



# Florence is a Gargoyle

by Arthur Allen

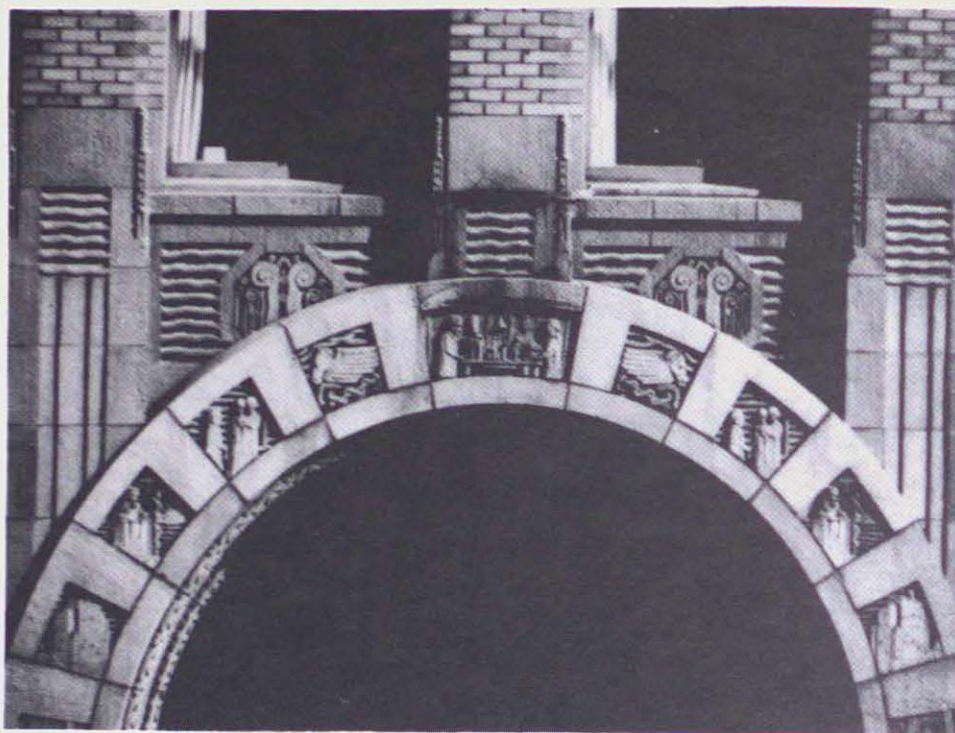
**H**opefully the Wrecker's Ball of the Vancouver Urbanarium celebrations has created a magic spell powerful enough to protect the Medical-Dental Building at Georgia and Hornby Streets, but if it has not, and a real wrecking ball goes to work, the sight and sound of shattering terra-cotta ornament will be a very painful experience. The glazed clay decorations of the Medical-Dental Build-

ing, along with their contemporaries on the popular Marine Building, are in a class by themselves, and are widely known as excellent examples of Art Deco ornamentation.

The Medical-Dental ornaments are worth preserving on grounds of style, delicacy, and visual delight alone. To me, however, it is the symbolism and meaning of the clay cast figures that is most intriguing. It is the



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story told by the ornaments that is unique to this building; a story that makes preservation of the building and its ornaments so worthwhile.

I understand that when the building opened for business in 1927 it contained a small hospital unit that continued in operation until approximately 1960. I also understand that when medical and dental staff in the building first saw the nine foot nurses high on the corners of the building, with that peculiar humour common in their profession they promptly named the nurses "The Rhea Sisters... Pya, Dya, and Gonna!"

Personally I prefer to call the nurses "Florence". Actually they are dressed in uniforms of World War I, not the long gowns worn by Florence Nightingale of Crimean fame. I call them Florence because they are indeed gargoyles -- placed in 1927 to remind us that it is now the wonders of

medical science, not the powers of Medieval magic, that will prevent evil spirits, i.e. disease, from entering a building.

For some years, too busy to meddle in such things, I did not pursue this idea in detail, until I read an anthropologist's account of house decoration among primitive peoples of India. The anthropologist, Tore Hakansson, contends that people decorate body orifices: eyes, ears, noses and mouths, in order to deter the entry of evil spirits. This practice, says Hakansson, is extended to architectural orifices: doorways, windows, chimneys and vents.

I immediately went to the Medical-Dental Building to inspect the entrance -- and was astounded! The leather brown terra-cotta panels that decorate the archway over the main entry on Georgia Street contain a fascinating series of pictographic messages. Starting at the top of the arch, the panels depict:



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- a keystone panel illustrating a medical laboratory where science brews its modern potions.
- on each side of the keystone, a panel illustrating a horse's head, with wings, and a caduceus, a rod with an entwined serpent, the symbol of the Canadian Medical Association.
- next, on each side, a panel showing a scene of higher learning, a lecturer speaking, presumably to medical students.
- fourth, panels showing families in prayer, with a clergyman under a cross.
- lower panels show further scenes of Greek mythology, Christian worship, and medical science.
- finally, at the bottom of each side of the arch, right at eye level where I had walked so often without seeing, there are two large panels, each depicting another caduceus. In these cases the symbols show rods, each with two entwined snakes.

