

# Cathedral Gargoyles

## ***Background***

Although the practice of placing frightening statues on buildings has a long pedigree in ancient cultures, Christians in the Middle Ages perfected the art and equipped the practice with its own theology. In a nutshell, scary-looking creatures looking down from the eaves of cathedrals were a way of reminding people of the real possibility of eternal damnation. It is a common myth that gargoyles were placed on churches to “ward off” evil spirits; that is superstition, not faith.

The reason gargoyles were never placed inside cathedrals was that to enter into the Church meant to be saved. The angels that rebelled against God (see Revelation 12) were cast out of heaven and thus became the ultimate outsiders. Hence, gargoyles in various forms, are perched on the outsides of buildings to exhort the viewer, believer and unbeliever alike, to take account of his own soul or risk being cast into the outer darkness. The spiritual creatures in hell are much more frightening than scary carved statues.



## ***Origin of the Name***

The word “gargoyle” comes from French folklore, which held that an evil dragon, called *La Gargouille*, lived in the River Seine but was subdued by the sign of the cross. The people posted the beast’s head and throat on the town’s cathedral as a token of thanksgiving to God. As per the legend, gargoyles are situated on cathedrals often in the form of decorative rain spouts. The English word “gurgle” (the sound of draining water) reflects this. Etymologically, “garg-” or “gul” is the root of the word for “throat” in all Romance languages.

## ***What to Look For***

- 1. Demons (above):** This class of gargoyle fills the viewer with horror of the demonic world and emphasizes the reality of spiritual evil from which humans need to be protected by God’s grace.
- 2. Beasts (grotesques/chimeras – left):** These gargoyles come in the form of monstrous, unclean creatures to reflect the chaos and distortions of sin. If virtue makes us more like angels, vice makes us more like beasts.
- 3. Damned souls (below):** Perhaps the most frightening of all, these types of gargoyles depict human souls literally fleeing from the Church in wide-eyed horror even as they are being transformed into grotesque creatures themselves by their rejection of God. Some are pictured in flames, others as bishops or nobles (a common theme!), and others as recognizably human faces with demonic characteristics.

