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Problem 3: Field Documentation & Formal Analysis

The history of the Cohan-Niblo mausoleum begins with the premature death of actress and Broadway baby Josephine Cohan on July 12, 1916. Her husband, Fred Niblo, purchased a lot in fashionable Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx on September 14, 1916. Shortly thereafter, on February 26, 1917, Niblo transferred the deed to the plot to his brother-in-law, "The Man Who Owned Broadway," George M. Cohan. Born on July 3, 1878¹ in Providence, Rhode Island, George was introduced to a life of performing through his parents, Jeremiah "Jere" and Helen, and older sister Josie at the tender age of eight. The quartet toured as the vaudeville troop "The Four Cohans" before George began writing his own plays and helped the family settle in New York City. George would often cast his family and himself in his plays, including *Little Johnny Jones* in 1904, which included two of Cohan's most famous songs, "Give my Regards to Broadway" and "Yankee Doodle Boy." Along with his business partner Sam Harris,² George produced over fifty plays on Broadway, as well as writing the patriotic World War One anthem, "Over There" in 1917, for which George was awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.³ Shortly before his death in November of 1942, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, a fictionalized account of George's life starring James Cagney, was released in theaters and went on to win several Academy Awards.⁴ At the time of Josie's death, George was at the peak of his fame and fortune, allowing him to enlist the help of famed artist Louis C. Tiffany and the Ecclesiastical department of Tiffany Studios to plan and construct a fitting resting place. Tiffany had been rapidly expanding the department, and had examples of their work in cemeteries across the country, including in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Virginia. The bulk of their work, however, was installed in New York, and particularly at Woodlawn.

¹ George and his family would insist later that he was born on the Fourth of July, claiming so on several legal documents, including his passport application.

² Harris purchased a plot next to Cohan's shortly after the death of his wife, Alice, who was also the sister of Cohan's second wife, Agnes.

³ "Obituary: George M. Cohan, 64, Dies at Home Here." *The New York Times* 6 Nov. 1942: *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 28 Sept. 2013.

⁴ "The 15th Academy Awards (1943) Nominees and Winners". *Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences*. *Oscars.org*. Web. 8 Oct. 2013.

Monuments and mausoleums produced by Tiffany Studios are both rare and highly characteristic of the firm. Based on other Tiffany mausoleums in the cemetery and the Ecclesiastical Department's catalogues, the typical Tiffany monument was based on a modern streamlined neoclassic model, exemplified in the Currier Mausoleum in Woodlawn cemetery, which also serves as the main model in Tiffany's 1913 Mausoleum brochure (*fig. 1*). Tiffany also utilized the Egyptian style (*fig. 2*), although it relied more heavily on the neoclassical approach. Mr. Cohan, however, did not choose either of these styles, instead opting for something more individual.

The Cohan-Noble mausoleum is not opulent or gaudy, but elegantly restrained, a tribute to the skilled hands and minds of Tiffany Studios (*Fig. 3*). The building is a series of shallow planes held together by a framing system and composed entirely of Cohasset granite blocks taken from Tiffany's private quarries.⁵ The building itself sits on a shallow platform, which is not imposing as some in other mausoleums. There are four square bases situated at each corner of the rectangle, which are connected to thinner pylons that brace and elongate the facade up to a square parapet, which crowns the structure. The facade is laterally symmetrical, and longitudinally rhythmic, building in ornament as it moves upward (*fig. 4*).

Both the parapet and pylons are decorated with Gothic ornaments, including lobed arches and peaked gables. Similar to other Gothic and Gothic Revival architecture, these ornaments do not cast shadows or create deep voids in the facade. Instead, they are very shallow and allow the unique coloring of the Cohasset granite to shine. The deepest voids in the facades come from the pointed equilateral arched window frames and the recessed door, which is capped by a beautifully carved tympanum, also of speckled Cohasset granite (*fig 5*). The safety of the doorway, elevated from the platform and reached by three short but elongated steps, has prevented the tympanum from soiling, and it is here that design and material conjoin for an impressive sight. The geometric rosette design of the stone continues the Gothic theme, as do the bronze doors, which are cast in similar medieval style ornamentation. Even the small bronze grates incorporate the Gothic design in a row of miniature lancet arches. Juxtaposing these angular designs are the delicately sculpted roses at the point of each

