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Exhuming the Artistic Afterlife from One of NYC's Historic Cemeteries

by Allison Meier on September 15, 2014



Maquette for Patricia Cronin's "Memorial to a Marriage"

Up in the Bronx, at the end of the line of the 4 train, is a “remarkable museum of American funerary art,” as the wall text for Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, Art and Landscape at Woodlawn at Columbia University’s Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery puts it. That “remarkable museum” is Woodlawn Cemetery, and the exhibition makes a case for it as a major resource of architecture and decorative arts history in New York City.

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Back in 2006, Woodlawn gave its archives — including photographs, blueprints, drawings, and other records — to Columbia's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library. These form the foundation of the exhibition, which also includes pieces usually installed on the burial grounds, such as a marble cherub from 1926 by Adolph Weinman that prays solemnly near the entrance. Co-curated by the Avery's Curator of Drawings and Archives Janet Parks, architect Charles D. Warren, and Woodlawn's Director of Historical Services Susan Olsen, the galleries offer intricate ironwork that usually lines mausoleums, books related to cemetery history in the United States, maps, and even a reflection of contemporary art in the cemetery with a maquette for Patricia Cronin's "[Memorial to a Marriage](#)."

Woodlawn celebrated its 150th anniversary last year, following another commemoration of another grand NYC cemetery: Green-Wood in Brooklyn marking its 175th. Green-Wood was also lauded with an exhibition, theirs at the Museum of the City of New-York. But while that show concentrated heavily on the individual people buried there, bringing in related objects in a way that felt at times random and detached from the space, the Woodlawn exhibition is much more centered on the incredible art of the necropolis itself. And there's definite value in doing so: Woodlawn is a place where Tiffany windows are installed in tombs (one of which is part of the Harbeck mausoleum, which was also set up for electricity even though the plots aren't wired for it), the prominent iron artist Samuel Yellin designed metalwork, and the elite of the city were trying to always outdo each other with taste and grandeur. (I explored some of this in a previous post for Hyperallergic.)

Yet one thing that's curiously missing from the exhibition is the reason for it existing: death. Behind every impressive mausoleum blueprint, with its public face, private interior, and even more private crypt carefully drawn, is a corpse. A collection of marble busts positioned in one gallery comes with little context indicating the people whose tombs they ordinarily guard, such as the Dunlops, whose sculptures usually overlook a parrot in a glass-topped coffin. It might darken, but would probably also enhance, the exhibition to examine what compels people to build these stunning memorials that they themselves will never see.

[Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, Art and Landscape](#) at Woodlawn continues at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University (926 Schermerhorn Hall, Morningside Heights, Manhattan), through November 1.

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