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**Cemetery & Cremation**

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Père Lachaise  
City of the  
**Immortals**







## Profile

By Patti Martin Bartsche

# A City of Immortals

Arguably the most famous and most visited cemetery in the world, Paris' Père Lachaise is a 107-acre labyrinth housing an eternal "salon" of luminaries from the worlds of art, design, literature, the performing arts and more.

**B**oasting the final resting places of more celebrated artists and thinkers than any other location in the world, the cemetery has, in the last century, become a pilgrimage site for visitors from all over the world to pay their respects. It is also a magnificent open-air museum of sculpture and architecture, representing the first revolutionary design in memorial parks and the fourth most popular destination for the 65 million tourists who visit Paris each year (behind the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and the Arc de Triomphe).

In "City of Immortals: Père-Lachaise Cemetery, Paris," Carolyn Campbell presents a first-person account of her more than 30 years visiting, studying and documenting Père Lachaise. Campbell's images, complemented by those of renowned U.K.-based landscape photographer Joe Cornish, celebrate the novelty and eccentricity of the cemetery.

Released by Goff Books, the book focuses on the gravesites of 84 architects, artists, writers, musicians, dancers, filmmakers and actors. Campbell also includes several intimate "conversations" with some of the cemetery's high-profile residents.

We recently had a chance to chat with Campbell about her love affair with Père Lachaise, the cemetery's "immortals" and the important role cemeteries play in society.



Opposite page: A romantic section of Père Lachaise Cemetery. (Photo credit: Joe Cornish) Right: Carolyn Campbell, author of “City of Immortals.” (Photo credit: Marcel Wepper)

### When was the first time you remember setting foot in a cemetery?

When I was 11, my mother told me that we were going to attend my grandfather’s military funeral at Arlington National Cemetery.

### What stuck in your mind about that experience?

The pageantry: the horse-drawn caisson carrying my grandfather’s casket; the elaborate uniforms of the soldiers with gold braid and shiny swords; the soldiers’ precision in folding the flag and the bugler playing taps.

### Your first steps in the world of death care began when you started a meditation practice on death and impermanence. How did that come about?

I studied with a Buddhist teacher whose practice focused on being in the present. He asked that I sit with the question, “I am going to die; how do I feel about that? Be open to what I feel. .... Understanding penetrates deeper and I would become more aware and present in my life.”

My teacher wrote about the certainty of death: “Death casts a different light on life. The more fully you relate to death, the more fully you relate to life. You are clearer about what is and isn’t important, what can and cannot be done, what is and isn’t meaningful ... the more you accept death, the more you embrace life.”

I believe that in visiting Père Lachaise over several decades, I have never felt more in the moment. Père Lachaise resident Honoré de Balzac said it best: “I seldom go out, but when I feel myself flagging I go out and cheer myself up in Père Lachaise ... while seeking out the dead I see nothing but the living.”



### Tell us how your first trip to Paris came about.

Robert Wiles was the conservator at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where I worked. He moonlighted as a travel agent and came to me one day saying a cancellation on a charter flight to Paris had left him with a round trip ticket, and did I want to go? He would only charge me the tax. Needless to say, I booked it.

### How did you come to visit Père Lachaise?

An artist friend at a museum exhibition opening overheard that I was going to Paris for the first time. He knew about my love of Oscar Wilde and told me about his ancestor, the sculptor Jacob Epstein, who created the monolithic tomb of Wilde in the cemetery. I had my first destination.

### What were your initial impressions?

I had no expectations, so I was delightfully awestruck by the sights and sounds; the yellow and orange leaves sharply contrasting with solemn





**Left: The City of Immortals map at Père Lachaise in Paris. Opposite page: The Grand Rond in Père Lachaise. (Photo credit: Carolyn Campbell)**

gray tombs and iron railings; the light filtering through latticed trees above with sunbeams spotlighting headstones and sculptures; the cawing of crows swooping overhead, and the sweet trill of songbirds. It was an unforgettable, visceral experience.

**When was the next time you visited the cemetery?**

I returned the following fall in 1982 when I commissioned British photographer Joe Cornish to join me.

