

The Green Men of Rosslyn Chapel

Foliate heads, to give them their 'proper' name, have been around since Roman times. Examples have been found that date back to the second century CE. They are not confined to religious buildings, but can be found decorating many indoor spaces, outdoor gardens and even furniture.

Some of these early carvings appear to represent ancient Greek or Roman deities, such as Medusa with snakes for hair, or Okeanos, with seaweed for hair, and dolphins woven through it. Some carvings described as foliate heads seem to be mislabelled, and are actually Medusa or Okeanos. However, there are examples of leafy faces on Roman buildings, and we don't really know what they were meant to represent.

What we do know is that leaf masks of various kinds began to appear on decorations in Christian churches from around the 4th to 6th century CE. Trier Cathedral displays some magnificent leaf mask carvings which were copies of 2nd century Roman originals found on the site. A restoration project in the late 1800s uncovered these fascinating originals, but sadly they are once again hidden from view. We can only wonder why the Bishop copied the Roman faces and incorporated them into his Christian Cathedral. What was it that appealed to him, and what did he think these unique little faces symbolised?

The term 'Green Man' is in fact a fairly recent invention, coined by Lady Raglan in an article published in *Folklore Magazine* in 1939. Lady Raglan was fascinated by folk tales, and she was responsible for associating the leafy faces in churches with characters from the folk traditions. Sadly, she had not quite got her facts right – many of the folk characters that she felt could be the inspiration for the green men in our churches were actually invented hundreds of years after the leaf mask, or foliate head, appeared on our buildings and in our gardens!



Medusa with her hair of snakes has been around for a long time – this sculpture is based on a Greek carving from 5th century BCE.



The Italian sculptor, Bernini, created this head of Medusa in 1630.

Foliate heads probably do not originate from a single source. Some do go back to Roman times, and there are leafy faces in Scottish buildings which are similar to designs that came over from France with the Normans. Others may have origins further afield, such as the Far East, though they have largely disappeared from religious art in the East where depictions of people or animals are forbidden.

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It must also be assumed that the meanings attached to the foliate heads did not travel with the designs, and may have been incorporated into Christian art with no understanding of their original significance. Any meaning given across time may not have remained constant, as there is always recycling and re-interpretation of physical motifs.

For example, the Robin Redbreast used to be a bird of ill-omen in the UK, especially if it appeared at a window or entered the home, but today it is seen as a sign of good luck, or a religious symbol for the blood of Christ. Chrysanthemums in a bouquet would be appreciated in Scotland, but in Italy they would not be welcome in a house, as they are funeral flowers.

There appear to be two distinctive types of Green Man: a leaf mask, where there is a face obscured by leaves, leaving only eyes and mouth visible, or one in which leaves grow out of the nose or mouth; these are sometimes described as 'disgorging' masks. Some have only a suggestion of leafiness, while others are completely obscured by foliage.



Leaves and tendrils cover this Green Man leaving only the centre of his face visible.



This Green Man, from a 12th century church in England, has leaves growing out of his mouth.



Could this Green Man, with his open mouth and terrifying teeth, have carried associations with Hell?

In early Medieval art, leaf masks could represent either the Holy Trinity or Absolute Evil. In the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, the masks are mainly represented as demons or goblins. There is a dark side to their nature. Demons of early Medieval art often had their tongues sticking out or displayed savage teeth. Such a figure could represent the mouth of Hell, and there are examples of carvings depicting a figure disappearing into the mouth of a leaf mask.

We also find masks with tendrils growing out of the nose or mouth. These branches can then turn into diabolical creatures such as snakes or birds. Often these masks look discontented, as if they are being suffocated by their leafy foliage, or eaten up by it. Yet in other carvings, many found here in Rosslyn, the suckers coming out of a mouth wind upwards or sideways into magnificent string courses of naturalistic foliage.

The leafier masks appear more harmonious, perhaps expressing the idea of remembrance, or renewal. They may symbolise the passage of the immortal soul from the body to eternal life, or life sprouting again. It was in the Medieval period that Mary Gardens became popular. These gardens were planted with flowers that had symbolic meaning with daisies and lilies representing Mary or purity in general.

