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Treasure in the Air Up There



Damon Winter/The New York Times

Robert A. King goes on an urban safari to find and record sculptural figures on city buildings.

By COREY KILGANNON Published: March 8, 2013

Robert A. King, 67, architect, checked in on one of his renovation jobs, a town house on Garfield Place in Brooklyn, and then spent the rest of Wednesday afternoon walking the neighborhood looking up.

The Particulars

Name Robert A. King

Age 67

Where He's From Harlem

What He Is Architect and architectural ornament buff

Telling Detail Mr. King's favorite architectural sculpture is Viola, a woman's face carved over the doorway of an apartment building in downtown Manhattan.

"Look, there she is, up there — oh, she's cute," he said gazing at a row house on Fiske Place and admiring a face carved into the brownstone on a frieze above the doorway. He snapped a long lens onto his camera and began photographing the sooty stone face. He jotted the address on an index card to file the new addition to his computer archive of roughly 10,000 other sculptures — mostly faces or animal figures — that decorate New York City's building facades.

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"People just walk by all this artwork and pay no attention," Mr. King said, "there are owners who don't even notice it on their own buildings."

"People are busy catching the train or catching the bus; they don't look up," Mr. King said. "People just walk by all this artwork and pay no attention — there are owners who don't even notice it on their own buildings."

Mr. King feels obliged to rescue the overlooked faces and figures from obscurity. He has been walking the city with binoculars for about 15 years, seeking them out.

"I've covered most of New York City," he said, rattling off a list, including the sculpture of Teddy Roosevelt that presides over a supermarket on West 145th Street and the nautical bas-reliefs at 74 Wall Street.

"Don't ask me how I remember these — it took me years to remember my own wife's birthday," said Mr. King, who is married with two grown daughters and lives in the same 1897 row house on Hamilton Terrace in Harlem where he grew up, near City College.

The hobby is not without its perils. Mr. King has dodged traffic while shooting the American Indian hunting scenes on the Manhattan Bridge. And with all the walking, he is due for a second knee replacement. He initially injured his knees while checking out a dilapidated brownstone and falling three stories after its floors collapsed. Both knees were replaced with steel joints.

It was one of several injuries incurred in the 1980s, when his clients were restoring crack houses and burned-out buildings, Mr. King said. There was the time he was shot in the shoulder by drug dealers who had stashed their goods in a building he was inspecting.

Mr. King, who is profiled in "Stonefaced," a new short film by Vivian Ducat, has written two books on New York City building sculptures.

Most of these carved faces seem based on real-life people, though information on the models is scant for less-notable buildings, Mr. King said. Many of them were created by artisan immigrants who brought their Old World training to their laborer jobs.

Mr. King forms attachments with these figures. He revisits some repeatedly and coos to them, asking for their secrets.

He is fun-loving, but not delusional. He has been teaching for 25 years — city building code and systems, along with historic preservation — at the New York School of Interior Design in Manhattan. His interest in facade artwork began in the late 1990s with an assignment for a photography class, but it really stems from his passion for preservation. He remembers a lovely terra cotta soldier he used to admire on a York Avenue

"Ah, this could be the mother," he said, looking at a similar but more mature face on a nearly identical adjacent building.

"She looks very serious — and oh, let me get those griffins," he said, turning to a winged beast on the facade.

Even on an empty city street, Mr. King is not alone. He is never far from a menagerie of sculptured animals, or the faces in stone that he says he can feel staring down at him from the buildings.

"They almost come alive for me," he said. "I can walk down a street and hear them say, 'Psst, I'm over here.' "

To many a New Yorker's eye, the sculptures — perched above doorways, flanking windows or topping off columns — often simply go unnoticed.

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apartment building cornice. One day, it was simply removed.

“It was just gone — now, that’s criminal,” he said on Thursday in the basement office of his row house, which has never gotten a proper restoration.

“My own place comes last,” he said. Mr. King has worked as an auto mechanic, an engineer and a construction worker. He studied architecture at Columbia and in London, and opened his office in 1977.

While looking at a building on Carroll Street in Brooklyn on Wednesday, he wore cargo pants and a brimmed hat, looking like someone on safari.

“When you discover this stuff, it’s like a whole other world,” he said, his face lighting up again now as he spied another trove of facade figures. “You can almost hear them calling out, can’t you?”

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