

ANIMAL-SHAPED MASKS IN SIXTEENTH- CENTURY ITALIAN SCULPTURE, ARCHITECTURE AND ARMOUR

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Caroline van Eck

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ABSTRACT

In sixteenth-century Florence a variety of sculptural or architectural ornament was developed in the shape of animal masks, often featuring several animals or parts of different animals in one object, and the presence of eyes half hidden behind the surface mask. Michelangelo's New Sacristy is a main locus for the development of these ornaments, but they soon spread over the city. Although sixteenth-century viewers called them "grotesques", they differ from the two-dimensional variety inspired by the Domus Aurea because they consistently use strange, hybrid animal features that are not part of the repertoire of mythological hybrid beasts such as griffins, commonly used in grotesques inspired by the Roman tradition. They also stand out because they share these animal features with parade and tournament armour of the same period. Their formal characteristics, as well as their similarity to the ornament of contemporary parade armour, little studied until now, raises many questions about their origins, meaning, circumstances of creation and use, and possible impact. These ornaments also share many formal and compositional features with the masks made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America. They share a duplication or triplication of animal shapes, the presence of eyes behind the mask, incrustation and other graphical patterns, and a particular patterning, or spreading, of animal features across the object they cover. The central question this article seeks to address is therefore: is it possible to develop an approach to these masks, both Italian and North American, that can suggest a common ground, in form, function, impact, or sets of beliefs that drove their creation and use? The analysis of Northwestern Coast mask design by Franz Boas, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Philippe Descola will serve, first, as an instrument to better understand the composition of sixteenth-century animal-shaped masks, because they make the viewer aware of aspects of their design that remain under the radar in traditional stylistic or iconographical interpretation. Second, the similarities between these two groups of artefacts will point to shared sets of beliefs in nature as a source of endless transformation, and in the fundamental kinship of humans and animals.

KEYWORDS

Grotesques; Medici Chapel; Michelangelo; Armour; Negroli; Lucretius; Ovid; Piero di Cosimo; Metamorphosis; Northwest Coast masks; Philippe Descola; Animism.

I. Introduction

In sixteenth-century Florence a variety of sculptural or architectural ornament was developed in the shape of animal masks, often featuring several animals or parts of different animals in one object, and the presence of eyes half hidden behind the surface mask. In Michelangelo's New Sacristy for instance a band of masks runs behind the tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici, where on close inspection eyes turn out to glare at the viewer from the eye sockets of the masks, suggesting a presence that can only be assumed, but not determined [Fig. 1]. The statues of Giuliano and Lorenzo de' Medici sport very conspicuous grotesque masks, which sometimes echo designs that Michelangelo made at the same time for small objects such as a salt cellar [Fig. 2a, Fig. 2b and Fig. 6]. Contemporaries called them grotesques, and at first sight they may look like a variety of grotesque ornament because they feature hybrid animal shapes and the ambivalent expression associated with grotesques. Actually, they share a number of features that set them apart from the dominant sixteenth-century tradition of two-dimensional ornament largely inspired by the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea.¹ They are

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This article originates in conversations in front of Florentine statuary with my friends and colleagues Stijn Bussels (Leiden University) and Bram Van Oostveldt (Ghent University). The research for it was done during a stay at the Harvard Centre for Renaissance Studies at Villa I Tatti. I am very grateful to its Director, Alina Payne, for the invitation to work there. The literature on grotesques is vast. Among recent studies, see Alessandra Zamperini, *Les grotesques* (translated from the Italian by Odile Menegaux), Paris 2007, which gives a survey of pictorial grotesques from antiquity to the nineteenth century; Claire Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden/Boston 2016, 442–592, to date the most sophisticated analysis of the place of grotesques within artistic thought from antiquity to the early modern age; Maria Fabricius Hansen, *The Art of Transformation. Grotesques in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, Rome 2018, a thematic analysis of Italian Renaissance grotesques and their antecedents in antiquity and the Middle Ages, which locates them in various contexts, both material, such as grottoes, and conceptual, such as ideas about nature, and also brings present-day theories of the grotesque, by Derrida or Deleuze for instance, to the table. Michael Squire's *Fantasies so Varied and Bizarre. The Domus Aurea, the Renaissance, and the "Grotesque"*, in: Emma Buckley and Martin Dinter (eds.), *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, Cambridge/New York 2013 is an important revision of current ideas on the nature and theoretical implications of grotesques, arguing for their meta-pictorial and metapoetical status. Damiano Acciarino (ed.), *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques*, Toronto 2022 revisits the condemnation of grotesque figuration by Counter-Reformation theorists, and broadens the scope of varieties covered to include artefacts created in the Americas. For studies that do not restrict themselves to the Renaissance, see Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture. The Image at Play*, Cambridge/New York 2012; and her older edited volume *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, Cambridge/New York 2003. Among slightly older studies Frances Barasch's *The Grotesque. A Study in Meanings*, The Hague 1971, is still fundamental, though less frequently cited, because of the wide range of literary, religious and artistic sources she brings to the table. André Chastel, *La grotesque*, Paris 1988, and Philippe Morel, *Les grotesques. Les figures de l'imaginaire dans la peinture italienne de la fin de la Renaissance*, Paris 1997, both remain fundamental discussions of painted grotesques, their development and spread across the Alps, setting many terms of discussion that still persist, such as the relation between grottoes, the Domus Aurea and grotesques, or the issues of fantasy, licence and realism, already introduced by Vitruvius in his condemnation of Pompeian illusionistic painting, and rehearsed ever since. Not much has been written on Michelangelo's grotesque designs. See in particular the article by David Summers, *The Archaeology of the Modern Grotesque*, in: Connelly, *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, 20–47, and David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, Princeton, NJ 1981, 496–497. Recently Robyn L. O'Bryan has argued that the grotesque elements in the New Sacristy should be considered as apotropaic devices, based on Roman and Etruscan funeral traditions: *The Grotesque in Medici Taste and Patronage*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Virginia 2000. Long before this, André Chastel contributed to a global exhibition of masks, held at the Musée Guimet in 1959–1960, part of a series of shows that aimed to develop a structural analysis, inspired by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, of varieties

animal masks that adorn walls, statues and objects. They consistently use strange, hybrid animal features that are not part of the repertoire of mythological hybrid beasts such as griffins, commonly used in grotesques inspired by the Roman tradition. They also stand out because they share these animal mask ornaments with parade and tournament armour of the same period. Also, where the grotesques stemming from the Domus Aurea generally present a cheerful picture of Nature's endless variety and abundance, organized in a symmetrical composition, these Florentine ornaments are single masks that are often quite uncanny because of the covert presence of eyes.

This corpus has received little scholarly attention so far, despite their striking appearance and often unexpected presence in monuments and on buildings across Florence and Tuscany. Their formal characteristics, as well as their equally unstudied similarity to the ornament of contemporary parade armour, raises many questions about their origins, meaning, circumstances of creation and use, and possible impact. Also, and this may sound quite counter-intuitive, the group of Renaissance artefacts studied here share many formal and compositional features with the masks made in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the peoples of the Northwest Coast of North America, particularly the Hajda, Yup'ik and Kwakwaka'wakw, formerly called Kwakiutl. They share a duplication or triplication of animal shapes, the presence of eyes behind the mask, incrustation and other graphical patterns, and a particular patterning, or spreading, of animal features across the object they cover [Fig. 3].

The central question this article seeks to address is therefore: is it possible to develop an approach to these masks, both Italian and North American, that can suggest a common ground, in form, function, impact or sets of beliefs that drove their creation and use? This question touches on the old problem in art history and anthropology posed by the presence of objects that display the same features, but in places and times that are far removed from each other, whereas there exists no clear evidence of the migration of people and objects that could have explained these similarities. In art history it was defined in the 1940s by Erwin Panofsky as pseudo-morphism: "The emergence of a form A, morphologically analogous to, or even identical with, a form B, yet entirely unrelated to it from a genetic point of view."² Intriguingly this phenomenon was defined in similar terms and at the same time by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his discussion of the similarities between Northwest Coast art and the art of ancient China.³ This article will not return to the problem of

of artefacts that are made across the world. In the catalogue he is, to my knowledge, the first recent author to discuss the sculpted masks and helmets in the New Sacristy in a global perspective: André Chastel, *Les temps modernes. Masque, mascarade, mascarone*, in: *Le masque* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée Guimet), Paris 1959, 87–93.

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Erwin Panofsky, *Tomb Sculpture*, New York 1964, 26–37.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le dédoublement de la représentation dans les arts de l'Asie et l'Amérique*, in: *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris 2003 [1958], 279–321 (first published under

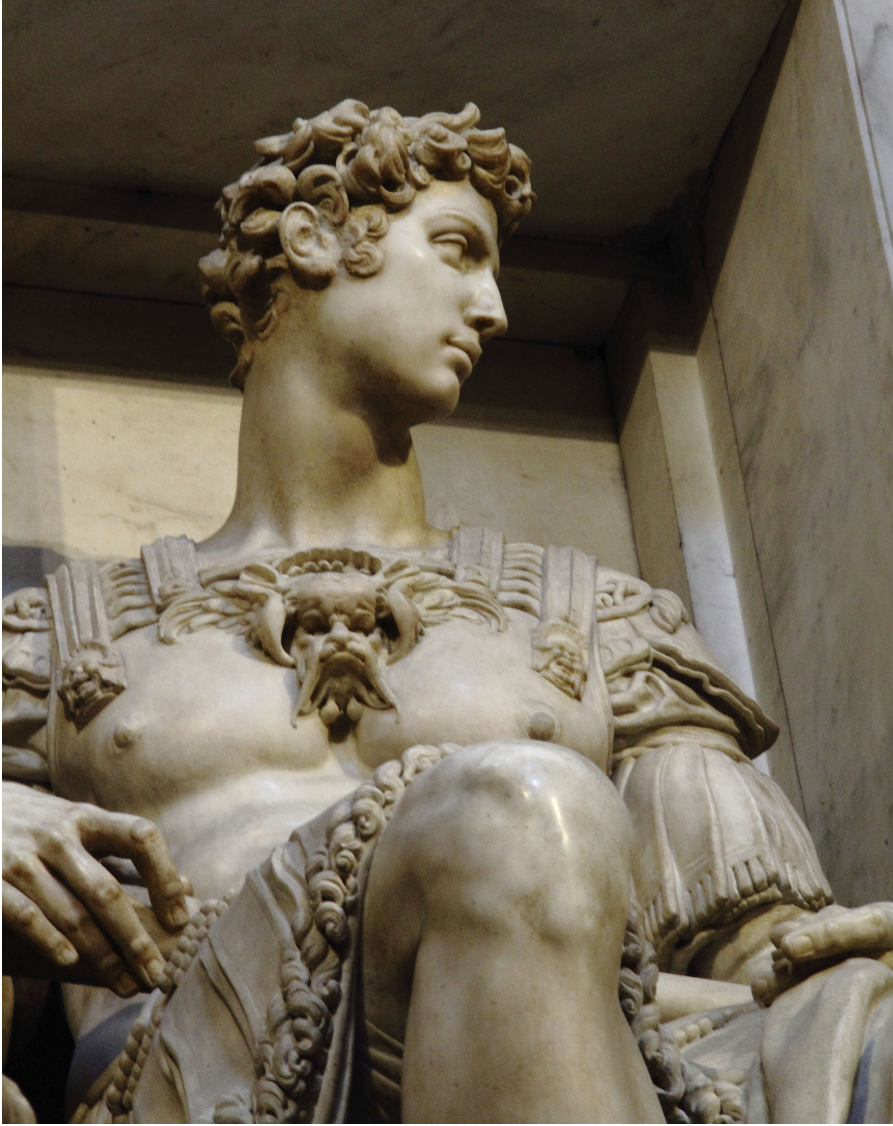


[Fig. 1]
Studio of Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Tomb of Giuliano de' Medici*, 1526–1534, marble, detail
of mask frieze, Medici Chapel, San Lorenzo, Florence, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#)
(30 September 2024).



