

GARGOYLES

by Brian Lorne Maged

Were gargoyles political cartoons? Was the mocking of man actually a pre-conscious antagonism towards the established power structure which included priests and archbishops and which curtailed the freedom of artisans? A century before the invention of the Gutenberg Press the average scribe was forced to sit at a desk and copy the words of the Bible. Was he bored to tears by his poverty? Was he sick of and tired of the images of martyrdom of his fellow man? Did he have a concern for his individuality and his place in the Universe?

Gargoyles were but one form of political satire. In previous ages there were hieroglyphics, decorated Greek vases, Roman frescoes, and the foundations of Shakespearian Theatre which began in the Middle and the Late Gothic periods. But humour was not only evident in established civilizations. Many instances of human distortion were apparent in earlier vernacular cultures. What their true significance might have been many have pondered, but they seem to have been linked with fertility rites rather than with political commentary.



The rise of civilizations has been characterized by the emergence of Gargoyle-like caricatures. We need only look back to our own age at the works of Picasso, which rest in the realm of such other great artists as Dali, Rockwell and Disney, to understand how enlightenment emerges. In each culture where images and psychic visions have been abandoned in favour of materialism and functionalism, there has emerged an antithetical tendency towards the foundations of new spiritual and artistic heights.

In looking to the early Doric origins of the later Hellenistic Greek art we recognize that the simple untreated surfaces which related to the anti-imagery Hebraic tradition were soon replaced by more highly decorated surfaces with sculptural and textural treatment. Simple heraldic cartoons are evident in astrological symbols and representations of the Gods. Less known however is the similar emergence of **Gargoyles** from the early Christian era, and from the Byzantine civilization in which the Arabs practiced their neat geometrical repetitions in angles and swirls which resemble cur-

rent work by architect Moshe Safdie and by artist Judy Chicago, whose "Dinner Party" has recently been displayed in galleries across North America.

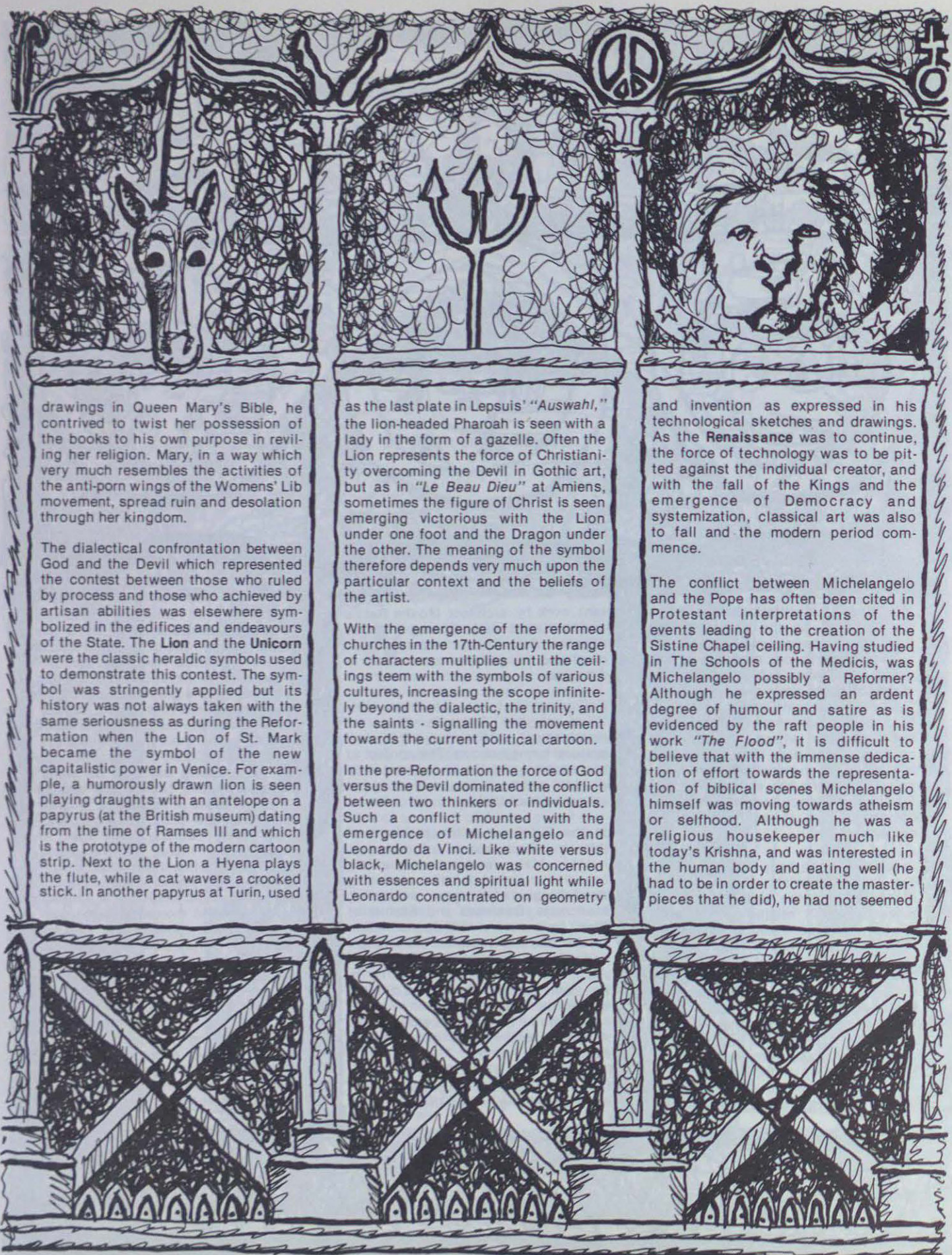
Following what has now been identified as the **Gargoyle Stage** of development we find that a period of cultural turmoil occurs. The conflict of state control with the development of individual autonomy can be identified in every major civilization.

