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978-1-107-62996-7 - The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play

Frances S. Connelly

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## THE GROTESQUE IN WESTERN ART AND CULTURE

This book establishes a fresh and expansive view of the grotesque in Western art and culture, from 1500 to the present day. Following the nonlinear evolution of the grotesque, Frances S. Connelly analyzes key works, situating them within their immediate social and cultural contexts, as well as their place in the historical tradition. By taking a long historical view, the book reveals the grotesque to be a complex and continuous tradition comprising several distinct strands: the ornamental, the carnivalesque and caricatural, the traumatic, and the profound. The book articulates a model for understanding the grotesque as a rupture of cultural boundaries that compromises and contradicts accepted realities. Connelly demonstrates that the grotesque is more than a style, genre, or subject; it is a cultural phenomenon engaging the central concerns of the humanistic debate today. Hybrid, ambivalent, and changeful, the grotesque is a shaping force in the modern era.

**Frances S. Connelly** is professor of art history at the University of Missouri–Kansas City. She is the author of *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics* and the editor of *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, and she has published numerous articles and book chapters on topics pertaining to the intersection of art and anthropology.

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The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;  
What is her burying grave, that is her womb;  
And from her womb children of divers kind  
    We sucking on her natural bosom find,  
    Many for many virtues excellent,  
None but for some, and yet all different.

William Shakespeare,

*Romeo and Juliet*, act 2, scene 3

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*The Image at Play*

Frances S. Connelly

*University of Missouri–Kansas City*



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## PREFACE

At some point several years ago, I realized that I have always been writing about the grotesque in some incarnation or another. In this book, I address it directly. The introductory chapter discusses the reasons for the book's scope and structure. In this space, I would like to add a few personal observations. Certainly one of the most appealing aspects of the grotesque is that it is the most imagistic of images. Ornament might be purely visual, but as Ruskin pointed out, the grotesque expresses meaning through the purely visual. Also, the grotesque truly is the image at play, and its humor and irreverence offer a welcome antidote to all forms of conventional thinking. Another characteristic of the grotesque is that it is not content to be solely the object of the aesthetic gaze. Instead, it is engaged in the world, always pushing against boundaries and raising questions. It acknowledges the individuality and particularity of viewers' responses and sometimes even speaks for those whose experiences fall outside the norm. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a fundamental humility to the grotesque, rooted as it is in the living (and dying) body, an embrace of the relativity and changefulness of life as we live it.

In the process of writing this book, I have benefited from the time and expertise of several distinguished scholars, including Jenny Anger, Walter Gibson, Claire Farago, Maria Makela, Mark Antliff, and Pamela Kort. I am deeply grateful for their collegiality and generosity. I also express my thanks to the anonymous readers of the manuscript, whose observations and suggestions were quite helpful. The research for this book was supported by a University of Missouri Research Board grant. For the gift of some dedicated time to write, I thank the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and my department.

This study could have no better home than Cambridge University Press, and it is my privilege to have the opportunity to work once again with the estimable

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Beatrice Rehl, who was undaunted by a manuscript that crossed disciplinary boundaries and period specialties. Many thanks to Amanda Smith, Janis Bolster, and Mary Becker, who have been resourceful and reliable guides throughout the process of transforming the manuscript into a book.

I would like to dedicate this book to my family, Mary and Emma, and to my parents, Jean and Earle Connelly. I would also like to recognize those teachers who have influenced my path. Aaron Sheon and David Summers remain valued mentors and examples. When I was an undergraduate at Wake Forest, many of the ideas within this book were kindled in the classes of Ed Wilson, Pat Johansson, David Evans, and Jim Barefield. And to Helen Poe, Ethel Reynolds, Martha Safrit, and Helen Poole, exemplars of those teachers whose dedication makes all the difference in small rural schools: thank you.