



The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity

By Michael Camille



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Most of the seven million people who visit the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris each year probably do not realize that the legendary gargoyles adorning this medieval masterpiece were not constructed until the nineteenth century. The first comprehensive history of these world-famous monsters, *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame* argues that they transformed the iconic thirteenth-century cathedral into a modern monument.

Michael Camille begins his long-awaited study by recounting architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc's ambitious restoration of the structure from 1843 to 1864, when the gargoyles were designed, sculpted by the little-known Victor Pyanet, and installed. These gargoyles, Camille contends, were not mere avatars of the Middle Ages, but rather fresh creations—symbolizing an imagined past—whose modernity lay precisely in their nostalgia. He goes on to map the critical reception and many-layered afterlives of these chimeras, notably in the works of such artists and writers as Charles Méryon, Victor Hugo, and photographer Henri Le Secq. Tracing their eventual evolution into icons of high kitsch, Camille ultimately locates the gargoyles' place in the twentieth-century imagination, exploring interpretations by everyone from Winslow Homer to the Walt Disney Company.

Lavishly illustrated with more than three hundred images of its monumental yet whimsical subjects, *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame* is a must-read for historians of art and architecture and anyone whose imagination has been sparked by the lovable monsters gazing out over Paris from one of the world's most renowned vantage points.



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Editorial Review

Review

“The ‘restoration’ of Notre Dame de Paris has always been controversial. Viollet-le-Duc and Jean Baptiste Lassus have long been cast as the handmaidens of nineteenth-century positivism, instilling a vision of rational structure and historical development on the cathedral only recently purged of its Revolutionary years as a Temple of Reason. Writing a history of the cathedral’s bevy of gargoyles, Michael Camille brilliantly confirms Viollet-le-Duc’s definition of ‘restoration’ as both a word and thing of modern coinage. This last work of one of our time’s great medievalists is, like Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*, at once monumental and wide ranging, yet always focused on a demonic protagonist. Provocative, at times profoundly insightful, Michael Camille unveils the fantasies and anxieties of both Viollet-le-Duc and all the restorations since in the veils of meaning and emotions of France’s most visited cathedral.”

(Barry Bergdoll, Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design, Museum of Modern Art)

“The celebrated medievalist Michael Camille takes on the modern era in this sweeping and brave book—with staggeringly original results. Exploring the indispensability of the monstrous to the modern, *The Gargoyles of Notre Dame* is at once a meditation on the valences of modernity and a rumination on the meanings attributed to the Middle Ages and the cathedral itself in the later nineteenth century.”

(Hollis Clayson, author of *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege*)

"Extraordinary, comprehensively illustrated and cogently argued. . . . The illustrations alone are amazing . . . and the whole monumental, provocative, finished volume is a tribute to scholarship as well as to the protagonists of one of the most spectacular works of controversial restoration ever undertaken. The book investigates the monstrous and its influence on the modern . . . as well as providing thoughtful asides on 19th-century interpretations of the meanings given to medievalism and to a revived medieval artefact."

(James Stevens Curl *Times Educational Supplement*)

"Camille contextualizes the social dimension of this 19th-century restoration project by expanding it into a cultural digest to demonstrate that, rather than restoring a medieval bestiary, Viollet-le-Duc's passionate imagination shaped creatures expressive of social anxieties resounding today."—*Choice*

(*Choice*)

“An ingenious and highly readable book.”

(*Sculpture Journal*)

About the Author

Michael Camille (1958–2002) was professor of art history at the University of Chicago. His many books include *The Medieval Art of Love* and *Mirror in Parchment*.

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