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Sandra Berresford et al.

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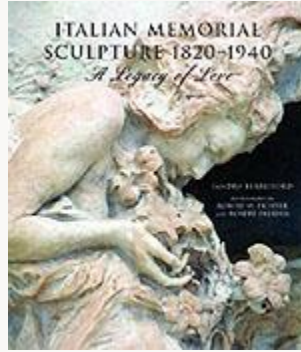
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Italian Memorial Sculpture, 1820-1940: A Legacy of Love

Sandra Berresford, with photographs by Robert Fichter and Robert Freidus and special contributions by Francesca Bregoli, James Stevens Curl, Fred Licht, and Francesco Sborgi
London: Frances Lincoln, 2004

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In December of 1873, Edgar Degas, suddenly called to Turin to the side of his ailing father Auguste, left his painting and his organizational plans for a group exhibit of fellow artists planned for the coming spring. Once in Italy, the artist found himself *en plein Piémont* in suspended tension, hoping his father would improve and could continue his journey. The 66-year-old banker eventually rallied, only to reach his brother's home in Naples in a weakened condition where he died on February 23, 1874. Auguste Degas is buried in the Capella Degas in the public cemetery of Poggioreale, where his own father, Hilaire, patriarch of the De Gas banking family, is also interred.[1]

A new volume, *Italian Memorial Sculpture, 1820-1940: The Legacy of Love*, gives us an indication of the profusion of funerary monuments Degas may have visited, notably in Florence, if not in southern Italy. This much needed introduction for the contemporary reader and scholar conveys the surprising range, in a time of progress and positivism, of nineteenth-century sculptures erected to guard the graves of just such middle-class citizens. Sumptuously photographed by Robert Freidus and Robert Fichter, and presented with excellent supporting essays, the work explicates the growth of public cemeteries in northern and central Italy after the Napoleonic Edict of St.-Cloud of 1804, (p. 26, 37), the major figures and styles of Ottocento sculpture, and the prevalent imagery of the day. Though the sculptural effulgence of an earlier time is somewhat muted by a layer of graying soot, and perhaps because the startling white realism of these marbles is ripening to a fine antiquity, the time is right for a review, and recuperation, of nineteenth-century memorial sculpture. To this end, the 476 photographs and numerous color plates that grace the text, which were culled by Freidus and Fichter from over 14,000 images gathered during visits to over ninety cemeteries, are the most effective means of insuring greater awareness of the breadth and depth of this sculptural richness. Despite the dusty appearance of many of the angels and forlorn families, these images capture the best of the sculptural presence within public settings. One angel, having already blown the trumpet of fate, is touched by a glow of light reflecting the setting sun. Such a poetic view both confirms and heightens the

photographers' passion for these distantly nostalgic icons. So too does the photographers' frequent use of the peeling, rusticated walls of yellow, orange, and sienna-toned crypts as background, notably those at Ferrara and Bologna, which feature extraordinary architectural settings.[2]

The only quibble is that, at times, the reader is forced to turn back and forth in order to find the many multi-referenced images in the texts of the five contributors. But this minor inconvenience cannot detract from the fact that *Italian Memorial Sculpture* is a welcome addition to our understanding of Italian nineteenth-century sculpture, hitherto so little known in English language publications. Its focus on funerary monuments adds importantly to our knowledge of the common visual culture of the nineteenth-century Italian bourgeoisie, helpfully exploring the different aspects and meaning of Italian funerary sculpture from the viewpoints of the five contributing authors. James Steven Curl's essay, for example, provides the larger cultural context: the invention of the landscaped final resting places of Italy, Britain and France, as church graveyards became overcrowded and sanitary conditions demanded reform. His text is especially engaging on the literary parallels, notably the phenomenon of Youngism, which encouraged solitary rambles and purposefully melancholy thoughts. He subtitles this "The Growth of Tenderness." Through the popularity of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742-50) into the next century, particularly in its German translation, the notion of burial in gardens resonated with a generation of young Romantic artists just as the wave of new public cemeteries became a hygienic necessity (p.13).[3]

