

Nearly abandoned, funerary art loses relevance

Focused on cemeteries São José I and II, study traces the history of local funerary art and emphasizes the importance of preserving monuments

By Carolina Golenia

The word “cemetery” comes from the Latin expression *coemeterium*, which means “a place to sleep”. Throughout history, these places suffered continuous modernization. Considering the increasing population and, consequently, the number of people who die, great funerary monuments are being replaced by smaller tombs, and funerary art, by crematoria. Luiza Fabiana Neitzke de Carvalho studied the topic in her doctoral thesis in the Visual Arts graduation course at UFRGS (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul). The researcher’s focus is the story of São José I and II, two cemeteries in Porto Alegre that belong to a German Catholic community called São José.



Researcher verified how neglected and depredated the graves were and suggested the implantation of a funerary art memorial - Photo by: Rochele Zandavalli/UFRGS

History

In a historical overview, funerary art begins with materials such as gres stone and porcelain, and with smaller tombs, especially at German cemeteries. In the beginning of the 19th century, funerary monuments built with marble were at their peak, and sculptures of angels, mourners and saints were very common. In the 20th century, theological virtues stood out. From the 1930s on, granite and sacred art made in bronze, such as Pietás (Christian art that represents the Virgin Mary with Jesus' corpse in her arms) and Cristos, started to gain evidence. The representation of military or even the dead person himself is another trend. In Rio Grande do Sul, there is a phenomenon called "gauchismo", in which funerary monuments depict people who live in the state, called "gaúchos". Later, the vaults became simpler, smaller and, sometimes, reduced to small drawers.

Iconography

Allegories and iconographical content more frequent in funerary monuments:

Cross: it may indicate the religious choice of the family and it is also a symbol of death;

Angels: some of them have ornaments attached to the sculpture, such as flower bouquets, which means longing, or palm leaves, a sign of victory. There is one who holds a torch upside down, which is also a symbol of death. The angel who holds a trumpet in his hands represent an allegory to the final judgment - he calls the dead for the judgment;

Torch: it is a metaphor for eternal life and, in Christianity, it represents religious fervor;

Theological virtues: sculptures that represent a virtue and that hold in their hands an object, such as: faith, that carries a cross; hope, that holds an anchor; justice, that holds a sword; and charity, with a child in its arms;

Prayers: sculptures that are depicted with their hands folded in prayer;

Mourners: sculptures that cover their faces with their hands in a sign of mourning. Some of them use magnificent veils and are very dramatic;

Pigeons: in Christianity, they are the symbol of the Holy Spirit;

Grapevine: it represents the relationship between God and men;

Skull: a symbol of vanity and death.

The researcher emphasizes that these meanings depend on the symbolic context in which they are inserted, and may vary according to the religion or the culture of the deceased.

Materials

Arenite, also known as sandstone (gres stone), is more frequently used in smaller tombs and, according to Luiza, the state of Rio Grande do Sul has a large production of the material. The favorite material of the artists, however, is marble. It is durable and also considered noble, in addition to being aesthetically beautiful. The better its quality - such as, for example, of white and Carrara marble -, the more expensive it gets. Bronze is also a very important and expensive material and, as well as porcelain, it is used in ornaments and sculptures. "They give the monuments a very luxurious appearance", the researcher says.

Burial rituals

The burial rituals also changed over the years. In the past, there were funeral processions that passed by carriage through the city. The more powerful the deceased, the fancier was the procession. "The city of Pelotas is an interesting example: for the dead adults, there was a black funeral carriage and, for the "little angels" (children) and virgin girls, a white one", explains Luiza. Another ritual consisted of pinning an ornament in the front door of the house, represented by a hand holding a black fabric, which would indicate that someone had passed in that house. There was also the grieving state, in which people wore black garments for a period of time or, in the case of the widow, for the rest of her life.

Today, funeral processions still take when, for instance, a famous person dies, but now, people use cars instead of carriages. The most common ritual is still the wake. The researcher made remarks about the cremation ritual, in which the coffin is placed inside a kind of chamber and slowly disappears, usually accompanied by a song. In cremation, there is the possibility of burying the ashes or spreading them

elsewhere, even in a tomb of the cemetery itself. Another option is to put them inside a columbarium or a vault, which is a chamber built on the wall to keep the ashes, or even to turn them into diamonds. "We are burying less because there isn't much space left. The question is that the tomb is a reminder of the decomposing body, which supports the idea that they cannot rebuild themselves anymore. Cremation is the ideal solution, since it sets the body free. It is also very practical because the family is not obliged to pay the grave's annuity," Luiza emphasizes.