[Fig. 2a]

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Statue of Lorenzo de' Medici*, 1524–1534, marble, 168 cm, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 2b]

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Statue of Giuliano de' Medici*, 1524–1534, marble, 168 cm, New Sacristy, San Lorenzo, Florence, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 3]

Kwakwaka'wakw people, *Wooden, carved, oval shaped, human transformation mask*, n.d., wood, straw, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).

the occurrence of similar formal features in very different cultures as such. Instead, it will take a close look at one particular variety of such similarities – the animal-shaped mask and the features it shared between sixteenth-century Florence or Milan and more recent cultures of the Northwest Coast, to see whether we can make some progress on two major elements in the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss and the recent work of his successor, Philippe Descola. The former argued that if repeated historical investigation of these similarities does not provide an answer, one should turn towards human psychology and structural analysis.⁴ The latter in a sense attempted to provide both kinds of answers, by developing a structure of four ontologies or sets of beliefs about the relation between animals and humans, coupled with very detailed analyses of image-making from Alaska to Florence, and from the remaining prehistoric cultures of North America to the highly literate environment of Renaissance Florence or the Dutch Republic. Both were contributions by anthropologists with a deep interest in, and knowledge of, art. Here I want to see whether, starting from an art-historical perspective, we can advance the understanding of this particular kind of animal-shaped mask ornament by combining art-historical contextualization with anthropological analysis and widening of perspectives.

The first section following this introduction will therefore explore their emergence in the circle of artists working at the New Sacristy, and their spread through Florentine architecture and sculpture (§ 2). Next I will consider similar features in parade armour and their contexts (§ 3). Arrived at this junction I will return to formal analysis to consider the similarities with Northwestern masks in more detail, as the foundation for a different, anthropological approach (§ 4). Here the analyses of Northwestern mask design by Franz Boas, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Philippe Descola will serve, first, as instruments to better understand the composition of sixteenth-century animal-shaped masks, because they make the viewer aware of aspects of their design that remain under the radar in traditional stylistic or iconographical interpretation. Second, the similarities between these two groups of artefacts will point to shared sets of beliefs driving their production. Therefore, in the final section, I will argue that the common ground between these Florentine sixteenth-century ornamental masks and nineteenth-century Northwestern Coast masks lies in a shared set of beliefs in nature as a source of endless transformation, and in the fundamental kinship of humans and animals.

the same title in: *Renaissance. Revue trimestrielle publiée par l'École libre des Hautes Études*, vols. 2 and 3, 1944–1945, 168–186). On this coincidence, see Yves-Alain Bois, On the Uses and Abuses of Look-Alikes, in: *October* 154, 2015, 127–49.

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Lévi-Strauss, *Le dédoublement de la représentation*, 289.

II. Sculptural and Architectural Animal-Shaped Masks

The New Sacristy of the Basilica of San Lorenzo was designed by Michelangelo, and built from 1519 to 1524, to house the tombs of the Medici. It was left unfinished after the exile of the family in 1527, the death of the Medici Pope Clement VII, and Michelangelo's departure for Rome in 1534. Only the tombs of Giuliano de' Medici, duke of Nemours, and of Lorenzo, duke of Urbino, were executed by Michelangelo; the rest of the highly ornate initial sculptural project was only partly finished, and by other sculptors.⁵ Overshadowed by the monumental tombs and revolutionary use of elements of the classical orders, here deployed in an interior, in austere *pietra serena*, the animal-shaped masks scattered around the Chapel have not received much attention in existing scholarship. Yet animal features are already quite prominently displayed in the corridor that leads to the New Sacristy. The two sculpted, free-standing trophies (quite possibly the first early modern three-dimensional monumental version of this motif, until then usually represented in relief) display several grotesque animal features, such as the snake-like sword handle protruding from the corselet of the figure closest to the threshold of the Sacristy [Fig. 4]. These were executed, after Michelangelo had stopped working on the New Sacristy, by Silvio Cosini (1495–after 1547), who was trained by Andrea Ferrucci in Florence, and worked for Michelangelo between 1524 and 1528.⁶

The breastplate and back of the statue of Giuliano de' Medici also sport grotesque masks. The one on the breast has a humanoid face whose front is transformed into a crab flanked by what look like the feather tails of a cock, whereas the one on Giuliano's back, not usually visible to visitors, combines a humanoid face wearing long moustaches with the diadem-like ornament that would later return in the Porta Pia [Fig. 2b].⁷ The helmet of Lorenzo de' Medici

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On the presentation drawing of the original project, see William E. Wallace, Two Presentation Drawings for Michelangelo's Medici Chapel, in: *Master Drawings* 25/3, 1987, 242–260; for the design and building history of the chapel, see Alexander Perrig, Die Konzeption der Wandgrabmäler der Medici-Kapelle, in: *Städte-Jahrbuch*, N.F. 8, 1981, 247–287, here 267–271. In the initial design the sculpted trophy was intended to be placed above the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. See most recently Horst Bredekamp, *Michelangelo*, Berlin 2022, 408–411. Gino Lorenzi began the process of adding grotesque motifs by adding a ram's head, festoon and shell, which together look like a grotesque face, to the socle of the tomb of Giuliano de' Medici. He was then joined by Silvio Cosini to carve the grinning heads in the capitals (1524–1531). Cosini and Francesco da Sangallo made the rows of masks behind the statues of Morning and Dusk below the tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici. See also Dario Donetti, Modelli, produzioni, variazioni. L'organizzazione del lavoro nel cantiere della Sagrestia Nuova, in: Alessandro Nova and Vitale Zanchettin (eds.), *Michelangelo. Arte – materia – lavoro*, Venice 2019, 217–231, and William E. Wallace, *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo. The Genius as Entrepreneur*, Cambridge/New York 1994, 122–135.

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On Cosini see most recently the unpublished PhD thesis by Stefano Farinelli, *Monumental Grotesque. Michelangelism and Ornament in 16th-Century Florence through the Case Studies of Niccolò Tribolo and Silvio Cosini*, PhD thesis, University of Kent 2022; and Marco Campigli, Silvio Cosini e Michelangelo, in: *Nuovi Studi. Rivista di Arte Antica e Moderna* 11[12], 2006 [2007], 85–116, and id., Silvio Cosini e Michelangelo, 2: oltre la Sagrestia Nuova, in: *Nuovi Studi. Rivista di Arte Antica e Moderna* 13[14], 2007[2008], 69–90.

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Bredekamp, *Michelangelo*, 409–410.

is covered by a hybrid duplicated animal [Fig. 2a]. He leans his arm on an armrest that ends in a lion's head with the ears of a mouse. Behind the tomb of Giuliano runs a frieze of grinning masks, where on closer inspection eyes look out from behind the eye openings of the masks. The candelabra on the altar, installed after designs by Michelangelo in the eighteenth century, show several animal-shaped elements [Fig. 5]. These are also found in contemporary designs by him for lamps, candelabra, and a salt cellar [Fig. 6].⁸

According to Francisco de Hollanda, Michelangelo considered them as expressions of artistic invention, which despite their irrational character are praised because of their artistry.⁹ Contemporaries mentioned them: Vasari noted in his *Life of Michelangelo* how the artist's breaking away from the constraints of Vitruvianism inspired them to design grotesque ornament.¹⁰ Anton Francesco Doni wrote how "grotesques fill the eye"; Cellini would later echo this in his praise of Michelangelo's ornament, which has "such infinite beauty that calls the eyes of men to see, or rather, forces them".¹¹ The most detailed assessment is by the antiquarian Pirro Ligorio. Ligorio was himself a designer of grotesques and wrote his text in reaction to the fashion for grotesque ornament following the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea in Rome.¹² Like practically all Renaissance writers on grotesques, he follows Vitruvius' rejection of architectural grotesques in Pompeian painting – attenuated columns tottering on stiletto-heeled bases supporting pediments by the whispiest of connecting elements – because such images do not

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See Charles de Tolnay, *Corpus dei Disegni di Michelangelo Buonarroti*, Novara 1975–1980, vol. 1, 86–87, cat. nrs 437 and 438; for a design of saliera for the Duke of Urbino, 1537, now in the British Museum, and for a lamp in the shape of a hybrid mask, now in the Fogg Museum, Inv. 1932-152r. This resembles the helmet of Lorenzo. See also vol. 2, 194 for a design, now in the Louvre, of an earlier, much more lavish design for the New Chapel; and see vol. 2, 186 for an alternative design with armour trophies in niches in the walls. See also Cammy Brothers, *Michelangelo. Drawing and the Invention of Architecture*, New Haven, CT/London 2008, 141-142 on these drawings.

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Francisco de Hollanda, *Vier Gespräche über die Malerei geführt zu Rom 1538. Originaltext mit Übersetzung, Einleitung, Beilagen u. Erläuterungen von Joaquim de Vasconcellos*, Vienna 1899, 105.

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Giorgio Vasari, *La Vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568. Curata e commentata da Paola Barocchi*, Milan 1967, 59: "La quale licenzia ha dato grande animo a quelli che hanno veduto il far suo, di mettersi a imitarlo, e nuove fantasie si sono vedute poi alla grottesca, più tosto che a ragione o regola, a'loro ornamento."

