Grotesques, and Dragons delights in the discovery of these carved images. Their variety staggers the mind, and yet one must know that due to decades of building demolition—through urban renewal and other nefarious acts—this now adolescent-city has lost many such artworks. These shown here are the survivors—for now.

Chicago: Gargoyles, Grotesques, and Dragons presents the images and stories of an obscure Chicago. Photographs never before published and details never before recorded begin, for the reader, a journey of the imagination.

¹Rolf Toman, *Romanesque Architecture Sculpture Painting* (Cologne, Germany: Tandem Verlag GmbH, 2004), 339.

²The Prairie School was not a building for education but a school of thought, a realm of design ideas predicated upon the naturalistic forms of the American—especially Midwest—prairie. This late nineteenth and early twentieth century movement was identified with horizontally-based homes, simple forms, and natural colors. Chicago architect Frank Lloyd Wright was its most famous proponent.