

From Da Bronx to Eternity

by **Allison Meier** on July 3, 2012



"Lion" by J. Massey Rhind on the Ehret Mausoleum, 1913 (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

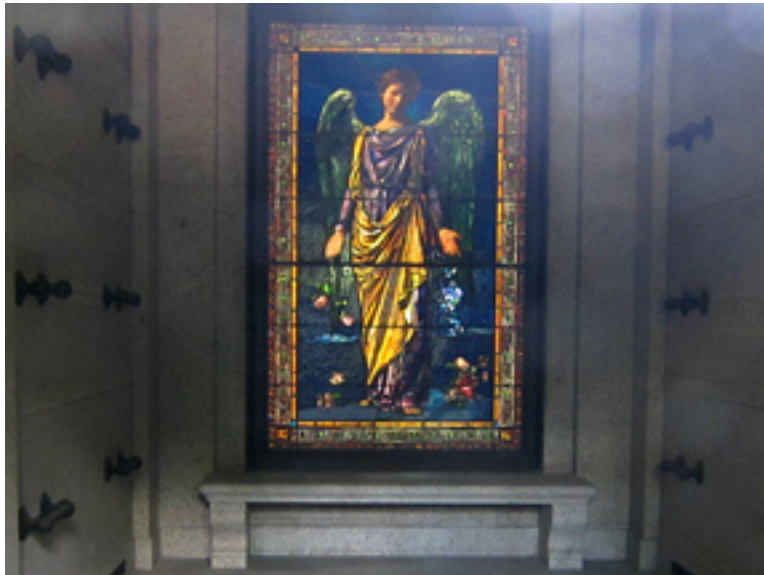
Editorial note: This is the second in a [series](#) that explores the sculpture of New York's cemeteries.

Stepping through the gates of [Woodlawn Cemetery](#) in the Bronx, you are first awed by the sheer number and size of the mausoleums that tower over its more than 400 acres. Once you begin to explore this 19th century city of the dead, you discover the incredible details that went into all these personal memorial estates, from the ornate metal gates to the bronze, granite and marble statuary, and then peaking through the doors you see bursts of color in delicate stained glass. You notice the sculptures of familiar cemetery motifs of angels and mourning ladies, but also highly personal tributes by some of the most recognizable 19th and 20th century artists.



Patricia Cronin, "Memorial to a Marriage"

In June, I explored the [rich art collection](#) contained within Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, and this past Sunday I took the 4 train to the end of the line for a tour with Susan Olsen, the Director of Historical Services at Woodlawn Cemetery, to further discover the history of art in New York City's cemeteries. I also met with Patricia Cronin, whose above "Memorial to a Marriage" I wrote about in [October 2011 for Hyperallergic](#). The bronze sculpture depicts Cronin and her wife Deborah Kass asleep together, and it was created as both a monument to a marriage she thought they would never be able to have, and also as a future memorial for them in the cemetery. While unique sculptures like Cronin's that act as personal monuments are not as popular as they were a hundred years ago, they continue to serve as a final and meaningful way of commemorating a life through art. Surrounding Cronin's sculpture and throughout the cemetery are other beautiful examples of 19th, 20th and 21st century art, which were made or acquired for graves and tombs instead of the gallery.



Stained glass window by John LaFarge

Woodlawn Cemetery was opened in 1863 in Westchester County, an area that was not yet the Bronx, but would be annexed to New York City in 1874. It now contains over 300,000 interments, reflecting all corners of New York history with such notable figures as Miles Davis, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, Celia Cruz, Herman Melville, Ralph Bunche, Fiorello La Guardia, Joseph Pulitzer, Robert Moses, Nellie Bly and Otto Preminger.

The rural cemetery, designed by James C. Sidney as a sprawling garden accented with monuments and trees that are now some of the oldest in the city, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2011, partly due to its around 1,300 private mausoleums, the most significant collection in the United States. Designed by historic architects like John Russell Pope, McKim Mead & White and Cass Gilbert, they contain stained glass from Tiffany & Co. and artists like John LaFarge, and are surrounded by gardens by landscapers such as the Olmsted Brothers and Beatrix Farrand.

In the 1880s, when many East Coast cemeteries stopped allowing marble monuments due to their deterioration and went to granite, Woodlawn allowed individuals to still use whatever material they chose for their memorials. While it was most active from 1880 to 1930, Woodlawn continues to serve as a working cemetery.



Belmont Mausoleum, exterior and interior

The most stunning of the over a thousand private mausoleums could easily be argued to be the Belmont Mausoleum, a full-scale recreation of the 15th century St. Hubert chapel at the [Château d'Amboise](#) in the Loire Valley of France, the final resting place of Leonardo Da Vinci. This year, Woodlawn received a Partners in Preservation grant from American Express and the National Trust for Historic Preservation to restore the structure and reset the cross that toppled from the top of the mausoleum.



Pediment frieze of the Belmont Mausoleum

The Belmont Mausoleum was built in 1910, and contains the tombs of [Oliver Hazard Perry Belmont](#) and [Alva Erskine Vanderbilt Belmont](#). The story of St. Hubert encountering a stag with a crucifix between its antlers while on a hunt is depicted in stunning detail above the mausoleum doors, with all of it having been carved on-site at Woodlawn. Gargoyles fly out from the sides of the Gothic Flamboyant structure and the interior is just as soaring, with Guastavino arches, a triptych of stained glass, a carved altar and religious murals. Alva Belmont had commissioned the tomb for her husband and it was completed in 1913, supervised by Richard H. Hunt.



