

Frances S. Connelly. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*.

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As the foremost scholar on the subject, Frances Connelly's latest book, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*, represents the next level in her trajectory of scholarship. Briefly, the premise of this book is to show how the bizarre and unsettling challenge traditional notions of beauty and appropriateness in art.

She points out in her introduction that the definition of *grotesque* was often determined by the gaze of the individual, not the object itself. Her book is also one of the first examples to discuss in depth the prototypical examples of the grotesque in Western art from the sixteenth century onward.

Throughout this thoughtful study, Connelly carefully asks the reader to consider what makes something grotesque: “Although the word ‘grotesque’ first referred to ornamental inventions, by the seventeenth century it shifted in meaning to refer more routinely to caricature and caprices, and by the nineteenth century, ‘grotesque’ began to take on its association with horror and repulsion” (19). In her first chapter, Connelly explains the history of the grotesque, excavating its etymological beginnings in Nero’s *Domus Aurea* as recaptured by Raphael in 1519. She considers the variety of works that might be regarded as grotesque, ranging from Archimbaldo’s vegetable men to Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

In chapter 2, Connelly traces the development of grotesque ornamentation from Roman times through the rediscovery of *grottesche* ornamentation during the Renaissance and its further metamorphosis into mannerism by Michelangelo and his contemporaries. Most valuable is her discussion of Horace’s definition in *Ars Poetica*. In chapter 3, Connelly describes the evolution of this ornament form against the historical background of the Enlightenment that imported designs from the East. This chapter discusses all the different decorative art styles that developed in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, including arabesque, chinoiserie, moresque, and *Turquerie*; Connelly further traces the development of this frivolous decorative art into styles concerned with dreams and visions. Here she ranges from Piranesi’s *Carceri d’invenzione* through Victor Hugo’s fantasies, Redon, and Klee.

In chapter 4, Connelly applies the term *carnavalesque* to the comic and subversive aspects of the grotesque ranging from Bruegel, Hogarth, to Dada. In chapter 5, Connelly discusses the most monstrous and painful subjects that arise from the grotesque, from Hieronymous Bosch’s imagined *Hell*, through medical operations by Rembrandt, to Goya’s *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*. Connelly declares that “the abject, the monstrous and the demonic are the expressions that contemporary views most readily associate with the grotesque” (115). The inclusion of Frida Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* is a particularly poignant example of the pain and trauma that one can inflict on one’s self, magnifying it out to the viewer.

In chapter 6, Connelly concludes her discussion, rather surprisingly, by examining John Ruskin’s defense of Gothic art: “More essential to Ruskin’s noble grotesque is that it springs from its maker’s free imagination, unfettered by rules of design or canons of beauty” (152). Throughout her study, Connelly reveals how the concept of the grotesque has multiple characteristics, and how its definition can change over time. She posits that the “hybrid, ambivalent, and changeful character” seems ever more relevant in the world of the twenty-first century (22).

This is a welcome addition to the survey of the grotesque in Western art history, and should be adopted by scholar and student alike because it makes this disturbing area accessible. One major criticism might be made concerning the absence of women in her corpus of artists. She does mention Frida Kahlo, but she could have included more on female Dadaists such as Hannah Höch, and such contemporary artists as Cindy Sherman. Do women not do grotesque in Western art? In other respects this is a challenging and engaging contribution to a complex and difficult subject.

RACHAEL GOLDMAN

Adelphi University