

Père-Lachaise Cemetery

Paris, France

Photographs by Alan Ward 1985-1991

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Père-Lachaise Cemetery was founded in 1804 as a place of burial outside of Paris in response to the overuse and horrid conditions of urban cemeteries. Père-Lachaise is a little over three kilometers east of the heart of Paris on an escarpment rising over twenty-five meters with views back to the city. The cemetery is on the site of a former Jesuit home and was laid out by neo-classical architect Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart, who had experience designing gardens and country estates. The purpose in founding the cemetery was to honor the family and its ancestors, as well as commemorate heroes and notables of French culture (17-19) in a landscape setting.

The main entrance pierces a long wall along a boulevard on the west side at the base of the hill, and aligns with a central axis through the site. Parallel linear avenues are in a grid-like pattern that resemble city streets on the gently ascending terrain (2-5). As the grades become steeper from west to east, the avenues curve as they go up the hill, along with pedestrian paths that wind up the slopes (9,11,12). The principal avenues terminate at stairs to continue further on foot (8,14,16). Brongniart preserved existing trees on the property, supplemented the existing landscape with new plantings, and lined the avenues and paths with additional trees (2,3,4,9). Visitors in the early nineteenth century commented on the attractiveness of a place with the picturesque character of a garden and started using Père-Lachaise like a public park. After the first decades, the pastoral landscape gave way to

large mausolea and sepulchers on small family plots that have filled much of the grounds, especially along the avenues (5-7). The large memorials also step up the hill - built on shelves into the grade, accessed along narrow pathways with steps (25-27). As a result, there is a density of structures on the forty-four-hectare site to make it appear as a city - a city of the dead (7).

I photographed Père-Lachaise in 1985 and 1991 when the cemetery was in poor condition with monuments tilting, fallen over, and some merely piles of broken stones among overgrown trees (22-24). The melancholy feeling of the expressive memorial sculptures was exacerbated by the sense that the landscape was slipping away, and the natural processes of decay had taken over. The photographs show the structure of the plan beginning with the cemetery wall (1). The sequence of images takes the viewer from the lower elevations along linear avenues (2-4) to the curving streets and paths up the hill (9-13). Stairs climb the steeper grades to arrive at monuments on hillside terraces with views back to Paris (27). Père-Lachaise is dense with structures, however it retains the quiet calm of being in a landscape that is a respite, a place of reflection in a highly urbanized context. Brongniart's design had a profound effect on Americans who visited the cemetery. The founding of Mount Auburn Cemetery a little over twenty-five years later in 1831, influenced by Père-Lachaise, initiated the Rural Cemetery Movement in America.

List of Photographs

1. Boulevard de Ménilmontant and cemetery entry
2. Tree-lined avenue
3. Avenue Principale
4. Avenue terminated at monument
5. Wall of tombs on avenue
6. Density of monuments along avenue
7. View over the city of the dead
8. Stairs at end of an avenue
9. Curving tree-lined avenue
10. Stairs on a curving path between monuments
11. Memorial at diverging avenues
12. Curving avenue between memorials
13. Multiple avenues and paths
14. Flight of stairs between terraced-hillside monuments
15. Statue of Casimir Perier
16. Stairs to a path and mausoleum
17. Burdeau Monument
18. Bronze sculptural figures on a tomb
19. Draped sculptural figure and mausoleum
20. Monument to the Dead of the 1871 Commune
21. Family plot with iron fencing
22. Large trees along avenue
23. Footpath and pile of memorial stones
24. Pile of stone fragments
25. Classical memorial at higher elevation
26. Terraced hillside with mausolea
27. Hillside tombs and view of Paris























































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Linden-Ward, Blanche, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery*