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Decoding the symbols on Satan's statue

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By James Morgan
BBC News, Washington DC
@JMorgan

A controversial statue unveiled by the Satanic Temple at a secret ceremony in Detroit has attracted protests. But who is the goat-headed figure? And what do the elements of the statue symbolise?

The bronze statue is nearly 9ft tall and depicts a winged hermaphrodite known as Baphomet. It was commissioned by the group at a cost of $100,000 to make and hundreds of Satanists turned out to see it unveiled.

Long term, the Satanic Temple wants to move the piece 900 miles (1,450km) south-west and erect it opposite a Ten Commandments monument outside Oklahoma City's Capitol Building.

This plan was thrown into doubt when Oklahoma's Supreme Court ruled that the use of state property to benefit a religion is banned under the state constitution - the fate of both the Satanist statue and the Ten Commandments monument is now unclear.

GREG SMITH/FACEBOOK

The unveiling of the statue came at a secret event for Temple members, where VIP ticketholders were invited to pose with the Baphomet

The name Baphomet

The name dates back to the Inquisition and torture of the Knights Templar about 1100 years, according to French chroniclers of the Crusades, confessed to worshipping a heathen idol called Baphometh.

Some scholars believe "Baphometh" was simply a corruption of "Mahomet" - the Prophet Muhammad.

But even this pure-as-the-mystery-and speculation around the Templars has grown, so too have the interpretations of the word and its meaning.

Christian Dior Corporation even drove the plot in Dan Brown's historical thriller The Da Vinci Code where the word Baphomet is decoded and translated to mean "Sophia" or wisdom.

Levi's Baphomet

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The best-known modern image of Baphomet was drawn in 1856 by the French occultist Eliphas Levi, in his book Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual.

He envisaged a winged hermaphrodite with a torch between his horns and a pentagram on his forehead.

Its arms bore the Latin words SOLVE (separated) and COAGULA (join together) - the powers of "binding and loosing" slurped from God.

Levi's drawing was the inspiration for the Satanic Temple's new monument.

It contains all these binary opposites - above and below, part animal, part human. Male and female," says Greaves.

"It embodies opposites and celebrates contrasts."

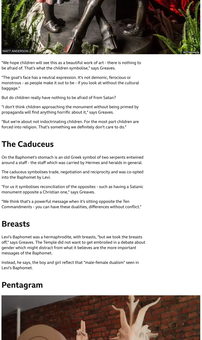
Two-finger salute

Two fingers on the right hand point up and two on the left hand point down, meaning "as above, so below".

These words and the accompanying gesture are familiar to occultists. They are used in the occult practice of Thelema, a philosophy, whose writings became popular during the Renaissance and Reformation.

The phrase is also used in relation to science, the universe and God, but Levi wrote that, by making the gesture, his Baphomet "expresses the perfect harmony of mercy with justice".

Two young children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"We hope children will see this as a beautiful work of art - there is nothing to be afraid of. That's what the children symbolise," says Greaves.

"The goat's face has a neutral expression. It's not demonic, ferocious or monstrous - as people make it out to be - if you look at without the cultural baggage."

But do children really have nothing to be afraid of from Satan?

"I don't think children appreciate the monument without being primed by propaganda will find anything horrific about it," says Greaves.

"But we're about not indoctrinating children. For the most part children are forced into religion. That's something we definitely don't care to do."

The Caduceus

On the Baphomet's stomach is an old Greek symbol of two serpents entwined around a staff - the staff which was carried by Hermes and heralds in general.

The caduceus symbolises trade, negotiation and reciprocity and was co-opted into the Baphomet by Levi.

"For us it symbolises reconciliation of the opposites - such as having a Satanic monument opposite a Christian one," says Greaves.

"We think that's a powerful message when it's sitting opposite the Ten Commandments - you can have these dualities, differences without conflict."

Breasts

Levi's Baphomet was a hermaphrodite, with breasts, "but we took the breasts off," says Greaves. The Temple did not want to get embroiled in a debate about gender which might distract from what it believes are the more important messages of the Baphomet.

Instead, he says, the boy and girl reflect that "male-female dualism" seen in Levi's Baphomet.

Pentagram

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| Are nearly rendering of the statue and throne - featuring the inverted pentagram

Seen both on the forehead of the Baphomet and on the throne behind him, the pentagram is a widely recognised Satanic symbol - and often appears inverted.

Sarah Peter's cross is often inverted too - as it was during the Satanic Temple's wedding ceremony.

"This inversion is Satan's perception. It aids people to reconsider their cultural grounding, look at the evidence and reconsider their values," says Greaves.

"Has Satan this one-sided vision with institutionalised religion as the arbiters of moral correctness.

"It prevents them considering whether they could be incorrect today on issues such as gay marriage and reproductive rights.

"It's true you don't have to identify with Satan to take on those causes. But the image of Satan resonates for us."

MATT ANDERSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Torch between horns

"The torch of knowledge is the middle horn - it glorifies the pursuit of knowledge. We put a high value on that - it's really central to our beliefs in general," says Greaves.

As Levi wrote: "The flame of intelligence shining between his horns is the magic light of the universal balance, the image of the soul enlightened above matter, as the flame, which being tied to matter, shines above it."

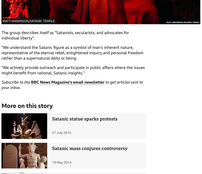
Inscriptions

These have yet to be added but the Satanic Temple gave details of their plans in a statement last year.

On the front of the statue, above the inverted pentagram, will be one of the Satanic Temple's seven tenets: "Reason and Science are the foundation of wisdom, and justice should always prevail over the written or spoken word."

The back of the stone slab will display a passage from Lord Byron's dramatic work, Cain that reads: "Then who was the Demon? He who would not let yet live, or he who would have made ye live forever, in the joy and power of knowledge?"

What is the Satanic Temple?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The group describes itself as "Satanists, secularists, and advocates for individual liberty".

"We understand the Satanic figure as a symbol of man's inherent nature, representative of the eternal rebel, enlightened inquiry and personal freedom rather than a supernatural deity or being.

"We actively provide outreach and participate in public affairs in the issues might benefit from rational, Satanic insights."

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