

Use and Absence of Neoclassicism in Chicago Funerary Art

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Juxtaposed between Chicago's "L" train lines and its skyscrapers, Graceland Cemetery juts out as a field of neoclassical funerary monuments. The park serves as the resting place for many of Chicago's most prominent, including Daniel Burnham, Joseph Medill, and Potter Palmer. Graceland's edifices appear not to be analogous to typical Roman and Greek funerary art, but rather to borrow artistic traits common to other architectural feats. However, alongside these Roman-Greco monuments, other much smaller and less elegant monuments pop up. It appears that, in Graceland Cemetery, systemic differences arise between those Chicagoans marked by extravagant funerary art and those marked by more austere styles.

One of the most unorthodox monuments in Graceland cemetery belongs to the famed Chicago architect, Howard van Doren Shaw. Its design combines the modern and the ancient: the bottom half of his monument is shaped in an obelisk, a style which nearly overwhelms the field; distinctively, however, a green sphere tops this unique monument. Compared to many monuments within the cemetery, Shaw's tomb appears relatively modest and contemporary in design, thereby reflecting his work as an architect, sometimes regarded as "the conservative eclectic style".¹ Unlike many architects memorialized in Graceland cemetery, this Chicago native did not work on large public, grand projects. Instead, his artistic specialty lay in "domestic architecture".² Just as his statue ignores the tremendously popular Beaux-Arts trend, so too did his work. Shaw's work on residences was renowned for "combining diverse materials for a harmonious effect".³ Shaw's monument continues this legacy, and demonstrates play with color, material, and shape. The green orb placed atop contrasts with the gray granite, and the curves of the orb play against the angular obelisk. The artistic techniques employed in Shaw's funerary art stand in distinct contrast to the neoclassical architecture within Graceland, just as his career stood out from other Chicagoans.

Similarly, modesty appears to be a trend among the funerary art placed in memory of architects at Graceland. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, too, is memorialized by a simple sheet of stone. The cut stone, perhaps 2 inches high, bears only an inscription of the architect's name and dates of birth and death. Since the monument is so easily overlooked, it is possible that this plaque is not intended to serve as a memorial to the architect, but merely his resting place. Rohe's work and memory are preserved elsewhere, on a much grander scale: some of his works may be viewed today in downtown Chicago, including the tall 880 Lake Shore Drive residences and the Federal Building. Like much of the eclectic architecture in downtown Chicago, these buildings use innovative design and material. Rohe avoided the Neoclassical trend in Chicago, instead designing in "modern contemporary" style.⁴ Just as clean in appearance as his formal designs, the simplicity of his funerary marker speaks volumes amidst larger monuments.

Just as Rohe, Burnham's resting place is also nearly inconspicuous. It is marked by a medium-sized boulder, which blends seamlessly into the naturalistic landscaping. Though it is perhaps not the monument desired by the Graceland Cemetery, whose regulations state that "no monument and no portion of vaults above ground shall be of any material other than cut stone, granite or marble, without the consent of the Company".⁵ The rugged boulder seems to teeter along these guidelines, as it is arguably not a "cut" stone. Only a careful eye can discern the spot as a funerary monument, and it is certainly an unexpectedly modest marker for such a prominent architect. Within an otherwise completely unadorned rock, a simple green plaque names Burnham and his wife. Such an image stands in stark contrast to his work, and the expected funerary monument for the architect would be in the classical tradition, because of his work on the Chicago's World Fair. The surprising choice of his funerary marker could have been chosen to fulfill a number of ends: for example, it is possible that Burnham wished to separate himself from his neoclassical architecture. Among the elite, Beaux-Arts architecture gained a negative reputation as uninspired and predictable. Therefore, perhaps Burnham did not wish to have his legacy memorialized by a style that, although successful and popular among the public, was highly criticized by his colleagues. One such critic was his contemporary Louis Sullivan, also buried in Graceland. In Sullivan's autobiography, he accused Burnham of possessing a "megalomania concerning the largest, the tallest, the most costly and sensational" in design.⁶ It is reasonable that Burnham would wish to escape such a reputation. Moreover, it is also possible that Burnham wanted to be remembered not by his grave, but rather by his lasting architectural contributions, which notably included city planning for Chicago. Thus, perhaps a walk through downtown Chicago is a better memorial than Burnham's burial plot.