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Here at Rosslyn Chapel, we have over 100 green men, all over the building, inside and out, visible and hidden from view. Many of them were only discovered during the conservation work, when we had high-level scaffolding that gave us a unique view of the high pinnacles. Most of the faces are disgorging suckers or vines from their mouth or nose. We don't have so many of the leafier faces. We have smiling men, scowling men, men baring savage looking teeth, and something that we think is quite unique to us – green men that age as you walk round the building. We have what we call our Green Boy, such a youthful face, then the adult bearded men, and finally one or two green skeletons! So this might explain why people feel that the green man represents the passage of life, birth, living, death and renewal.



A selection of Rosslyn Chapel's many Green Men, who transform from youth to old age and death throughout the building.

But getting back to Lady Raglan and her interest in folklore. She was the first to connect foliate heads with a mythical creature known as a Jack in the Green. He is a man in a basket woven frame, covered in greenery and flowers who dances during May Day festivities. She thought he was the origin of the leaf mask. But Jack in the Green is an invention from the 18th century – the tradition is not mentioned before 1795. It was a fairly short lived May Day parade tradition, which has been revived in more recent times by people organising what they think are 'traditional arts'.

But the link took hold after Lady Raglan's article, and many village pubs named the Green Man during the 1800s, after the Jack in the Green figure who was popular in the day, now use a foliate head on their pub signs!



This sketch from the 1700s shows Jack in the Green covered in foliage with only his face peeping out.

Now that's not to say that there has never been a Spirit of the Woods. There are a few other contenders for the title. Just outside Rosslyn Chapel is Roslin Glen, an ancient woodland full of Celtic and Pictish symbolism. So we might think of Cernunnos, a Celtic deity, sometimes known as Herne the Hunter. But he is always depicted with horns. There are one or two recorded examples of horned leaf masks, but none here at Rosslyn Chapel as far as we know.



The Celtic god, Cernunnos, shares similarities with the Green Man but he is depicted as a horned figure.

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For the masks found in the Middle and Far East, perhaps he is Al Khidir, The Green One. He is an Islamic immortal who is revered by Sufi mystics. In Islamic folklore, Moses, or Musa, makes a journey with a strange creature in green robes. But he is never described as being covered in leaves. We have on occasions been told that the interior of Rosslyn Chapel shows signs of Sufi symbolism.

Then we have to consider the ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. What about Medusa or the Gorgon? The mop of snakes might have been transformed into leaves. But Medusa has never been connected with forests, and never worshiped as a god. There is Silvanus, a Roman God associated with agriculture and fertility. But he never appeared with a foliate face in any Roman icons. Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine, has sometimes been associated with the leafier masks, which had grapes in their hair. Faces covered in ivy and vine leaves do appear in Gothic cathedrals, but the Roman green men don't look like this.



Bacchus, the Roman god of agriculture and wine, is often shown with grapes in his hair but is quite distinct from the Green Men.

We could go on and on, and of course we have the stories that seem to give importance to the colour green, or to mysteries lying within the ancient woodlands of Scotland and England. For example, the Arthurian myths, like Gawain and the Green Knight. Is Rosslyn the Green Chapel that Gawain had to search for? Is the Green Man Robin Hood? Or is the Green Man simply a depiction of a forest spirit whose origins have been lost in the mists of time?

For every Green Man you see, someone will give you a different interpretation of its meaning. It's rather like Rosslyn Chapel itself – so many different interpretations.

What can we say for sure?

- The Green Man is very old, and has been placed in buildings, gardens and churches since Roman times.
- It's not strictly a Pagan symbol - the Green Man belongs to all faiths, and to none.
- There is definitely something about life and death, renewal and rebirth.
- They often look like they are having a really miserable time.
- But at the same time, they are engaging, mysterious, compelling, and sometimes, really good fun!
- Their meaning has never been static – people have given them symbolism that suits the time and the place where they are carved.

And for those who wonder why there are so many of them in Christian Churches, well there is one story from the Bible that might just explain that. But you will have to come to Rosslyn Chapel to hear it!

Article adapted from a lecture given by Fiona Rogan, Learning Manager in 2015

Recommended Reading:

The Green Man by Kathleen Basford, DS Brewer, Cambridge 1998

Explore Green Men by Mercia MacDermott, Heart of Albion Press, Loughborough 2006

The Green Man Companion and Gazetteer by Ronald Millar, Seaford, SB Publications 1997

Green Man: Spirit of Nature by John Matthews, London 2002

www.rosslynchapel.com