

**The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame. Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity.** By Michael Camille. 439 pp. incl. 379 b. & w. ills. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2009), £34. ISBN 978-0-226-09245-4.

Reviewed by PHILIP WARD-JACKSON

THIS WONDERFULLY ECCENTRIC testament has dropped on us, as it were, out of the blue, seven years after the death of its author. It recounts an obsession with the so-called gargoyles of Notre-Dame, the cast of equivocal creatures, sculpted mainly to designs by Viollet-le-Duc, for the gallery at the foot of the western towers of the cathedral, which had recently become celebrated as the location for much of the action in Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*. These replaced sculptures which had left behind only the most minimal of blips on what remained of the medieval balustrade, but, within a short interval, had come to be accepted as inseparable spirits of the place. Not only that, but Michael Camille shows how they acquired over the century after their creation the reputation of symbolic guardians of Paris and witnesses of its life and vicissitudes.

Camille from the start confers special status on these creatures as reflections of the more disturbing aspects of the nineteenth-century psyche. Coming into existence in the years surrounding the revolution of 1848, he finds them to be an exception to the general rule enunciated by T.J. Clark, that sculpture – that 'official' art – 'failed to find a form for the revolution', and consequently feels justified in treating them as a case apart from the history of the sculpture of that time. Indeed they have not figured in nineteenth-century sculptural history, and are, as features of a revivalist architectural project, in some ways independent from it, which makes it a little easier for specialists to suspend their disbelief as they embark on this particular ghost train. The gargoyles, or chimeras, as Camille prefers to call them, are known to have been carved by one Victor Pyanet, evidently a sculptor of subaltern status. Unlike his colleague, Victor-Adolphe Geoffroy Dechaume, who both originated and carved the more prominent, though in many ways less interesting, figurative sculpture for the restoration project, Pyanet was responsible for what one might describe as the decorative marginalia. He was a realiser, although by all accounts a much-appreciated one, of designs drawn up with great precision by Viollet-le-Duc and his partner on the restoration, Jean-Baptiste Lassus. The only one in the series for which no authoritative preliminary drawing exists is that usually considered the most outstanding, the so-called *Stryge*, but even for this Camille found what he believed to be a copy by Pyanet of a 'blue-print' drawing by one of the architects.

The creative process and the progress of the work are dealt with by Camille in a perfectly scholarly manner. He also convinc-

ingly conveys the trajectory of these works, which, ironically, instilled something of the spirit of Hugo's depiction of late medieval Parisian life into a façade which the novelist had seen as a '*vaste symphonie de pierre*', emasculated in later times by architects ignorant of the true Gothic spirit. Once in place, these creations were incorporated into the illustrations of new editions of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, as though they had been there in the days of Quasimodo and Esmeralda. The first to assimilate the interventions of Viollet-le-Duc into the imaginary texture of '*ancien Paris*' was the etcher Charles Meryon, who drew the chimeras apparently from a distance, but with a great eye for their sculptural dynamic, in preparation for his plate *Le Petit pont*, before going on to use the *Stryge* for his most celebrated print. Camille, disappointingly, did not take on board my theory, never yet committed to paper, but communicated to him in conversation, that Meryon's collection of Maori artefacts, brought back to Paris following his participation in the expedition to New Zealand and the Pacific aboard the corvette *Le Rhin*, may have influenced the design of the sculpted *Stryge*. In a letter of 1846, Meryon, after realising that he was colour-blind, admitted that he had considered adopting sculpture as a profession, and, given the privileged access he seems to have had to the towers of the cathedral during the restoration, we may reasonably surmise that he was acquainted with the sculptors working there. The relevance of Meryon's South Seas experience to his etched work has already been discussed by several scholars, so it might appear strange that Camille chose to ignore that matter entirely, particularly as Meryon's later ravings about the prevalence of sodomy among the Maoris would have made good grist for Camille's exploration of nineteenth-century sexual pathology in relation to the chimeras.

Camille opts for a more predictable, but in my view implausible, identification of the *Stryge* as an anti-Semitic stereotype. This, as he himself admits, is called somewhat into question by the fact that the series already includes a perfectly dignified *Wandering Jew*, the only normal human being in their number. His determination to make of the unwitting sculptures a summation of all the nineteenth century's worst hang-ups and obsessions, anxieties about revolution, the implications of evolutionary theory, racial diversity, homosexuality, etc., leads to much purely supposititious loading of meaning onto them. A medievalist's desire to distinguish what he sees as the nineteenth-century taste for the uncanny, as opposed to the more innocent, less contingent, medieval grotesque, risks carrying his project entirely off track, although a degree of self-indulgence is clearly built into it from the start. J.-K. Huysmans, who in his later years acquired a very considerable degree of medieval erudition, was initially taken in, like a number of contemporary occultist interpreters of medieval cathedrals, by the chimeras of Notre-Dame, treating them, in his essay *Le*

*Monstre*, as the quintessential examples of the medieval monster. We may laugh inwardly as we read Huysmans regretting how little sense a modern mind can make of this '*inexplicable texte*', despite the occasional identification of particular creatures, such as the *Pelican in her piety*, familiar from the medieval bestiary. Camille, by contrast, is fully apprised of the origins of the chimeras, and yet, at times, seems equally far from the mark. However, we should perhaps learn a lesson from his non-judgmental approach to the aberrations of some of the less academic, new-age style interpreters of the Gothic, and admit that a scatter-gun approach may have its virtues.

