

PERPETUAL MOTION

Revisiting Père-Lachaise, the Champs-Élysées of cemeteries

I have always enjoyed ambling in cemeteries, particularly those of big cities. Far from macabre, these tranquil settings inspire me to relax and reflect, away from the urban din. I also find the ubiquitous expressions of melancholy and loss that permeate such spaces oddly comforting. Of all of Paris' graveyards, Père-Lachaise is the most illustrious and the most picturesque. A wonder of early 19th-century urban planning, it revolutionized French burial rituals and became the model for modern Cities of the Dead.

Located in northeastern Paris in the thick of the 20th arrondissement, Père-Lachaise takes its name from Father François d'Aix de la Chaise, Louis XIV's confessor, who, with fellow Jesuits, occupied the pastoral land (then outside city limits) in the late 17th century. Following a succession of owners, the municipality acquired the terrain in 1803 and earmarked it for development. Père-Lachaise soon would become the final resting-place for an international cavalcade of notables, many of whom remain household names.

Plans to establish a new cemetery beyond Paris proper were years in the making. In 1765, local authorities issued a decree banning all burials in city churchyards. They also ordered exhumed the piled-high human remains in the 50-some parish graveyards dotting the capital. Their motivation: public health. Since the Middle Ages, Parisians had laid to rest loved ones in these modest plots, where corpses were stacked and packed one atop another. By the 18th century, the city's cemeteries were brimming with bodies, and Paris had become an out-and-out ossuary.

The largest and most popular burial ground was that of the Church of the Holy Innocents. Situated next to the main marketplace in Les Halles, it remained in use for over 800 years. Side by side, market and necropolis thrived—almost every inhabitant of Paris frequenting the former in life and ending up in the latter. Over two million people eventually were interred there. Legend has it that by 1780 clerics had shoehorned so many cadavers into the churchyard that the cellar wall of a neighboring building collapsed under the pressure and was flooded with bones. The mishap forced the powers that be to take action.

Amid considerable public resistance, Paris' cemeteries were progressively closed. Beginning in April 1786, innumerable nameless skeletons were ceremoniously transferred to an abandoned underground quarry south of the capital (now Denfert-Rochereau in the 14th), which later was christened the Catacombs. For the first time in Paris' history, the dead were segregated from the living, and the stronghold of the church in defining the rites governing death was forever loosened. Burial had become "a civic matter," as Victor

Hugo observed.

Concurrent with the evacuation and closure of the city's burial grounds, a project to design several public cemeteries around its perimeter was afoot. After Napoleon seized power in 1799, he appointed Nicolas Frochot, Prefect of the Seine, to oversee its realization. Père-Lachaise, first dubbed the Cimetière de l'Est (Eastern Cemetery), was inaugurated on May 21, 1804, followed later by the cemeteries of Montparnasse (1824) and Montmartre (1825). Frochot enlisted architect Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart to design the former. Mixing grid-like pathways with meandering alleys punctuated by unmanicured vegetation and stairways offering panoramic views, Brongniart's plan wedded neoclassical order to the English garden aesthetic. He successfully harnessed the



randomness of the natural landscape to produce calculated visual effects.

Despite high hopes for the success of Père-Lachaise, initial public reaction proved tepid. Few Parisians wished to be inhumed on the northern hills away from their local parishes or neighborhoods. The bourgeoisie was especially leery to invest in plots in a poor, working-class quarter outside the capital. The year Père-Lachaise opened, a mere 13 individuals were buried there. In 1805 and 1806, it counted only 44 and 46 new decedents, respectively.

Napoleon attempted to rectify the situation, announcing the creation of the "concession à perpétuité" (land-grant in perpetuity) that allowed anyone to purchase up to 16 square meters of land in the cemetery, "ownership of which will be assured, whatever may befall, for time immemorial." Tapping into humans' narcissistic desire for immortality, the first-of-a-kind measure proved appealing. The First Consul also declared that every citizen had the right to be interred no matter what his or her race or religion. In so doing, he crowned Père-Lachaise the country's first non-denominational cemetery. Jews soon clamored for access, even though they were consigned to

a walled-in section (known as the ghetto) until 1882. Another division was reserved for paupers. (Napoleon III later set aside a parcel on which Turks built a mosque and buried their own.) But in the end, this Elysian field principally attracted the moneyed classes, who strove to flaunt their wealth and social status in death as they had in life.

To attract clients, impresarios of Père-Lachaise depended on publicity. In 1817, they devised an ingenious scheme to imbue their memorial park with celebrity cachet, transferring bones falsely identified as those of Molière and La Fontaine, France's two greatest 17th-century writers, to the graveyard and reburying them next to one another. They did the same with the graves of Héloïse and Abélard (the famous, long-separated medieval lovers). The tactic drew major press and seduced thousands of new, affluent customers. Napoleon even fell under the spell. Contemplating his own demise while in exile in 1819 on the remote island of St. Helena, he admitted that he wished Père-Lachaise to be his final resting-place. By 1830, some 33,000 people had followed suit. Between 1824 and 1850, the size of the cemetery increased fivefold to satisfy public demand. The final expansion, which included the upper level to the north, offered uniform, parallel plots and straight, intersecting walkways that owe much to Baron Haussmann's concomitant campaign to "straighten up" and remodel the capital. Today, with some 70,000 gravesites, Père-Lachaise covers 108 acres.

From the beginning, Père-Lachaise has been as much an enchanting, romantic enclave for the living as it has been a final destination for the deceased. An 1828 guidebook characterized the venue in glowing terms: "Everything in this magnificent garden satisfies one's pleasures where the funerary monuments, rising up everywhere, inspire in the heart a seriously sensual delight in this superb city of the dead situated on the frontier between two worlds." The elaborate, often eye-popping sepulchers of the wealthy and well connected cemented the cemetery's reputation. From pyramids, obelisks and ziggurats to domed basilicas, miniature neo-Gothic cathedrals and menhirs, these cenotaphs (some quite literally as big as houses) embody their subjects' last-ditch efforts to stave off mortality, while parading their individuality and financial eminence. Nineteenth-century French writer Maxime du Camp chided such a cult as distinctively Parisian: "This respect for the dead, this quasi-cult they make of their memory, is an idiosyncrasy of the Parisian populace ... It's as if death were not understood, as if no one wanted to admit the idea of material obliteration."

Whether visiting Baroness Stroganoff, General Foy or Chopin, anyone strolling through Père-Lachaise—the Champs-Élysées of cemeteries—quickly realizes that the post-Revolutionary French bourgeoisie, despite its republican and anticlerical bent, could not help parroting its noble ancestors. But they were aristocrats without a monarch and Catholics without a God, desperately seeking eternal life in the everyday world.

—By Paul B. Franklin