On the other hand, businessman William Kimball's monument stands out as one of the largest and most brilliant works at Graceland. It is one of the very few monuments to be built of marble, glimmering in a sea of stone and concrete. Consisting of six columns, the monument extends tall and takes on a decidedly classical appearance. Its six Corinthian style columns are topped by an ornate frieze, which bears the Kimball name and is further decorated by engraved wreathes and garlands. Since the plot ownership dates back to at least 1870, it is reasonable to assume that there was a certain degree of forethought to the design of the edifice.⁷ The Kimball family legacy itself has been built by William Kimball, who initially "launched his career as a piano dealer".⁸ Perhaps testifying to the spirit of the entrepreneur, setbacks such as the Chicago fire urged on Kimball to manufacture his own pianos and organs.⁹ From such biographical information, it may be inferred that Kimball's reputation lay primarily in his skills as a businessman, not necessarily as an artisan. As a result, Kimball lacked the tangible memorial to his name that certain other architects possessed, and the role of the funerary monument grows more influential. Thus, it is possible to shed light on why Kimball selected such a grand monument; this was his exclusive physical memorial.

Perhaps the only monument to rival the scale of Kimball's, the Palmer Mausoleum demands attention from any visitor to Graceland. The structure has the appearance of a Classical temple, consisting of 16 tall (6x4) columns finished in Ionic order. Moreover, the monument, designed by McKim, Mead, and White, is also fully roofed.¹⁰ The banner, connecting the columns, displays the Palmer name, and is sandwiched by two layers of ornamentation. On the floor of the edifice lie the sarcophagi of Potter and Bertha Palmer. These too are decorated in classical style; a carving featuring vines of foliage encompasses the sarcophagi. Indeed, its huge size and grand style sends a clear message of power and wealth to cemetery visitors. Palmer himself had built a strong reputation through his work as a business man, serving as a "real estate entrepreneur and hotel-owner".¹¹ Through his lavish monument, the Potter family legacy continues.

George Pullman, the noted Chicago inventor, also rests in Graceland cemetery. His grave follows classical trends too, but includes stylistic alterations designed by Solon Beman.¹² His grave site is marked by a single column, which extends to tall heights. The Corinthian order column stands alone, with a circular foundation; on either side of the column are benches. It is unlike any other in Graceland cemetery; while

the classical element is present, it manifests through innovative measures. Perhaps Pullman's monument was an attempt to ally himself with the well-respected already buried in Graceland. Pullman himself had a somewhat unclear reputation in his business life. He experienced financial success by having "mounted [a car] onto sixteen wheels and attached it to a train," and subsequently, "sold the right to sleep in it;" a concept known as the sleeper car.¹³ However, as seen in this satirical editorial, George Pullman was not universally regarded as innovative. Just as Pullman's career, his funerary monument is not the most grandiose or elegant structure, but certainly invokes intrigue and further study. In the tradition of other prominent Chicagoans, it invokes traditionally classical architecture.

While classical influence stands out in Graceland cemetery, the question still remains as to how these monuments compare to ones found in classical antiquity. This can be examined both in terms of epitaph and architecture. It seems that both the monuments of architects and businessmen alike in Graceland include only concise inscriptions. On the other hand, in classical antiquity, funerary art would read much like the modern-day obituary. The burial plot would likely be marked by a stele, or decorated slab of stone. Many Roman stelai included a portrait, name, and the names of family members, and who made the monument. The portrait, usually done in relief, is of particular interest. From the image, one could discern much about the deceased party, including their career and any notable achievements. Conversely, the monuments in Graceland cemetery employ the more grand aspects of classical architecture. Monuments that would never be found on the winding roads into Rome, the equivalent to graveyards, now have taken over Graceland cemetery. However, the pseudo-classical monuments in Graceland conjure up an immediate response of "Roman-ness," which a traditional funerary stele might not. "Roman-ness", to a Chicagoan, would likely invoke thoughts of power, success, and organization; attributes by which one would wish to be remembered.

In Graceland, most of the prominent monuments borrow architectural design from the classical world, especially Rome. However, these same monuments depart from the style normally used for ancient funerary stelai. Nowhere within the Chicagoan graveyard do traditionally-stylized Roman monuments appear, with portrait monument and extensive epitaphs. Instead, Graceland exudes the most lavish and intricate designs, which would likely appear on expensive public works in the classical world. From this departure, it is evident that Graceland's funerary monuments do not seek imitation, but rather connotations of the classical world. To a 20th century Chicagoan, this classical period meant authority and prosperity. The appearance of elegant columns, friezes, and marble send a visual message and personal statement about the memorialized: affluence. On the other hand, those who worked in the architectural field fervently avoid this statement. Rather, their memorials are in other styles or strikingly simple, as in the case of Ruhe and Burnham. Reception of the classical arts varied widely among elite and public. To an architect, classical influence seemed pedestrian, a much different perspective from that of most others in Chicago. Possibly in order to separate themselves from these negative associations, a departure from the classical world was essential both to maintain artistic reputation, but also to discourage the public from strongly associating the architect with his final resting place; instead his work would be his most important memorial.

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[3](#)Wriston "Howard Van Doren Shaw," 87.

[4](#)Graceland Commission (1982).

[5](#)Graceland Charter (1861).

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