**How did the idea of the book come about?**

It became a reality starting in September 2018. Over tea one afternoon with esteemed architecture writer Michael Webb, who was interviewing me about the genesis of my illustrated map of Père Lachaise for *Form: Pioneering Design* magazine, I shared with him the mock-up of my GPS tour app that was in development. He casually asked, “You have so much material and so many great images,

why don’t you do a book?” Ha! What writer/photographer doesn’t dream of having their work published and shared with the world?

Well, my dream came true when Michael introduced me to Gordon Goff of ORO Editions who, after reading my proposal, offered me a publishing deal through his Goff Books imprint. And here we are.

**Many books have been written about Père Lachaise. How did you set about creating something different?**

I have had a lifelong interest in history, artist biographies, culture and design. The cemetery tapped into all these passions, so I focused on these topics as I started writing.

It was a privilege and an advantage interviewing many individuals who had a personal connection to Père Lachaise whether having worked there with knowledge of the fascinating backstory of the cemetery; or scholars who studied funerary history, and friends or family who knew an artist buried there. Their

input helped create a lively and intimate look at the cemetery that I have not found in other books. I wanted to write a book that was all-inclusive of history, design and photography that was written from a first-person perspective, and that focused on the artists at Père Lachaise – elements that I had not found in many other books about the cemetery.

**How long did it take to write the book?**

The book is a labor of love, three decades in the making. I suspect from the first day I visited some 30-plus years ago, it was a twinkle in my eye. But, more recently, I had been working on chapter and overall content development in a writing workshop led by Los Angeles author and poet Terry Wolverton. Once Goff got involved, it took about three furious months to assemble my life’s work, if you can believe it.

**What came first ... the copy or the photographs?**

They were simultaneous. I began interviewing people in Paris from day one and transcribing those conversations, as well as jotting down my observations and making drawings for the future map. The images Joe Cornish and I took stood in as my muse when I was not in Paris.

**Do you have a favorite section in the cemetery?**

Yes. Several, really, but I always come back to Division 11 (in Tour One) along Avenue de Lille, which stretches along a hilly, tree-lined path toward Chopin’s tomb. It overlooks the heart of the Romantic Section, the original acreage of the cemetery designed in 1804.





**Père Lachaise attracts more than 3.5 million visitors annually. Why do you think so many people are drawn to the cemetery?**

No question it is because of its historical and cultural significance. No other cemetery in the world has as many high-profile residents or the collection of 19th-century architecture and sculptures. It's literally an outdoor museum of art and design.

**What surprised you during your research?**

I was unaware that for centuries burials had traditionally occurred either within a church or in an adjacent graveyard. Alexandre Brongniart's design of Père Lachaise represented a radical departure from that tradition, and it became a revolutionary model for future garden-style memorial parks.

It was also fascinating to discover that Étienne Louis Boullée, one of the most admired architects of the period and Brongniart's mentor, considered the commission to design a cemetery crypt one to covet. He developed a

design philosophy for the funerary world that included "architecture of shadows" – recesses cut into stone that cast dark shadows in the moonlight. Boullée was also a proponent of the pre-Romantic celebration of nature. This pantheistic view led to the changes in the image of a cemetery. It became a site of divinity and no longer a frightful place filled with dead bodies.

**You have said, "If the word 'necropolis' means 'city of the dead,' then Père-Lachaise is indeed the City of Immortals. The deceased found within its walls do not rest, but instead live forever." Can you explain?**

My book focuses primarily on the artists, writers and performers who have left behind a legacy of great works of art. This is their immortality.

**In the book, you have conversations with several of the cemetery's "immortals." How did you decide who to feature?**

For many years, I set a strict reading list for myself to only those

biographies of people buried in the cemetery. I was never at a loss for riveting stories. I also used as criteria those individuals whom I admired for their creative process and their ability to surmount life's struggles or not.

**Was Oscar Wilde an easy person to include?**

Absolutely. I have always admired his wit and cultural significance as a playwright, but, more importantly, his having the courage to take a stand, at great risk, for his beliefs.