The message was suddenly clear! In case of illness, try medicine, prayer, and magic, in suitable proportions!!!

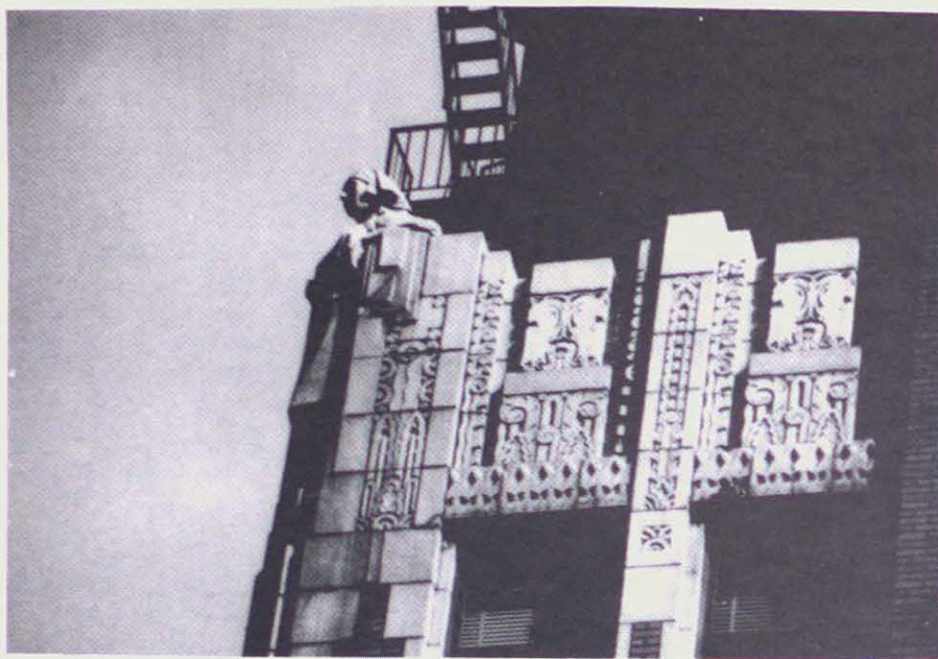
As usual I left the building quite pleased with my new perception. It wasn't long however, before a nagging doubt appeared. While photographing ornaments of other old buildings in Vancouver, I had found numerous examples of the caduceus, most of them rods, with two serpents coiling up the shafts. The old Vancouver coat of arms carried a double serpent caduceus, which may still be seen on the Burrard Bridge, and over the entry to City Hall. Several old buildings of the Bank of Commerce still display it, for instance at Main and Pender. The single serpent caduceus may be seen on the Academy of Medicine at 10th and Burrard, in the concrete mural by Beatrice Lennie showing Hippocrates with his staff and pet snake.

Again my curiosity deepened, and I looked up a handbook of Classical Mythology, and read on.

It seems that the caduceus with single serpent is appropriate to Hippocrates, allegedly the father of modern medicine, and to



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Asclepius, the great healer who was able to revive the dead, a feat by which Zeus was not impressed. The caduceus with two snakes however, was developed when Apollo gave Hermes a rod, or wand, in exchange for the lyre, which Hermes had fashioned from a tortoise shell. The story goes that one day Hermes placed the point of his wand between two fighting snakes, whereupon the serpents promptly coiled themselves on the shaft, where they remain to this day.

At this point I was still confused, until I read more about Hermes. That ancient figure was very busy, even for a God. He was messenger of the Gods, guide of the dead, God of wind, speed, navigation, increase of animals, manual skill, oratory, and God of travellers, commerce... and of thieves.

Again I understood! Hermes, and the double serpent caduceus, are the symbols of money and commerce, of bank vaults and

of robbers! How could such a symbol be mounted at the entrance to a place of mercy, healing, and of charity? Truly, it must have been a mistake... or did a sculptor have his/her tongue in cheek while modelling the double caduceus of the Medical-Dental Building?

What can be done? ... Possibly like the Puritans of England, we should remove this badly mistaken symbol. If we do however, to be fair we ought to remove the head of Hermes from the Hotel Vancouver; Hermes was God of travellers, but also of thieves. We should also find and remove the four Jolly Rogers on the Marine Building. How could anyone dare to place the skull and crossbones on such an eminent citadel of enterprising commerce and honest hard work?

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