Cemetery Symbolism

Part 4

Religious Symbols

A photo-story/fact sheet resource set that introduces students to religious symbolism such as angels, virtuous women, and cherubs and objects representing the resurrection and Eucharist we see in heritage cemeteries and the meanings they held for Victorians that are often hidden from us today.
The Christian Virtues

- For Victorians the Christian virtues were very popular. They include
  - Faith
  - Hope
  - Love or Charity - (meaning generosity and willingness to give.)

- In cemetery art the virtues are sometimes portrayed as women. These women are usually wingless and have sculptural attributes that are easy to identify.

- The virtue of Faith is depicted as a woman usually clinging to or holding a cross.
Each of the Bible gospels states that Christ’s cross was raised at a place called Calvary or Golgotha (in Hebrew).

The site is usually depicted as a rocky mound and the cross looks as though it is formed out of tree trunks. Plants growing out of the mound around the cross show that new life is brought by Christ.

A woman clinging to the cross was a popular symbol of deep attachment and undying faith.
A popular hymn of the time included the words,

"Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."
In Victorian popular art, Hope is also represented as a woman.

She is seldom seen with wings but is often depicted holding an anchor, an ancient symbol of hope.
Charity is one of the three virtues most often seen in historic cemeteries.

Charity is almost always portrayed as a woman nursing an infant or holding a child or children.

Charity can also be depicted with a flame, torch or candle or dispensing food such as fruit.
Trinity Cross

- Frequently represented in the cemetery are crosses where both ends of the cross bar and the top bar are broken into three points.

- Three is an important number for Christians representing:
  - ‘The Trinity’—that is God the Father, his son Jesus, and the Holy Ghost and/or
  - Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity or love.

- This same idea is also represented by an emblem broken into three as this example of ivy leaves and also by the three numbered steps on the Latin cross (lower left).
Sorrowing Women

- Tombstones featuring women in a posture of grief have been popular since medieval times.
- Mourning women figures are often featured with other symbols such as an anchor, an open book, a scroll, a cross or inverted flaming torches.
Angels

- Angels are supernatural beings who are believed to act as messengers from God. They are usually shown with wings and are dressed in a classical Greek style.

- Angels usually have their right hands and the index finger raised upwards indicating the deceased now has a place in heaven. In the other hand they often hold a scroll or the anchor of hope, the trumpet of resurrection or the palm fronds of peace.

- Sometimes a fold in the clothing is filled with flowers to indicate the deceased is in paradise (or heaven).
Putti or Cherubs

- The putto was a figure of a pudgy, male, naked baby with wings that was a creation of Italian renaissance religious painters.
- Putti and cherubs were revived in 19th popular art along with angelic children including girls.
- Their presence often indicates that a child is buried in the plot.
The skull and cross bones motif symbolised death and was in common use during the 17th century.

The motif gradually developed into a skull with wings symbolising the fleeting nature life and was called the “soul effigy”.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, with changing attitudes towards death and the afterlife, the skull gradually became a human face with human features and emotions and came to look more like a winged cherub.
The Crown & the Cross

- A crown represents the ultimate reward received for a Christian life faithfully lived. Crowns are mentioned on several occasions in the Bible, for example, "Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life." The deceased has received the grace of God and the crown represents this state of grace.

- Crowns can be seen as a single decoration on headstones.

- They can also be seen encircling a cross and with clinging vines, such as ivy (left) or grapes.
Stars

- The star symbolises Christ and his role in the resurrection.

- The idea comes from Revelations (a chapter in the Bible) where Christ identified himself as the Star of Dawn.

- The star can also be a symbol of the presence of loved ones, who like stars, are visible but are out of reach. Stars have a close association with heaven.
The Dove of Peace and the Gates of Heaven

- The roses represent the shortness of life.
- The dove of peace represents the soul of the deceased leaving for heaven.
- The open gates signify that the soul has passed through gates of heaven and beyond to peace, paradise and eternal life.
- In a variation on this design, the dove is replaced with an anchor.
Some headstone ornamentation depicts the Easter story – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ or the passion of Christ.

This image shows a cup or chalice and a circle.
These symbols represent the Eucharist.
The cup holds the blood of Christ and the circle is the host or the body or Christ.
The Glory Cross

- The sunburst behind the cross is most commonly seen today in both the monstrance and reliquaries that are important religious icons in the Catholic Church.
- This symbol represents Christ and His role in the resurrection, taken from the book of Revelations, where He identifies himself as the Star of Dawn.
- There was a belief that the resurrection would be at dawn, with the rising of the morning star or the sun.
The IHS monogram can be seen on many graves and is often mistaken for the dollar sign $ we use today.

There is some disagreement about what IHS means. Some believe IHS stands for the first three letters of the Greek word for Jesus, or Ihsus: the I for iota, the H the Greek letter for eta, and the S is for sigma.

Other people think that the letters are the first letters (an acronym) of the Latin Phrase *in hoc signo*, short for *in hoc signo vinces*, meaning “in this sign you will conquer.” Allegedly seen on a banner by Roman Emperor Constantine before he went into battle.

Other experts claim IHS stands for the initial letters for three Latin words *Jesus Hominum Salvator*, meaning ‘Jesus the saviour of men’.
The Winged Globe

- This is a very old and quite unusual symbol, which stands for the fleeting temporality of life. It is a reminder that this life is very short compared to the eternity that awaits those who are reborn in the Christian faith. It is also a depiction of time flying – or *tempus fugus*.

- It also represents the cyclic nature of heaven and earth. This symbol can sometimes be seen as an hourglass.
The Hand of God

- An ancient way of representing God was as a hand appearing from clouds. It is an image that comes from the Bible where the hand of God is involved in creation, revelation and redemption.

- On headstones, the hand of God can be seen holding links from a chain and is shown picking up other links. This symbol refers to the ties that bind a family, that are broken with death and will come together when all family members will one day meet in heaven.

- A hand pointing upwards is more unusual but means the soul had passed into heaven.