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FROM CAVES TO GALLERY: THE EVOLUTION OF GROTESQUE ART FROM ANCIENT TO MODERN

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Abstract

Grotesque art has always been a source of perpetual interest to mankind. The form originated in classical Rome, flourished in medieval Europe and still exists substantially in the contemporary art and architecture. The grotesque art begins with the designs on the wall of the *Domus Aurea* or the 'Golden Palace' by the Roman artist Fabullus during the first century B.C. During the Renaissance the application of the term 'grotesque' was no longer confined to Fabullus' paintings of *Domus Aurea* but its scope now encompassed myriad imitations that were being reproduced. These changes were recorded in the works of Georgio Vasari and Sebastiano Serlio. In the early seventeenth century France, the engravings of Jacques Callot was labeled as grotesque. The origin of his style of caricature may be traced to the Germanic school of Diablerie and the Italian school of Caricatura which abounds in Renaissance extravagance. The nineteenth century brought in an era when the peripheral decorative grotesque became the locus of the art-world. The idea of classical beauty that was prevalent in the Romantic period was challenged by the grotesque which brought to the limelight a modernist expression that resulted in the exploration of the alternative modes of experience. In this paper I wish to present how the form of grotesque art acquired its present connotation travelling in time and space and moulding itself according to the whims of artists and more importantly, to reflect the condition of society.

Key-Words

Grotesque, *Domus Aurea*, Renaissance, Caricature, Bakhtin.

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The emergence of the grotesque form can be traced to Roman art around 100 B.C., centuries before the term itself officially came to the forefront. The earliest designs of what we may call grotesque art were the creations of an obscure Roman artist, Fabullus, who was commissioned by the infamous Emperor Nero to embellish the interiors of the first century *Domus Aurea* or 'Golden Palace'. Fabullus could never wholly capture the grandeur and intricacies of Nero's intended forms, even though he invested all his strength to the mammoth task. The murals he created were far from being extraordinary; they were neither entirely revolutionary in style nor in method. But through his faithful pedestrianism, he strove to assemble a picture that may appropriately be called one of the finest examples of early grotesquerie. A curious intermingling of animal, plant and human forms, Fabullus' wall paintings in *Domus Aurea*, when examined by modern standards reveal the fantastic bent of its creator's mind and it may be observed that the style was fabricated to "please the fancy and the eye rather than to instruct the soul." (Barasch 18). The characters represented in the frescoes had a mythological touch with its various fauns, nymphs, satyrs and centaurs. These bodies themselves are a combination of human and animal anatomies. But the outlandish element lies not in their bodies but in their ornamentation. Fabullus played out his whims to create graceful fantasies out of symmetrical anatomical impossibilities, human heads, small beasts and delicate indeterminate vegetables.¹ Artistic influence alone was not responsible for such anatomical absurdities; the designs might have transmitted into art from ancient public practices: mimes, the Saturnalia and other carnivals celebrating irrationality and nonsense. This intermixture blurred the boundaries of the normal and the abnormal and as such acquired a capacity to generate a communal merriment without hurting any specific individual and was thus embraced by the masses.

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This form of art which would later come to be known as grotesque crept into oblivion with the fall of Roman glory and the actual identification of the neologism silently awaited nearly a millennium and a half till the frenzy of Renaissance revivalism touched Fabullus' early designs. Europe witnessed a renewed resplendent enthusiasm for ancient art and architecture during the fifteenth century. The construction of Vatican in Rome attracted curious antiquarians and master painters who began to comb through the ruins for traces of the city's glorious past. This frantic search for lost glory led to the unearthing of the site of Nero's now famous *Domus Aurea* around 1480 A.D. and it proved to be a remarkable archaeological discovery, one that would carve out a niche of its own in the history of art and influence the greatest of the great artists.

Primarily the upper walls of the structure were visible, but the unbridled curiosity got better of the impending danger and enthusiasts crept down into the caverns crawling through tunnels to the rooms known as *volta dorata* and *crypto portico*. One at a time they were lowered on a sling to view the delicate paintings of the *grotto*. Artists unanimously agreed on the designation of the style – *grottesco* or *grottesca* – the word derived from the Italian 'grotte' which means 'caves'. Geoffrey Galt Harpham points out that the naming is "a mistake pregnant with truth, for although the designs were never intended to be underground nor Nero's palace a grotto, the word is perfect." (27)

The style of Fabullus was recognized by artists as well suited for ornamentation. The Renaissance saw the central work of art at times being rivaled by marginal decorative art. The decoration of the Vatican Loggias, one of the period's most magnificent achievements is a testimony to the dominant role of the grotesque during that time. Raphael and Giovanni da Udine undertook the project and Raphael's distinctive touch brought grotesquerie to mainstream art. He juxtaposed venerable Christian narrative with bizarre pagan representations, incorporated the style of Fabullus and transformed them according to his own personal desire. "Never before had grotesque been applied to such a large – or important – surface-area; never before had ornament stood so independently." (Harpham 29). The adornment of Vatican Loggias marks a significant turning point in the historical development of grotesque art.²

