

At the foot of the Pyramid:

300 years of the cemetery for foreigners in Rome

An exhibition by the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome and the Casa di Goethe in Rome

INTRODUCTION: ARTISTS AND THE FOREIGNERS' CEMETERY IN ROME

“The most beautiful and solemn cemetery I have ever beheld” declared Percy Bysshe Shelley. The burial-ground for non-Catholic foreigners lies at the foot of the ancient pyramid-tomb of Caius Cestius (**see map, Room 1**). The contrast between the Protestants’ gravestones and Cestius’ massive monument appealed to many artists, both Italian and foreign. The exhibition brings together forty-three of their paintings, drawings and prints. It portrays its peaceful beauty while revealing how the cemetery developed and how artists responded to it.

The pyramid appears in all but eight of the exhibits here. It remains a constant, looming presence while the landscape around it evolved. The land, the Meadows of the Roman People, was communal and mainly used for pasturage. But this changed with the erection of the Protestants’ stone monuments, especially after 1822 when the New Cemetery was laid out. A site of mourning for the foreign community in Rome displaced the grazing flocks which were excluded from both burial-grounds.

Within that community there was a potential market for *vedute* of the cemetery. But several of the works exhibited here were produced not with that aim but as visual souvenirs of particular graves, commissioned by bereaved families or friends.

Images of stone monuments to the dead have a timeless, static feel to them. Completely different are the dynamic representations of early funerals at the pyramid. Three of them are brought together in this exhibition for the first time.

The visit starts with the changing character of the Old Cemetery, first while in use for night-time funerals (**Room 1**); and then after its closure when still a popular subject for the artist (**Room 2**). Its dense rows of tombs gave the New Cemetery a different character (**Room 3**). Several artists contemplated the two adjacent cemeteries from a nearby hill. More personal than the distant views are the paintings of individual tombs, often produced on commission (**Room 4**). Mementoes of the graves of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley appealed to their many admirers. The visit culminates with Edvard Munch’s homage of 1927 to his uncle’s grave, the latest work on display here. By the 1920s photography predominated for representing this site devoted to the memory of foreigners dying in Rome.

ROOM 1. THE FIRST GRAVESTONES AND THE FUNERALS AT NIGHT

The haunting *Roman elegy* by the Swiss artist **Jacques Sablet (Cat. 3)** epitomises the mourning of a close friend. Neither there nor in his funeral scene (**Cat. 9**) do we know the identities of the deceased; nor in Prosseda’s engraving of a similar event (**Cat. 10**) after a watercolour of 1831 by the Roman artist, **Bartolomeo Pinelli**. Such funerals had ceased in 1822 so Pinelli had probably made an earlier sketch.

The drawing (**Cat. 8**) and a report of the burial of Jonas Åkerström was sent to Stockholm by Francesco Piranesi, son of the famous artist and agent in Rome of the Swedish Crown. All three works feature moonlit ceremonies at the pyramid with mourners, some carrying torches, gathered at the grave-site while their carriages await. They confirm eyewitness accounts of funerals conducted with decorum and attended by numerous spectators: men, women and children, Romans and foreign.

Stone memorials are conspicuous in these and other works of the same period (**Cat. 4**) but many burials were marked by only a perishable wooden cross. The gravestones visible today are often recognisable in early views. **Hackert's** watercolour (**Cat. 1**) shows two of the earliest, commemorating Georg von Werpup († 1765) and Friedrich von Reitzenstein († 1775). The same two appear far off in **Sablet's** *Roman elegy* (**Cat. 3**) and were noted by the Marquis de Sade in November 1775 (see the other panel). Of great documentary value are the little-known works by **Keller** (**Cat. 6**) and **Magozzi** (**Cat. 7**). Both had evidently studied closely the inscriptions on the tombs, all of them visible today.

With the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1814 more British people travelled to Italy, among them **J. M. W. Turner** who knew of the cemetery from working in London on James Hakewill's drawing (**Cat. 12**); and perhaps also the author of an unpublished drawing (**Cat. 5**) dated December 1816. On the right stands an outsize monument erected eight years earlier to a young Briton, William Sidney Bowles, and easily recognised (e.g. **Cat. 6** here and **Cats. 11, 15 and 17** in the next room). In 1822 the Secretary of State ordered burials to cease in the Old Cemetery: the Protestants' gravestones and trees were spoiling the visual impact of the pyramid. Instead, he established at government expense the New Cemetery on adjacent land still grazed by the sheep depicted by **Turner** (**Cat. 12**) and **Hackert** (**Cat. 2**).

ROOM 2. THE PROTESTANT TOMBS IN THE SHADOW OF THE PYRAMID

Even after its closure the Old Cemetery attracted artists. The Neapolitan painter **Achille Vianelli** (**Cat. 15**), adopted a popular view of it, with the pyramid framed by the wall-corner of the New Cemetery and by trees inside the old burial-ground. This 'classic' view endured well into the era of photography and, later, of mass-produced postcards. Another favourite viewpoint was from directly opposite Cestius's tomb (**Cats. 11 and 13**). Rejecting these, the German artist **Oswald Achenbach** (**Cat. 16**) looked outwards from the pyramid, inserting a distant cupola of the Catholic basilica of St. Peter's to counterbalance the non-Catholic tombs.