⁵ Cohan-Noble Mausoleum, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

pitched gable, the largest crowning the tympanum. A finely carved cross that pulls against the horizontal line of the parapet is on axis with this rose, and serves as an excellent compliment. By contrast, the window enclosures are much heavier, but mirror the tympanum above the door. The clean lines of smooth stone serve as contrast to the brightly colored and highly decorative art glass windows, which are obscured from the outside by opaque glass.

There is a sketch of a mausoleum in the Tiffany mausoleum catalogue from 1913 that seems to contain several of the basic framing devices of the Cohan mausoleum, including the low platform, three short steps, vertical organization of ornament (*fig. 6*). However, its ornamentation is entirely different. The design for the Cohan mausoleum is reminiscent of a medieval British castle. However, text in Tiffany's own glass brochure from 1896 states that Gothic architecture that stained glass was typically installed in was not necessary to showcase the beauty of the glass. In fact, the brochure goes on to say that stained glass windows fit much better into other forms of architecture.⁶ This, combined with Tiffany's penchant for the Neoclassical and the Egyptian point to a custom design for the Cohan-Niblo mausoleum. While this exterior design may seem plain, all of Tiffany's mausoleums maintained streamlined facades, regardless of style. To the casual viewer, the only aspect of the exterior that seems interesting are the pierced bronze doors with glass panel. Rather than being of poor design, this method was actually contrived to draw the visitor to the real attraction: the interior. As makers of fine household wares, Tiffany had taken this skill and transformed it to furnish the homes of the deceased.

Once inside the mausoleum, the monumentality of the building disappears and is replaced by a feeling of reverence. The interior resembles a medieval chapel in miniature. As such, it retains a balance, with tombs positioned vertically that contrast with a massive horizontal altar, all of the same Alabama cream marble. Two white marble sarcophagi rest on either side of a narrow aisle, extruding halfway out of the floor. They are simple in design, with clean lines, and are inscribed only with the names and dates of their occupants. Jeremiah "Jere" Cohan and Helen Cohan. These tombs are very similar to an outdoor ledger stone in memory of Charles

⁶ "The German and English workers in glass...their windows were exclusively in harmony with but one style of architecture - viz., Gothic. On the other hand, American artists, adopting only what was purely artistic in medieval work, have developed to the utmost the inherent quality of glass...by demonstrating its adaptability to all styles of architecture," Tiffany Glass Pamphlet, 1896, Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, pg. 37.

T. Cook also designed by Tiffany and also in Woodlawn Cemetery (*fig. 7*). The focal point of the interior becomes, in characteristically tiffany fashion, the details. The favrille art glass windows that had been so muted on the outside come to life in deep, rich colors depicting the life and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (*fig. 8*). These, unlike the exterior, do not seem to be unique to the Cohan mausoleum. In fact, a copy of the rear window above the altar can be seen nearby in the Miller mausoleum (*fig. 9*). Although the Cohan mausoleum predates the Miller mausoleum by eight years (*fig. 10*), it shows that Tiffany was not above reusing designs.

But despite the beauty of the favrille figure windows, by far the largest and most interesting element of the interior is the altar and its regalia, which also serves as the tomb for Josie. This tomb/altar hybrid, almost four feet high, and centered in the rear wall, is made of Alabama cream marble and delicately carved in a simple style similar to her parents' tombs, with elegant molding at the edges (*fig. 11*). In a recessed front panel is a white and gold glass mosaic, using iridescent tiles, again, recording only the occupant's name and dates. Beneath Josephine's name is the name of her brother. Repointing around the name suggests that George's name was added after, presumably after he died in 1942. Josephine's epitaph has the added decoration of the two Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* on either side of the inscription, symbolizing the cycle of life and death. This, combined with the window of Jesus ascending to heaven that rests just above the altar gives a feeling of hope for eternal life, a fitting thought for someone taken before their time.