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Anton Francesco Doni, *Disegno*, Venice 1549, 22; Benvenuto Cellini, in: Carlo Cordiè (ed.), *Opere di Baldassare Castiglione, Giovanni Della Casa, Benvenuto Cellini*, Milan/Naples 1960, 1109–1110. See also Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 171 and 176.

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E. Mandowsky and C. Mitchell (eds.), *Pirro Ligorio's "Roman Antiquities". The Drawings in MS XIII.B7 in the National Library of Naples*, London 1963. Ligorio's text was reprinted in Nicole Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea et la formation des grotesques à la Renaissance*, Leiden 1969, 162–182, after the Turin ms. of the *Libro dell'antichità*, vol. VI, s.v. Grottesche, fols. 151–161, and the Vatican ms. *Libro dell'Antichità*, vol. VII, fols. 118v–129v (Ottob. Lat. 3368).



[Fig. 4]
Silvio Cosini, *Detail of trophy statue for the corridor leading to the Medici Chapel*, ca. 1524–1528, marble, 150 cm, photo: author.



[Fig. 5]

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Design for a Candelabrum*, 1520–1530, drawing, 43.4 × 25.4 cm, New York, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, photo: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Public Domain.



[Fig. 6]
Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Design for a Salt Cellar*, 1537, black chalk, 217 × 155 mm, London, British Museum, photo: British Museum © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence.

represent reality as it is, and contradict or ignore structural logic.¹³ They should therefore not be included in the “maestà dell’architettura”, but, observes Ligorio, the ancients, associating them with the broken and interrupted desires of men – “interrotti desiderii negli humani pensieri” – used them to decorate those parts of their houses which were deprived of light, and where night always reigns.¹⁴ Because of this Roman usage Ligorio does not approve of the most famous sixteenth-century creator of architectural grotesques: Michelangelo. He broke with classical use and introduced broken pediments, masques and other grotesque forms, formerly reserved for pagan funerary rites, used on the exterior of buildings, into the interior of the New Sacristy. This was much imitated by his students in sixteenth-century palazzi, and thereby these forms were deprived of their original reason and meaning. In doing so, instead of “sculpting the vessels and instruments of the priesthood into an image of the divine word, [Michelangelo] has made wings of bats, and fantastic mixes of brute and strange forms instead of angels. [...] Thus the architecture of façades and side walls dedicated from old to Pluto has become public and sacred ornaments.”¹⁵ After this very articulate condemnation it seems that critical appraisal of these animal-shaped elements died out; at least there is no mention of them in Raphael Rosenberg’s recent survey of accounts of the Sacristy.¹⁶

When we move out of this interior into the streets of Florence, we can see very similar masks in the buildings designed by Michelangelo’s students and followers.¹⁷ They display the same hybrid animal features, the same uncanny presence of seeing animal eyes behind the face of an animal that turns out to be a mask, once one notes that there are eyes behind it. They also feature an intensification of their uncanny and threatening expression. The window-frames of the Palazzo Nonfinito by Bernardo Buontalenti host such grotesques, as do the kneeling windows of the Casino Mediceo, also by Buontalenti, and his Palazzo Gerini [Fig. 7a, Fig. 7b, Fig. 7c and Fig. 8].

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Vitruvius, *De architectura* libri X, VII.v.

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Pirro Ligorio, entry on *Grottesche* from his *Libro dell’antichità*, reprinted in Dacos, *La Découverte de la Domus Aurea*, 16. On Ligorio, see most recently David R. Coffin, *Pirro Ligorio. The Renaissance Artist, Architect, and Antiquarian*, University Park, PA 2005.

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Pirro Ligorio, entry on *Grottesche*, 175.

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Raphael Rosenberg, *Beschreibungen und Nachzeichnungen der Skulpturen Michelangelos. Eine Geschichte der Kunstbetrachtung*, Munich/Berlin 2000.

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On the imitation of Michelangelo by architects such as Buontalenti or Ammanati, see Brothers, *Michelangelo*, 206–209; Francis Ames-Lewis and Paul Joannides (eds.), *Reactions to the Master*, Aldershot 2003, in particular 114–136; and Francis Ames-Lewis, *Artists as Beholders*, in: Thomas Frangenberg (ed.), *The Beholder*, Aldershot 2006, 103–122.

In a next stage of what may be called the emancipation of the sculptural grotesque, fountains take the form of a multiplication of grotesque animals. In Pietro Tacca's fountains in the Piazza Santissima Annunziata for instance, one monstrous animal slithers into another [Fig. 9a and Fig. 9b].¹⁸ The last example to show here are the objects below the windows in the Argenteria in the Palazzo Pitti, somewhere between outsized ornament and independent sculpture: in several rooms these are executed in grey stone, always showing dragon wings with talons flanking a grotesque mask at the top and the bottom of the central axis. In the last room, it is executed in much more lavish coloured marble [Fig. 10a and Fig. 10b]. They are probably based on a design for a fountain which was never executed, and which is now attributed to Andrea Ferrucci.¹⁹

A few things emerge from this tour: these grotesques are very often masks, which on closer inspection reveal a face hidden behind the eye sockets. They are always combinations of animal and human features. Their hybridity, for want of a better word, connects them to teratology or monster theory, which will be discussed in Section III.3. Unlike pictorial, two-dimensional grotesques inspired by the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea, these three-dimensional varieties do not look like a celebration of the infinite variety and metamorphosis of nature. Instead, they puzzle, terrify and threaten, particularly because often they are not spotted straightaway, but turn out to have been there already, looking at the viewer, before the spectator becomes aware of them, which adds to their frightening effect: suddenly you become aware you are being observed by a monster.

III. Animal Masks in Renaissance Parade Armour

In the New Sacristy animal-shaped masks in sculpture and in armour are placed in close proximity: Michelangelo's designs for the candelabrum include elements that are very similar to the masks on the armour of the Principi. The two animal hybrids looking like a helmet just above the pedestal are, for instance, very similar to the mask on the back of Lorenzo's armour, sadly difficult to see under normal circumstances. When we move out of this interior, and into the world of real armour, there are even more striking similarities between stone and metal grotesques. Here it may help to bear in mind the original double meaning of the Latin *ornamentum*, which could refer both to adornment or decoration, and to military

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See Eugenio Castellani, *Maschere Grottesche tra Manierismo e Rococò*, Florence 1991; G. K. Koenig, Finestre fiorentine della seconda metà de Cinquecento, in: *Quaderni 2-3 dell'Istituto di Architettura*, Florence 1963.

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See Sandro Bellesi, Interventi decorativi in Palazzo Pitti, in: *Paragone* 49/583, 1998, 49-68, and id., L'Allestimento della Grotta dell'Ammanati e il suo significato iconografico, in: *Palazzo Pitti. La reggia rivelata* (exh. cat. Florence, Palazzo Pitti), ed. by G. Caprecchi, Florence 2003, 60-69.



[Fig. 7a]
Bernardo Buontalenti a.o., Palazzo Nonfinito, Florence, 1592–1600, photo: Dimitris Kamaras, [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 7b]
Palazzo Nonfinito, Florence: detail of window, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 7c]
Palazzo Nonfinito, Florence: detail of window, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 8]

Bernardo Buontalenti, Casino Mediceo, Florence, 1568–1574, photo: author.



[Fig. 9a]

Pietro Tacca a.o., Fountain, 1629, bronze, Piazza SS Annunziata, Florence, photo: author.



[Fig. 9b]

Pietro Tacca a.o., Fountain, 1629, bronze, Piazza SS Annunziata, Florence, photo: author.



[Fig. 10a]

Andrea Ferrucci (attr.), Grotesque stair decoration, c. 1630, pietra serena, Argenteria, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, photo: author.



[Fig. 10b]
Andrea Ferrucci (attr.), Grotesque stair decoration, c. 1630, various kinds of coloured and white marble, Argenteria, Palazzo Pitti, Florence, photo: author.

arms or equipment.²⁰ The parade and tournament armour created by the Milanese workshop of the Negroli family in particular displays many elements also present in the sculptural and architectural grotesques we just saw. Animal hybrids, dragons and bat wings are often used, as in the burgonet for Guidobaldo II della Rovere by Filippo Negroli, which is part of the so-called Fame Armor [Fig. 11].²¹ This helmet has bat wings with eyes flanking the face, but also at the back of the head. Double or triple combinations of animals are used as well, for instance in a burgonet for the emperor Charles V by Filippo Negroli of c. 1540 [Fig. 12]. Another shared element is the use of incrustation. *Sgraffito* grotesque ornament is present for instance on the façade of the palazzo for Bianca Capello (1578) by Bernardino Poccetti, and incrustation in the so-called Morosini helmet by a Milanese armourer from 1550–1560, now in the National Gallery in Washington [Fig. 13a and Fig. 13b].²² The similarity between the breastplate that is part of the Fame Armor, now in the Bargello, and the sculptural object in the Palazzo Pitti is perhaps most striking: in both cases there are dragon wings with talons and eyes [Fig. 14a and Fig. 14b]. Bat wings and heads, which are also so striking in the architectural grotesques of the Palazzo Nonfinito, continued to be used in sixteenth-century armour, for instance in a garniture made for Francesco de Medici (1570–1575, now in the Bargello).²³ The chanfron of an armour made for Charles-Emmanuel of Savoy in 1585, which he offered to Philip III of Spain, now in Madrid, shows a very intriguing combination of a surface treatment that makes it look very similar to the skin of animals such as the armadillo, recently introduced into the Medici menagerie [Fig. 15]. The tomb

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On the Latin meanings of ornamentum, see Caroline van Eck, *Classical Rhetoric and the Arts in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge/New York 2007, 25. The double meaning can be traced back to the verb “ordinare”, which meant to organize, arrange or put in order. On Renaissance armour, see Charles Oman, *A History of the Art of War in the Sixteenth Century*, London 1937; John Rigby Hale, *War and Society in Renaissance Europe, 1450–1620*, New York 1985; and Bruno Thomas and Ortwin Gamber, *L’arte milanese dell’armatura*, in: *Storia di Milano*, vol. 11, *Il declino spagnolo, 1630–1706*, Milan 1958, 697–841. Carolyn Springer’s *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance*, Toronto 2010, Introduction, note 1, has a very good bibliographical overview of armour studies; see also Marianne Koos, Körper in Hüllen. Die Rüstung als Maske/Maskerade und zweite Haut in der englischen Kultur des späten Mittelalters, in: *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual* 4, 2021, 35–86. Although this article considers English armour, it offers many new perspectives for the study of late medieval and early modern armour in Europe in general.