The American **Alfred Miller** also defied convention in his moody oil painting of the Old Cemetery in evening light (**Cat. 14**). Miller was in Rome in 1832-34. By then, the New Cemetery had been operating for ten years and the old one, unused, was protected by a deep, walled ditch. In his magnificent etching (**Cat. 17**) **Agostino Penna** shows the ditch (on the left) and the staircase descending to the pyramid's entrance. He added a variety of characters: two hunters with dogs, a groom holding two frisky horses, and a man with two ladies, all elegantly dressed, who are perhaps about to descend the stairs to visit the burial chamber.

Monte Testaccio provided an excellent vantage-point for artists. On first visiting Rome in 1819, **J. M. W. Turner** reprised the view that he knew from Hakewill's drawing (**Cat. 12**) and others followed his example (see **Cats. 22 and 25** in Room 3). **Joseph Thürmer** preferred the 'Piccolo Aventino' hill to the east to make a detailed drawing (**Cat. 18**). In it the new, white-washed walls of

the New Cemetery are visible, as they are in an amateur watercolour of two years later (**Cat. 19**). Artists now increasingly paid attention to tombs in the New Cemetery (Room 3), while still featuring the pyramid. Cestius's tomb served as a landmark for foreign visitors driving out in search of the cemetery. It was also reproduced as a souvenir-model for sale (**Cat. 44**), although much less often than were other ancient monuments such as the Colosseum or Trajan's column.

ROOM 3. THE NEW CEMETERY AMONG THE CYPRESSES AND ROSES

“When a girl swings open the great iron gate one of the prettiest views, I think, in Italy is disclosed. It is that of a little garden, sown in heartache, but planted in love...” wrote an American journalist in 1899 on entering the New Cemetery). Other writers such as Gabriele D'Annunzio (see the other panel) were similarly moved, as were artists (**Cats. 21, 23 and 24** here and **Cat. 33** in the next room).

A central path, lined by rose-bushes (**Cat. 20**) led up from the entrance-gate towards the tower and Shelley's grave (see Room 4). Burials gradually extended down the slope (**Cats. 20, 21, 23, 24**). By the 1850s little space remained and an extension was added to the west. From Monte Testaccio the German artist **Arthur Blaschnik** sketched the new plot before it came into use (**Cat. 22**). An earlier view by **Lorenzo Scarabelotto** (**Cat. 25**), a scene-painter from Trieste, may have been prepared for a stage-set (in it he omits entirely the Old Cemetery). Nor was **Thorald Læssøe**'s oil (**Cat. 26**), exhibited publicly for the first time, a work for sale. The bereaved parents of a Danish theology student, Johannes Knudsen, had commissioned it from Læssøe. Rather than paint the young man's simple grave, the artist stood back and used the pyramid symbolically to represent it.

The dense cypresses of the New Cemetery contrast with the open spaces of the Old (see **Cat. 39** in Room 4). The American **Clayton Griswold** captured beautifully the relationship between the two (while almost totally obscuring the pyramid) (**Cat. 27**). A few years later **Ettore Roesler Franz** was exhibiting his watercolours of historical Rome in the throes of modern development (his *Roma Sparita* series). Plans for a new road threatened to destroy the Old Cemetery. On his fine watercolour (**Cat. 28**) Franz carefully added in pencil the epitaph on John Keats's headstone, as if to ensure its preservation for posterity (see further, Room 4).

ROOM 4. THE GRAVES OF KEATS, SHELLEY, GOETHE AND OTHERS

“It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place” wrote Shelley in the preface to *Adonais*, his elegy on the death of John Keats. Many artists were attracted to the two poets' graves, seen in a remarkable diptych (**Cat. 36**) by a young American painter, **John Linton Chapman**. Their contexts were different: Keats's grave isolated in the unused old burial-ground, and Shelley's under a wall-tower of the new one. In **Walter Crane**'s watercolour Shelley's gravestone is almost invisible (**Cat. 40**), but **William Bell Scott** elevated the slab and introduced the pyramid's massive presence (**Cat. 41**) that Crane had avoided.

The two contemporary artists also approached Keats's grave differently (**Cats. 37 and 38**), with Scott meticulously reproducing its epitaph. Crane's two works were commissioned by **George Howard**, himself an artist. His own watercolour (**Cat. 39**) also ignores the pyramid but shows Keats's grave after its renovation in 1875.

Rudolf Müller's delightful view of the tomb of Goethe's son (**Cat. 33**) was perhaps a commission or gift, as possibly were others in which single monuments stand out (e.g. **Cat. 35** here, **Cat. 13** in

Room 2 and **Cat. 23** in Room 3). The painting of the grave of the Danish artist Christian Holm (**Cat. 34**) still belongs to Holm's descendants. **Richard Cooper** was the friend and executor of the famous landscape painter, Jacob More. His sketch of More's tomb (**Cat. 31**) is complemented by an engraving of it (**Cat. 32**) published a few years later. **Edvard Munch**'s oil painting (**Cat. 42**) commemorates his uncle, P. A. Munch, a famous historian. The only painting from his visit to Rome in 1927, it evokes the spirit of the place rather than the grave itself (the obelisk in the background).

But '*tutto finisce*' (everything comes to an end), the favourite motto of **Bartolomeo Pinelli**, seen seated with his two mastiffs (**Cat. 43**). Both **Corrodi** (**Cat. 24** in Room 3) and **Müller** (**Cat. 33** here) were buried in this 'cemetery of artists and poets'. The architect **Karl Friedrich Schinkel**, visiting Rome in 1803-1804, designed a tomb either for himself or for another (**Cat. 30**). One who did think of being buried in his beloved Rome (see the other panel) and who sketched his monument was **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe** (**Cat. 29**). But it was not to be (he died in Germany). *Tutto finisce*.