Sandra Berresford's core text discusses both the stylistic evolution of the period from Neoclassicism through Art Deco, and its iconography. She picks up the thread of influence by citing poetry by I. Pindemonte and Ugo Foscolo (d. 1827). Inspired by Canova's famous tomb of Vittorio Alfieri in Santa Croce, Florence, Foscolo penned "I Sepolcri," turning melancholy meditation to patriotic aspirations, and Alfieri's dream of a united Italy, the Risorgimento. As Berresford notes, Foscolo envisioned not only the memorial to an individual life, but a repository of collective memory.

In Milan's Cimitero Monumentale, designed in 1863 in the Lombard-Byzantine style, and initially meant to be a church with a *famedio* set apart to honor Risorgimento patriots, the trend to memorialize heroes paralleled the liberalization of new civil rights for Jewish citizens following the political reforms. Thus, the monument designed in 1887 at the Cimitero Monumentale for the well-known Jewish publishing family, the Treves, featured an almost fully three-dimensional relief by noted Palermo sculptor, Ettore Ximenes, whose numerous public monuments included sculpture on the Vittorio Emanuele II monument in Rome at the end of the century (p.197).[4] This combination of well-known artists with the middle class's new sense of social prestige and enfranchisement becomes a constant theme. Through these sculptural efforts, Italian families of the period aspired to memorialize the greatest sense of tragic loss, the death of a beloved child or parent, seeking to dramatize for posterity the awful void left after such a bereavement in ways powerfully meaningful for them. Although these memorials may strike the modern sensibility as melodramatic and overly sentimental, they testify to the many lives that had been altered forever by the drama of Risorgimento unification.

One need only think of the soaring notes of Italian lyric opera as the heroine lingeringly expires. Here is the embodiment in sculpture of the same impulse, captured in the image of an angel leading a little child heavenward, depicted in many sentimental variations, or the dying husband's last kiss as he lies plumped up on deliciously detailed cushions and linens. One recalls Franco Zeffirelli's cinematic adaptation of *La Traviata* (1983) in which Violetta expires in an ornately swagged and canopied bed, singing through her last labored breaths. Zeffirelli's scene evokes Vincenzo Vela's tomb for the youthful, dying Contessa D'Adda (1852). Much honored by her husband, la Contessa drifts away among starched cushions, fringed by anthropomorphic draperies suggesting hooded mourners, in a private chapel on the estate grounds. For this reason, it is not included in this study of sculpture in public cemeteries, nor is it open to the public to this day, though the plaster original is on view in the Museo Vela in Switzerland. Despite the unsettling effect of such ornamentation, one nevertheless pauses to meditate on the high cost of death in childbirth, the sudden departures before the invention of penicillin or modern antibiotics, concerns that have virtually passed from modern life.

The estimable essay, "Italian Funerary Sculpture after Canova" by Fred Licht, whose writings on sculpture have delineated the field of study for over thirty-five years, casts a contemplative regard across the role and purpose of monuments since the age of the Enlightenment, as made manifest particularly in funerary sculpture. He addresses the often-ignored topic of the evolution of sculpture's larger societal role after the nineteenth century's embrace of "no religion," which, he writes, renders visible "the gradual atrophy of allegory" (p. 27).^[5] Nevertheless, Licht concedes that the Ottocento sculptor's candid confrontations with middle-class grief and longing can present uncomfortably direct, sometimes unintentionally humorous, portrayals. As Licht states, here we find "new contemporary themes...in more concrete fashion." With a strong emphasis on the notion of sculpture in crisis, Licht sets out the dilemma: funerary sculpture evolving from religious contexts to newly candid "monuments to success." A prime example is the merchant Peroni's tomb in Gravedona, on Lake Como, sculpted by D. Barcaglia. Seated atop bales of material crawling with worms, the deceased is rained with gold coins by Fortuna. As Licht points out, Fortuna closely resembles St. John the Baptist and the vermin are silk worms, not at all a medieval memento mori, but rather symbols of the prosperity of the region, based on the export of silk.

