

PRE-RAPHAELITE ARTWORK UNCOVERED AT WILLESDEN CEMTERY

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A TOMB DECORATION BY THE ARTIST EDWARD BURNE-JONES HAS BEEN DISCOVERED AT THE LONDON BURIAL GROUND

Willesden Jewish Cemetery might not be the first place you'd expect to find a lost piece of Pre-Raphaelite art. But recently a roundel designed by Edward Burne-Jones has been rediscovered on one of the cemetery's Victorian tombs. Burne-Jones spearheaded the Pre-Raphaelite movement in the mid 1800s and the roundel marks the final resting place of Maximilian Eberstadt, secretary to the merchant banker Ernest Joseph Cassel. It was uncovered during a three-year Lottery-funded project at the site.

The roundel takes the form of a severed branch – perhaps to represent the fact that Eberstadt's life was cut short by illness at the age of 40. The distinctive motif is a rare piece of funerary work by Burne-Jones.



Edward Burne-Jones roundel and Maximilian Eberstadt grave post-restoration

Eberstadt's socialite twin sister, Elizabeth Lewis, held artistic salons at her home in Portland Place and was painted by Burne-Jones, John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler.

“Max Eberstadt's tomb is important not just as a work of art in its own right, but also as a moving testament to the close friendship between Burne-Jones and Elizabeth Lewis,” says Stacey Sell, Associate Curator of Old Master Drawings at Washington's National Gallery of Art. “The Eberstadt gravestone is [probably] one of only two surviving Burne-Jones tombs in England.”

The roundel was identified after it was shown to match a cartoon of the design by Burne-Jones held by Aberdeen Art Gallery. Its restoration by art conservationist Ben Newman is just one element of the work that has been going on at the cemetery. “We have created the House of Life visitor space, installed soundscapes and trained volunteers to offer guided walks, do outreach and gardening,” says Hester Abrams, project leader at the cemetery.



Maximilian Eberstadt's grave pre-restoration

Abrams is also planning a tour of art-related graves at the sprawling cemetery, which was founded in 1873 by the United Synagogue and contains the remains of nearly 30,000 men, women and children. Many of these were notable figures, such as another Pre-Raphaelite, Simeon Solomon, scientist Rosalind Franklin, Henrietta Adler, who was one of the first two women on the London County Council, and Jack Cohen, who founded Tesco. The United Synagogue will continue to fund the project into the future, says Abrams.

The cemetery will also celebrate the lives of ordinary people buried there. “The visitor centre has a touchscreen with 12 life stories – six men and six women – highlighting people who weren't famous. We want visitors to be inspired.”

By Peter Watts