

Sculpture in the Non-Catholic Cemetery of Rome

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(For the illustrations, see the published Italian version)

The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, also known as the “Protestant Cemetery,” is not the earliest of its kind in Italy,¹ but it offers the longest chronological span of monuments, from the eighteenth century to the present. Indeed, the cemetery is still in use, providing a final resting place not only to Protestant Christians, but also to Greek and Russian Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, and those of many other faiths and philosophies.

Before the eighteenth century, Protestants and other “heretics” who died in Rome were usually buried outside of the walls, often at a place called the Muro Torto, along with prostitutes, criminals, and other “sinners” or undesirables.² Protestants were forbidden by canon law to be buried in consecrated ground. In the age of the Grand Tour, when wealthy northern Europeans came to Italy in increasing numbers, it became desirable to provide a burial ground that did not have such negative associations. The fact that the Stuart court of Great Britain was in exile in Rome, where James III Stuart found papal protection, was an important factor, as there were many Protestants as well as Catholics in the Stuart entourage, and they were of too high a rank to be buried with prostitutes.

¹ The English cemetery in Livorno dates from 1598, while the Protestant cemetery on the Lido in Venice was established in 1684. Livorno and Venice were important ports, located outside of the Papal States and thus in places more tolerant toward non-Catholics. The Protestant Cemetery in Rome was the next to be created, in the early eighteenth century. Later non-Catholic cemeteries are located in Siracusa (ca. 1800), Naples (1826), Florence (1827), Bagni di Lucca (1842), and Capri (1878), and areas reserved for non-Catholic burial were set aside in the cemeteries of other Italian cities, such as Bologna (ca. 1820). Early Protestant cemeteries are also found in Portugal (Lisbon, 1717; Madeira), Spain (Malagá, 1831), Malta (Valletta, 1806), Greece (Athens, Corfu), and Turkey (Istanbul).

² For the history of the Cemetery, see: *The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the "Parte Antica,"* by Carl NYLANDER ... [et al.]; edited by Antonio MENNITI IPPOLITO and Paolo VIAN (Roma: Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell'Arte in Roma, 1989); Wolfgang KROGEL, *All'ombra della Piramide: storia e interpretazione del Cimitero acattolico di Roma* (Roma: Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia storia e storia dell'arte in Roma, 1995); Carl NYLANDER, “The people at the pyramid: notes on the Protestant cemetery in Rome,” in: *Suecoromana. - 1. Docto peregrini: Roman studies in honour of Torgil Magnuson* (Stockholm: Istituto Svedese di Studi Classici, 1992), p. [221]-249; Catherine PAYLING, “The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome: a history,” *Keats-Shelley Review* 20 (2006): 52-57.

After about 1720,³ such Protestants began to be buried near the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, just inside the walls and not far from Monte Testaccio. This area was then a common grazing ground. The Pyramid, with its obvious funerary connotations and its beautiful, simple shape, and the adjacent Aurelian Wall already had great appeal for artists.

Throughout the rest of the eighteenth century, Protestants were buried here in largely unmarked graves, as the funerary regulations of the time forbade epitaphs or monuments. Burial was usually at night (fig. 1), to avoid notice and, later, during times of cholera, to avoid contagion.

In 1765, simple monuments and epitaphs began to be permitted, though their content was still strictly regulated. Crosses, Christian symbols, or references to the afterlife were discouraged (even for Catholics at the time) and are very rare. The earliest monuments were approved by the Pope himself. For his monument for James MacDonald, a young member of the Stuart court who died in 1766, Giovanni Battista Piranesi chose an ancient Roman column, and added an inscription in which his own name is also present as the dedicator of the tomb (fig. 2). The simplicity of this tomb is deceptive, as it combines two ancient motifs: the truncated column is an old symbol of the interruption of life by death, while the form of the inscription is similar to that of an ancient Roman milestone.⁴

A single column was also the choice in 1807 for the little son of the Wilhelm von Humboldt, Prussian minister to the Holy See, who was the first person to obtain permission for a family plot. Based on the importance of this concession, the Germans took the lead in looking after the Cemetery's interests throughout the 19th century, even though the Cemetery was (and still is among Italians) commonly known as the "English cemetery."

Three monument types, all drawn from Classical antiquity, were popular before 1810: the column, the sarcophagus, and the pedestal (or altar). If there is any relief sculpture, it is usually confined to heraldic imagery or very simple motifs, such as the jug and disk, a reference to the pouring of funeral libations.