**The book also includes three custom tours ... why was this important and how did you decide which stops to include on each tour?**

Though there are prominent politicians, scientists and others resting in the cemetery, I focus exclusively on the creative spirits. And there are so many more. I added a dozen in the last year to the map, GPS tour app, as well as the draft of the book.

I broke the tour into three sections that I felt would give visitors an





**Above: The tomb for Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde is located in Division 89 in Père Lachaise Cemetery. (Photo credit: Carolyn Campbell)**

experience of the topography, clusters of famous tombs, and one's hiking ability. Some tours are more strenuous than others. It was formerly called Mont Louis after the Sun King and it rises to an elevation of 1,000 feet in some divisions.

**Many of the photographs featured in the book were taken by you. Can you talk a little bit about how you went about capturing the essence of the cemetery?**

Subjects and I seem to always have an exchange of some sort. A conversation if you will. It happens in my portrait work as well as with locations and objects. Père Lachaise always seemed to be telling a story. All I had to do was listen and observe.

Even though I became familiar with the ideal time to shoot: early morning or at dusk, and in the late fall and winter months, sometimes the most remarkable images presented themselves as I was hurrying down a path to the exit before the warning bell rang alerting me that the gates were closing. I'm surprised that after all this time I have never been locked in overnight due to my wanting to shoot "just one more picture."

**You have visited Père Lachaise a number of times over the years. Have you learned something new, found something new, each time you've stepped into the cemetery?**

Every single visit has provided a new experience. I discover yet another of my favorite, whimsical bat carvings on a tomb; or an amazing chapel doorway; a fallen headstone engulfed by a tree trunk that seems merged in an eternal embrace. Nature creates ever-changing theater in this land of the dead. Then there are the surprising fellow taphophiles I meet. In springtime last year, I strolled with the dean of the American Cathedral in Paris, as well as a film location licensor who had flown to Paris from Arizona for an industry conference. Both made time to commune with the afterlife and share with me their insights of the place.

**At the end of the book, you pose an interesting question: "Can eternity last forever?" Have you been able to answer that question to your satisfaction?**



I am sometimes torn seeing the decadent beauty of a monument covered in moss and streaked black by acid rain, or a toppled tomb sinking fast into centuries of mulch and dried-up bouquets. Fortunately, the decision to restore a tomb is in the hands of the cemetery conservators. Many significant gravesites are protected through a historic designation in Père Lachaise, including those of composer André Grétry, and artists Théodore Géricault, Auguste Clésinger, Camille Corot and Pierre Paul Prud'hon.

Pauline Duclaud-Lacoste, the great- great-granddaughter of legendary French filmmaker Georges Méliès, spearheaded a successful crowdfunding campaign in early 2019 to restore his tomb in Père Lachaise. Méliès was one of the pioneering figures of film, who is often credited as the man who single-handedly invented special effects in movies. I contributed to that campaign and spread the word among my movie industry friends. So, I feel satisfied that any of us can do our part assisting with “eternity lasting forever.”

### What role do cemeteries, whether they are Père Lachaise or a small rural cemetery in New Jersey, play in society?

I find them positive and peaceful. A wonderful place for contemplation – whether it be for a loved one who has passed, or simply a quiet place to clear one’s head.

Having a location to remember a family member is healing in the grieving process. I lost a dear friend several years ago, and after attending a funeral service for a friend’s son at the same cemetery where many of us were there for support, I walked across the park and visited the outdoor niche where my friend’s urn is placed. It was sweet and therapeutic as it brought me joyful memories at a time of sadness.

Cemeteries provide an important role not only for the individual but for also bringing the community together as a whole.

### There are people who consider cemeteries morbid places. What do you say?

It has never been my experience. It seems an old trope based on too many horror movie scenes and society’s fear of death and dying.

### What do you want people to get out of reading this book?

It gives me great pleasure to share the beauty and mystery of this place with others. The legacy of the cultural icons, rebels, intellectuals, innovators and rule-breakers buried there reminds me of the importance of taking risks and giving voice to whatever creative contribution you leave behind.

Friends who have acted as my scouts when trying out drafts of the map and text describing the funerary symbols and architecture told me how their visits were vastly enriched by knowing what they were seeing. One said it was like having a private tour of a museum. That made my heart swell.

