

Exhibition on the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, at the Casa di Goethe, Via del Corso 18

Fascination

"I became involved in the cemetery when I was the director general of ICCROM, an intergovernmental organisation. In 2005, the then director of the cemetery asked for our help in the restoration of tombs." When Nicholas Stanley-Price became a member of the advisory committee of the Non-Catholic Cemetery, his love to the place started. In those years the cemetery, a private institution, was in a severe financial crisis, tombstones were decaying and trees and bushes overgrew the monuments. Now, ten years later, the cemetery has overcome the crisis. Nicholas Stanley-Price is the author of a major book on the cemetery as well as the curator of the exhibition at the Casa di Goethe in Rome's Via del Corso and he explains the importance of the burial-place: "The cemetery at the Pyramid is a microcosm of the foreign community in Rome for the last 300 years. Many people who lived and died in Rome are remembered in the tombstones, people from fifty different countries and all the major religious faiths of the world."

The beginnings of the cemetery were marked by the arrival of the Stuart Court in Rome. Many members of the court were protestants, they asked for a place to be buried, and the the Papal administration assigned the meadows at the foot of the Pyramid to them.

It took fifty years until the first gravestone was erected, many of the first people to be buried, had no gravestone. The funerals took place at night. The first man to have a gravestone near the Pyramid was Georg Werpup, a young man from Hanover. James Boswell commented on the burial in his diary that to him it felt like discrimination that Werpup was buried at night. "Boswell was wrong," states Nicholas Stanley-Price, "also catholics had their funerals at night." Nevertheless, soon the moonlit burials close to the walls of ancient Rome became one of the myths of the Eternal City.

Objects

One large oil painting in the exhibition has never been on display before, it still belongs to the descendants of the young man whose grave is depicted. Johannes Knudsen, a theology student from Denmark had died from tuberculosis in 1856. It was quite a detective's work for Nicholas Stanley-Price to find the painting and its current owners.

Austrian Object from the Albertina

"To me one of the most beautiful objects is the painting from the Albertina in Vienna," holds Nicholas Stanley-Price and he shows a watercolour by Jakob Philipp Hackert, "the colours are really fresh and it is also the earliest picture of tombs next to the Pyramid." In 1777 the famous German painter Jakob Philipp Hackert

depicted the first two tombs of Baron Georg Anton Friedrich von Werpup and the margrave of Brandenburg-Ansbach, Wolf-Carl Friedrich von Reitzenstein.

Souvenirs

The pyramid is one of the famous ancient monuments of Rome. A lot of the works in the exhibition have been used as vedute, as souvenirs for well-off Rome travellers, others were carried out on commission. Family and friends asked artists for special works on the cemetery in memory of the person who had died. 44 objects are in total on display in the exhibition, among them one model of the Pyramid, made of marble. Half of the objects come from Roman collections, the other half was shipped to the Casa di Goethe from museums and private homes abroad. The last painting of the cemetery which is on display in the exhibition is an outstanding work of art by Edward Munch. It is the only painting from the 20th century, before photography took over. When Edward Munch visited Rome in 1927 he only carried out one painting. It shows the grave of his uncle, a famous historian who wrote the History of the Norwegian People and died in Rome.

Goethe

Obviously Goethe cannot be missing in the exhibition at the Casa di Goethe, the German museum in the Italian capital. When during his Italian Journey Goethe was feeling blue, because he had to leave the Eternal City, he drew with brown ink and grey brushwork over pencil "The Cestius Pyramid in Moonlight", featuring his own imaginary grave. Full moon over the Roman walls which cast their shadow on the Pyramid, the then untouched Arcadian landscape of the Roman Campagna, pinetrees and Cypresses, and one single outstanding tomb. In his seventh Roman Elegy Goethe wrote: "Suffer me here, oh Jupiter, and may Hermes later lead me, past the monument of Cestius, quietly down to Orcus."

"We want to show that the cemetery is not only a place of sadness and grief," says curator Nicholas Stanley-Price, "but it is also very much a place that makes you feel better, where you enjoy the peace, coming from the noise of the center of Rome, that atmosphere we want to communicate."

The exhibition at the Casa di Goethe is running until the 13th of November 2016 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Mondays excluded, www.casadigoethe.it.

Reading: Nicholas Stanley-Price, The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome: its history, its people, and its survival for 300 years (Rome, The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2014).