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HOLLYWOOD

MAGAZINE

Hollywood High
Revisited

The Faces of Hollywood
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ABOVE: Roman soldier stands watch at 6423 Hollywood Blvd.

RIGHT: Pantages Theatre art deco image (6233 Hollywood Blvd.) features sun rays (or searchlights)

For decades, they've been hiding out in plain sight — laughing at generations of Angelenos and unsuspecting tourists. Some are playfully defiant, almost antagonistic. Others aren't so jovial, casting a stony gaze upon passersby in silent yearning. A wizened few seem resigned to their purgatory, eyes glazed over with indifference.

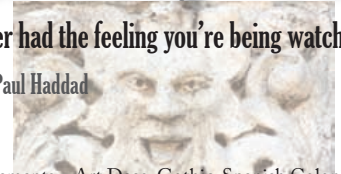
They are the sculpted faces of Hollywood's historic buildings, and they are amongst the most stunning, yet overlooked, flourishes of architecture in Los Angeles.

The 1920s launched the Golden Age of Hollywood. With the advent of feature-length motion pictures, Hollywood Boulevard was the epicenter of glamour. Downtown Los Angeles was where the studios first premiered movies, but Hollywood was where the moviemakers worked, ate, shopped, and lived. Businessmen and movie moguls commissioned the finest architects of the day to build monuments of opulence designed to appeal to their outsized sense of self. Banks, nightclubs, office buildings, theaters — the majority of these buildings lie on a 1.8 mile stretch of Hollywood Boulevard, from Western Avenue to the east, to La Brea Avenue to the west. No one style defines these structures. Like Los Angeles itself, architects of the day borrowed from a dizzying array of

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by Paul Haddad



movements — Art Deco, Gothic, Spanish Colonial Revival, Classic, Baroque, Rococo, Churriguera, Streamline Moderne, Moorish, faux Egyptian — sometimes combining several into one. Architectural purists might faint in horror at this mongrel mix of styles, but in Los Angeles, they found a place where Old World rules happily come to die.

As if to play up this “anything goes” outlook, many architects adorned the facades of their buildings with sculpted faces from the human, animal and otherworldly worlds. Sometimes it might just be one face in repetition, like the cherubic angel that appears at least fifty times at 5981 Hollywood Boulevard, or the lonely-looking maiden affixed above the portal at the historic Fontenoy apartment building on Whitley Avenue. On the other end of the spectrum are the faces at two of the boulevard's oldest movie theaters. El Capitan's faces are a divided bunch — an explosion of colorful funhouse revelry surrounding the outdoor vestibule,



while its exterior is lined by sepia-toned royalty types, taking their roles as the theatre's guardians very seriously, thank you very much, quite literally above all the frivolity on the sidewalk below. And don't even get me started on the old Warner Hollywood Theatre, home to over one hundred vis-

ages. This motley menagerie of jesters, actors, plutocrats, dragons, lions, and angels must have seemed like apropos motifs to help celebrate the West Coast's first movie theater wired for sound. Taken as a whole, the faces of Hollywood's historic buildings form a living outdoor museum. But it's the effect they have on our field of vision that's even more profound. The majority of pedestrians along Hollywood Boulevard fix their gaze on the sidewalk and



LEFT: A crouching figure at 6253 Hollywood Blvd. bears a striking resemblance to Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*, doesn't he?

BELOW: An ornate Churrigueresque facade at 6554 Hollywood Blvd. has dozens of figures—animals, masks and aristocrats.

the more than 2,400 stars that make up the Hollywood Walk of Fame. The faces force our gazes upward. Searching them out, we can't help but admire the buildings on which they reside, their craftsmanship and lines, the bewildering clash of styles that somehow form such unifying wholes. And then you realize—the faces are an invitation to a greater consciousness.

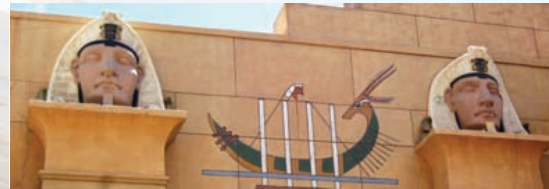
The Hollywood & Western Building is an apt metaphor for Hollywood's historic buildings. It once housed Central Casting and the offices of the Hays Code and Cecil B. DeMille. It now has a new lease on life. Others have followed a similar script. It's wonderful to see the Equitable Building on the northeast corner of Hollywood & Vine with its offices converted to trendy condos become relevant again. Its array of bizarre faces look to be freshly spit and polished, ready for the new millennium.

Which brings us to the best part about the faces of Hollywood's buildings: they must be taken in by foot.

Most are easily visible from street level just one or two stories up. But you'll want a good set of binoculars to take in those that preside near the rooftops, like the gargoyles hanging out over the First National Bank, or the pharaohs and eagles glowering from an eighth story aerie of the Yucca Vine Tower, the highest perch of any portraits. Speaking of eagles, you may want your walking companion to be someone with an eagle-eye, the better to fish out the grotesque portraits hidden in the Churrigueresque facade of the Owens Building, a "Where's Waldo?" exercise



set to swirling masonry. I've counted at least 48 figures in its facade, but there may well be more. Each building offers its own voyage of discovery to the viewer. Sometimes a face will only emerge upon closer inspection, or when the shad-



LEFT: Several of these faces jut out beneath the eaves at 6765 Hollywood Blvd.

BELOW: Below: Another discovery at 6331 Hollywood Blvd. They're everywhere!





LEFT: The El Capitan Theatre (6838 Hollywood Blvd.) features some of the most life-like images, enhanced by detail, color and impossible to ignore.



FAR LEFT: First National Bank teams up a human guard with a lion. Your money's safe here!



LEFT: This forlorn lady gazes down from the Fortenoy Apartments (1811 Whitley) like some oversized cameo.

BELOW & BELOW LEFT: The figures on one of several panels on the fire escapes at Hollywood & Western, 5500 Hollywood Blvd., are a reference to Central Casting, whose first location was in this building.



BOTTOM: A God of the Greek or Biblical nature above an entryway.

ows from the sun cut across at just the right angle, or when your imagination sees thing that your conscious mind insists isn't there.

Which begs one last question: Why are these faces there in the first place? Most of them fall into two camps: Either they say something about the building's original purpose (movie theatre, performance center, school,



film offices), or they are an inherent part of the building's ornamental style (Baroque, Gothic, Churriguera). But what of the random madman on the side of the Baine Building? The bathing beauty on the Julie Lee Apartment Build-

ing? Or the weird chimpanzee head on the Bernard Luggage building? We'll never know all the answers. But that's okay. After all, it's considered poor form to go to a museum, stare at a work of art, and ask the artist "what were you thinking?" But when it comes to the portraits themselves, sometimes it's more fun to leave things to our own interpretation, which is probably what the architects wanted in the first place.

With that, get on your walking shoes, gaze up, and squint hard. They've been watching us for decades. It's about time we return the favor. **DH**

RIGHT: Dancing pig plays the flute at the Pig 'n Whistle restaurant. (See DINING)



Paul Haddad was born in Hollywood and writes about all things Los Angeles. He is working on a book edition of the Faces of Hollywood. Earlier this year his book about Vin Scully and the Los Angeles Dodgers was published by Santa Monica Press. He can be reached via that book's website: www.dodgerglory.com