In the Renaissance the problems of this transition reach an historical height. Many architectural artists branch into varied domains producing **Post-Gargoyle** imagery including Madonnas, Geniuses and Scenes of War. As the wars of the reformation mount, the art becomes increasingly serious and intellectual. The fly in Fig.1, the letting down of the fly in Fig.2 and the child who stands curiously before the warriors in Andrea Mantegna's "St. James before Herod Agrippa" point to the graveness of Renaissance humour.

In the third stage of Gargoyle development, **Rebirthing**, we see the humour of

a child's head emerging from the balustrade painted on the ceiling of the *Camera degli Sposi* in the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua. Notice the wonderful perspective distortions and the evident scale of the grown-up head of the Arab versus that of the cupids. Humour now moves from the grotesqueries of combat to the more subtle interplays of sensuality. Comic art in architecture had come a long way from its earlier Gargoyle stages. Notice how Jupiter takes the cupid in Raphael's "Jupiter and Cupid" and holds him to the cheek in a keen fatherly embrace. In Raphael's next mural, "The Venus and the Psyche" notice the inhibition in the offering of the young lady, a commentary which would still find many meaningful symbolic moments in the context of our modern age. In his "Galatea" Raphael presents the darker side of Romance and perhaps in so doing invents the toy gun and pistol in his trinity of bow-and-arrow fending cupids.

The **Reformation** is an uneasy time, and the Gargoyle and its equivalent in the prayer book drawings do much to transform the existing papal-state relationship. When Malcolm reacted to the



drawings in Queen Mary's Bible, he contrived to twist her possession of the books to his own purpose in reviling her religion. Mary, in a way which very much resembles the activities of the anti-porn wings of the Womens' Lib movement, spread ruin and desolation through her kingdom.