Necropolis

Porto Alegre has a group of necropolis – "city of the dead" – of several religions, such as the catholic cemetery, which highlights tears, pain and extreme weeping of the families. "The full-of-ornament sculptures seem to scream. It is an awash/stuffed/laden cemetery, with imposing graves, like chapels or mausoleums. They present a mix of secular and Christian iconography," says Luiza. The evangelical cemetery, on the other hand, has more trees and tries to bring nature and men together. There are less sculptures, no saints and, in those of Porto Alegre, a lot of statues of mourners.

Artists Cemetery

The Artists Cemetery is the main attraction of São José Cemetery. There you may find the tombs of Miguel Friederichs (founder of the marble yard Casa Aloys), of João Grünewald (constructor of the Cúria Metropolitana (metropolitan curia) and of the old church located in the Menino Deus neighborhood), of the Weingärtner family (exponent of the academic art history of Rio Grande do Sul), and of Germano Rüdiger (a renowned artist, his grave was transferred to São Miguel e Almas Cemetery). Casa Aloys, pointed out by the author, is a marble yard that existed between 1884 and 1960. "It was the one responsible for spreading funerary monuments across the state, and it has also brought a lot of them from Germany. It also brought art to churches and squares," says Luiza.

Crematoria construction

In the end of the 1990s, São José Cemetery was run by a specialized construction company, which never renewed the leases on the tombstone owned by the families. Many works of funerary art and of memory from São José Community were lost because of that, according to Luiza, creating a blank within the heritage of the cemetery art of Porto Alegre and of Rio Grande do Sul. The remains themselves got lost and the marble works of Casa Aloys were damaged. Luiza says there are “very valuable tombs in terms of research” in the São José Cemetery.

According to the researcher, whilst cremation puts cemetery art at risk, it also praises it. Monuments end up becoming an historical legacy, but, with the technique, the art of decorating the tombs becomes rarer. The graves tell the story of the deceased and they are the city’s memory. Surprisingly, its decrease ends up valuing it both in financial terms and in terms of memory and culture.

“There are no preservation parameters of what we should or should not keep. In Rio Grande do Sul, there are strict regulations about crematory building which require that there must be a cemetery also. The prerogatives for actually building it – if the graves will be kept or will be removed to create free space – are not established. The monuments are at risk of being removed for the construction of a building or a parking lot. That is what happened with the example we are analyzing in our thesis,” emphasizes Luiza.

Neglect and depredation

Negligence and depredation of the tombs, lack of inventory, vandalism and theft are some of the biggest problems found by the researcher in cemeteries. The tombs are not well preserved, some of them were abandoned and others are falling apart. According to Luiza, maintaining them is very expensive. “To properly maintain the monument, the ideal would be to have a conservation and restoration professional, which also costs.” Older tombs have dirt, the marble presents cracks and fractures, oxidized bronze, and broken or lost pieces of porcelain. “Both stone and monument lose their characteristics because of all that. Some of them are repaired once in a while, others get completely restored and lose all their features.” Another question is the family’s possession of the grave, since nothing can be modified without the authorization of the owner.

Alternatives

In order to change that, the researcher suggests some alternatives, such as a legislation that ensures an inventory and promotes funerary art, even including visits in tourist guides and school activities. She also sees the need of developing an archive in order to preserve art memory through documents and of financial incentives for conserving and monitoring the work. "A cemetery's modernization and its preservation must coexist," Luiza believes.

Funerary art memorial

According to Luiza, besides records of the history of these cemeteries, which would be lost and forgotten, "the thesis brought to light an unseen problem: how funerary art is being lost to the cemetery's modernization. Public Ministry (Ministério Público) has prohibited grave removal so I could study them and write my thesis. And, at last, the result: the implantation of a funerary art memorial." Although there is still no date for its opening, the memorial will be a space for patrimonial administration of the cemetery and its work, which will provide to the public the opportunity of getting to know funerary art and will act on behalf of preserving the most important work.

Thesis

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