

1.

STONE BEAUTY OR MUSEUM BESTIARY

Look up and take in the beauty of the sculptural decoration of the unique building that has housed since its inception the first museum of applied arts in the Czech lands, today's North Bohemian Museum in Liberec. In its exterior and interior, in addition to stone sculptural elements with floral motifs, you will also see a number of depictions of mythical and real animals. Let's take a look at what the individual animals mean, why they are placed on the museum building, dating from the end of the 19th century, and where you can find them on the facade and in the museum's interior public spaces.

2.

WHAT IS A BESTIARY?

The interpretation of animal symbolism is based on ancient and medieval literature. In bestiaries, which were whole books or parts thereof, real and fictional stories were written about real and fictional animals. These stories became popular and are therefore still present in our consciousness today. The oldest known bestiary dates back to the 2nd century AD. The first Czech author who translated the nomenclature of the bestiary into Czech was Claretus, a Master of the university in Prague in the third quarter of the 14th century.

Popular medieval bestiaries with illustrations depicted mythical creatures (e.g., the unicorn, hippocampus, griffin or hydra), birds and even stones. Anthropomorphic creatures such as wild men or deformed human monsters were popular from the 12th to the 15th century.

We also encounter bestiaries in the present day. They are mainly found in fantasy literature. The most famous example is the Harry Potter Bestiary by J. K. Rowling.

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WHAT IS A DROLLERY?

Animal motifs often appeared in drolleries. These are small humorous pictures in the margins of old illuminated manuscripts that bear no relation to the main text. Through them, the illustrators were able to express themselves with at least a little freedom. The main text and illuminations were subject to strict and binding schematic rules. Drolleries depict fantastic creatures and monsters. Mostly, however, they depict profane scenes unrelated to the text, for example from the lives of the nobility, monks or villagers. They are, among other things, a rich source of information about the everyday life of people in the Middle Ages.

3.

WHO AND HOW BUILT THE MUSEUM?

The museum building constructed in 1897–1898 was designed in a romantic-historicist style by Friedrich Ohmann, a native of Lviv in Ukraine, son of a Prague building official, and future court architect to the Austrian Emperor in Vienna. The exterior and interior of the building and its decoration and layout combine elements of sacral and palace architecture. The monumental complex is complemented by a copy of the tower of the Renaissance Liberec Town Hall and, as an extension, the so-called burgher house, reminiscent of the original Liberec buildings from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The incorporation of copies of older architecture into the body of the building is one of the main characteristics of eclectic architecture, which is based on a combination of neo-historicist styles from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and which is perfectly represented by the museum building.

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ECLECTICISM

Eclecticism (Greek *eklegein* – to choose, to opt for) is manifested by the use and imitation of elements from several, often contradictory, artistic styles. In both architecture and interior design, these elements can include the buildings themselves, furniture, decorative motifs, historical ornaments, traditional cultural elements and styles from foreign countries, usually with regard to the character and overall aesthetic effect of the resulting architectural object.

Fig. – Location of the town hall tower and the burgher house

Left: Copy of the town hall tower

Right: Burgher house

4.

SCULPTURE IN ARCHITECTURE OF THE 19TH CENTURY

During the last third of the 19th century, the demand for rich sculptural decoration of public and private buildings in towns and the countryside increased greatly. This was related to a building boom and the further development of historicism, which was based on late Renaissance and Baroque models. For public buildings in the eras of historicism, Art Nouveau and Modernism, sculptural and painterly decoration was a key element.

Many renowned sculptors and anonymous stonemasons participated in the decoration of the buildings, working stone blocks into original forms according to the instructions of designers, creating patterns for serial facade products or simple sculptures. The creators of the original sculptural decoration of the Liberec Museum include Emanuel Gerhart, who is also responsible for the decoration of the neighbouring city spa or, Jakob Kozourek from Prague, who created the stucco decoration on the facade of the so-called burgher house.

5.