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On the Negroli, see *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance. Filippo Negroli and His Contemporaries* (exh. cat. New York, Metropolitan Museum), ed. by Stuart W. Pyhrr and José-A. Godoy, with essays and a compilation of documents by Silvio Leydi, New York 1998; *Parures triomphales. Le maniérisme dans l’art de l’armure italienne* (exh. cat. Geneva, Musée des Beaux-Arts), ed. by José-A. Godoy and Silvio Leydi, Milan 2003. For the Fame Armor, see *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance*, 18–19 and 136–150.

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Cf. *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance*, 326–330. See also Vittoria Addona, The Grotesque Provocations of the Palazzo di Bianca Cappello, in: *Source. Notes in the History of Art* 42, 2022, 26–47; Gunther Thiem and Christel Thiem, *Toskanische Fassaden-Dekoration in Sgraffito und Fresko, 14. bis 17. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1964; Emanuela Ferretti, Appunti per la conoscenza del cantiere storico. Bernardo Buontalenti e la fabbrica del palazzo di Bianca Cappello a Firenze (1573–1578), in: *Ricerche Storiche* 1/32, 2003, 47–79.

23

Parures triomphales, 252.

for Ruggiero Minerbetti in Santa Maria Novella of 1527, carved by Silvio Cosini, whom we have already met as the sculptor of trophies and grotesques in the Medici Chapel, offers an early material instance of this connection between stone and metal grotesque masks: helmets with grotesque animal shapes figure below the cat-falque, and they look strikingly similar to the grotesque helmets made by the Negroli workshop [Fig. 16].²⁴

III.1 Parades and Tournaments

Now the question is, what to make of these shared features across different materials and artistic disciplines. A first starting point is offered by the settings in which such armour was worn: that of parades and tournaments. Armour *all'antica*, very fashionable for such events, abounded in grotesque masks. Tournaments were a fixture of Italian court ritual, and continued to be part of festivities to celebrate marriages or peace treaties well into the sixteenth century, even after the invention of gunpowder had made armour quite obsolete. Actually tournament armour became ever more lavish as the invention of gunpowder and firearms made it less and less effective as a protecting device. Victor Stoichita called this the “enveloppe de surenchère”, the creation of what we might call a second, superfluous skin, that often looked like the body or hair.²⁵ The tradition was nourished by the popularity of mediaeval chivalry texts, such as the Arthurian romances. The libraries of the Gonzaga, Este and Visconti held numerous copies. In the Palazzo Ducale at Mantua, Pisanello decorated the Sala del Principe with scenes from the tournament at the Castle of King Brangäne in c. 1439–1442.²⁶ *Amadis de Gaule* was equally popular. It counted Charles V, François I and Philip II among its assiduous readers.²⁷ Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516) represented a final Italian flowering of this tradition.

The interest in chivalry so widely documented in Italian Renaissance courts suggests some iconographical connections, particularly for the motif of the dragon wings with eyes. The breast-

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On the genesis of this tomb, see Farinelli, *Monumental Grotesques*, 179–187.

²⁵

Victor I. Stoichita, La ‘seconde peau’. Quelques considérations sur le symbolisme des armures au xvie siècle, in: *Micrologus* 20, 2012, 451–463, esp. 453–456.

²⁶

Pisanello. *Painter to the Renaissance Court* (exh. cat. London, National Gallery), ed. by Luke Syson and Dillian Gordon, London 2001, 48 and 55.

²⁷

Cf. Braden Frieder, *Chivalry and the Perfect Prince. Tournaments, Art, and Armor at the Spanish Habsburg Court*, University Park, PA 2008, 20 and 40. On Renaissance tournaments, see also Ida Sikević (ed.), *Knights in Shining Armor. Myth and Reality, 1450–1650*, Piomont, NH 2006; *Italian Armour for Princely Courts* (exh. cat. Chicago, Art Institute), ed. by Leonid Tarassuh, Chicago 1986; John F. Hayward, *The Revival of Roman Armour in the Renaissance*, in: Robert Held (ed.), *Art, Arms and Armour. An International Anthology*, vol. 1, Chiasso 1979, 144–163; Angus Patterson, *Fashion and Armour in Renaissance Europe. Proud Looks and Brave Attire*, London 2009. On the impact of *Amadis de Gaule* on architectural design, see André Chastel, *The Palace of Apollidon*, Oxford 1986.



[Fig. 11]

Filippo Negroli, *Burgonet for armour of Guidobaldo II della Rovere*, Milan c. 1532–1535, steel, gold, textile, Saint Petersburg, Hermitage, in: *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance*, 137.



[Fig. 12]

Filippo Negroli, *Burget for Charles V, "alla romana antica"*, Milan, c. 1540, steel, gold inlays and incrustation, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, photo: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.



[Fig. 13a]

Bernardino Poccetti, Façade of the Palazzo for Bianca Capello in Florence, 1578, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 13b]

"The Morosini Helmet", visored burgonet, c. 1550–1560, repoussé and embossed iron or steel, with gilding and silvering, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection, photo: National Gallery of Art, Public Domain.



[Fig. 14a]

Filippo Negroli, *Breastplate for armour of Guidobaldo II della Rovere*, c. 1530–1532, steel and gold, Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, photo: author.



[Fig. 14b]
Andrea Ferrucci (attr.), Grotesque stair decoration, c. 1630, pietra serena, Argenteria,
Palazzo Pitti, Florence, photo: author.



[Fig. 15]

Milanese, Chanfron and crinet from the garniture presented by the Duke of Savoy to King Philip III, c. 1585, etched, embossed, gilt and gold-damascened steel, Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional, Real Armería, in: *Parures triomphales. Le maniérisme dans l'art de l'armure italienne* (exh. cat. Geneva, Musée Rath), ed. by José-A Godoy and Silvio Leyd, Geneva 2003, 87.



[Fig. 16]
Silvio Cosini, *Tomb for Ruggiero Minerbeti*, 1527, marble, Santa Maria Novella, Florence,
photo: author.

plate that is part of the Fame Armor, made for Guidobaldo della Rovere (1532–1535), is covered by two dragon wings with eyes scattered over them. It also carries a device: “Nulla bibam Laethes oblivia flumine in ipso” (“Let me not drink any of the forgetfulness of the Lethe in the river itself”); its pauldron is decorated with hybrid animal heads. The device may be a reference to passages in Ariosto, Vergil, or to the late Roman poet Claudian, where Good and Bad Fame are distinguished, with Bad Fame carrying black wings like a bat.²⁸ Carolyn Springer discusses various interpretations connecting it with Ariosto, suggesting a reference to the armour of Rodomonte in Canto XIV, line 118: “He was armed with a strong and hard breastplate made from the scaly hide of a dragon.” Others have compared it to the passage describing the battle with the sea monster Orc (Canto X.94–112): the monster also has a horned head, pointed wings, protruding eyes and a porcine snout bristling with teeth. Another similarity is with the bat-winged creature encountered by Rinaldo in the Ardennes, which has a head with a thousand lidless eyes that never shut, and snakes instead of hair.²⁹

These connections with chivalry literature are all plausible, particularly in the light of the prominence of armour worn, lost or found in Ariosto’s epic. At the same time, they should not obscure the much wider network of Greco-Roman and Christian meanings and associations of dragons, armour and danger that go back to the Greek etymology of the word “dragon” in the verb *derkomai*, which means to see. It was taken to refer to someone or something with a deadly glance or very sharp eyes, because such eyes always appear to be open.³⁰

III.2 The Revival of Roman Armour

The Renaissance revival of Roman armour also provided an inspiration for the inclusion of grotesque imagery in helmets, breastplates or chanfrons. Surviving pieces were present in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian collections. Armour was also represented

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Ariosto, *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1533), lines XXXV.11–16; Vergil, *Aeneid* IV.181–183. The connection between the breast plate and Ariosto was first proposed by Florent Gille, in the text accompanying plate 57 in F. Gille and A. Rockstuhl, *Musée de Tzarskoé-Sélo, ou collection d’armes de Sa Majesté l’empereur de toutes les Russies*, Saint Petersburg/Karlsruhe 1835–1853; reprint Fridingen 1981. Cf. Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance, 18–19. See also Ortwin Gamber, Der italienische Harnisch im 16. Jahrhundert, in: *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 54, 1958, 73–120; and Ortwin Gamber and Christian Beaufort, with Matthias Pfaffenbichler, *Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien, Hofjagd- und Rüst-kammer. Katalog der Leibrüst-kammer*, vol. 2: *Der Zeitraum von 1530–1560*, Vienna 1990.

29

Gerusalemme Liberata 42.46–47. Cf. Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 95–103. Ariosto, XXXV.11–16 tells of Ippolito d’Este and an “ancient man / who to and fro perpetually ran”, “He fills his lap with labels to the brim [...] and in the stream, named Lethe, which takes all / His precious load of plaques, he lets them fall.”

30

Cf. Daniel Ogdern, *Drakon. Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds*, Oxford 2013.

in stone trophies, such as the so-called Trophies of Marius, recorded for instance in the sketchbook attributed to Jacopo Ripanda now in the Ashmolean, or the pillar with trophies that had been in the Uffizi since the early sixteenth century.³¹ Surviving statues of Roman emperors, coins and sarcophagi all provided models for Renaissance armourers. They share many conspicuous features: the use of bats, dragons, Gorgons and other terrifying, often animal faces; the use of animal body parts, in particular feet and dragon claws; and monstrous combinations of animals, both real and fabled.

Wearing parade armour *alla romana* was part of the general trend among Renaissance rulers to model their appearance and behaviour on that of the rulers and captains from antiquity. Humanist speeches, for instance those by Leonardo Bruni, often compared them.³² They drew on treatises on war such as Roberto Valturio's *De re militari* of 1472, the second illustrated book to be printed in Italy, and widely distributed to fellow rulers by its dedicatee, the Condottiere Sigismondo Malatesta. The Roman author observed that the depiction of predatory animals on standards and banners "has been in use since the beginning of the world, when men were themselves animals, living in the woods in a constant state of war and eating human flesh".³³ I will return in Section V to this association of the use of animal imagery and the animality of early humans.

Knowledge of Roman armour was consolidated in the sixteenth century in Du Choul's treatise on Roman military equipment of 1555, the *Discours sur la castrametation et discipline militaire des Romains*. We can trace the spread of adaptations and transformations of Roman armour through drawings and sculpture. An early case is the relief of Alexander the Great, c. 1483–1485, now attributed to the workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio [Fig. 17]. It became something of a specialism of Florentine artists in the late Quattrocento to depict figures in profile like this, wearing fantasy armour.³⁴ Leonardo's drawing of an old warrior, now in the British Museum, shows a similar helmet with batwings and eyes. The surviving draw-

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See H. R. Robinson, *The Armour of Imperial Rome*, New York 1975; for surviving visual documentation of Roman armour, see Cornelius Vermeule, Hellenistic and Roman Cuirassed Statues. The Evidence of Painting and Reliefs in the Development of Cuirass Types, in: *Berytus Archaeological Studies* 13/1, 1959, 1–82 and plates 1–26. For the Medici collections of surviving Roman armour, see Eugène Müntz, Les collections d'antiquités formées par les Médicis au XVIIe siècle, in: *Memoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et des Belles-Lettres* 35/2, 1895, 85–168. For the revival of Roman armour, see Hayward, *The Revival of Roman Armour*.