As shown by the expansive illustrations accompanying Sandra Berresford's detailed text, Italian funerary monuments included extraordinary sculptures of people of all walks of life. The Berresford chapters trace the evolution of style from Neoclassicism to Realism, the latter representing the most profound roots of the Italian public cemetery movement. In her last three chapters, she turns her focus to Symbolism and the Liberty Style, or *stile floreale*, particularly as manifested in the works of Leonardo Bistolfi. Berresford provides an admirable brief survey of the principal personalities and major movements of Ottocento work in Italy, which should be required reading for those who study nineteenth-century sculpture, with the important caveat that, unfortunately and solely due to the nature of her subject, the major civic monuments of the period are not covered. The bourgeois public cemetery was not the locus for the grand sculptures commemorating the Garibaldis or the Cavours; they presided, and still dominate, in civic squares up and down the peninsula, and not in the place of the people, the public cemetery. This means that several of the most

inventive sculptors of the late nineteenth century do not receive much more than passing commentary here: notably Giuseppe Grandi whose one Milan tomb (1877) has already been moved to the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, and is not illustrated; and Paolo Troubetzkoy, who sculpted a bust portrait of Felice Cameroni as his tomb in 1914. Medardo Rosso is also represented by one singular tomb, for V. B. Onnis, 1888, a wild tangle of attributes at the foot of the pedestal supporting an equally expressive bust in the Milan Cimitero Monumentale.

Berresford correctly acknowledges Vincenzo Vela as head of the Realist school and closely documents his rival, Giovanni Duprè and their differences, as two wings of mid-century practice. Her essays on Bistolfi and the antecedents to his style, principally Odoardo Tabacchi in Turin, who was in turn a disciple of Vela, give the impression that this is a mini-monograph within the larger text. At the same time, her text in its entirety treats all the artists it discusses in non-hierarchical fashion, foregrounding the monuments of technical 'pattern-followers' alongside those of the greatest sculptors of the day. This admirable democracy may, however, become confusing for the neophyte who is just learning the lineaments of Ottocento production. Also, the decision to list the name of the tomb first in the captions, i.e., the deceased, and then the artist second, may be disorienting for the reader just beginning with this field.

After the waning of the strongest Realist impulses, Berresford demonstrates the growth of the fluid, organic style associated with *stile floreale* and Symbolism. These emerge in Bistolfi's most famous tomb sculptures, which elicited his famous popular nickname, the "Poet of Death." The works, often exhibited publicly prior to final placement, in Turin or at the early twentieth-century Venice Biennale, indicate by their very titles—*Grief*, *The Cross*, *The Beauty of Death*, or *The Dream*—the turn toward Symbolist evocation of the mysteries of life and death. Not illustrated, alas, is Bistolfi's tomb monument to the Engadine Swiss painter, Giovanni Segantini, the title of which, *Beauty freed from Matter* (St. Moritz, 1899-1906), enunciates core Symbolist attitudes.

That said, once the chapters on Bistolfi introduce the reader to Symbolist motifs, and the late nineteenth century period, there is a quick tour of his multiple followers ('Bistolfians') and twentieth-century styles such as Art Deco. Despite the need to acknowledge Adolfo Wildt, the major stylistic impulses and ideas explored in the core text emanate from a nineteenth-century sensibility. This is true even at the Toscanini family tomb, built in 1909, sculpted by Leonardo Bistolfi for the commemoration of the death of the great conductor's little son, Giorgio.

The theme of death, as envisioned in a Symbolist vocabulary, is central to the fin-de-siècle era that prized the dream-like hallucinatory mood, the femme fatale, and the organic clinging images of vines, flowers and tendrils. Bistolfi clearly earns a place in future surveys of the sweep of Symbolist art from Vienna, Belgium, or Norway, to Paris.