During the Renaissance Fabullus' designs not only influenced Italian art but quickly spread to France and all of Northern Europe. Imitation of Fabullus' designs began to appear in such places as the Siena Library, the Vatican, Fontainebleau Palace, the Strozzi Palace and other historical sites. With the new style spreading like wildfire, a simultaneous semantic shift was noticed. The application of the term 'grotesque' was no longer confined to Fabullus' paintings of *Domus Aurea*, its scope now encompassed myriad imitations that were being reproduced. These changes were recorded in *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters* (1550-1568) by Georgio Vasari and in *Architettura* (Venice, 1551) by Sebastiano Serlio.

Grotesquerie spread to France where the term was adopted around 1530s and in Germany too during the early part of the sixteenth century. Traversing through different cultures the term acquired several new connotations. In France, for instance, physical objects were often described in terms of grotesque while in Germany a style quite different from that of Italian Grotesque came to be known as 'groteske'. The fearful demons and goblins of the mythological tradition was

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popularized through the Germanic school of Diablerie and like the ancient Roman art of the fantastic, the diabolic school merged together various parts of different animals to create unforeseen creatures. Some of the finest paintings in the tradition of diablerie were based on the legend of Saint Anthony, a tale depicting the temptation of a third century Egyptian monk. The macabre and the horrifying crept into grotesque for the first time through the veins of the diabolic school. The infernal monsters came out from the underground as did the ancient designs of Fabullus. "Man has always associated the underworld with the shadowy, the chaotic, and the unnatural, and the popular imagination regularly peopled Hades and Sheol with monstrous creatures, devils, and demons." (Clark 19). Later during the Romantic period the grotesque embodied the frightful Satanic and the unearthly ghoulish.

The early seventeenth century France labeled the engravings of Jacques Callot (1592-1635) as grotesque. The origin of his style of caricature may be traced to the Germanic school of Diablerie in combination with the Italian school of Caricatura which abounds in Renaissance extravagance. Exaggerated characterizations are Callot's forte which he fortified through detailed depiction of contemporary scenes and events and most importantly through ridiculing public figures. Burlesque characters and those of Grotesque started to share the same features so the term extended to former genre of art too. Callot's subjects were classified into three categories – the demonic, the realistic, and the fantastic. The demonic comprised the engravings of monsters that possessed the soul as illustrated by the temptation of Saint Anthony. The realistic enveloped the representation of urban life in Florence. From peasants and cripples to lavish scenes of masquerades and Italian ceremonies – every aspect was a part of it. During the 1620s Callot studied in Italy and that directly influenced this phase of his work. Callot's extraordinary talent lay in infusing grotesque in the low rustic figures in their everyday lives and this established him as the master of grotesque art. The fantastic, on the other hand, included the expression of the stock characters of commedia dell' art tradition and the mellifluous dance movements of the dramatis persona of the Florentine stage with a tinge of the Italian gypsy culture. It's a dark celebration of life where the serious and the light-hearted join hands to reveal the artist's open-minded approach to the hideous as well as the exuberant aspects of the seventeenth century society.

Retracing a few steps backward, we see that during the early sixteenth century a number of Italian painters were persuaded to join the French court at Fontainbleu and through them grotesque ornamentation spread its wings in France. In the same decade the first album of grotesque designs were printed. The grotesque style of decoration also spread to the centers of ornamental engravings in Germany, Oxburg and Nuremberg. By the mid sixteenth century, grotesque had strengthened its base in Flanders where an artist named Cornelis Floris intricately designed 18 sheets intertwining features of the human face with leaves and branches. These were randomly stylized as opposed to the still recognizable engravings of Frans Huis in Antwerp.

The decorative grotesque took a step forward with the Viennese court painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo who worked in this tradition and assembled human faces out of animal and vegetable figures. Gradually all manner of decorative art began to show signs of grotesquerie. Be it ceramics or tapestry, embroidery, furniture-making or jewellery – everywhere Grotesque made its presence

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felt. Manuscript decoration too was refashioned with illuminated alphabet in Joris Hoefnagel's *Mira Calligraphia Monumenta*. More bizarre designs were created by Christoph Zamnitzer in his *New Grottesken Buch* of 1610, in which the standard grotesque 'mask' is pushed almost beyond recognition. This trend though continued glamorously into the seventeenth century, waned in the eighteenth due to an insurmountable importance bestowed upon decency and decorum.

