

Funerary Art
Lenten Devotional
Saturday March 29
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Here I raise my ebenezer
Hither by thy grace I've come
Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He to rescue me from danger
Interposed his precious blood.

An ebenezer is a stone set up as a pillar, a marker, to signify the help of God. It can be seen as a memory aid. In the same way when the Israelites finally crossed the Jordan, God instructed Joshua to "set up twelve stones." These stones would serve as a prompt for the coming generation whose question, "why these stones," can be answered, "we were slaves in Egypt and by the hand of God we were brought to this land."

To set up a stone, be it as an altar or a marker or even a tribute, is the most basic form of memorial and monument. In the same way, the cairn, the stacked stones, is the most accessible and popular form of statue construction. Yet, from the most ancient statues until today the most common form of statuary is the grave marker, funerary sculpture. From the simple grave marker that doesn't rise above the ground to the massive crypts and mausoleums, each can be found in every community and every town, and often in great number.

Although an ancient practice, the entombment and use of funerary statues for individuals is a relatively recent phenomenon. Prior to the French Revolution, the crypt and tomb and massive statues surrounding them were reserved for royalty and wealth. More common before the sense of egalite became a burial practice, a common grave was more likely as well as a church yard where the "saints" could be buried. Also, the family plot in the rural area of America was much more the norm than the cemetery of the city.

Two factors greatly changed our funeral/burial practice and with it American public statuary. The first was the geographical challenge of burying the casualties of the Civil War. For families in the northern states the pain of loss was compounded when the bodies of their beloved were brought home for burial. Bloated and rotting, the bodies of Northern soldiers often were unrecognizable by their families. From this painful experience arose the reintroduction of the ancient practice of embalming. Deceased soldiers could now be brought home in a condition that preserved their appearance. In addition to embalming, reburial was also a common practice during and after the civil war. Hundreds of thousands

of soldiers were “brought home” after having been buried and then exhumed from battlefield graves.

The second change in America burial process was the introduction of elaborate markers, often symbolic, to create a private monument. These statues took many, many forms. One of the most common monuments that can be found in cemeteries after the Civil War was the obelisk. Seen as a symbol of eternal life, American cemeteries began to resemble an Egyptian monumental scene with their popularity.

Both the process of embalming and the introduction of elaborate statuary created the funeral industry that shaped American culture until the recent rise in cremation. What was often the work of the local furniture maker, pastor, and family, now became a corporate industry complete with state laws prohibiting people from burying their own dead and where the dead could be buried. Although the later restriction is an ancient practice (burying outside the city), the current legal restrictions regarding burial are not so much a matter of public health, but commercial considerations.



Perhaps the greatest change of late in funerary statues is the image of the deceased or symbols held dear by the deceased. To have a statue of a person in full relief or in base relief, has always been a great expense. Such images are the work of renowned artists. A great example is the very popular relief statue of Robert Louis Stevenson completed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Yet today a “laser etching” can achieve something similar. What is significant here is the symbols have shifted from references of eternal life and grief to a kind of eulogy in stone.



Such “personalization” replaced the “Victorian” designs more commonly seen in cemeteries after the Civil War and unto the later 20th century. Most common were the willow and urn. The willow symbolizing grief and the urn eternal life.



From the Victorian symbols, the obelisk, the grand crypt crafted to appear as a Grecian temple, to the now personalized laser etched images, funerary art is an expression of loss and mourning. What is of interest here is the consistent desire for people to be recognized, authentic, even lifelike. This need for authenticity and the personal is key to the modern monument and memorial.

Perhaps the greatest example of this can be seen in the recent addition of the Eisenhower Memorial in Washington D.C. Here Eisenhower is depicted as leader of troops, a president both as a mature man and leader of the nation, and then as a young boy growing up in Iowa.

The memorial leads the visitor to see the span of Eisenhower’s life and career, his evolution as it were, but it also reveals a key aspect of his personality. Although a man who possessed great power and responsibility, Eisenhower was known for his humility and his persistent lack of grandiosity.



The Eisenhower memorial is far from an Ebenezer or a cairn. Total cost to complete the design of the statuary, the inscriptions, and the plaza that contain them was over \$140 million. A large part of this cost was the massive elements surrounding the statues, and some would suggest overshadowing them. Yet if we see the value which best embodies modern funerary statues is authenticity, personalization, the lifelike, the colossal elements surround the statues of Eisenhower seems to “pay” what is owed to him. The memorial “captures” his life: he lived and thrived in the midst of events often grand in scale, but yet he was not consumed by them.

Yet of greatest interest for this study is the idea that the Eisenhower Memorial is not about loss or grief or sacrifice or greatness, it is about the person, the life, the living memorial held by those who remember him. It is his image not a symbol. This is important because it reveals the emerging tension of personal and common memory, the individual and the collective recollection.