There are signs of an inevitable lack of authorial supervision in some of the French titles, as in the transcription of some of the documents. The name of Meryon is incorrectly accented throughout, a common error, marring only slightly a most attractively produced volume whose wealth of illustrations suffers little from being exclusively in black and white.

**John Singer Sargent's 'Triumph of Religion' at the Boston Public Library: Creation and Restoration.** Edited by Narayan Khandekar, Gianfranco Pocobene and Kate Smith. 295 pp. incl. 400 col. + b. & w. ills. (Harvard Art Museums in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2009), \$65. ISBN 978-0-300-12290-9.

Reviewed by MARC SIMPSON

JOHN SINGER SARGENT worked on the murals for the third floor of the Boston Public Library (BPL) from 1890 until 1919, expending on them over those three decades significant time, energy and (as he jokingly wrote) 'more brain work than is good for a would-be Impressionist'.<sup>1</sup> The canvases of what has come to be called Sargent Hall prompted strongly divided opinions: 'Were it a question of giving up the alcove of the 'Dogma of the Redemption' or all the portraits, I should give up the portraits [. . .] [T]here is no equivalent for Sargent's finest decoration, and its absence would deprive us of a capital document of our times', wrote the distinguished scholar, critic and collector Frank Jewett Mather.<sup>2</sup> The equally distinguished Roger Fry, albeit without seeing them *in situ*, could find no good word for 'designs so wanting in decorative coherence, filled with such common and inexpressive figures, and inspired with such journalistic pedantry'.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Fry's attitude toward the *Triumph of Religion* prevailed. Scholars, with a few notable exceptions, ignored it.<sup>4</sup> Simultaneously felt-like layers of grime and soot periodically occluded its vibrant surfaces, while misunderstood conservation treatments combined with changes in lighting to foreclose the possibility of seeing

it as Sargent intended. Until, that is, the 1990s, when the BPL trustees undertook a major refurbishment of their McKim, Mead & White building, including the conservation and enhancement of all its murals (other notable BPL cycles are by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Edwin Austin Abbey). For fifteen months in 2003–04, conservators from the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies at Harvard University, in consultation with conservation scientists and art historians, sought to return Sargent Hall to its 1919 appearance. The present volume documents that campaign while exploring the complex processes that Sargent employed to achieve the work's splendour, now once more revealed.

The book tells its story with both words and pictures. The prose – ten chapters and five appendices by a team of art historians and conservators – is clear and judicious. We learn from the first four chapters about the murals' cultural and architectural contexts, techniques, and the hundreds of sculptural elements (made from plaster, wood, papier-mâché and Linocrusta-Walton wall covering) that contribute to the effect of the whole. Another four explicate how Sargent developed the project, including a discussion of preparatory drawings (Fig.40), oil-studies and scale models, underdrawings on and changes to the canvases themselves, and speculations concerning his transfer techniques. The final two essays outline early conservation programmes (1924, 1940, 1953) and then detail the procedures and discoveries of 2003–04. The appendices give a documentary history of the *Triumph of Religion* from 1887 to 2004; transcriptions and translations of the texts depicted throughout the cycle; maps of the relief elements; SEM-EDS (scanning electron microscope-energy dispersive X-ray spectrometry) analysis and pigment identification tables; and the analytic protocols in place for the 2003–04 programme. A useful glossary of materials, forms and techniques follows.

The BPL trustees wisely decided that not only the 2,132 square feet of canvas be involved in the conservation effort but that the team would also treat the ceiling and wall elements that frame them. I suspect that this integrated approach is one of the reasons that both the restoration project and the book that documents it are so successful. In keeping with the holistic, systemic approach of the enterprise, many of the essays are co-authored. There are revelations in each of them. 'Chapter 10: The 2003–04 Restoration', with seven co-authors, is particularly notable for its synthesis of Sargent's methods and the murals' conservation history, peppered with such worthwhile asides as the caution to interpret 'objective' archival photographs taken before 1906 with care, since the black-and-white orthochromatic film used until then dramatically altered the tonal relationship of blues and reds.

If words compose one key element of the volume, its many pictures (over three hundred plates and figures, the vast majority in colour) are no less important. They comprise



40. Study for a mourning angel in the *Sorrowful mysteries*, by John Singer Sargent. c.1903–12. Charcoal with chalk on laid paper, 60.9 by 40.9 cm. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).

a wealth of archival photography; before-, during- and after-treatment panoramas and details; related and comparative works; microscopy of paint layers; clearly marked diagrams; and exceedingly good views of the murals suitable for study or simple delectation. All have clear, informative captions. There is, as well, some historically informed humour present in the book's final illustration: a brilliant tableau vivant of the *Frieze of prophets* enacted by the conservation staff and members of the advisory committee at their last meeting.