### How has visiting Père Lachaise and writing this book changed you?

In my experience, the success of any creative endeavor or, life in general, is to stay open to what arises. What began over 30 years ago as a curious adventure to seek out the tomb of Oscar Wilde has resulted in my deeper appreciation for the works of classical musicians such as Chopin, Bizet and Rossini, as well as the diversity of writers I encountered such as the Persian poet, Sadegh Hedayat, African American novelist Richard Wright and the heroine of French letters, Colette. Lastly, to my great surprise I discovered the final resting place of Rosa Bonheur, the leading woman painter of her era. I first encountered her magnificent work, “The Horse Fair” now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as an illustration in my grade school poetry book. To this day, I expect the unexpected thanks to Père Lachaise. It makes for a much more satisfying existence.

### How can funerary art and architecture tell the story of a person?

The eternal staying power and drama of funerary monuments appealed to the architects, designers and artists who contributed to the mesmerizing environment of Père Lachaise.

Images of animals and objects lend unique symbolism: dogs signify fidelity, loyalty, vigilance and watchfulness. For example, see the reclining hound at

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A variety of architectural stylings can be found in Division 28 at Père Lachaise Cemetery. (Photo credit: Joe Cornish)

the feet of the famed lovers Héloïse and Abélard in Division 7 (Tour One). Lions and eagles mean courage (usually found on men’s tombs); white doves represent beauty; owls symbolize watchfulness, wisdom or contemplative solitude; turtles mean longevity, patience or sloth. An image of an hourglass with or without wings represents the rapid passing of time. Wings attached to the hourglass suggest the fleetingness of life.

Graves of accident victims or others whose lives were cut short are marked by a broken column, tree trunk, or urn. An open book is the human heart; a closed book is a completed life. A curtain or veil is a symbol of passage from one type of existence to another; a lamp is a symbol of wisdom, faithfulness, and holiness; a harp is a source of divine music; a lyre is more playful but often has a broken string in funerary use. The angelic muse on Chopin’s tomb in Division 11 (Tour One) is playing a stringed instrument.

I filled an entire chapter with images and text about symbols. I think my next endeavor may be to create a treasure hunt for children to use when visiting a cemetery with their parents.

### Earlier this year, you launched the City of Immortals GPS Tour App. Where did the idea come from?

It was the natural, online expansion of my foldout map. I learned a great deal when designing the app both on site in the cemetery and at home on my computer. Just ask me about the challenges of logging accurate satellite coordinates in a hilly, tree-canopied, mausoleum-filled site! I could not have done it without the wonderful support team at My Tours, based in New Zealand.

Of course, there are other maps of Père Lachaise out there, but they weren’t very detailed, or available in English, or they were difficult to navigate. I wanted to make something more user friendly.

Most of all, I made sure to incorporate crucial elements in the app: an

image of the tomb one is looking for; precise written directions; and a bright orange pathway drawn in the online map leading visitors to their destination. One doesn’t realize when they arrive in this 107-acre labyrinth how difficult it is to locate a specific tomb in areas where sometimes there can be 30 or more headstones crowded together. My goal was to make the experience pleasurable and less confusing. However, in my own experience, sometimes getting lost is half the fun.

### Do we have an obligation to help preserve cemeteries?

Yes, we are all guardians, in my opinion. Cemeteries represent our communal history. Many are endangered by pollution, vandalism and mismanagement.

Thankfully, there are those who care – and have the resources to help. It took the cooperative efforts of the French and Irish governments to repair Oscar Wilde’s monument in Père Lachaise, which was being defaced with lip prints from misguided fans whose cosmetic kisses were harming the porous limestone sculpture.

### In your visits to Père Lachaise are there spots you return to time and again?

It’s always Aux Morts at the end of the main entrance Avenue Principale, then Colette, Chopin and Wilde.

### What would people be surprised to learn about Père Lachaise?

One can still be buried there. However, to qualify you must either have a place in an existing family crypt, been born in Paris, or have died there. •



## DIGITAL BONUS:

Explore more of Père Lachaise in our digital photo gallery:

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