DECORATION OF THE MAIN PORTAL

The main entrance to the public building is, in terms of both its role and appearance, the most important part of the building, or rather of its exterior. Here the sculptural decoration is concentrated in its greatest opulence. We can find panels here with floral decoration, complemented by fauna in the form of birds, squirrel, frogs and the mythical dragon. The facade includes architectural elements such as pinnacles or column capitals, which are also very richly worked in stone. On the column capitals we can find the heads of sheep, and, a little further on, for example, the heads of armed men.

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DECORATION DEVOID OF MEANING

In the 19th century, plasterers, stonemasons and architects used decorative pattern books, which were published in print and thus were easily available. The stonemasons and plasterers then created on their basis the whole decorative series that we admire so much today. Symbolic meanings, the bearers of which in the Middle Ages and early modern period were animals and plants, disappeared, and artists and the public perceived figurative decoration in the 19th century as nothing more than an embellishment of the facade. The library of the North Bohemian Museum contains a huge number of original pattern books, which are gradually being restored and digitised to make them accessible to the public.

Fig. on the right: Gargoyles

6.

WHAT CAN BE FOUND ON THE FACADE?

The museum building is located at the intersection of Vítězná and Masarykova streets. It is separated from Gorkého and Dvořákova streets by a small park. Masaryk Avenue was and still is a magnificent boulevard, so the museum as viewed from it had to be decorated fairly spectacularly. Similarly, the view from Vítězná Street had to be sufficiently representative. Towards the park, the facade decoration thins out. In this northern part, two architectural replicas were incorporated into the building: the visually dominant and popular copy of the Renaissance town hall tower, which was demolished along with the entire town hall in 1894, and, in contrast, a copy of the Liberec burgher house, hidden in the mature trees.

Probably the most charming anthropomorphic decorative elements of the facade are the rainwater gargoyles, in which the creators of the museum had themselves depicted along with the attributes of their profession. The gargoyles, which are situated in the small courtyard of the museum building, depict Gustav Miksch, the owner of the Liberec construction company that built the museum, on the left, and August Krauss, the building site manager, in the middle. On the far right, the museum's chief sculptor, Emanuel Gerhart, created his own self-portrait. Copies of two of the gargoyles can be seen in detail in the exhibition "Liberecké fragmenty" (Liberec Fragments).

7.

WHAT'S HIDDEN INSIDE?

As soon as we enter the museum, we meet representatives of the animal kingdom. An owl, a traditional symbol of wisdom, is placed above the entrance to the library in the lobby of the museum. Then, in the jamb of the entrance to the ticket office, we see a dragon whose visual impact is different. Its appearance is that of a long monster lying on huge claws with its head arched backwards, reminiscent of Asian dragons. On the staircase columns we then find cute rabbits and birds, which correspond to the decorative style of the main facade. A unique animal motif in the main hall is a bat, whose body forms the decoration on the door leading to the current exhibition, "Liberec Fragments" (Liberecké fragmenty).

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Fig. – Owl, Dragon, Hare, Bird, Bat

8.

THE SWAN – THE HERALDIC SYMBOL OF THE LIEBIG FAMILY

In heraldry, the swan is most often depicted as a bird walking to the right with upraised wings and a bent neck. The second possibility is a bird floating on the water, which also pertains to the coat of arms of the Liebig family, patrons of the Liberec Museum. Although the swan appears already early in the heraldic bestiary and was one of the twenty species of animals that adorned coats of arms around 1200, it is not often encountered in the Middle Ages. It was not until the 17th century that it became more common, and by the end of the 19th century the Belgian heraldist Theodore de Renesse counted 774 coats of arms with this animal!

Although members of the Liebig family were among the founders, most important patrons and organisers of the museum life, we do not find any reference to them in the iconography of the museum building. Their coat of arms, which they received on their elevation to the nobility in 1867, can only be found in the form of the metal decoration on the grille at the entrance to the small exhibition hall. In the decoration of the facade we can find this bird, which carries many symbolic meanings, but it perhaps cannot be associated specifically with this important Liberec family.