This is a book with a serious tale to tell. In tandem with volumes by Sally Promey and Mary Crawford Volk,<sup>5</sup> *John Singer Sargent's 'Triumph of Religion' at the Boston Public Library* provides the means to understand the method and scope of Sargent's splendid achievement. Mather's evaluation of the *History of Religion* as a 'capital document' of the era, one worthy of study and admiration, seems to be catching on.

<sup>1</sup> Sargent to Mrs Charles Fairchild, 6th March 1892 (Boston Athenaeum). Even so, and for all his legendary devotion to work, he left vacant the *Triumph of Religion's* culminating panel.

<sup>2</sup> F.J. Mather: 'The Enigma of Sargent', *Estimates in Art, Series II: Sixteen Essays on American Painters of the Nineteenth Century*, New York 1931, p.257.

<sup>3</sup> R. Fry: 'J.S. Sargent as Seen at the Royal Academy Exhibition of His Works, 1926, and the National Gallery', in *idem*, ed.: *Transformations: Critical and Speculative Essays on Art*, London 1926, p.129.

<sup>4</sup> The writings of Martha Kingsbury, Trevor Fairbrother, Sally M. Promey, Derrick Cartwright and Mary Crawford Volk stand out for the care and attention they have given the BPL murals.

<sup>5</sup> S.M. Promey: *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's 'Triumph of Religion' at the Boston Public Library*, Princeton 1999; and M. Crawford Volk in R. Ormond and E. Kilmurray, eds.: *John Singer Sargent: Complete Paintings* (volume on the murals forthcoming).

## Publications Received

*Le Commerce du tableau à Paris dans la seconde moitié du 18e siècle*. By Patrick Michel. 384 pp. incl. 16 b. & w. ills. (Editions Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2007), €23. ISBN 978-2-7574-0001-2.

A study devoted to art dealers is of interest only if it examines how they influenced the art world in a wider sense, and not just in a commercial sense. For example, it was in the second half of the eighteenth century in France, the period explored in the book under review, that Louis-Jean Gaignat's collection was formed under the guidance of the dealer François-Louis Colins; that the taste for Murillo was born; and that the commercial triumph of northern painting in Paris influenced Greuze's repertory.

However, these are not the sorts of questions explored by the author of the book under review. His subject thus becomes a vaguely sociological one in which art dealers are viewed as no more or less interesting a group of individuals than, say, the fruit merchants in eighteenth-century Paris. How and in what capacity were they selling their wares? Did they run a shop or not? Did they live on the left or right bank? Michel answers these questions by piecing together various documents, although some of the evidence is purely anecdotal. On p.12 we find an astonishingly simple chart dividing the history of the art market in eighteenth-century France into the 'Gersaint years', followed by the 'Rémy years' and the 'Le Brun years'. On p.37 Michel tells us that 'the late eighteenth century saw the emergence of the collector/speculator', as if someone like Everhard Jabach a century earlier would have completely ignored the idea of making a profit. On p.89 Michel writes that 'dealers as advisers were a relatively new phenomenon'. But did not a century earlier Jean-Baptiste Forest and Jean-Michel Picart advise the likes of the marquis de Seignelay and the duc de Richelieu, respectively?

In addition there is a surprisingly large number of errors and misinterpretations. According to Michel (p.51), Ferdinand-Joseph Godefroid, one of the most famous art dealers of the first half of the century, dealt in works 'of a decorative nature' and died in 1762 (he was killed in a duel in 1741, as we know from a document published by Jules Guiffrey as long ago as 1884). On p.90 Michel writes that Jacques Pingat was 'one of the best dealers in the middle of the century', but the 1751 inventory of his estate reveals instead that his stock consisted of rather insignificant paintings that were for sale at very modest prices. Antoine Schnapper is plagiarised on p.150: 'il convient de distinguer le marché de la commande du marché de l'offre, ce dernier correspondant à ce que les économistes appellent le marché ouvert ou le marché on spec'. In Schnapper's *Le métier de peintre au Grand Siècle* (Paris 2004, p.189) we read: 'il convient d'opposer [. . .] le marché de la commande [au] marché de l'offre, qui correspond à ce que les économistes appellent le marché à l'offre ou le marché on spec'.

Citing hundreds of archival sources, Michel creates the impression that the book represents a meticulous piece of research, but in reality almost all these sources have already been scrutinised by others before him, while many have in fact been published. In an article published in 2003 the present reviewer discovered and analysed a rather exceptional document covering the dissolution in 1760 of the partnership between the dealers Pierre Rémy and Jean-Baptiste Slotz, which contained a complete list of works of art brought back from the Netherlands, with details of their purchase prices (*Apollo* 158 (August 2003), pp.34–35). This source has been plundered by Michel (pp.165–66) without quoting the article. It is but one example of how this book relies heavily on other people's research, often without any acknowledgment, and in the final analysis it does little to further our understanding of the art market in eighteenth-century France.

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