

The Grotesques of Sauk County Tales of Earlier Days

By Bob Dewel

We Americans don't incorporate much embellishment into our public buildings. We often design and build them as plain and as cheap as possible. Compare this to our European and Oriental brethren, where many public buildings are often proudly and lavishly adorned.

Art and sculpture are not necessarily adornments of beauty, however, as evidenced by the gargoyles and grotesques found in both Europe and the Far East, especially on religious structures. Muslims, forbidden to sculpt or illustrate either the human or god-like figure, do manage adornment of their buildings with the beautiful script of their language, usually religious scripture.

Only rarely, however are our public buildings, such as those in Sauk County, presented in a classic design. The present 1906 courthouse, though classic, is a scaled down version of an elaborate proposal first presented to the citizens by architects Ferry and Clas. Some banks do present a classic appearance, as do the Gard Theatre in Spring Green and the Al. Ringling in Baraboo.

Missing from all, however, are the hallmark gargoyles of the more famous structures in Europe. Actually,

there are no gargoyles in Sauk County as best we can determine. Grotesques to be sure, but not gargoyles. And what about gryphons?

The strange castings guarding the entrance to what was once the Dell View Hotel in Lake Delton, commonly called gargoyles, are really gryphon. The secret is that a gargoyle may appear rather odd or grotesque, but also serves as a water spout, as on a cathedral roof in England. Without the spout, it is a grotesque or gryphon. In any case, both should be or once were attached to a building.

We are indebted for much of the material in this article to Marcia Wollschlager, who presented a paper on the subject to the Sauk County Art Association a year ago. Her in-depth pursuit of the subject revealed plenty of grotesques and other figures in the County. Grotesques are usually ugly or weird or fanciful, so not all bas-reliefs and other carvings are grotesque

Perhaps the closest things we have to a gryphon in Baraboo are the six Winged Lions guarding the entrances to the present Civic Center, built with some style as a High School in 1929. Actually a true gryphon would have an Eagle's Head, lion's body, and wings! The McFetridge house on Oak has a low relief caving of both a lion and a unicorn, flanking a heraldic crest.

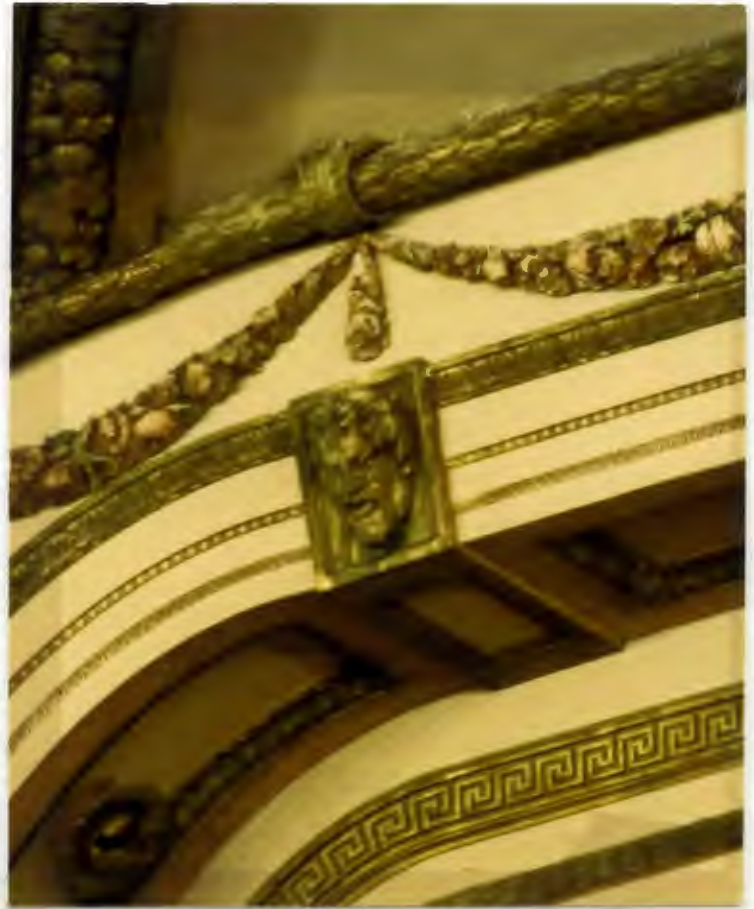
There is not room in this article to list other Baraboo grotesques and bas-reliefs, though Mrs. Wollschlager lists nine possible locations. Special attention might be given to the Al. Ringling Theatre interior, with seven bas-relief carvings suggesting the Ringling Brothers. A close inspection, inside and out, reveals countless other theatre carvings and reliefs in the theatre which qualify, though not as grotesques.

Note the rooster on the roof of the Presbyterian Church.. Look at the library, and at the Wells Fargo bank façade. Note also the bell relief on the old telephone building, now a part of the city hall offices. The bas-relief carvings on the main courthouse addition are huge and historical in nature. The Al. Ringling façade is perhaps the most elaborately sculptured facade in the county.

In Reedsburg two banks feature low relief cravings of note on their façade, as do law offices at 110 Main Street. Already mentioned in Lake Delton are the Gryphon from the Dellview hotel, and there are some 28 possible Caryatids scattered along the Duck Trails. Human figures used as pillars for part of a structure are, if female, called Caryatids. If male, they are called Telamon.

Mrs. Wollschlager's research is far more complete than can be covered in this article. She emphasizes that architecture is art, and that architects are artists. She speculates that the Circus World wagons surely have examples of gryphon and grotesques among their elaborate wood carvings. She notes that art surrounds us in many ways and in many forms, not always traditional.

It appears, then, that there are no gargoyles in Sauk County. The only gryphon are the Dell View pair, True grotesques may be seen over the proscenium at the Al. Ringling Theatre. Patrons of the Fall Art Tour on the weekend of October 18 might find this article of interest. The theatre will host an open house then for the attendees.



Each grotesque, seven altogether, high over the Proscenium, represents one of the seven Ringling Brothers