³ The earliest name mentioned in documents (William Ellis) dates from 1732, while the earliest actual burial remains which can be dated are from 1738: George Langton, an Englishman, whose name is known from a lead shield covering his remains.

⁴ Cf. Roberta BATTAGLIA, "Giovanni Battista Piranesi e il monumento funebre: la tomba MacDonald," *Prospettiva* 73/74 (1994): 169-179.

The earliest examples of high relief in the Cemetery are also Neo-Classical. The first was the beautiful stone erected to the memory of an American, Elisa Watson, Lady Temple (1771-1809), a beloved wife and mother of four children. It is modeled on Roman altar reliefs, with a scene of leave-taking and mourning (fig. 3). The sculptor was Erik Gustav Goethe, a Swede.

The poet John Keats, like many of the people in the oldest part of the Cemetery, was neither rich nor famous when he died in 1821. He did not want his name on the stone, but only the line “Here lies one whose name is writ in water.”⁵ He also requested an image of a Greek lyre, with a broken string, symbolic of the silencing of the poetic voice (fig. 4). This motif, unique in the Cemetery, is drawn from Keats’s poetry, especially his *Endymion*, but has roots in antiquity.⁶

The year after Keats’s death, a wall was built around the oldest part of the Cemetery, known thereafter as the *Parte Antica*, and a new section was laid out to the west, with regular terraces. No more burials were to be allowed in the *Parte Antica*, although this rule was occasionally violated.

In 1824, Rosa Bathurst, age 16, drowned in the Tiber, swept away while on a riding party. Her mother, who had already lost her husband under mysterious circumstances, poured all of her grief into a long inscription in both English and Italian. Reliefs by the English sculptor Richard Westmacott II show a *genius* comforting a female mourner (on one side, fig. 5) and holding an inverted torch (on the other). This was as close as one could come at the time to the representation of the Christian hope of life after death, but still firmly in the Neo-Classical style. This tomb was made famous by Henry James, who first saw it in 1871 and described it in his book *Italian Hours*.⁷

⁵ For the story of Keats’ death and how his tomb became the most famous in the Cemetery, a magnet for poetry-lovers and an icon of the Romantic movement, see: *Keats and Italy: a history of the Keats-Shelley House in Rome* (Roma: Il Labirinto, 2005) and Catherine PAYLING, “An Echo and a Light unto Eternity: the Founding of the Keats Shelley Memorial House” (with Italian translation) in *Spellbound by Rome: The Anglo-American Community in Rome (1890-1914) and the Founding of the Keats-Shelley House* (Rome: Palombi, 2005): 23-36.

⁶ Cf. John Curtis FRANKLIN, “Once more the poet: Keats, Severn, and the Grecian lyre,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 48 (2003): 227-239.

⁷ Henry James, though he is not buried in Rome, is present in spirit in this Cemetery, thanks to his *Daisy Miller* and to his many friends in real life who were buried there. He summed up the special poignancy of the place in *Italian Hours*: “...the most touching element of all is the appeal of the pious English inscriptions among all those Roman memories; touching because of their universal expression of that trouble within trouble, misfortune in a foreign land.” (H. JAMES, *Italian Hours*, New York: Grove Press, 1959, p. 159, originally published 1909.)

Portrait reliefs became popular in the late 1820s. Some of the earliest were done by Bertel Thorwaldsen, a Dane, one of the most famous sculptors of his generation. His relief of August Goethe, who died in 1830 and was the only son of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, was originally in marble and has been replaced by a copy in bronze.⁸ The English sculptor John Gibson, who is buried in the Cemetery, was the author of the portraits of his fellow sculptor Richard Wyatt and of his own brother Benjamin. The anonymous stone of the Russian painter Karl Brjullof (1799-1852) combines Brjullof's portrait with several other symbols, including artists' brushes and palette and a classical mourning scene.

Free-standing portraits are much rarer. Devereux Plantagenet Cockburn, a Scottish soldier who died in 1850 at age 21 (fig. 6), was represented as a reclining figure, with his favorite dog and an inscription praising his "rare mental and corporeal endowments." The sculptor was Benjamin Edward Spence (1822-1866), from Liverpool, who studied with Richard Wyatt in Rome.

When Italy became a unified nation in 1870, Protestants were allowed to worship freely, and began building their own churches, within the walls of Rome. The old restrictions on cemetery monuments were swept away. Crosses and other Christian symbols were now acceptable. New monuments were built for persons who died long before, such as the Celtic cross erected in the *Parte Antica* for John Bell, a Scottish surgeon, who had died in 1820, his grave marked with a simple slab.