The dialectical confrontation between God and the Devil which represented the contest between those who ruled by process and those who achieved by artisan abilities was elsewhere symbolized in the edifices and endeavours of the State. The **Lion** and the **Unicorn** were the classic heraldic symbols used to demonstrate this contest. The symbol was stringently applied but its history was not always taken with the same seriousness as during the Reformation when the Lion of St. Mark became the symbol of the new capitalistic power in Venice. For example, a humorously drawn lion is seen playing draughts with an antelope on a papyrus (at the British museum) dating from the time of Ramses III and which is the prototype of the modern cartoon strip. Next to the Lion a Hyena plays the flute, while a cat wavers a crooked stick. In another papyrus at Turin, used

as the last plate in Lepsius' "Auswahl," the lion-headed Pharaoh is seen with a lady in the form of a gazelle. Often the Lion represents the force of Christianity overcoming the Devil in Gothic art, but as in "Le Beau Dieu" at Amiens, sometimes the figure of Christ is seen emerging victorious with the Lion under one foot and the Dragon under the other. The meaning of the symbol therefore depends very much upon the particular context and the beliefs of the artist.

With the emergence of the reformed churches in the 17th-Century the range of characters multiplies until the ceilings teem with the symbols of various cultures, increasing the scope infinitely beyond the dialectic, the trinity, and the saints - signalling the movement towards the current political cartoon.

In the pre-Reformation the force of God versus the Devil dominated the conflict between two thinkers or individuals. Such a conflict mounted with the emergence of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Like white versus black, Michelangelo was concerned with essences and spiritual light while Leonardo concentrated on geometry

and invention as expressed in his technological sketches and drawings. As the **Renaissance** was to continue, the force of technology was to be pitted against the individual creator, and with the fall of the Kings and the emergence of Democracy and systemization, classical art was also to fall and the modern period commence.

The conflict between Michelangelo and the Pope has often been cited in Protestant interpretations of the events leading to the creation of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Having studied in The Schools of the Medicis, was Michelangelo possibly a Reformer? Although he expressed an ardent degree of humour and satire as is evidenced by the raft people in his work "The Flood", it is difficult to believe that with the immense dedication of effort towards the representation of biblical scenes Michelangelo himself was moving towards atheism or selfhood. Although he was a religious housekeeper much like today's Krishna, and was interested in the human body and eating well (he had to be in order to create the masterpieces that he did), he had not seemed



to have removed himself from the essences of God's Universe. Did Michelangelo ever mock the Church? Perhaps not, but there is in the Medici Chapel built for Lorenzo a frieze on the entablature with a very strange relief just below the triglyphs. In this relief is the repeated image of a two-toothed visage with an Ionically shaped mustache, is perhaps an image of Lorenzo, or perhaps a self-portrait of Michelangelo himself. The figure reminds one very much of Salvador Dali (who was perhaps himself a gargoyle), quite eccentric looking with his straight whiskers. It is said that Michelangelo's gargoyle was produced in response to an incident which occurred early in his life, in which Lorenzo Medici looked at the sculpture and said "it doesn't look old ... old people lose some of their teeth." Following this, it is said, Michelangelo hollowed out the teeth so that they appeared exactly the way the Medici had desired. After this, Lorenzo took the young artist into his Institute. Four centuries later young men get taken in by old men who no longer lack their teeth because they have had the spaces filled in with gold. The relationships between teacher and philanthropist,

