Session Title: Antiquarianism in Art. Ideology of Representation During the Renaissance: The Grotesques

Organize for ATSA: Damiano Acciarrino, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia and University of Toronto
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CAA membership in progress

Abstract: The purpose of this session is to discuss various aspects of the conception and perception of grotesque paintings completed during the Renaissance, with a particular focus on the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period. After the decrees on images approved by the Council of Trent (1563) and the publication of Gabriele Paleotti’s Discorso on sacred and profane images, the opponents and defenders of this artistic genre felt a clear and general need to confer upon it a new semantic approach. The effects of this dynamic, which manifested itself as a conflict between two different cultural ideologies rather than simply a divergence of aesthetic perspectives, were two-fold. On the one hand, it influenced the theoretical debates on grotesques, creating an extensive body of literature that attempted to explain their essence, with particular focus on their relationship with or distortion of nature. On the other hand, it also paved the way for the emergence and growth of innovative multifarious patterns that served as alternatives to the more conventional figurations.

Chair: David Cast, Professor of Art History, Bryn Mawr College
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Biography: David Cast studied Classics at Oxford University and then Art History at Columbia where his supervisor was Rudolf Wittkower. He has taught at Yale University, Cornell and, for many years now, at Bryn Mawr College. His scholarly interests cover the criticism of art in the Renaissance in Europe, XVIIth and XVIIIth century architectural theory in England and traditions of the criticism of painting in England in the XXth century.
I. Presenter: Damiano Acciarrino, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia and University of Toronto
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Title: New Investigations on the Renaissance Etymology of ‘Grotesque’

Abstract: The Renaissance debate on the etymology of the word ‘grotesque’ (It. ‘grottesca’), which signified a specific type of ancient paintings, gradually grew throughout the 16th century, encompassing a variety of phases and noteworthy shifts in perspective. Since the first occurrences, it had always been considered by Renaissance scholars, such as Benedetto Varchi, Daniele Barbaro and Benvenuto Cellini, to be a modern coinage. However, in the 1580s, Gabriele Paleotti attempted to establish that the term ‘grotesque’ had already been used by ancient Romans. The reason for this lexicographic interpretation was purely ideological, because Paleotti wanted to prove that grotesques had been perceived negatively since their origins in ancient times. The aim of this contribution is to show the ramifications of the etymological debate on what was meant by the term ‘grotesque’ in the late Renaissance.

Biography: Damiano Acciarino, PhD from Ca’ Foscari University of Venice in 2015. His doctoral dissertation was on Renaissance antiquarianism. He worked as a researcher and as a professor of Italian for the Department of Humanities at Ca’ Foscari University (2015–2016). He currently holds a Marie Curie Global Fellowship at Ca’ Foscari University and at the University of Toronto (2017-2020). He has published books on Renaissance antiquarianism, including De’ Conviti degli Antichi. Opera Adespota (Padua: Il Poligrafo 2012), Lettere sulle Grotteche (Rome: Aracne, 2018), and a second book on grotesques forthcoming in May. He also has contributed essays in international academic journals.

II. Presenter: Charles Burroughs, State University of New York at Geneseo

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Title: Horace’s Pitchfork and the Mason’s Trowel: Grotesques in Architecture and the Nature of Nature

Abstract: In the polemic against grotteschi, Horace’s lines in the Ars Poetica were of major importance. The ancient poet condemns hybridity, the mingling of disparate items, whether detached from different animals or in the form of stylistically irreconcilable passages of text. The potential application of such ideas to architecture is evident, but an obvious case of rejection of Horace’s doctrine is Sebastiano Serlio’s Extraordinary Book of 1551, full of formally and semiotically diverse elements cobbled together. In Horatian terms this is in defiance of the
inclination to coherence and unity attributed to nature. Indeed, Horace’s famous comment that if you try to keep nature out with a pitchfork, “she” will rush back in, forms part of a critique of an artificial or “mannered” style of composition. In a famous comment on wall decoration Vitruvius also critiqued artificiality and hybridity in architecture; what was “natural” was the emergence of temple architecture from primitive construction methods using timber. However in 16th-century architecture, there were occasions when the stylistic control typical of Horatian classicism could not contain – at least symbolically -- the force of the material substrate. The incorporation of anthropomorphic or zoomorphic elements in so many buildings is more than decoration or adherence to a fashion for grotesques, but rather -- turning Horace on his head -- recognition of the limited effect of the pitchfork and of the power of sublimated nature to rush back in.