Inside the Belmont Mausoleum with the Alva Belmont's suffrage banner

Alva Belmont was an influential figure in the women's suffrage movement, and her Votes for Women banner is kept on display by her tomb in the mausoleum. Near the door is the chair that once was the Belmont's gardener's, who would come and open up the mausoleum so that the public could see inside.



Angel holding an hourglass and painted details by Lee Lawrie in the Harkness Mausoleum



Carving of "Justice" by Lee Lawrie on the ceiling of the Harkness Mausoleum

More subtle, but also impressive, is the 1932 Harkness Mausoleum of the philanthropist [Edward S. Harkness](#) and his wife Mary, which is currently being restored. If you were a visiting family member, the first thing you would encounter would be an H-shaped key that would fit into the metal gate by [Samuel Yellin](#) to the garden, where you would walk through a shaded path to the chapel mausoleum designed by [James Gamble Rogers](#), who also designed the [Edward S. Harkness House](#) in New York. Inside are carvings by [Lee Lawrie](#), best known for the *Atlas* sculpture at Rockefeller Center. The mausoleum is a great example of how an individual would commission every detail for their memorial lot, from the landscaping to the tomb itself, as one cohesive and personalized design reflecting the aesthetic tastes of their lifetime.



Metalwork by Marie Zimmerman



Metal urn box by Marie Zimmermann in mausoleum

Woodlawn is also unique as a place to see a concentration of work by late 19th century and early 20th century, as well as many contemporary, women artists, including sculpture by Janet Scudder, Sally James Farnham and Anna Hyatt Huntington. Sculpture was often an “acceptable” profession for women of the Victorian era, and by placing work in cemeteries they were able to exhibit among and compete with the most significant male sculptors of their time. An incredible glass-doored mausoleum by [Marie Zimmermann](#) has her elegant metalwork winding through over the gates opening to a narrow interior with a stately urn box positioned against a landscape in stained glass.



Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's "Untermeyer Memorial" (1925)

Figures by [Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney](#), the sculptor who founded the Whitney Museum, are breathtaking inside the Untermeyer Memorial, which has sculpted metal doors that open on three sides to reveal the scene within. Samuel Untermeyer was a civic leader and lawyer, and incorporated into the family’s huge burial lot is a slate Star of David with a fountain at its center, backed by a whispering wall.



"Outcast" by Attilio Piccirilli

Treading through the grassy lawns or along the winding roads, there are striking monuments everywhere you look, and even some hidden in the greenery. Wrapped by a spring's growth of vines is the "Outcast" by Bronx-based Italian sculptor Attilio Piccirilli of the [Piccirilli Studio](#), who created the Maine Memorial in Central Park and sculptural details on the Frick Museum. His work always focused on the universal figure of the everyman and he has several pieces in Woodlawn, with this marking the grave of a nephew who perished in WWII. It is a copy of an original that was in the St. Mark's in the Bowery churchyard, which has since been lost.



"Annie Bliss Titanic Victims Memorial" by Robert Aitken

Up on a hill by itself is the Annie Bliss Titanic Victims Memorial, sculpted by [Robert Aitken](#), the creator of one of the pediments on the Supreme Court, who won the chance to design it in a sculpture competition (a common avenue for commissions in the early 20th century). It was completed in 1917 and dedicated to all victims of 1912 disaster.



Memorial to Ida and Isador Straus, with sculpture by Lee Lawrie

Across from the Bliss Memorial is that to Ida and Isador Straus who both perished on Titanic, and a funeral barge carved by Lee Lawrie rests solemnly above their name before a structure designed by James Gamble Rogers accessed by gates created by Samuel Yellin. Isador was an owner of Macy's and also served as a US Congressman before he and his wife were lost to the ocean, with Ida's body never having been recovered.



Memorial to Joyce Alexander Wein

While perhaps less elaborate, the continued use of personalized sculpture for memorial is still an integral part of Woodlawn, particularly in the area favored by the Jazz Greats. In this area you spot etched black granite illustrating Jean-Baptiste Illinois Jacquet playing the saxophone and a dynamic sculptural monument stands as a tribute to Joyce Alexander Wein, who passed away in 2005. Wein's musician husband George Wein was greatly involved with the promotion of jazz throughout the world, particularly with the Newport Jazz Festival and New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival.



Gates mausoleum door by Robert Aitken, 1914

Even just an afternoon exploring Woodlawn's artistic wonders was overwhelming in the amount and quality of work quietly on display in this Bronx cemetery, and it is easy to see why Woodlawn has become such a resource for scholars and students of art and architecture. The records of the cemetery are now held by Columbia University's Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, but the sculptures and mausoleums themselves are accessible to anyone who is willing to make the journey to the cemetery's forested paths.

Woodlawn Cemetery is open daily with entrances at Webster Avenue and East 233rd Street, and Jerome Avenue and Bainbridge Avenue in the Bronx.

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