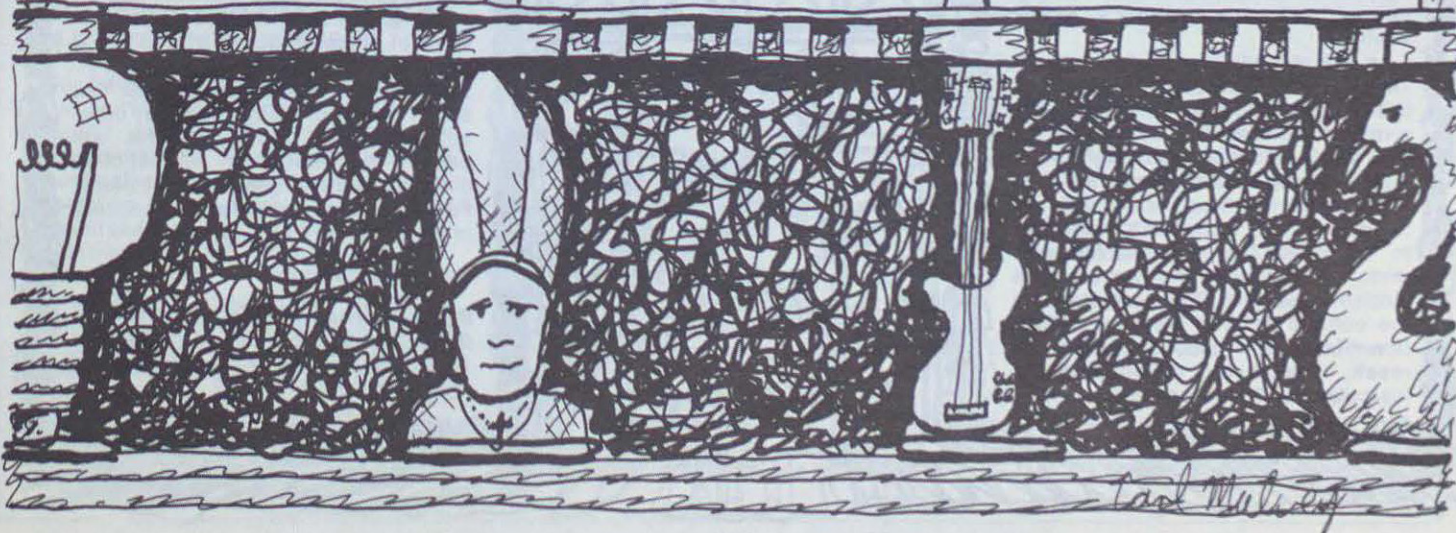
technologist and artisan are indeed interesting ones and make for the diverse human relationships we see about us today.

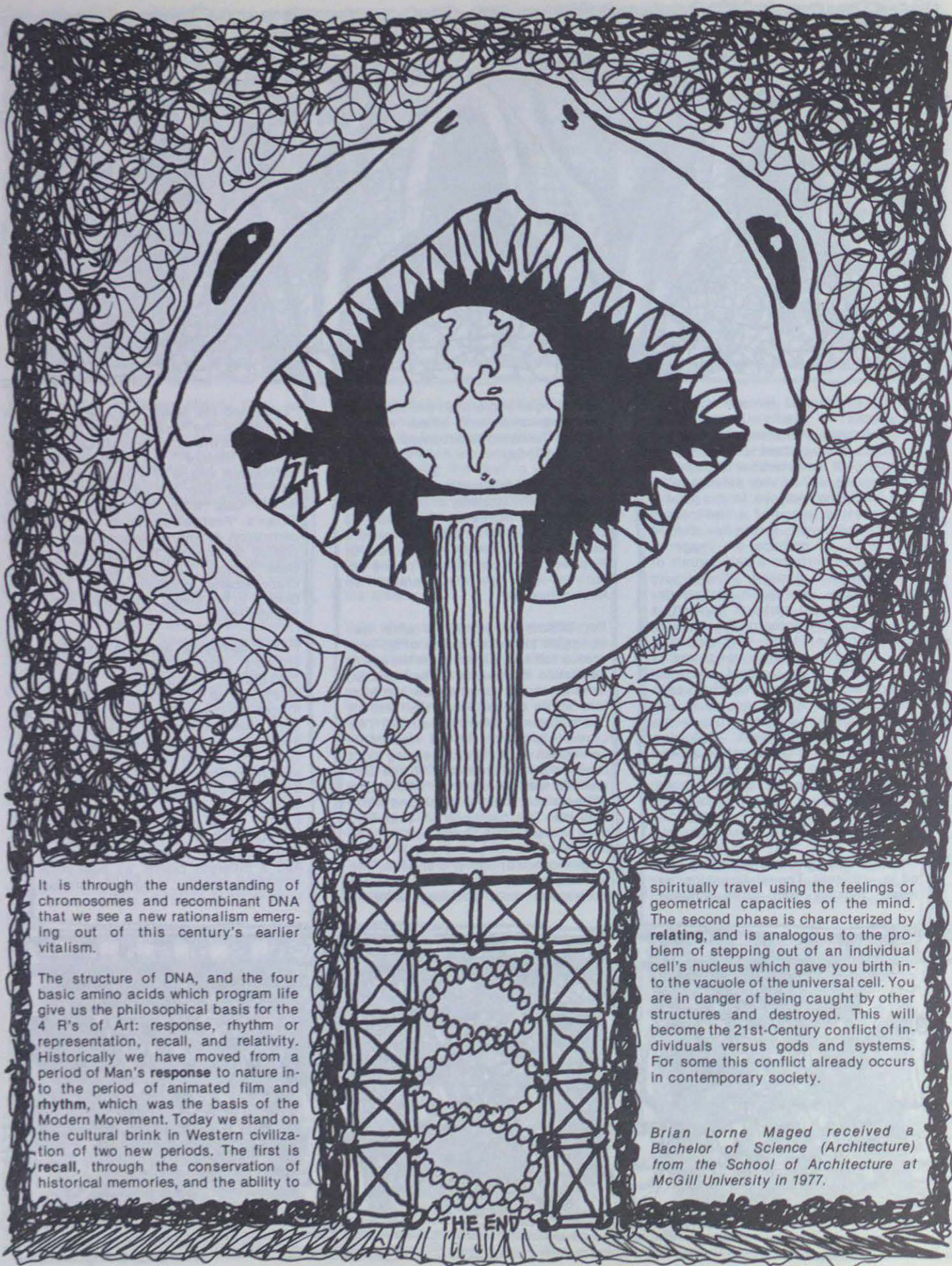
In the eye of the storm, some men never lost the intensity of the vortex of the tornado. However, the discipline that characterized individual creators such as Borromini in architecture or Raphael in art was broken by the advent of the age of **Liberation** or **Abstractionism**.