Part II, an iconography section, follows the stylistic discussion sketched above. This delightful and amusing array of motifs gives a tapas-like menu of brief essays on the prevalent themes of how the nineteenth century honored its dead. The headings, such as "The Bed" or "The 'Magnificent' Widows," call up the unconventional theatricality of these

tombs, not to mention late-century mysteries such as "The Kiss of Death," which is sometimes delivered to the dying figure in bed. "The Bed" begins with an Etruscan-style bronze of a married couple in bed, modeled after the famous tombs of Cerveteri, a monument now in the Turin cemetery (the Torchio monument, artist unknown). This reminds us of the potency of antique ideas, taken literally once again. So too is the author's linguistic reminder that the Greek origin of the word 'cemetery' is from *koimeterion*, which means dormitory (p. 108). These subheadings will give the reader seeking a particular connection within the social mores of the times a variety of depictions: the worker, the role of belief, women as mothers (the dangers of mortality in childbirth), femme fatales, or the embellishment of the bourgeois philanthropist.

If one draws back, and thinks of such iconographic choices in terms famously posed by Erwin Panofsky, that is—does the age honor retrospective accomplishments or the prospective merits of life after death—the clear focus on the here and now, and an individual's primary life accomplishments, is more than evident. Moreover, the state of grief itself, as seen in the embodied mourners grouped at the tomb, deserves consideration. For these ever present mourners suggest a tomb adornment that traces its heritage straight back to Bernini's great papal tombs, such as that of Pope Urban VIII in the Vatican. The difference is that now the mourners are top-hatted gentlemen or corseted ladies. The compositional similarities between Vela's Adami-Bozzi monument (Pavia, Cimitero Generale; and plaster half-size modelli in the Museo Vela, Ligornetto, TI) and the Bernini tomb in the Vatican are readily apparent; Signor Bozzi's posture evokes that of the allegorical figure of Virtue leaning against the sarcophagus of the Pope.

The Vela tomb at the Cimitero in Pavia, identified incorrectly as located in Padua, is sadly absent from the rich illustrations (p. 55). Though such a small oversight is perhaps understandable amongst the many illustrations, it is only a short step from Vela's Realist composition of the dolorous father and poignant grouping of three children at the tomb stele (1844-46), a work we might well call the 'mother' of such embodied grief, to the vivid drama of the mourners' tableau vivant in the Augusto Rivalta monument at Staglieno (1872) where the entire family is assembled at the bed of the deceased.[\[6\]](#)

Worth documenting in the study of religious beliefs made manifest in funerary sculptures is that, for the nineteenth-century middle classes, the enormity of loss finds no succor in 'prospective' meditations. One of the more unexpected, flamboyant realizations of death comes from sculptural images depicting the magnificence of the deceased person's unique contributions in life. The Besenjanica monument by Enrico Butti of Viggiù, *Work and the Vital Spirit of Nature* (designed after 1897, erected in 1907) in the Cimitero Monumental, Milan evokes this style, as the hold of Realism gains prominence. The actual sculpture is dominant at the entrance to the Milan Monumentale, and imparts an impression that nineteenth-century sculpture is literally 'over the top'. The "Breath of Life," a gigantic female figure emerging out of red rock, dominates the entire memorial, titled *Work (Il Lavoro)*. Below her overarching form, a three-dimensional bronze field with two agricultural laborers plowing and pulling at recalcitrant oxen recreates a landscape. The piece combines allegory with a tableau vivant. Having noted its excess, it presents difficulties in analysis and discussion. The reader will know the Besenjanica is considered important, placed as it is twice in full-page spreads: once opposite the first Preface, and later in a full-page detail, in a