32

Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance, 9ff.

33

Roberto Valturio, *De re militari*, Verona 1483, fols. 215r, 234v, 236v and 238v, quoted and translated by Francesca Borgo, The Beast Within, the Beast Without. Zoomorphic Armour Ornament and the Human-Animal Divide in the Material Culture of Renaissance War, in: *Venezia Arti* 32, 2023, 35–50, 36.

34

See Francesco Cagliotti, Fifteenth-Century Reliefs of Ancient Emperors and Empresses in Florence. Production and Collection, in: Nicolas Penny and Eike D. Schmidt (eds.), *Collecting Sculpture in Early Modern Europe*, New Haven, CT 2008, 67–111.

ing by Rubens after Leonardo's *Battle at Anghiari* shows an intriguing use of shell shapes for grotesque shoulder protections, as well as a ram's head on the breast plate [Fig. 18]. This has the effect of dazzling the viewer, who can no longer distinguish immediately the various features of the armour from the body of the warrior. Because the body of this warrior hides the neck and head of his horse from sight, there is also a strong suggestion that he is a centaur, which adds to the blurring of the boundaries between man and beast in the image. The lavabo attributed to Verrocchio for San Lorenzo also displays the dragon wings we have met earlier [Fig. 19].³⁵

To date, however, there are very few, if any, surviving documents that would show how a design made for instance by Verrocchio or Michelangelo was used in the workshops of the Negroli or other Milanese armourers. There is only one material connection between sculpted grotesques and their use in armour, to my knowledge, a relief sculpture showing a grotesque helmet, in Cosini's Minerbetti tomb, mentioned above [Fig. 16]. Instead, what we do have, is a series of very strong visual and thematic similarities: the use of hybrid beings that combine parts of different animals and humans; the duplication and triplication of animal shapes, particularly in three-dimensional objects such as the grotesques in Palazzo Pitti; and the treatment of grotesque ornament to suggest a second skin. The appearance, later in the sixteenth century, of grotesque helmets in images of trophies, for instance by Polidoro da Caravaggio, or in collections of prints such as the *Speculum Magnificentiae Romae*, does document the dissemination of grotesque armour, outside Florence and after Michelangelo and his studio had stopped working on them. Giulio Romano's designs for grotesque helmets *all'antica* for instance, created in Mantua in 1530 in connection with Charles V's visit to the city, were recorded in Jacopo Strada's *Galearum Antiquarium*. Strada took these drawings with him when he moved to Vienna to work for the Habsburg court, and they illustrate the spread of such grotesque armour design outside Tuscany and Italy.³⁶

III.3 Monster Theory

Many animal-shaped masks discussed here either present hybrid animals, combining for instance features of bats with claws and

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On the lavabo in San Lorenzo sometimes attributed to Verrocchio, see most recently Simona Cohen, *Animal Heads and Hybrid Creatures. The Case of the San Lorenzo Lavabo and Its Sources*, in: ead., *Animals As Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, Leiden 2008, 195–239.

³⁶

Cf. *Fürstenhöfe der Renaissance. Giulio Romano und die klassische Tradition* (exh. cat. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), ed. by Nikolai Dobrowolskij, Vienna 1989, 236 and 338; *Riddarlek och Turnerspel. Tournaments and the Dream of Chivalry* (exh. cat. Stockholm, Royal Armoury), ed. by Lena Rangström, Stockholm 1992, 120. The manuscript of the *Galearum Antiquarium* is kept in the Austrian National Library, ms Cod. min. 21; a copy entitled "Casques d'après Jules Romain" is in the National Museum in Stockholm, Inv. THC 4166–4241.



[Fig. 17]
Andrea del Verrocchio or studio, *Alexander the Great*, c. 1483/1485, marble relief,
55.9 × 36.7 cm, Washington, National Gallery of Art, photo: [National Gallery of Art, Public Domain](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 18]

Peter Paul Rubens, *Drawing after Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari*, 1603, black chalk, pen in brown ink, brush in brown and grey ink, grey wash, heightened in white and grey-blue, 45.3 × 63.6 cm, Paris, Louvre, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 19]
Andrea del Verrocchio, Lavabo, now in the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, Florence, c. 1465,
marble, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).

humanoid eyes, or combine human and animal features, such as horse ears and a human face. These suggest connections with contemporary monster theory or teratology, as well as with the general interest of Renaissance culture in metamorphosis and transformation. Benedetto Varchi for instance, who gave a lecture on monsters at the Accademia Fiorentina in 1548, and who was probably responsible for the concept of the *Grotta degli animali* by Tribolo in the Boboli Gardens (begun before 1550), explained their existence by looking for natural causes, such as accidents in conception. He only discusses natural monsters, not monstrous artefacts created by humans, in an enquiry that is still very much indebted to Aristotle's treatise on the generation of animals.³⁷ For Varchi the main problem posed by the existence of monstrous living beings is to understand the purpose of their creation, since he firmly adheres to the view nature does not make mistakes. His solution is to argue that monsters exist because of an accident, not even an error, on the part of sublunar nature. But that conclusion makes his entire treatise less relevant for the understanding of grotesque monsters, since these were created intentionally.³⁸

Somewhat later, Vincenzo Scamozzi would make the connection between design and monster theory. In his *Idea dell'Architettura* of 1615 he compared architectural detailing or *sacome* (the small parts of profiles such as crown mouldings, astragals, cymas or scotias) with animal faces, and applied the distinctions between *genera* and *species* to the classification of ornament. These small details are very important to architectural composition, since they knit together the larger parts, such as architraves, friezes and capitals. Thus they make up, as Scamozzi puts it, the "true portrait (*ritratto*) of the work". But the analogy between a face and a façade is pushed further. These small elements or profiles are like the eyes in the heads of animals: without them, they look like "mostri di natura".³⁹ The corporeality of architecture is further elaborated when he compares the way in which the parts of a building are articulated and connected with the bodily fabric of muscles and nerves:

As in the latter one can see the connections between bones, the linkage of the nerves, and the intersection of the veins, with the covering of soft tissue: so in the former one can see the trimming of the columns, and walls, the interlocking of

37

Benedetto Varchi, *Della generatione de mostri*, a lecture held in 1548, and published in 1560 and 1590; reprint in *Opere di Benedetto Varchi ora per la prima volta raccolte*, Trieste 1859, 146–147.

38

Varchi, *Della generatione de mostri*, in particular 93 and 114.

39

Vincenzo Scamozzi, *Idea dell'architettura universale*, Venice 1615, 149. Cf. Alina Payne, *The Architectural Treatise in the Italian Renaissance. Architectural Invention, Ornament, and Literary Culture*, Cambridge/New York 1999, 310 n. 83.

cornices, the entwining of those things that ornament, and finally the shells [*corteccie*] that cover the internal parts.⁴⁰

Here a perception of the surfaces of buildings is revealed that considers them as organic, living surfaces displaying features very similar to human faces. But at the same time the monstrous animals so prominent in Florentine architecture and sculpture are not included: it is the human face that is taken here as a metaphor to understand the function of *sacome*.⁴¹ We do find here a confirmation, in architectural theory, of a conception of the façade of a building as its face and skin, features that seem to be thematized by the insertion of grotesque masques in Florentine palazzi of the late sixteenth century, or by the use of sgraffito ornament.

IV. Anthropological Perspectives. Animal-Shaped Masks from the American Northwest Coast

To move forward at this stage, I want to return to the animal shapes themselves, the starting point of this essay, to ask, what do these grotesque animal figures actually *do*? Both in buildings and in armour grotesque animal shapes are used to cover parts of the underlying fabric. They are masks in the shape of animals that disguise and perhaps even camouflage the face of the bearer or support.⁴² These similarities suggest a series of questions about grotesques as part of the defensive apparatus, the body armour of a building – in line with one of the original Latin meanings of the term *ornamentum*, that of the armour and equipment of a soldier. As we saw, Du Choul quotes an observation by the Roman military writer Vegetius that Roman soldiers wore helmets in the shape of a lion's head to terrify the enemy, and also to appropriate the characteristics of the animal, already suggesting the terrifying nature of such grotesque *ornamentum*, as well as hinting at underlying psychologi-

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Scamozzi, *Discorsi sopra l'Antichità di Roma*, Venice 1582, 15, quoted and translated in Payne, *The Architectural Treatise*, 234 and 310, n. 81.

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On Scamozzi's species theory of architectural ornament, see Payne, *The Architectural Treatise*, 223–230.

⁴²

In *Armour and Masculinity*, Carolyn Springer develops a reading of such hybrid decoration and duplications in terms of Caillois' ideas on protective adaptation in insects. Caillois also points out that the best protection is to look like nothing at all – which clearly does not apply to armour and architectural grotesques. Caillois also notes that “the insect [...] acquires [eyes, circles, and masks] as part of the morphology of the species and carries them as an indelible part of its organism”, while humans develop prostheses that can be taken up and removed at will. Taking her cue from this she argues that all forms of technology illustrate the evolutionary desire to exceed the limits of the species. Springer's argument opens up many perspectives, and it illustrates the importance and implications of looking outside art theory to understand grotesques.

cal mechanisms.⁴³ With such varieties of duplication, in a second skin, or in the multiplication of animal and hybrid shapes in one grotesque mask, we enter the realm of human behaviour, of humans using dress, or the second body of armour, and by extension the interior and exterior of buildings, to fascinate, frighten or ward off viewers. In other words, we enter the realm of anthropology.

To provide a foundation for this excursion into anthropology we need to return to a formal analysis of our sixteenth-century masks. Zoomorphic masks, often combining several animal faces, are quite common across the world, and particularly in the animist societies of the Northwest Coast of North America. There is one category of artefacts that displays in particular many features similar to the mask ornaments made in sixteenth-century Italy: the masks made by the Hajda, Yup'ik and Kwakwaka'wakw societies.⁴⁴ Compare for instance the Italian sallet in the shape of a lion's head with a Yup'ik mask of a sea lion's head framing a man's head [Fig. 20a and Fig. 20b]. Or consider the multiplication of animals in a helmet by Giovanni Paolo Negroli with a Kwakwaka'wakw transformation mask [Fig. 21a and Fig. 21b]. These masks also show the stressing of facial features such as the eyebrows, that we find for instance in the masks guarding the windows of the Palazzo Nonfinito [Fig. 7]. The aspects of a second skin, and integration of human or animal wearers' faces with the animal face of the mask, as shown in the sallet in the shape of a lion's head [Fig. 20a], and a chanfron or protective armour for the head of a horse [Fig. 22a], also suggest a comparison with the masks made by the Kwakwaka'wakw [Fig. 22b].