For billions of years the artist had struggled towards a sense of his conscious self and discipline. In the age of Liberation he begins to be released from the huge vortex which had kept him in its grasp. From the time of Giulio Romano, who had painted "Two Lovers" (presently in the Hermitage, Leningrad) we find the increasing flight towards sexual freedoms. In the **Jimi Hendrix** period of the 1960's this ultimate liberation of black and white appears. The paintings of Tintoretto over two centuries earlier and prior to the fall of the Kings express a similar magnificence of light and shadow. The females are encased in an artificial naturalness, in a denturely white. In

"*Leda and the Swan*" we see the attraction of the young female for her white swan friend. In Dionisio Calvert's scene "*Danae*" we find a very humorous image of a young woman and cupid who are catching money which falls from the heavens. In Titian's "*Festival of Venus*" the concentration of the luminosity on the cupids is evident. The gargoyle has been reduced from the enraged and crazy looking creature of the early Gothic to the loving tenderness of the cupidic child.

In the **Surrogate Gargoyle** era which follows after the divorce from classicism, Men begin to look elsewhere to find their symbols. No longer using such imagery as beasts, lions, swans or cupids, they try to use such new symbols as erasers and soup cans. They try to detach the painting and the sculpture from their position in architecture. Man, however, has never seen himself in a greater way as the totality of the environment, mistaking his liberation to be merely a spiritual definition. The Pharaohs must have had a different desire, as have men throughout history, to strive for immortality through structure and geometry.





It is through the understanding of chromosomes and recombinant DNA that we see a new rationalism emerging out of this century's earlier vitalism.

The structure of DNA, and the four basic amino acids which program life give us the philosophical basis for the 4 R's of Art: response, rhythm or representation, recall, and relativity. Historically we have moved from a period of Man's **response** to nature into the period of animated film and **rhythm**, which was the basis of the Modern Movement. Today we stand on the cultural brink in Western civilization of two new periods. The first is **recall**, through the conservation of historical memories, and the ability to

spiritually travel using the feelings or geometrical capacities of the mind. The second phase is characterized by **relating**, and is analogous to the problem of stepping out of an individual cell's nucleus which gave you birth into the vacuole of the universal cell. You are in danger of being caught by other structures and destroyed. This will become the 21st-Century conflict of individuals versus gods and systems. For some this conflict already occurs in contemporary society.

Brian Lorne Maged received a Bachelor of Science (Architecture) from the School of Architecture at McGill University in 1977.

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