discussion of iconography ("Agricultural Ethos"). Amazing and amusing as they are, these technically superb conceits will better engage an audience new to the cemetery and the style if more specific information on the artist, his history, and the origins of the monument were made available. Also the weight of visual presentation must allow for Freidus's admission that the over-scale work first amused him. He references Thurber's famous cartoon of "House and Woman" with the woman reaching around to consume the entire dwelling, just as the spirit of life engulfs the tomb site. Butti's great civic monuments to Giuseppe Verdi in Milan or *The Battle of Legnano*, for example, are not discussed here as they are outside the range of the cemetery. Butti's plasters for monumental work, recently renovated at his gipsoteca in Viggiù, Italy, deserve closer study to bring his career into focus.

In contrast, Lorenzo Orengo is famous for only one monument, and it is found in Staglieno, the great repository of many remarkable and vivid sculptures. Amongst the statues of the lower classes, who found their 'fifteen minutes of fame' in death is the remarkable Caterina Campodonico. She was a fruit and nut vendor, who wears her produce as decorative garlands. Each chestnut and bread roll is lovingly carved, as is her lace-trimmed apron, her earrings and fringed shawl. She has become a dignified proletarian. The sculptor, Orengo, shares in her egalitarian glory, his fame resting entirely on this monument, which she herself had commissioned in 1881.

The last chapters by Francesca Bregoli and Franco Sborgi present important, but distinct, considerations. Bregoli writes on the Jewish cemeteries of Italy, in the chapter entitled "Among the Mourners of Zion and Jerusalem," and provides a contribution in both the religious and sociological sense. The Jewish tombs she discusses, notably in Milan, are not far removed in drama and purpose from those of the Christian cemetery. It seems that tributes to the departed crossed lines of religious practice. Sborgi's essay, "Companions on the Final Journey," focuses on the most prominent funerary conceit, one still accessible to our own times, the angel. His diagnosis of typologies within the world of angels is worth further exploration. He particularly discusses, as against the Christian symbol, the mysterious angel who metamorphoses from the antique 'genius' of neoclassical sculpture, dons a long cloak over antique nudity, but still evokes an ambiguous sexuality, and broods atop the grave. Sborgi's focus on Giulio Monteverde's angel at Staglieno (Oneto monument, 1882) guides the reader to progeny from Barcelona to Buenos Aires, and confirms the popular appeal of the newly multivalent Italian archetype.

In addition to the excellent bibliography, the book concludes with a practical guide to all the cemeteries and mausolea visited by the photographers in their exhaustive documentation project; locations and hours of operation are included. The Gazetteer helpfully provides a list of museums with a focus on sculpture, and individual gipsoteche of the relevant sculptors.

To return to the French painter Edgar Degas, avid observer of the visual culture around him, and later a sculptor; he would have surely noticed the profusion of tomb monuments at Santa Croce, which Mme. De Stael called "perhaps the most brilliant assembly of the dead in Europe" (p. 37). Degas would further commemorate his grandfather's memory in the Bellelli family portrait, where one notes his Aunt Laure still wears mourning black, and

displays her deceased father's portrait on the wall.[7] Had he been a sculptor at that time, Degas might have considered portraying this same group at the tomb.

This idea is not without some historical support. In 1887, when Degas's friend, Albert Bartholomé, lost his beloved wife, Périe, Degas encouraged the painter of academic themes to assuage the pain of his loss by trying sculpture. On Degas's advice, Bartholomé then began a sculptural ensemble of his beloved in bed. Degas himself photographed his friend leaning down to embrace the wife's effigy.[8] Bartholomé then created the final tomb sculpture from this imagined embrace; the two figures commemorated in bronze reside in Père Lachaise cemetery to this day, surmounted by a crucifix. The work simply would not exist without the Italian funerary monument. It also serves to document the pervasive success of the Italian monument in its time.

