

## The Manhattan Sky Lion

For as long as I can remember, I've always been a hunter, possessing a talent for observation, wasted on suburban quarry. Each day, I hunt my prey above the city canopy, shooting dangerous beasts, hiding in plain site, invisible to others.

I remember the day this hunt first began, I was like a newborn baby opening my eyes for the first time. On a classic weekday in New York City, I arrived at my meeting, escaping the street's squeal of tapping taxi brakes and seductive smells of sugar smoked nuts. Deep in the offices of a large global corporation, I was conducting a meeting between the resident buttoned down bean counters and the defiant, dressed-in-black squad of tortured tacticians. As the meeting progressed, I fogged out on autopilot and glanced out the window from the 21<sup>st</sup> floor of the Trump Tower. I had a bird's eye view toward Central Park, looking past the tops of office buildings, skyscrapers and the rarely seen rooftops that cap the heads of buildings like fancy square hats. It was at this moment of conception that I surrendered my visual virginity and witnessed my first Lion Head.

In the background I could hear my finance colleagues interrogating the choking creatives. Two teams muffled, debating the value verses cost, of flying a team half way around the world, to shoot a magazine spread and a TV commercial stretching a whopping fifteen seconds. All this squander to brand a famous wet athlete walking out of the ocean onto a tropical beach. Just to show a close up of his wet face looking like anyone's after getting out of the shower. This was truly the stink of spend on one of the most costly cash outlays in history, to promote a fragrance that can't be smelled on TV.

Deep down I knew all this was about the creative director just wanting to leave his mark, paid for by the corporate dime.

Muffled voices argued as my attention zoomed in on this far off Lion Head perched proudly on top of a building, way in the distance. The king of the jungle sat royal in his cement frieze, in full regalia and detail, his highness growling at me in statue silence, was impossible to be seen from the street. I walked closer to the window, looking out further and shook my head as the secret magical city in the sky focused into my view. Suddenly, it seemed that they all came out from hiding - Grotesque Gargoyles, Loyal Lions, Harkened Hounds, Wary Wolves, combinations of lizards with wings and birds with scales.

This first Lion Head looked like a beautiful woman, stuck in stone, roaring in ecstasy at her moment of little death. Somewhere high in the sky, twenty stories up in the air, pinned this mane attraction adorning the eve of an old New York skyscraper. She had almost human looking, shoulder length wavy hair, framing high cheekbones and beautiful seductive eyes. It was the head of a lion but the face of an angel. Frozen foliage of fruit and flowers, swagged underneath the head, like a concrete Christmas wreath. The bust of this beast sat on a scrolling cartouche shelf, bringing the whole elaborate roar together. I impatiently completed my week of bore, eager to escape my employed cage, hunt and explore.

Finally the weekend came and I was able to track my prey, possessed by the need to discover what else towers above our common view. I began my safari throughout Manhattan doing what everyone has always told me not to do since I was a child, strolling the streets like a tourist, looking up, in search of granite gargoyle guardians,

looming lizards and reclining rock stars. Gleeefully I marched, making the Manhattan Sky Lion mine.

I had to learn more about these creatures. Can you imagine the time and cost that went into planting these images in high places for virtually no one to see? Disguised as marble mantles, gutter guards and sentinel spouts, they have been motionless, watching us for hundreds of years.

For thousands of years prior to coming to Manhattan, medieval villages were overshadowed by dragon demons dancing aboard towering cathedrals. Beast forms like gargoyles with spouts drained rooftop water away from the edge of the foundations. It is thought that illustrated books carried throughout Europe by traveling menageries inspired the choice of forms. These images impressed the masons and enabled them to instill their cold stone with moral meaning. More and more the images adopted familiar, human features and greater religious significance. With this evolution came beasts representing positive or negative meanings, most frequently selected were the dogs and lions designed for loyal protection.

The lion, the “King of Beasts” is an ancient sign of status selected by kings. Above, countless other religious and royal symbols, the lion was predominantly associated with vigilant, regal and powerful behavior. Ultimately it became the signature of pride.

Other animals carried other meanings and of course the gargoyles are loaded with bizarre, laughable qualities or hideously menacing expressions. The amazing mock-in-rock, expression on the faces of some of the human gargoyles suggests not an intent to ward off evil spirits, but rather fear at what they observe as they look down. Is it not the

epitome of irony to be in awe at the discovery of them, and in researching their origin find their purpose to be the condescending, fearful, amuse or disapproving view of us from above?

I found that from the very beginning there has been opposition to the use of these gross extravagances. Eventually their architectural or religious function diminished and even in medieval times, approvers argued about them being too far away to be seen properly despite their costly concern for detail. Further concrete contradictions continue in how these grotesque granite sculptures were deliberate depictions of temptations, sins and sinning. The combinations of unlikely features naturally combined, suggest that everything is possible. The simple device for drainage can coexist with the sculptor's urge to have a little fun with exaggeration. Still, today architects and builders compete in an attempt at combining the implausible with humor and possibility. Twinned with their ability to command respect or frighten, is their capacity to amuse.

For weeks after that first day, I hunted continuously. Toting the big lens, enabled me to peek at peaks unseen. Sometimes I went nimble and caught the fish eye view connecting the sidewalk to the roof thirty stories high, all within the same frame of my viewfinder.

I've captured black lion head fountains in crowded city parks and collected rows of little lion heads that buttoned down the edge roof corners like rivets on a belt. I've arrested mean, nasty lions biting bars of wheat and a sad frustrated pride, anonymously frozen like has been celebrities in an urban nursing home. Occasionally, I'd spot a lion head that came right out of an Egyptian tomb, with odd round features and oversized tassels. Then there would be the rare, "look at me" lion, smiling proudly from his square,

flat, concrete base. I am drawn to the lion heads like a hungry animal chasing his next kill.

Most of my walkabouts are random hunt and capture missions, aiming for the rare and unseen, but occasionally I seek out the more famous lions such as “Patience and Fortitude” guarding the New York Public Library. A hunt in Central Park, on the west side of East Drive at 76<sup>th</sup> street revealed a mountain lion worthy of note; yet she is not hiding at all. And off Broadway between 155<sup>th</sup> and 156<sup>th</sup> streets sit a pair of lions flanking the entrance to the Hispanic Society of America.

There is no end in sight for me, just more concrete against blue skies, seen just the right way at just the right time of day from just the right angle to reveal a new king of beasts not yet grabbed. Stalking shadows for doorknocker lion heads with rings pulling down their jaws and charming scaled lion heads sporting the bodies of snakes, have created my jungle paradise. But no matter how many obvious lions I see I am always the most thrilled by the silent one lying in wait, under window sills, cleverly caged over doors, wrapped in rings of royal rock on dark side streets or caught on the corner under a row of cove molding.

An actual lion hunter once said, “One of the most intriguing aspects of lion hunting is the ability of your quarry to evaporate behind a single miserable blade of grass in an open desert. An exaggeration? Perhaps. But it’s damn nearly true that lions hardly need cover to disappear right before your eyes.”