These masks have been collected since the nineteenth century and have been the subject of anthropological study by Herman Haerberlin and Franz Boas, and most recently Philippe Descola.⁴⁵ They combine animal and human features, often including two or three different species. These representations of animals are often split or duplicated over the entire surface of an object, in a way that recalls the duplications of animal figures flanking a central element such as a column in European heraldry. Haerberlin and Boas noted a series of common features in these masks: stylization and schematization, the representation of a body by splitting, often across the entire surface, and the dislocation of split details, the frontal representation of

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Guillaume du Choul, *Discours sur la castramétation et discipline militaire des Romains*, Lyon 1555, 152. He refers to Vegetius' *Epitome* II.16, where the Roman author discusses the use of boar skin covering of helmets to frighten enemies. See also his description of tournaments in II.57.

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On these masks, see the recent overviews by Allan Wardwell, *Tangible Visions. Northwest Coast Indian Shamanism and Its Art*, New York 2009 [1996]; Steven Brown, *Native Visions. Evolution in Northwest Coast Art from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century*, Seattle/London, 1998; and Gaylord Torrence (ed.), *Art of Native Americans. The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection*, New York/New Haven, CT, 2019.

45

See Herman Haerberlin, Principles of Esthetic Form in the Art of the North-Pacific Coast. A Preliminary Sketch, in: *American Anthropologist* n.s. 10/3, 1918, 258–264, and Franz Boas, *Primitive Art*, Oslo 1927.



[Fig. 20a]

Italian, *Sallet in Shape of a Lion's Head*, c. 1475, embossed and gilt copper on underlying steel helmet, New York, Metropolitan Museum, photo: [Metropolitan Museum, Public Domain](#) (30 September 2024).



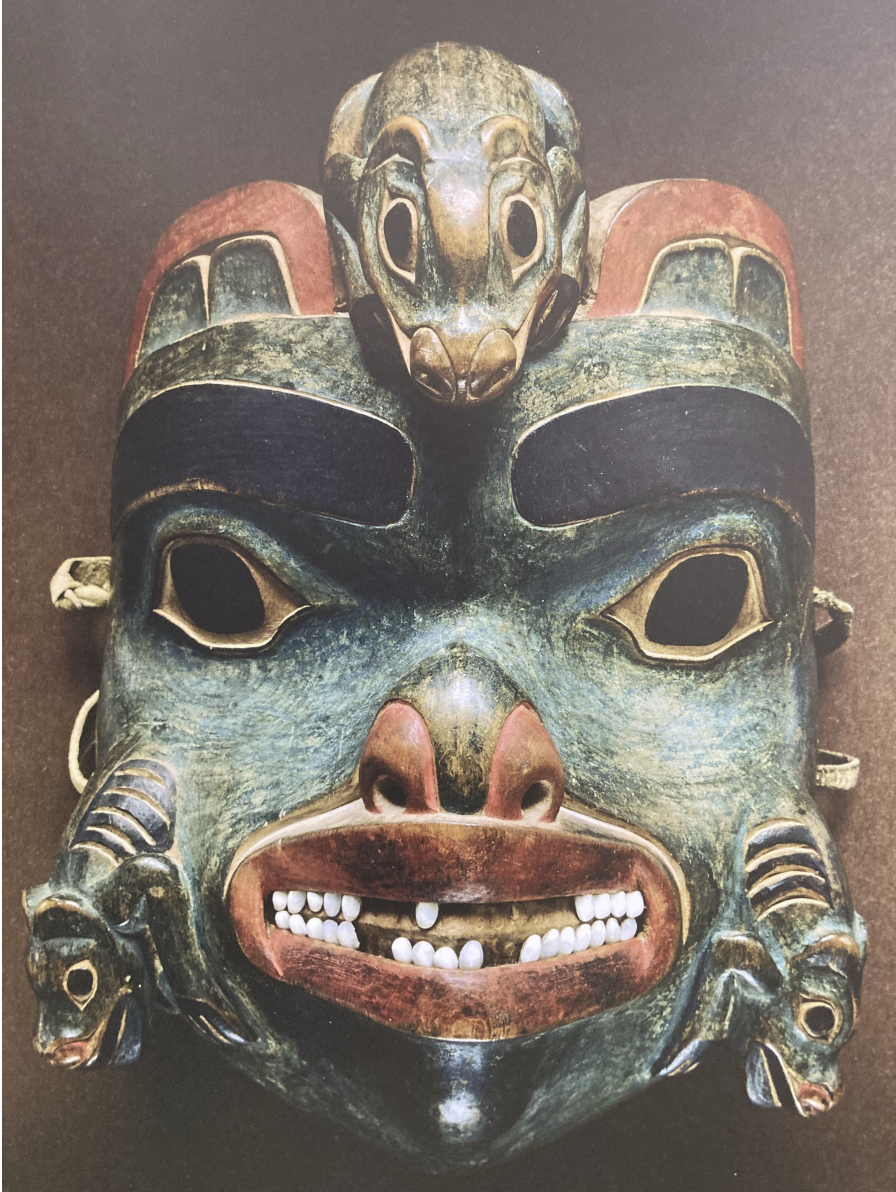
[Fig. 20b]

Tlingit Bear Skin Helmet, before 1867, bear skin, wood, teeth, iron, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 21a]

Giovanni Paolo Negroli, *Close Helmet*, c. 1540–1545, steel, copper alloy, gold, 27.3 × 29.2 × 38.1 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum, photo: [Metropolitan Museum, Public Domain](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 21b]

Tlingit mask, before 1867, wood, shells, animal skin and pigments, 27.8 × 17.9 × 12 cm, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, in: *La Fabrique des images. Visions du monde et formes de la représentation* (exh. cat. Paris, Musée du Quai Branly), ed. by Philippe Descola, Paris 2010, 26.



[Fig. 22a]

Filippo Negroli studio, *Chanfron from Roman Armour for Ferdinand II of Tyrol*, Milan c. 1547–1550, steel, gold, silver and brass, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, in: *Heroic Armor of the Italian Renaissance*, 276.



[Fig. 22b]

Kwakwaka'wakw culture, *Wooden transformation mask*, created before 1960, cedar wood, cedar bark, paint, fibre, lacquer, metal, skin, 42.8 × 47.1 × 104.3 cm, Vancouver, Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, photo: Wikimedia Commons.

a creature through the use of two contrasting profiles, the reduction of monumental artefacts to small scales, and the illogical transformation of details into new representations. To these features should be added an element identified by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his essay on split representation of 1946: the combination of graphic, that is two-dimensional, and plastic, that is three-dimensional forms, for instance the use of tattooage on a face, or of incrustation in a mask.⁴⁶

Now many of these features of Northwest Coast masks can also be found in the group of Renaissance artefacts studied here. They are all highly stylized and schematized to begin with. Split representation of an animal to cover the entire surface can be found in the Palazzo Pitti sculptures as well as a burgonet for Guidobaldo II della Rovere now in Saint Petersburg [Fig. 11 and Fig. 12]. In the latter the pair of horns over the eyebrows of the visor is flattened, or splayed, to flank the animal crouching over the eyebrows. Dislocated splitting can be found for instance in Michelangelo's design for a salt cellar, with birds' heads and beaks added at both ends of the lid, but also in the masks at the centre top and bottom of the Pitti pieces [Fig. 6, Fig. 10a and Fig. 10b]. The frontal representation of a creature through the use of two contrasting profiles is present in many helmets. The chanfron of Ferdinand of Tirol, where an animal is masked as a human face growing from acanthus leaves, baring animal teeth, is a typical case of the transformation of details into new representations [Fig. 22a].

For Philippe Descola the variety of Northwestern masks most rich in elements pointing to the ontology that drives in his view their creation, is that of the transforming masks made by the Kwakwaka'wakw. Here the human wearer is disguised, or transformed, into various animals, depending on the parts of the mask he or she opens or folds. This looks very similar to the helmets that integrate several animals into one protective device, and hide the human face of the wearer, or to the helmets that completely encircle their face, as in the lion-shaped sallet discussed above [Fig. 20a].

So let us have a closer look at Descola's analysis of these masks in *Les formes du visible*. He is the successor to Lévi-Strauss at the Collège de France, and has combined an impressive amount of field work in Amazonia, and the American Northwest Coast with a theoretical model to understand human image-making across the globe. The model is based on a structuralist classification of relations between human and non-human animals, or ontologies. This was the topic of his recent major books, *Les formes du visible* (2021) and *Par-delà nature et culture* (2005), as well as the exhibition he curated at Quai Branly, *La fabrique des images* (2010).⁴⁷ *Les formes du visible*

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Lévi-Strauss, *Le dédoublement de la représentation*, 273. He refers to Leonhard Adam, *Das Problem der asiatisch-altamerikanischen Kulturbeziehungen mit besonderen Berücksichtigung der Kunst*, in: *Wiener Beiträge zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte Asiens* 5, 1931, 40–64.

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Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris 2005; *Les formes du visible*, Paris 2021, and *La fabrique des images* (exh. cat. Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris), ed. by Philippe Descola, Paris 2010.

received immense media coverage in France, but far less in the Anglo-Saxon world, and even less among art historians, who have mainly criticized his sometimes outdated views on the development of linear perspective in Renaissance Italy [Tab. 1].