**Biography:** Since 2014, after retirement as Smith Professor of Humanities in the departments of Classics and Art History at Case Western Reserve University, Charles Burroughs has been Adjunct Professor of Art History at Geneseo. Previously he taught at SUNY Binghamton, UC Berkeley Architecture School, Northwestern University, and the Rome Program of Trinity College. He has degrees from Balliol College of Oxford University (BA) and the Warburg Institute, University of London (MPhil, PhD); his publications include *From Signs to Design: Environmental Process and Reform in Early Renaissance Rome* (MIT Press, 1990) and *The Italian Renaissance Palace Façade* (Cambridge University Press, 2002 and 2009), as well as articles on Alberti, Michelangelo, Palladio, Sixtus V, and Botticelli. Recent publications include the articles “Botticelli’s Stone: Giorgio Vasari, Telling Stories, and the Power of Matter” in *Artibus et Historia*, and “Fluid City: River Gods in Rome and Contested Topography,” in *Mediaevalia*.

**III. Presenter:** Andrzej Piotrowski, University of Minnesota

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CAA membership in progress

**Title:** The Grotesque as the Afterlife of Suppressed Worldviews

**Abstract:** The historical phenomenon of the grotesque will be discussed as a lesser-known example of the relationship among arts, politics, and religion. Grotesque designs have frequently been treated as a fascinating but deeply personal kind of creativity. Regardless whether found in remnants of antiquity, revived during the Renaissance, or reinvented by contemporary artists such as Franciszek Starowieyski, such forms are mostly studied for their aesthetic value—the paradoxical combination of the natural and the deformed, comical and terrifying features. In contrast, this presentation will show how the grotesque is symptomatic of a suppressed mode of thought rooted in the oldest Eastern religious beliefs. Because these pagan worldviews challenged Christianity, especially during the early modern era when the Catholic Church struggled to define and control the Western
identity, they were suppressed, including their latent meanings represented by the grotesque. Only when that unwanted frame of references was silenced, could any such a symbolic form be turned into a superficial object of aesthetic admiration. Many symbolically charged sculptures or prints have survived, however, including Cornelis Floris’ drawings and details in many Mannerist buildings constructed during the Polish-Lithuanian Reformation.

**Biography:** Andrzej Piotrowski, professor of architecture at the University of Minnesota, USA, was educated in Poland and worked as an architect in Poland and the United States. At the University of Minnesota, he teaches graduate design and theory of representation and he has served as Director of Design at the School of Architecture. In his scholarship, Piotrowski combines theory and history of architecture but focuses specifically on the epistemology of design. His Jeffrey Cook Award–winning research covers a globally framed spectrum of issues related to architecture, historiography, religion, politics, and culture and uses built environments to provide evidence for little-known cultural phenomena. This work stretches across different time periods and geographic locations, ranging from Mesoamerica, Byzantium, and Reformation-era Europe to Victorian England and Modernism, but also addresses contemporary issues of globalization. Author of *Architecture of Thought* (UMN Press, 2011) and co-editor (with J. Williams Robinson) of *The Discipline of Architecture* (UMN Press, 2001). Other publications include: *Spaces and Flows* (2014), *The Territories of Identity* (Routledge, 2013), *Camera/Constructs*, (Ashgate, 2012, 2014). *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* (2015), and *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Architectural History* (2018).