Free-standing sculptures also became more common. Seventeen-year old Maria Obolensky (1855-1873), for example, was depicted as an allegory of melancholy, seated before the half-open door of her tomb chamber, lost in thought or in grief. American sculptor Richard Greenough (1819-1904) erected his beautiful *Psyche divesting herself of mortality* over the grave of his wife in 1886. This tomb was described by Gabriele D'Annunzio in his novel *Il Piacere* as it appeared in the light of early evening: "The statue of Psyche at the top of the central pathway had taken on a pale flesh-like tint."⁹

Classical imagery also prevailed in the tomb of the Finnish art patron Victor Hoving (1846-1876), sculpted by his compatriot Walter Runeberg and featuring a winged genius lifting a palm-branch, and that of the German painter Hans von

⁸ The original marble relief of this monument and that of Heinrich Reinhold (1825) were removed in 1962 and are now in the Thorwaldsen museum in Copenhagen.

⁹ "La statua di Psiche in cima al vlao media aveva assunto un pallore di carne." (In G. D'ANNUNZIO, *Prose di romanzi*, a cura di E. Bianchetti, Milano: 1968, I: 357.

Marees (1837-1887), with an allegorical scene of the artist crowned by the Muse (fig. 7).

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, angels became popular, especially among American monuments.¹⁰ Perhaps the best known is the sculptor William Wetmore Story's *Angel of Grief*, for the tomb of his wife Emelyn, who died in 1895 (fig. 8). Franklin Simmons (1839-1913), also American, created his *Angel of Resurrection* as a monument for his second wife, Ella, who died in 1905. Hendrik Christian Andersen's monumental bronze *Angel of Life* (1912) no longer dominates the Cemetery as it did from 1918 to 1933, but can be seen in his museum in Rome.¹¹

Art Nouveau or *Stile Liberty* is represented by several monuments in the newer parts of the Cemetery. One of the most beautiful tombs was made by Italian sculptor Ettore Ximenes for Thomas Jefferson Page, American naval commander, who died in 1899 (fig. 9). The painter Elihu Vedder created a grieving female figure, her head draped, for his wife and sons.¹² A late work, little known, by the Maltese sculptor Antonio Sciortino for Violet May Court (1915) is the figure of an angel, bent over, picking flowers.

After World War II, the Cemetery came under the control of an international committee of ambassadors from non-Catholic countries, a situation that prevails today. Aesthetic decisions were usually referred to representatives of the various foreign academies, who favored a conservative and homogenous approach through most of the twentieth century.¹³

At any point in the Cemetery's history, however, and especially throughout the nineteenth century, if one compares the monuments of the Non-Catholic Cemetery with contemporary monuments of Campo Verano or any other Italian Catholic cemetery, the overall impression is one of sobriety and relative restraint in sculptural decoration. It has often been said that this aesthetic was determined by the restrictions imposed by the Papal government, but there is more evidence for a kind of self-censorship by Protestants themselves. The sculptural aesthetic here reflects the lasting appeal of the Neo-Classical style among northern Europeans and Americans. The very fact that the Cemetery is located next to the Pyramid conditioned the choice of monuments. Only at the turn of the 20th

¹⁰ Cf. Regina SORIA, "American artists in the Protestant Cemetery" (with Italian translation) in *Spellbound by Rome*, op. cit.: 65-77.

¹¹ Museo Hendrik Christian Andersen, Via Pasquale Stanislao Mancini, 20.

¹² This tomb probably dates to 1909, when Vedder's wife Caroline died, although he had lost two sons in the 1870s. Vedder himself lived until 1925 and is buried in the same plot.

¹³ The present study considers only moments up to the beginning of the First World War.

century, in the parts of the Cemetery furthest from the Pyramid, does one find a freer aesthetic based on international Art Nouveau, and that lasted only for a comparatively brief period.

The monuments in the Non-Catholic Cemetery are now increasingly threatened by air pollution, biological growth, soil subsidence, and insufficient funds with which to address these problems. Concern is not lacking: the Cemetery was named to the 2006 World Monuments Watch List of the most endangered sites in the world. New efforts are underway to save the Non-Catholic Cemetery and its monuments, drawing on the appeal which this site has always had for visitors to Rome. These efforts may have the added benefit of shedding more light on the sculptors, too many of whom are unknown, and their works.