Now what matters here is his analysis of animism, and how it can function to understand the similarities between Florentine mask-shaped ornament, Milanese armour and Northwestern masks. To show this let us turn to some of the masks he discusses, and the way they give visual and tangible form to an animist ontology. Animism is defined by the worldview that there is a similarity of interiority – of the soul, or deep nature, if you wish – between animals and humans, but a difference of exterior appearance. What looks like a human being can in fact be a fox or seal taking on the appearance, disguise or camouflage of humans. Metamorphosis is key to this ontology. As Descola puts it:

*L'animisme peut être vu comme une façon de systématiser l'expérience de l'inopiné. Un bruit inattendu [...], un animal qui m'observe, un coup de vent imprévu, tous ces événements qui tranchent sur l'ordinaire de façon minuscule incitent notre imagination à exercer 'un droit de suite' en inférant une présence là où on devrait être seul [...] bref, en imputant, lorsque les circonstances s'y prêtent, à des non-humains visibles ou non-visibles des comportements, des états intérieurs et des desseins analogues aux nôtres.*⁴⁸

In all these parts of the world where an animist ontology is documented, the world is populated by a multitude of living beings, dressed in an animal or vegetal appearance, but whose appearance, as the local inhabitants know, hides or disguises an intentionality and emotions that are analogous to those of humans. They all possess a soul, a morphology and attributes that distinguish them. Animist masks show the interiority of these beings, together with their incarnation in very different human or animal physiques. In some cases, human hands are added to the image of an animal to indicate that the animal has the intentionality or power to act analogous to that of humans. Animism is a very visual ontology, as is also suggested by the fact that in the languages of Amazonia the word for spirit or soul is the same as the one used to designate shadow, reflection or image. Spirits are most of the time invisible, but they can become visible by combining some anthropomorphical elements that suggest intentionality – eyes that see, for instance – with the attributes of a particular species. The resulting images show animals which by their human attributes indicate that they possess an interiority similar to that of humans. Therefore the challenge of giving visual form

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Descola, *Les formes du visible*, 89.

similarity of interiority difference of exteriority	animism	totemism	similarity of interiority similarity of exteriority
difference of interiority similarity of exteriority	naturalism	analogism	difference of interiority difference of exteriority

[Tab. 1]

A schematic representation of the four ontologies defined by Philippe Descola, adapted from the diagram in id., *Par-delà nature et culture*, 176.

to an animistic ontology is to render the subjectivity of non-human beings.⁴⁹

This is where the mask comes in. It is the simplest way to give visible form to the inner being of an animal spirit. At the same time it is also one of the clearest ways for a human to indicate that it can take on the appearance of an animal while simultaneously showing that it has remained human despite this new appearance. The mask is also a very effective way of exhibiting metamorphosis, enabling the oscillation between one being and the other, and between two perspectives, that of the animal and that of the human. The transformational masks made by the Yup'ik of western Alaska, who dwell in the delta of the Yukon, always show the quality of the represented person, their *yua*, by inserting a human face into an animal body or face, or by adding human limbs to an animal body, or vice versa [Fig. 20b]. They all refer to the quality of being a person, a state of being shared by all living beings according to animism. These human elements indicate aspects of human interiority: intentionality, for instance, discernment or anticipation.⁵⁰ [Fig. 23] shows a Yup'ik mask of seal or sea lion spirit, surrounded by human hands to show the inner human being. They are figurations of the importance for the hunter of a penetrating sight: the hunter needs to perceive the prey before being perceived.⁵¹ Similarly, the Negroli armour discussed here gives an animal appearance to the human that wears it, or a human appearance to the horse, while at the same time showing the human person inside it, their intentionality and watchfulness.

Metamorphosis is a conspicuous feature of animism because it reveals the essence of this ontology: humans and animals share a similar interiority, and this interiority or spirit or soul can inhabit very different bodily envelopes. Since there is this shared interiority, it can happen that humans and animals meet in unexpected ways, revealing their shared spirits: animals can fix the hunter when they are supposed to run away, a human can leave behind animal footprints etc.: all encounters that make one see in a being something other than what their face suggests.

Descola's observations about the figuration of animist ontologies in Northwestern masks sounds very similar to the experience

⁴⁹

Ibid., 509.

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On Yup'ik animist beliefs, see also Janet Catherine Berlo, *Yup'ik and Alutiiq Masks from the Alaskan Arctic*, in: *Indigenous Beauty. Masterworks of American Indian Art from the Diker Collection* (exh. cat. Seattle, Seattle Art Museum), ed. by David W. Penney, Seattle 2015, quoting a Yup'ik saying on p. 69: "the world contains no others, only persons". "This encapsulates the belief, essential among many Northern peoples, that there are varieties of personhood – human people, nonhuman people (animals), and other-than-human people. This last category encompasses the mysterious and influential beings that may manifest themselves in visions or be carved in masks as combinations of species of animals or as human animal hybrids." Cf. *ibid.*, 70: "[These masks] symbolize a vital force representing a chain or a continuum of all the individual spirits of that genus."

⁵¹

Ibid., 117–133.



[Fig. 23]
Yup'ik mask of seal or sea lion spirit, 1800s, wood, paint, gut cord, feathers, Dallas Museum of Art, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](#) (30 September 2024).

suggested by architectural masks. There animals, often with facial masks that combine parts of different animals, and half hidden by their window sill, observe the spectators before they see them. Their eyes, framed and half hidden by very prominent sockets, display the kind of intent watchfulness that is also visualized in Yup'ik masks. As in the transformational masks, a split representation or seeing-double occurs here: at one moment I see indications of a humanoid interiority; at the other I only see the distinctive physical appearance. These masks, particularly those made by the Kwakwaka'wakw, not only look very similar to helmets with their flaps and visors protecting their wearer: they also offer a similar metamorphosis of an animal into a human or vice versa. As André Breton already noted: "The power of the transformational mask resides first of all in the possibility of an abrupt passage from one appearance to another."⁵² They are connected to complicated myths about the slow transformation of a human into various hunting animals. Most of these masks represent two stages of metamorphosis at the same time, forcing the viewer to entertain various perspectives at once: a human face appearing in an animal face for instance.

Other mechanisms are at work here as well: what we would call camouflage, for instance. Among the Inuit of Alaska as well as the peoples of Terra del Fuego or Siberia it was quite common to wear animal skins, with their paws becoming human shoes, not just for protection, or hunting camouflage, but also to appropriate or embody the physical capacities of these animals: one captures the powers of an animal by becoming their living image. In Amazonia a very intriguing variety of ontological, animist camouflage occurs: humans paint their bodies to resemble how they think animals perceive them [Fig. 24].⁵³ Now this recalls the wishful thinking of much Renaissance armour: it makes the wearer look like the animal they would wish to be associated with, if not taken for.

V. Vestiges of Renaissance Animism

But is there a way of connecting this anthropological analysis of Northwestern masks produced by animist societies with the beliefs possibly driving the creation, use and perception of sixteenth-century animal-shaped masks and armour in Italy? Although Christianity firmly opposed any variety of animism, since it held that only humans possessed a soul, with animals created to serve mankind, there are nevertheless many indications of the persistence of animist beliefs from antiquity. The Roman poet Lucretius, whose work

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André Breton, Note sur les masques à transformation de la côte pacifique du Nord-Ouest, in: *Neuf* 1, 1950, 39, quoted in Descola, *Les formes du visible*, 125.

⁵³

Descola, *Les formes du visible*, 155.



[Fig. 24]

*Member of the Yanomami tribe in Venezuela, photo: Napoleon Chagnon, reproduced from
Descola, Les formes du visible, fig. 35, 155.*

enjoyed a significant, through contested, revival in Quattrocento Florence, wrote famously in Book V of *De rerum natura* how

[...] earth cloaked the scene, / Hill and dale, with every kind of leaf and shining green, / And green the blooming meadows gleamed. All trees began to vie / Galloping at a terrific clip, to race up towards the sky. / And just as feathers, fur or bristles straightaway start to grow / On four-footed beasts or on birds mighty-on-the-wing, just so / The fledgling earth first sprouted a down of herbs and coppices. / Next, she engendered the tribes of living things, the many races / That arose by different causes and in many different ways.⁵⁴

This animated universe was echoed by Leonardo, who described in a famous passage in the *Leicester Codex* how the earth is one big, living body, possessed of an “anima vegetativa”. Lucretius, like Pliny the Elder, noted the power of Nature to generate images in her own right: Pliny cites the example of shellfish, another animal quite conspicuous in grotesque figuration. Such animist views of Nature were not unique for Lucretius and his Renaissance followers. In the *Timaeus*, even though based on a very different, transcendental metaphysics from Lucretius’ Epicurean atomistic worldview, Plato described the world as a “single, living creature, containing within itself all the living things whose nature is of the same order”.⁵⁵ These views were subsequently rehearsed by the Paduan philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi, who argued that the universe was one big living being in which everything is connected.⁵⁶

It is highly likely that Lucretius’ animated universe was an inspiration for Piero di Cosimo’s painting of a *Hunting Scene* [Fig. 25].⁵⁷ This includes the humanoid and animal hybrid shapes

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Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, V.783–96; quoted from Lucretius, *The Nature of Things* (translated and with notes by A. E. Stallings. Introduction by Richard Jenkyns), London 2007, 172. On Florentine interest in Lucretius following Poggio Bracciolini’s discovery of a manuscript of *De rerum natura*, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve. How the World Became Modern*, New York 2011; and Pierre Vesperini, *Lucrèce*, Paris 2017, for a view arguing for a much greater continuity in the appraisal of Lucretius since his poem was written.

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Plato, *Timaeus* 30d, quoted from *Plato’s Cosmology. The Timaeus of Plato* (translated by F. M. Cornford), London 1956, 40. See also Ittai Weinryb, *Living Matter. Materiality, Maker, and Ornament in the Middle Ages*, in: *Gesta* 52/2, 2013, 113–132.

56

Cf. Dennis Geronimus, *Living Landscape and Wonderment in Renaissance Art*, in: Guy Hedreen (ed.), *Material World. The Intersection of Art, Science, and Nature in Ancient Literature and Its Renaissance Reception*, Leiden 2021, 191–225.

57

On Lucretius’ reception in Renaissance Italy, see Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge, MA 2010; Dennis Geronimus, *No Man’s Lands. Lucretius and the Primitive Strain in Piero’s Art and Patronage*, in: Dennis Geronimus, Virginia Brilliant and David Franklin (eds.), *Piero di Cosimo. The Poetry of Painting*, London 2015, 48–61, with bibliography; and Erwin Panofsky, who first suggested the connections between Lucretius’ account of the origin of human culture and Piero’s work: *The Early History of Man in a Cycle of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo*, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 1, 1937, 12–30.

that also occur in grotesques. There are also other connections between Florentine animal grotesques and Piero di Cosimo's work. Vasari described how as a young man he spent much time creating masquerades and triumphal processions for the Florentine aristocracy, which were decorated with "ornaments, trophies, and most bizarre things of fancy".⁵⁸ Working for Giuliano de' Medici he made a marine monster which, as Vasari put it, "was so extravagant, bizarre and fantastic in its deformity that it seems impossible that Nature should produce anything so deformed". It ended up in the wardrobe of Cosimo I, according to Vasari, but is now sadly lost, as is the book consisting of drawings of bizarre animals he also made for Giuliano.⁵⁹ In Piero's surviving work there are not many grotesques, but animal-human hybrids figure quite prominently: quite a few centaurs and satyrs in the *Return from the Hunt* now in the Metropolitan Museum [Fig. 28]. These all share a particular feature in their depiction: they are not the bestial, slightly manic creatures found in the work of most painters of the time. Instead, they often show behaviour, emotions and the suggestion of an inner life that stresses their parentage with humans. Conversely, the humans, particularly in the *Forest Hunt*, behave and look like animals: they are dressed in lion skins, snarl, tear and fight like wild beasts. Lucretius did not believe that mythological hybrids such as centaurs had survived the earliest stages of animal life on the earth; but he did suggest that humans still display the traits of animals, in an echo of these earlier stages of the development of life, despite their more evolved ways of life.⁶⁰

Even though no grotesque designs by Piero di Cosimo survive, spending some time with him, and the animist world that his paintings evoke with their Lucretian background, does point to a current of thought in Florence in the sixteenth century in which animality is a prominent feature. The earliest stages of life on earth were peopled with monsters and animal-human hybrids. Even after these had died out, according to Lucretius, many animal traits still remain present in humans. In the hunt as in warfare, as the *Forest Hunt* suggests, animals show human behaviour and emotions, and humans behave and dress like animals.

