

Accounting for the Popularity of Portraiture in Animal Cemetery Stones

My study of the Oregon Humane Society animal cemetery began with an issue about collective belonging: how does a process (burial), or more exactly an image (gravestone), ostensibly about community healing change when the deceased lacks the agency to identify itself as a part of a community? My leading hypothesis was that the burials of pets would be markedly eclectic and emotionally indulgent in nature: headstones in the shape of bones, pictures of chihuahuas in white floral dresses, et cetera. Moreover, I expected to focus my study on how the species of the animal affected these marks of indulgence and eclecticism.

Both of my questions encountered resistance for similar reasons: the reality of the O.H.S. animal cemetery is that the vast majority of pets buried there are only marked by name tags, lacking any other information; an example— though not in my submitted sample for this very absence— is pictured in figure one. Resultantly, my comparative question about species is largely useless. Instead, I will reframe my initial hypothesis in terms of the information available: what is specific to the iconography of animal gravestones, and what does this tell us about the affective realities of the burials/deaths behind these images?



Fig 1. Grave of “Prince Nifty Bollenback.”

The first noticeable iconographic attribute of the graves in the O.H.S. animal cemetery is again a lack, namely of traditional symbolic engravings: cherubs, urns, religious insignia, birds, flowers and various other flora. Out of the 49 gravestones surveyed, only five individual stones, and one group burial of three pets have any of the above. However, while only a handful of the stones display traditional symbolic engravings, nearly half—22 exactly— feature a portrait of some sort: 6 photographs, half of which are likely from one owner, and 16 engravings. One of

the more elaborate graves, dedicated to “Mr. Fierce,” even features two portraits on the same stone. This trend doesn’t appear to be the result of a specific time period either, since, even though the data set skews heavily towards the late 20th and early 21st century, multiple of the portrait stones, namely “Devil,” “Taffy,” and “Pat & Patty” date back to the early and mid 20th century.

It’s tempting to equate these images to the photographs and photorealistic laser portraits on contemporary human headstones, but the nature of pet portraits appears essentially different. Where human photorealistic portraits necessarily keep the image of the deceased ‘alive’ for the family, they also keep them ‘alive’ for unacquainted descendants and non-relatives of the future. The low frequency of actual photographs/photorealistic portraits in the O.H.S. cemetery gives way to a high frequency of what appear to be generic ones based on the animal’s breed. The collective gravesite of “Abby,” “Katy,” “Molly,” and “Herbie O,” contains identical and near-identical portraits for each dog; likewise, “Taffy,” “Lady,” “Sydney,” and “Pat & Patty,” receive portraits that resemble doodles more than anything objectively representative.¹

This lack of information, coupled with the general absence of specificity in their portraiture, suggests that the function of these gravesites is, as I expected— though not with the markers I expected— deeply personal rather than collective. The lack of complex visual information in these portraits points to the presence of a visitor who already has memories of the deceased animal available. The aim of the image is then to represent the deceased pet not to all visitors, but to the owner who buries them. Following, when the owners leave or pass away so does the function of the grave. Many of the stones were covered in debris, less elaborate plastic

¹ “Pat & Patty” even goes so far as to use one drawing for both dogs buried beneath.

ones were often chipping away like in figure 1, or entirely weathered off the block, and many older stones were almost entirely buried. Though in part a fault of the O.H.S.'s ability to preserve the site, this wear points back to the transient function of the stones: these pets seem to be buried not for the longevity of their image but for the personal experience they provoke in the immediate lifetime of their owner/s. Even the stones with little identifying information might suggest the immanence of the owner's role in filling in unmarked information; once the owners are gone, these animals are largely existent only in name.

The other, less exciting reality of the O.H.S. cemetery's sparse gravestones is also probably financial. A single spot in the adjacent mausoleum currently costs \$850, and the cheapest cemetery plot \$500, not including accompanying services such as euthanasia, cremation, or the gravestone itself (Wentz-Graff; "Pet Memorials"). The cost of such a process is likely already such an expenditure that owners are reticent to spend extra money on engraving iconography beyond their pet's name. It is also plausibly why most of the gravesites are marked only by plastic panels affixed to brick-sized blocks. The fact that the owners that *do* choose to include extra-textual images choose a portrait, even if it only 'resembles' the animal buried, just instantiates that one of the primary purposes of these gravestones is to engage a personal memory rather than preserve the animal's spirit for others. While their sparseness then certainly pushes against the eclecticism my project expected, it does support my initial prediction. Unlike many human gravestones, the key functions here appear to be the indulgence of the visiting owner's emotion, the engagement of their memory, and the ephemeral processing of their loss.

Works Cited

“Pet Memorials.” *Oregon Humane Society*, <https://www.oregonhumane.org/services/pet-memorials/>. Accessed 12 Mar. 2019.

Wentz-Graff, Kristyna. “Oregon Humane Society’s Animal Cemetery (Photos).” *Oregonlive.Com*, 15 Mar. 2015, https://www.oregonlive.com/multimedia/2015/03/oregon_humane_societys_animal.html.