

THE DEVIL: A MASK WITHOUT A FACE (PICTURING HISTORY) BY LUTHER LINK



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The Devil

A Mask without a Face

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Review

'Highly entertaining and informative... This is a book worth arguing with, written with verve, wit and passion. It is also lavishly illustrated. I enjoyed every minute of it.' *The Spectator* 'As comprehensive a guide as anyone could wish to the appearances of the Evil One in art and literature throughout the age.' *The Herald*

About the Author

Luther Link is Professor in the Department of Literature, Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan. He was born in the United States.

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Today we imagine the Devil with horns, tail and pitchfork, but medieval and early Renaissance artists saw him very differently. In illuminated manuscripts, mosaics, frescoes, and carved capitals he is to be found in a bewildering variety of forms and guises. The lack of a stable pictorial model, misreadings of Mesopotamian and classical figures, and the Church's own shifting response to heresies, have all helped determine how the Devil was represented. Who he really was and why he looks the way he does can only be understood by probing the political and theological controversies of the times.

Why is the Devil never shown suffering in Hell? How is it that he sometimes appears to be doing God's work? What is the origin of his characteristic flaming hair, and where did those instruments of torture, wielded by his cruel assistants, come from?

This book, which covers the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, draws on original sources, including colorful accounts in the Apocrypha of the Devil's origins and his true first crime, the writings of St Augustine and other Church Fathers, and reports of the intrigues of popes and emperors. Luther Link offers us unexpected insights into a wide range of artworks, from the carved capitals in the Romanesque church of St Benoît and Giotto's famous Arena Chapel frescoes to Michelangelo's Last Judgment in Rome. The result, the first comprehensive account of the arch-fiend in art, is a fascinating study in the history of visual representation.

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Another Reaktion Books Success!

By Amanda Chesworth

The book begins with a quote by Origen: "No one can know the origin of evil who has not grasped the truth about the so-called Devil and his angels, and who he was before he became a Devil and how he became a Devil..."

This understanding is exactly what the author sets out to provide and he does so with great mastery and interest.

Luther Link knows his subject matter incredibly well. The whole point of the "Picturing History" series by Reaktion Books is to study the artwork of a given subject and use this as a primary source in understanding that subject's history. In many ways, I have found this to be a far more accurate and useful way of learning the history of the subject and Reaktion Books are leaders in the field.

I found the histories of the devil to be fascinating - at times, he was the archenemy, at other times he seemed essential to the concept of God or even as His handmaiden. In other examples he was a mere slave of God and it was not him that did the soul-snatching but he simply suffered eternal damnation along with all of the humans who were sent to Hell by God. The pagan influence was surprising - Lucifer once being a good character but like many pagan ideas, was turned bad by Christianity. This is a mere drop in the bucket to the information provided in The Devil.

The art is rich and liberally sprinkled throughout the book. The source of the images is given and we become privy to information doubtfully unearthed before - where the horns, pitchfork, and tail originate. The naked versus the hairy devil - the deformations. Most strikingly, perhaps, is the morphing from angel to demon. The "angelic" and "demonical" behaviors are explored and found to be quite diverse in history - angels often being quite demonic themselves. One piece I found especially powerful was the reproduction of Signorelli's "The Damned." I immediately went surfing to find myself a print!

There is a period of time where very few artpieces are found depicting the devil. The author speculates why this may be but he doesn't entertain the first thought that came to my mind - perhaps it was seen as blasphemous, or inviting evil, to do so. Of course this is just another speculation and one no where near as grounded as those of the author. But considering the great amount of superstition to be found in history, I expect there was at least an inkling of that - much like people were once forbidden to create artistic renditions of God - for other reasons.

With so many books now coming out on the history of the devil or the hierarchy of hell, largely for sensationalist reasons, this book really must be read to show how far superior it is to others. The scholarship is of highest quality which is likely why Reaktion Books caters more to academics than to laypeople. I find this unfortunate though. As a layperson, I highly enjoyed the book and would recommend it to anyone who finds this subject interesting. Reaktion Books would be wise to follow Taschen and Phaidon's lead in bringing their books to a wider audience.

The first chapter doesn't pull the reader in as it should but it's definitely worth sticking it out because in later chapters it becomes a page turner. Not intimidating in any way.

Especially for those trying to make sense of the many stories told about the devil, this book provides our best possibility and it leaves the reader satisfied with an understanding that can be drawn on for years to come.

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