The animality of humans is also a topic in texts that do not belong to the Lucretian tradition, but whose subject puts them in closer proximity to armour. As Francesca Borgo has recently shown, many treatises of fencing depict the swordsman as a hybrid creature showing the features of the animals whose characteristics he wants to possess: the courage of the lion, swiftness of the hind,

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Giorgio Vasari, *Life of Piero di Cosimo*, in: id., *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (translated by Gaston du C. de Vere and with an Introduction and Notes by David Ekserdjian), London 1999 [1912], vol. I, 652–653.

59

Ibid., 655.

60

Lucretius II.700–710; IV.739–744; V.878–924; III.741–753; and V.862–877.

and fierceness of the leopard.⁶¹ The *Flos duellatorum* by Fiore dei Liberi of 1409, of which several manuscript copies exist, juxtaposes animals with the various parts of the body that are supposed to appropriate their characteristics: the lynx, associated with prudence, is placed next to the head, and the lion, symbol of courage, placed next to the arms of the warrior [Fig. 26]. In Paulus Kal's *Fechtbuch* of 1468–1479 the swordsman has turned into a hybrid being with the eyes of a hawk, the legs of a deer and a lion's heart and the figure actually proclaims its animal/human hybridity: "I have eyes like a hawk, so you do not deceive me. I have a heart like a lion, so I strive forward. I have feet like a hind, so I can spring back and forth" [Fig. 27].⁶² Going even further, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola argued that humans have the capacity to adopt the appearance of any being they choose. And perhaps most tellingly, in the last book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Pythagoras delivers a long speech about the fundamental identity and kinship of human and non-human animal: "The soul roams to and fro [...] and takes what frames it at will, from beast to man [...] and from man to beast."⁶³

VI. Conclusion

Animal-shaped sculptural mask ornaments are an arresting, but challenging part of the visual culture created by Michelangelo and his students under Medici rule. They are very prominently scattered across the statuary and architecture of the city and would continue to be made after Michelangelo had left the city, as can be seen, for instance, in the pedestal for Cellini's *Perseus*, the fountains and statues made for the gardens of the Medici Villas, or in cities such as Pisa that became part of Medici territory. Despite their omnipresence they are difficult to classify or interpret, because they do not fit very well into the categories of Renaissance art theory. This essay has taken a different approach, asking two new questions. First, where else do we find such masks, and what can be learned from extending the corpus? It turned out there are striking, but until now little investigated similarities with the parade and tournament armour made by the Negroli workshop for princes across Northern Italy, including the Medici. By taking armour into consideration, a new range of meanings and possible contexts could be envisaged: like armour, animal-shaped masks could serve as a protective device, or even a second skin, to defend the walls of a building. Connections with Arthurian romance and Roman armour introduced

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Borgo, *The Beast Within, the Beast Without*, 42–46.

⁶²

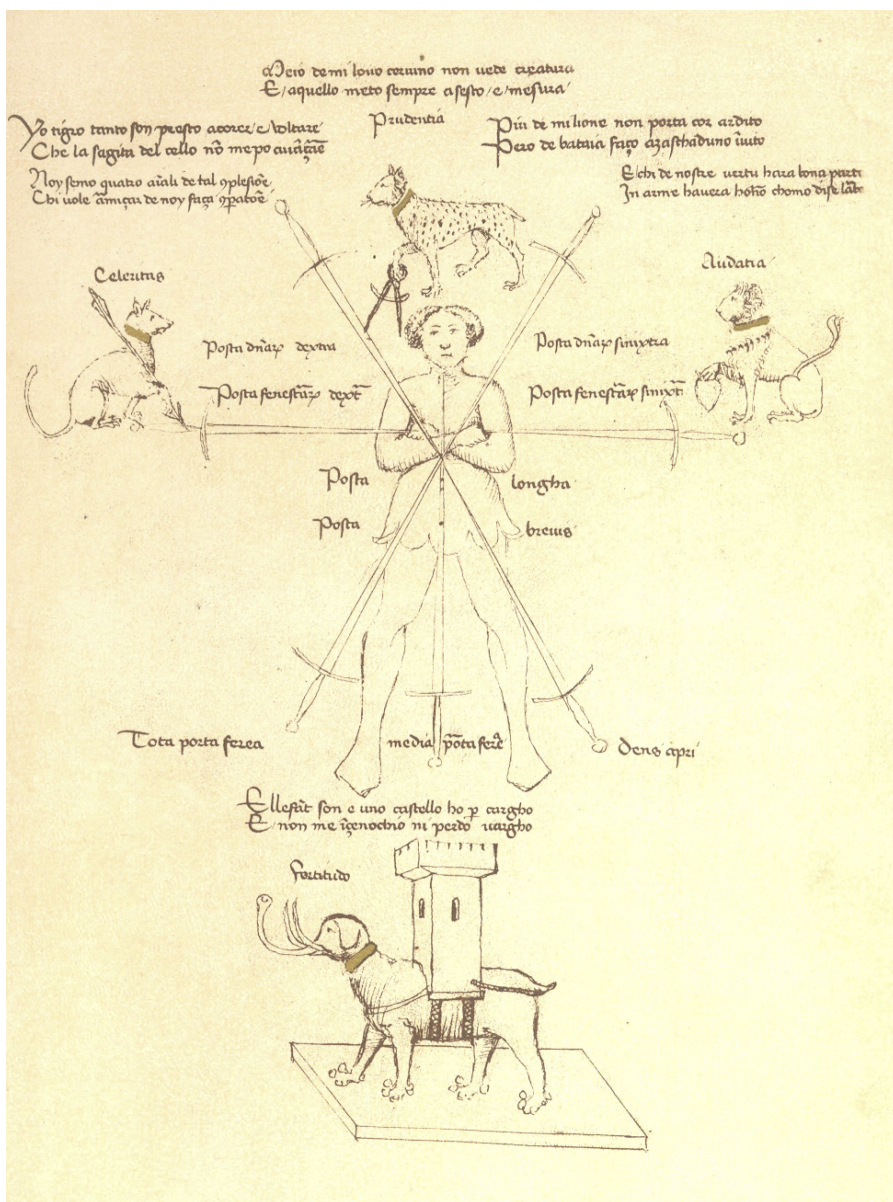
Cf. *ibid.*, 42–45. I am much indebted to Francesca Borgo for these sources.

⁶³

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV.60–152 and 252–253.



[Fig. 25]
Piero di Cosimo, *A Hunting Scene*, 1494–1500, tempera and oil transferred to masonite, 70.5 × 169.5 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum, photo: [Metropolitan Museum, Public Domain](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 26]

Fiore dei Liberi, *Flos duellatorum*, 1409, fol. 16r, from the facsimile by Francesco Novarti of 1902, original manuscript now lost, photo: [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fiore_dei_Liberi_-_Flos_duellatorum_-_1409_-_fol.16r.jpg) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 27]

Paulus Kal, *Fechtbuch*, 1468–1479, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 1507, fol. 6r
© Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, photo: [Münchener Digitalisierungszentrum](#)
[Digitale Bibliothek/DaFo](#) (30 September 2024).



[Fig. 28]
Piero di Cosimo, *Return from the Hunt*, c. 1494–1500, tempera and oil on wood,
70.5 × 168.9 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum, photo: [Metropolitan Museum, Public Domain](#) (30 September 2024).

notions of watchfulness, but also the aspect of appropriating the characteristics of animals when wearing armour in their shape. The second new question ventures into the domain of anthropology: what do such masks actually *do*? Here the comparison between Italian sixteenth-century artefacts and more recent masks produced by the peoples of the American Northwest Coast, led to a series of very strong formal and compositional similarities. This made it possible to consider these artefacts from the perspective of Philippe Descola's classification of the ways in which societies define the relation between animals and humans, and interiority and exteriority. But whereas Descola considers Renaissance art to be rooted in a naturalist ontology, which posits a difference of interiority and a similarity of exteriority, I would argue that the particular category of artefacts discussed here suggests instead a connection with the animist ontologies developed in antiquity, and only partly obscured by official Christian doctrine.

Now all this does not constitute an argument for the existence of fully fledged animist ontologies in Descola's sense in Cinquecento Florence or Milan. Instead, this brief excursion into Descola's work points to the heuristic potential of anthropological perspectives on image-making. It makes us compare Renaissance imagery and objects to images and objects made in very different cultures. In the case of architectural grotesques, looking for iconographical meaning, or origins in Roman art, or discussions in artistic theory brings us only so far. In such cases it can be useful, when history does not give an answer, as Lévi-Strauss put it, to look instead at similar psychological mechanisms or ontological belief systems. In the case of Florentine grotesques, as in figurations of animist ontologies, the mechanisms of visual and social interaction involved are similar: concealment and embodiment, embodiment and appropriation, confusing the viewer, and of playing on the subversion and undermining of the difference between animals and humans. Ultimately much of the fascination of these stone grotesque masks, as of the armour, resides in their power to appeal both to the desire to be certain kinds of animals, or at least appropriate their qualities, and to the fear that what looked like a human artefact is in fact a bestial monster – precisely the ambiguity that the animist ontology also thematizes.

Caroline van Eck is Professor of Art History at Cambridge University and Fellow of King's College in Cambridge. Before joining the Cambridge department, she taught at Ghent, Groningen, Leiden and Yale, and she has been a visiting professor at the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, the Ecole Normale in Paris, the Scuola Normale in Pisa and the Villa I Tatti in Florence. In 2017 she gave the Slade lectures in Oxford. Recent publications include: *Art, Agency and Living Presence. From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Berlin, München, Boston 2016); *Piranesi's Candelabra and the Presence of the Past* (Oxford 2023), and *Notes on the Prehistory of*

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