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The swan is a traditional symbol of elegance, beauty, loyalty and devotion. The Greek myth of the constantly competing friends Cygnus and Faethon tells its story. This story has been also carried over to the night sky, where the Cygnus (Swan) constellation is one of the most prominent in the northern hemisphere. The swan is encountered not only in the legends of Western Europe, but also in Indian mythology, where it plays an important role and is even associated with the birth of the world. The swan is a sacred, divine bird in all cultures, possessing supernatural powers and a magical voice that has healing powers. In the Christian tradition, it is an attribute of the Virgin Mary, symbolising purity and mercy.

Fig. above: Bat

Fig. on the right: Swans

9.

THE PELICAN AS A HOUSE SIGN

At the time of the museum's construction, the designer of the museum building, Austrian architect Friedrich Ohmann, decided to preserve the appearance of the disappearing weavers' houses from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, which were very characteristic of Liberec. Therefore, a copy of the historical house was created in the rear part of the museum premises, which housed an exhibition on traditional textile crafts and associations. The original pelican in the house sign, which served as a model for the museum, is still preserved in Na Perštýně Street on a neoclassical house from 1803, which is aptly called "U Pelikána" (At the Pelican).

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CRUEL ANALOGY

In Christian iconography, the motif of a pelican feeding its young with its own blood is particularly popular in the Middle Ages. The story from the bestiary about these birds, which hurt their mother with their beaks, and she hurts them in retaliation, is rather drastic. She keeps doing this until the young are dead. On the third day, however, the mother opens her wounds, smears her own blood on the young and they come back to life. The author sees this as an analogy to Jesus Christ redeeming humanity with his own blood (the Eucharist). There is also a milder version suggesting that the pelican feeds its young with its own blood during times of famine so that they do not die. In this, too, we can find an analogy to Jesus Christ. The legend may have originated from the fact that a pelican can smear its chest with the blood of fish that it ejects from its wattle for its young.

Fig. on the right: Burgher house - house sign - Pelican

10.

THE LION – THE SYMBOLIC KING OF THE ANIMALS

The lion is one of the best known general heraldic figures. As the symbolic king of the animals, it expresses the virtues of chivalry, courage, strength and bravery. The lion can therefore be found in the coats of arms of royal families and in the emblems of countries and cities. The motif of the lion is encountered not only in heraldry, but it also often appears, for example, as a house sign, its face is borne by various architectural elements, and ceremonial representative halls of rulers are named after it. In the museum's decoration we encounter the figure of the lion several times. Less conspicuously, it appears as a motif on the gable of the building near the museum tower, and a lion's head also features on several mascarons and as part of the decoration of the facade with garlands.

On the other hand, the modern bronze figures of a lion and a lioness adorning the entrance staircase are visually dominant. The lions were supposed to guard the museum from the very beginning, but in the end, they were not created in the 19th century. The idea of reviving the plan to position a pair of lions in a place of honour occurred only during the reconstruction of the museum in 2018–2020. The creator of the guardian lion and lioness is the sculptor Jaroslav Róna.

11.

THE MASCARON

A mascarón is a carved decorative motif, usually in the form of a female or male face, but even more often a surreal or animal face. The most valuable are mascaróns carved from stone and embedded as a building element in the architecture. Over the centuries, mascaróns appear in various styles at different points in the building. In antiquity and in the Renaissance they were used mainly in gables and on cornices, in the Gothic period on brackets, orbs and gargoyles. In the Baroque period, as in the Renaissance, they were often placed in the main arches of portals or city gates. In the period of historicism during the 19th century, the production of stucco mascaróns expanded significantly, and can be seen mainly as decoration on facades around windows and doors on so-called overdoors or suprafenestras.

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TWILIGHT OF DECORATIVE AESTHETICISM

During the 19th century, the mascarón became a decorative, schematised element without deeper meaning. It lost both its artistic originality and spiritual content, although it experienced a certain revival in the Art Nouveau period at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. After the publication of Adolf Loos' manifesto "Ornament and Zločin" (Ornament and Crime) in 1913, however, the era of decorativism was over and mascaróns, like all other decorative elements, ceased to have their dominant place in modern fine arts.

Fig. on the right: Mascarón

12.

IMPRINT

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