The nineteenth century brought in an era when the peripheral decorative grotesque became the locus of the art-world. The idea of classical beauty that was prevalent in the Romantic period was challenged by the grotesque which brought to the limelight a modernist expression that resulted in the exploration of the alternative modes of experience. A significant number of canonical works including Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels*, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. 1905)*, or Ernest's *Elephant of Celebes* employ structures rooted in the Western tradition as Grotesque. Figuring prominently in Romantic, Symbolist, Expressionist, Primitivist, Realist and Surrealist vocabularies, the grotesque also plays a role in Cubism and certain kinds of Abstraction. The late nineteenth century saw grotesque being linked to primitive expression and other primal realities. In *Le Monstre* published in 1889, J.K. Huysmans contended that the microscope revealed a whole new world of monstrosities parallel to those which animated the medieval art. The grotesque thus gained prominence too in the theoretical field when its reinterpreted by the period's most influential thinkers like Baudelaire, Ruskin, Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, Bakhtin and Kristeva.

Grotesque describes the aberration from the accepted convention to create the misshapen, ugly, exaggerated or even formless. This form ranges from the deliberate exaggeration of caricature to the unintended aberrations, accidents and failures of the everyday world, to the dissolution of bodies, forms and categories as represented in the realist imagery. In Coubet's *Burial at Ornans* the red-faced plainness of the individuals merging with fleshy, trowelled paint was castigated as grotesque by the supporters of academic classicism. In Otto Dix's *The Skat Players* the horrific mutilated figures are a bricolage formed by patching together the most unlikely objects. Functioning as a caricature, they mediate a living horror too real to dwell on. The exploration of the grotesque in the real found a new vehicle in photography in which a patchwork of random moments, events and landscapes previously unthought-of was given a mass exposure. The grotesque resists coherent unity, nullifies the idea of a set form. The abject and the formless tease the boundary of the normal and the abnormal and to recognize the lacuna between the two, an imaginative leap is required. For instance, the metamorphic grotesque, where one thing morphs into another, seems to be more reliant on mimesis and illusion but transgresses them for its impact. Surrealist imagery like Dali's *Apparition of Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* is a classic example of this kind of morphing, while this method also suggests a link to analytic cubism 'where monochromatic planes blur boundaries, merge hands with violins, tables with torsos, wine bottles with walls.' The modern day films and computer animation fully exploit the metamorphic grotesque as they combine illusionism with the element of time.

The unpredictability of grotesque brings to mind Victor Hugo's observation that ideal beauty has only one standard while the variations and combinations possible for the grotesque are

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limitless.³ Instead of artistically fusing the most beautiful individual components to produce a perfect proportioned, Dix makes the bodies in *The Skat Players* monstrous, jumbling categories, confusing orifices and wounds creating a kind of horrific nonsense that will at the same time produce both the impulse to laugh and to scream. The bodies of the players indulging in a game of chance brutally ridicule the purposive universe in their grotesque disfiguration. Mikhail Bakhtin emphasized the creative dimension of this disorder while describing the grotesque as “a body in the act of becoming... never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body.”⁴ Grotesque is thus an active, continuous process, better described for what they do, rather than what they are.

Constantly striving to acquire new meanings, the grotesque is a boundary creature and has no possibility of existing except in relation to a boundary, convention or expectation.⁵ The definition of Grotesque can be procured only by observing what it does to boundaries – transgressing, merging, overflowing and destabilizing them. The figures in Dix’s *The Skat Players* take its succor from subverting the expectation of both machine and man. Dark humour is merged with macabre horror to challenge the boundaries of propriety and an attack is launched on the authorities that created this creature. In aesthetic discourse, discreet boundaries are the primary prerequisite to the apprehension of beauty, a point Edmund Burke makes explicit.⁶ But Bakhtin harps upon the fact that “the artistic logic of the grotesque image ignores the closed, smooth, impenetrable surface of the body and retains only its excrescences and orifices, only that which leads beyond the body’s limited space or into the body’s depths.” Thus the grotesque is not similar to sublime which overwhelms reason and exceeds its powers to contain and define. But the grotesque needs a boundary to struggle with, a distinct boundary of the known, the understood, and the conventional.

The historical and cultural boundaries also play a role in differentiating the connotation of grotesque. Thus a particular object is considered grotesque at one place and time may not be at a different space and time or at the same place at a different time. The form of Lord Ganesha of India, for example, was neither intended nor defined as grotesques until it crossed into the European cultural sphere. When the image of Ganesha was weighed by the aesthetics of European art in the nineteenth century, it was repeatedly described as monstrous and grotesque because of its perceived deformation of European rules of representation. Within a century, however, the image was so completely assimilated into western culture that they ceased to be grotesque, appearing in academic curricula and art museums.

Notes:

1. For further description of grotesque designs found in *Domus Aurea*, see Barasch 18-19, and Clark 18.
2. For further information on Vatican Loggias paintings see Nicole Dacos’ *The Loggia of Raphael: A Vatican Art Treasure* (New York: Abbeville Press, 2008)

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3. Victor Hugo, Preface to *Cromwell* (1827), in *Ouvres Dramatiques et Critiques Completes* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1963), 139-53.
4. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.
5. Donna Haraway thoroughly examines the union of the body and machine and designates grotesque as 'boundary creature' in her study, *Cyborgs, Simians, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
6. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

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