Italian Memorial Sculpture, 1820-1940: A Legacy of Love gives important reconsideration to the Italian funerary monument as a major contribution to our visual cultural heritage. Both civic and funerary memorials of the Italian peninsula urgently deserve conservation, and perhaps this rich compendium will indeed create a necessary environment for re-evaluation of these sculptures. Both the cultural anthropologist and art historian alike will find that *Italian Memorial Sculpture, 1820-1940: A Legacy of Love* opens a long-neglected area of nineteenth-century artistic practice. The care and delight with which the subject has been studied and presented is infectious.

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Notes

[1] Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Fayard:1991) 316. Fabio Mangone discusses but does not illustrate the Degas tomb, which is devoid of sculptural ornament, but based instead on architectural prototypes from the funerary memorials of Pompeii. [" . . . è una piccola architettura in mattoni ispirata agli antichi monumenti di Pompei." Email communication from Fabio Mangone, September 23, 2005] See Fabio Mangone, *Cimiteri Napoletani: Storia, Arte e Cultura*, (Massa Editrice, 2004). 105. The Mangone text also augments the bibliography on funerary monuments and Italian cemeteries—in Italian—just as *Italian Memorial Sculpture* accomplishes the same goal for an English-speaking audience.

[2] Plates 183, 184, 233:Monuments by Giulio Monteverde, E. Barberi and L. Golfarelli. The angel with reflection of the setting sun is by G. Tadolini in the Perugia Cimitero, [pl. 429].

[3] James Curl notes that the burial of bodies within an enclosed public park actually occurred first in India, as early as the 1767. According to Curl, the South Park Street cemetery in Calcutta was 'embellished with mausolea and lavish tombs...far grander than anything seen in Europe since Roman times...' (p.13).

[4] The popularity of sculptural imagery for Jewish tombs of the period (angels, we learn, were ubiquitous throughout the period, even on Jewish tombs [cf. Pl. 413, to Luisa Estella Jung, sculpted by L. Vimercati, 1886]), led to increased rabbinical commentary, especially after 1871, centered on the 2nd commandment prohibition against imagery.

On E. Ximenes, later prominent in Rome, see: M. Pizzo, *Il Vittoriano* (Rome: 2002); and the critical text C. Brice, *Monumentalité politique et publique à Rome: Le Vittoriano*. Ecole Française de Rome: 1998.

[5] F. Sborgi, in the final essay, "Companions..." seconds this concern as he probes the metamorphosis by the late nineteenth century of this seemingly obvious religious symbol.

[6] The half-size plaster bozzetti of individual mourners—husband with top hat in hand, two older children and the baby poignantly pulling at the father's hand—are exhibited at the Museo Vela in Ligornetto, Ticino, as are the similarly related Rusca family portraits in terracotta busts (Tomb of Cecilia Rusca, 1845, Locarno, Ticino), and are evidence of Vela's early working method. In both instances, Vela creates images of direct portrayal of states of grief at the beginning stage of his career.

For Rivalta, see the Monument to Carlo Raggio, 1872, at Staglieno, Genoa, pl. 83.

[7] Henri Loyrette, pp. 144-48, documents Degas's portrait of the Bellelli, and refers to both his Aunt Laure and her sister Fanny (Stephanie) in Naples as being of a decided melancholic temperament, which the former particularly shared with her nephew, Edgar, at the time of her father's death.

Boggs, Jean Sutherland, Loyrette, Henri, Tinterow, Gary, et.al. *Degas* (1988): Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 252-54. The portrait of the *Duchessa de Montejasi and her Two Daughters* (1876) is Aunt Fanny, and one factor in the dating has traditionally been the return trip to Naples where Degas attended two family funerals, that of his uncle Achille, and the next year, his little nephew Georges. The work then in a private collection is today in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

[8] See Therèse Burolet, *Degas Scultore*, (Mazzotta Editore) which illustrates both the 1888 photo of Mme. Périe Bartholomé's effigy, embraced by her husband, and the completed work in the Père Lachaise Cemetery. Burolet quotes Fleury as saying the first photo is by Degas. 52-53.