



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Forgotten Memorials: The American Cemeteries in France from World War II

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Six cemeteries with the remains of 30,402 American soldiers killed in the Second World War are located on or near the battlefields in France. My dissertation addresses the many functions, both original and more recent, that these cemeteries have performed: as war memorials, as diplomatic gestures, as Cold War political statements, as prompts for debate about Franco-American relations and even about the nature of French identity itself. Furthermore, I analyze how those functions changed and intertwined over time. My goal is to demonstrate the importance accorded to visual and material expression as an indispensable part of diplomatic interactions between the United States and France.

Each of the cemeteries contributes to a remarkable and compelling stylistic dialectic of the era, which includes major examples of Neo-Classicism and Modern Gothic. I hope to demonstrate that these style dialogues reflect and symbolize a calculated evolution of American postwar identity, one that posited the United States as an ideal world leader or even superpower force. Part of my argument focuses on how such commemorations of war sacrifice, which incorporate a specific Christian rhetoric and comforting visual symbols pertaining to everlasting memory and afterlife for the fallen hero, erase a history of violent death. I hope to not only record a forgotten history of the cemeteries' design and construction, but also to address whether the aestheticization of war and death ultimately contributes to the perpetuation of aggression by disallowing a serious questioning of war's reality.