

# THE STONE CARVER'S IMAGINATION

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Stone carver green man and his trusty tools: Is this a self-portrait?

## IN THE SCOPE OF THE PYRAMIDS,

Mt. Rushmore, Stonehenge or even Michelangelo's *Pieta*, green men are incidents and details. But for me, these small anti-masterpieces scattered around the world come the closest to connecting us with our individual brother stonemason at work centuries ago building the temples, cathedrals, administrative buildings and even tombs revered today as classics of ancient and not so ancient architecture. Green men, or more generically mascarons, give us insight into the nature of architecture, but also the nature of the stonemason's job and the artistic license he employed at work.

I refer to them as anti-masterpieces because at most green men denote "flaunty ornamentation" dwarfed in the contexts of some monumental construction. These evocative pieces of a human scale are sort of free form improvisations; something like a cadenza in classical concerto, a moment when the orchestra stops playing and the soloist is set free from the strictures of the composition to invent music in a fit of creative expression without a strict, regular beat.

Traditionally, green men appear as ornaments at crucial points in a building: in brackets, roof bosses, capitals, column bases, etc. They proved useful as a motif because they were incredibly adaptable when employed to cover up "blemishes" in structures, such as at the intersection of ribs, groins, beams or at key points in a flying buttress. It was at these points in a structure that a stonemason

could "let it rip." At their best, green men are expressions of individual carvers' imaginations and the incarnations of their fears and hopes; their deities and demons. In green men we see what made the carver laugh and what made him cower. In the context of an edifice as a whole, green man became either visible focal points commanding attention or they could be hidden way, like a small witty "bonus." Regardless, these stones pique the onlooker's curiosity, inviting them to stop and wonder.

In contrast to the generic mascarons, which is the complete or partial representation of the human face or head, the green man (and very rarely, the green woman) is a face composed of, or peering out from foliage. The origins of the green man can be found in Roman art starting in the second half of the first century AD, according to Kathleen Basford in her seminal work *The Green Man*, published for the first time in 1978. She writes that some even described the motif as a male medusa. But these ancient works were manifestations of a pantheon of Roman gods. For me, the green men we revere today came out of the vast forests of northern Europe and they represent the taming of the fears that fertilized human imagination.

In Central Europe at least, the nineteenth century witnessed a resurgence in the popularity of the green men and their seculariza-

This green man supports a bay window.



tion. Their ubiquity and the vast diversity of forms and styles reflect not only a fascination with the ancient world, but also a belief in the power of science and progress. Green men suddenly take on attributes of the ancient god's like Hermes, or gaze out from façades with the frozen theatrical expressions of Greek thespians. But despite their classic motifs, these are "greenhouse" green men, very much grounded in the industrial revolution. Their leaves are exotic, and architects and artists alike seemed to have reached for inspiration from voyages around the world or trips to the botanical gardens.

Depending on the geographic location and specific building

traditions, green men can be anything from profoundly beautiful to down right ugly and disturbing. Sometimes they smile benevolently, but most of the time they glare down at us in a threatening, menacing manner.

The best green men are carved in a "laid back" sort of way, but they exude life. They don't have to have faces, in the strictest of senses, but they have facial expressions. The leaves can be arranged so that the green man smiles; and the best smile is a secretive one that fits any occasion. The more enigmatic and ambiguous the expression, the more appealing the piece will be.



The creator of this green man must have been influenced by the Italian painter Archimboldo.



Lesna zoo

Unusual for Central Europe is this late-renaissance green man with the plant sprouting from his mouth.



This green man on the facade of the Exchange Building serves as a springing stone for two arches. (Wroclaw, Poland)



A strangely Oriental green man



This is one of several green men that flank the statue of Holy Mary on the main entrance of the cathedral in Wrocław, Poland.



Green man squashed under a flying buttress:  
The pressure of his job made this green man lose most of his leaves and caused his eyes to bulge.