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Designs That Outlived Their Benefactors

By EVE M. KAHN AUG. 20, 2014

Woodlawn Cemetery, a national historic landmark in the Bronx that turned 150 last year, is celebrating with an exhibition on its spectacular Gilded Age tombs. “Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, Art and Landscape at Woodlawn,” which opens on Sept. 3 at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, will offer a display of ironwork, sculpture, stained glass and furniture from the mausoleums along with records from the cemetery’s voluminous archives, which were transferred to Columbia in 2006.

In a conference room lined with dark paneling and gloomy portraits of cemetery trustees, Susan Olsen, a curator of the exhibition and the cemetery’s director of historical services, discussed the challenges of researching tomb designers and what it was like to contact the descendants of those whose lavish graves had long been forgotten. Ms. Olsen, 56, also discussed her own posthumous plans. (This interview has been edited and condensed.)

Q. How do people usually react when they find out they have an ancestor buried there?

A. It can be a bizarre, extremely personal and very interesting process. Sometimes we’re calling out of the blue to let them know, “Well, along with your city place and your country place, guess what? You’ve got a home at Woodlawn, too!”

We want to make sure they realize, one, there’s a work of fine art here that needs their care and, two, there’s space available if they’re interested. We also want them to connect with the rest of the family, to bring them here as well. For many people, if they have been here before, it was when they were teenagers and a grandparent died, and now they’re in their 60s and thinking about what we think about when we reach that age. So sometimes the family has no idea how beautiful the tomb is?

The Metz family, for instance, had no idea that theirs was done by Marie Zimmermann, an extremely important Arts and Crafts designer. That’s the best part of my job, telling people stories like that and hearing their stories. It’s amazing how many of the families here are related to each other, too, how much shared DNA there is at Woodlawn.

Sometimes hearing from us brings up painful memories of multiple marriages, tragedies in the family, but still most folks are very forthcoming and want to share with us. And often they still have the cemetery folder somewhere. When we track them down, they say, “Oh, that’s what those funny keys are for.”

Does anyone you contact want to sell part of the mausoleum?

The objects inside are part of the monument. You can’t just put the bust of Grandpa’s head on eBay, or take out the Tiffany windows. If the heirs did decide to sell, we would go to court to stop them and we would win.

As the archives get sifted, at Columbia and here, are you finding more treasures?

We’ve got 13 works by McKim, Mead & White identified so far, and we found a Delano & Aldrich the other day. We have correspondence from John Russell Pope, and hardly any of his records survive.

We’ve found that each one of our architects had their favorite artisans. If the architect is McKim, Mead & White, the windows are Tiffany. If it’s James Gamble Rogers, the gate is by Samuel Yellin.

And we’re up to 11 Guastavinos now, and we have the major women landscape designers represented, too: Ellen Biddle Shipman, Beatrix Jones Farrand, Marian Cruger Coffin — they all came to Woodlawn. Every day we’re discovering something new, all sorts of little stories that weave in and out of this place.

How about you, where do you want to be buried?

I want to be cremated. We have glass-fronted cabinets here for cremated remains and mementos. I’ll have my own little exhibit, as it should be.

“Sylvan Cemetery: Architecture, Art and Landscape at Woodlawn” runs from Sept. 3 through Nov. 1.

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A maquette of “Memorial to a Marriage” by Patricia Cronin. Credit Danny Ghitis for The New York Times