Popular Motifs of the Victorian & Edwardian Era

♦️ In the late Victorian and Edwardian period the postal service became fast and efficient. The telephone was still a rare commodity. The picture postcard required only a short message and could be posted for a penny. It would arrive at its destination quickly, providing a reliable message service.

♦️ Picture postcards were also sent to please and they became extremely collectable.

♦️ These postcards often depicted the same loved and familiar motifs that were used on cemetery memorials, buildings and monuments of the times.
The Clasped Hands Motif

✧ One of the most common motifs found in historic cemeteries around New Zealand is the clasped-hands motif.

✧ This same motif is also very commonly found in cards and jewellery of the time.
The Hands Motif

- The motif symbolises friendship and separation from loved ones either as a result of immigration or death.
- In cemetery art the clasped hands always depict a male hand (shown with a cuff) on the left and a female hand on the right (shown with a lacy sleeve).
In Victorian and Edwardian times, flowers adorned everything including hats, clothes, interiors, cards and books.

Flowers given singly or, in combination, had hidden romantic meanings and conveyed particular messages.

Books and postcards were produced so that the hidden meanings in bunches of flowers could be deciphered.
In the Victorian language of flowers, pansies symbolised thoughts.

- Pansies were very popular and commonly adorned cards, and jewellery.
- In cemetery art pansies are usually found with other flowers in bouquets. It is unusual to see them as the only decorative form on a headstone.
In the language of flowers, roses symbolised love.

They were very commonly featured on postcards and this is replicated in the “swags of roses” seen festooning many cemetery memorials.

Roses are also very commonly found as plantings on cemetery plots.
THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

LILIES

✧ In the Victorian romantic language of flowers, lilies symbolised purity and innocence.

✧ Lilies, like roses, festoon many postcards of the times. Lilies also festoon cemetery memorials.

✧ The lily is often found with a scroll or as a broken flower meaning a life has been cut short.

✧ The lily is most often associated with women and also symbolises Mary the mother of Jesus.
The Lily of the Valley is a small plant with highly fragrant white bells that grow along the stem. It is easily grown and is valued as one of the first flowers of Spring.

In the language of flowers the lily of the valley symbolises the resurrection, renewal and a return of happiness, purity and humility.
National emblems such as the shamrock were very commonly depicted in both postcards and cemetery art. The shamrock is illustrated in both the postcard and on the headstones as part of, or in association with, a circle.

In this postcard the traditional handclasp is reversed and may symbolise good cheer rather than the traditional parting or enforced separation.
Thistle & Bluebells of Scotland

- The thistle is the official emblem of Scotland. The thistle & bluebell can often be found as decorative items on postcards.

- Both are also found as a decorative feature on cemetery headstones.
The Ivy Motif

- The ivy is commonly featured in postcards of the times and on cemetery memorials.

- Because ivy clings it is a symbol of attachment, friendship, and undying affection. The symbol is used in religious and non-religious contexts.

- Where ivy is depicted clinging to a cross then the notion of attachment relates to strong faith in or belief Christianity.
The Anchor Motif

The anchor is a symbol of hope and is commonly found both in popular arts of the Victorian and Edwardian period as well as in cemetery symbolism. A reference to the anchor comes from a book of the Bible called the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:19...

...hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast which enters into that within the veil.”
The Star Motif

- The star can be a symbol of both the presence and absence of loved ones, who, like stars, are visible in ones thoughts but are out of reach physically.

1. Wonder as I gaze upon
   The twinkling stars so bright,
   If you are gazing on them too—
   With thoughts of me to-night.

A Merry Xmas

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
The Resurrection Motif

✧ The gates of heaven are depicted on both the postcard and the headstone. Gates represent the passage from one realm to another.

✧ The postcard illustrates the resurrection. The souls of the righteous are gathering within the rays of light (or love) radiating from the star which symbolises Jesus.

✧ The image can be found in our cemeteries although it is not a particularly common one. The soul of the deceased is usually represented by a dove passing through the gates of heaven.

✧ References to the resurrection are more commonly part of gravestone inscriptions than displayed as a visual motif. The inscription below is a good example.

Not good bye but good night,
We all shall meet
In the morning light.
The combination of the lily and Cross was a favourite motif in the Edwardian era. The tableau illustrated in this 1910 postcard is one that is very commonly found in the cemetery.

The lily featured on both the postcard and the headstone is the Madonna lily. It symbolises purity, the casting off of earthly things and attaining heavenly or spiritual qualities.

The flowers of the lily are strikingly beautiful, are strongly scented and for both reasons were commonly used as funeral flowers.
The Latin Cross

The Cross is a representation of Jesus Christ. The Cross seen in the postcard and the memorial examples are Latin Crosses. Each has three steps at the base representing the Christian virtues - faith, hope and charity.

ABIDE WITH ME (3).
I fear no foe with Thee at hand to bless,
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness;
Where is death’s sting? Where grave, Thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.
MOURNING WOMEN

✧ Figures of women weeping have been popular for many centuries.
✧ In the Victorian and Edwardian era these women were sometimes portrayed as weeping angels. Their posture and action show their grief.
✧ They may hold a flaming torch symbolising life or they may hold a wreath symbolising the shortness of life.
GUARDIAN ANGELS

✧ Guardian angels are intermediaries between God and humanity and featured widely both in Edwardian cemetery art and postcard art.

✧ Guardian angels were often portrayed escorting children heavenward when "Jesus called".

✧ In cemetery art they are seen standing guard over the family plot.
Angelichildren, both boys and girls, are commonly found in our cemeteries and often commemorate the death of a child.

Angels and cherubs (or putti) were a very popular motif. They adorned Victorian & Edwardian postcards, cemetery memorials, statues and monuments, and domestic decorative ware.
Christian Virtues

✧ There are seven Virtues all together and they were frequently represented as women. There are three theological or Christian virtues – faith, hope and charity (or love) and four Cardinal (or moral) virtues - temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice.

✧ The postcards show the three (faith, hope and love) that are also most commonly found in our cemeteries.
The faith motif was a very popular one in Edwardian popular culture. The postcard images show a woman clinging to a cross and a strikingly similar pose is depicted on the three cemetery memorials illustrated.
Christian Virtues - Faith

✧ George Barnard’s hymn “The Rugged Old Cross” was a very popular hymn of the time and representations of this concept are found in both postcard art and in cemetery art as shown here.

✧ The rugged cross is a common feature of each of these images.
Hope is represented in both cemetery and popular art as a woman who is almost always seen with an anchor. The anchor is an ancient symbol of hope.
Christian Virtues - Charity

✧ Charity is almost always depicted as a woman, caring for, or nursing children.
✧ She may also be depicted with a flame, torch, or candle, or with food for the hungry and needy.