Adorning the altar are instruments of a Catholic mass, further reinforcing the chapel analogy. A bejeweled bronze cross with mother of pearl inlaid back and two bejeweled braided bronze candelabras rest on the altar, along with later additions of personal photographs, a sculpture that contains the ashes of George M. Cohan Jr. And his wife, Judy Cohan, and, in a separate urn, the ashes of George's daughter, Georgette Cohan (*figs. 12, 13, 14, 15, 16*). However, archival research indicates that there were also two sets of altar cloths that would have added to the church-like atmosphere.⁷

These items, coupled with the architectural design reinforce Catholic religious symbolism. Being of Irish Catholic heritage, George was president of the Catholic Actors Guild for several years. Additionally, upon

⁷ Cohan-Niblo Mausoleum, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

is death, in 1942, George's funeral was held at St. Patrick's cathedral with a crowd of mourners 4,000 people strong, and with "Over There" being softly played as his casket was carried out.⁸ Using these examples, it is fair to say that a religious design was desired, and the Gothic elements of ornamentation were highly recognizable religious iconography.

The placement of the mausoleum is also significant, as it reflects the character of its owner. The mausoleum is very close to the road, and faces Park Avenue (*fig. 17*). Unlike other celebrities in the cemetery, who chose to turn their buildings away from the road or situate them back from the lot behind copious amounts of landscaping, the Cohan-Niblo mausoleum is readily accessible from the street, and had a minimal landscape plan, none of which survives today (*fig. 18*). For a man who once remarked to a newspaperman, "I don't care what you say about me; as long as you say *something* about me, and as long as you spell my name right," it is a fitting location.⁹ It is a showman's mausoleum, but the Cohan mausoleum is not just for one showman. After Fred Niblo left his wife's body in the care of her brother, he moved to Hollywood, where he became a director of such famous films as *Ben Hur*, *The Mark of Zorro*, and *Blood and Sand*. Niblo also remarried on February 26, 1918.¹⁰ Knowing that Niblo never intended to return to New York, the mausoleum became the final resting place of the Four Cohans, where they are reunited for eternity. Josephine, partnerless, was placed within the alter on November 17, 1917, while Jere and Helen were placed in the elevated tombs side by side as husband and wife in 1917 and 1928 respectively. In an unusual move, George was placed beneath his father, to await his wife of thirty-five years, Agnes, who was placed beneath her mother-in-law in 1972.¹¹

These long lengths of time where the mausoleum is left closed has made apparent the conservation issues of the Cohan-Niblo Mausoleum. Although the outside of the mausoleum is marginally covered in biological growth, on the interior it is pervasive. There are several types of organisms growing, both on the

⁸ McCabe, John. *George M. Cohan: The Man Who Owned Broadway*. New York: Da Capo, 1980. Print., pg. 268 - 269. George's funeral marks the first time secular music is played in the famous cathedral.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 196.

¹⁰ Fred Niblo's second wife, Australian actress Enid Bennet, was also Josephine's understudy for the Australian production of George's play, *Get Rich Quick, Wallingford*, in 1915, which Niblo also starred in. The two also acted opposite each other in the 1916 film adaptation.

¹¹ George's first wife, Ethel Levey is excluded from the mausoleum, and is buried in a standard plot of Woodlawn.

walls and on the tombs. Moisture has leaked in from the roof and has led to disintegration of the mortar between the granite blocks allowing a visitor to see through to the outside (*fig. 19*). A recutting of the panel in the floor in 1972 has left it uneven. Large cracks have appeared on the tombs, the edges of which are curling.

While it is tempting to place blame on Tiffany Studios as the designer who thought they could do a builder's work, having built the mausoleum without the help of an external contractor¹², the blame most likely lies with the custom design that created a moat for water in the form of the parapet, a lack of ventilation, which comes from the small, decorative vents, and the lack of marble sheeting to clad the interior walls, which are evident in other Tiffany mausoleums in the cemetery. Additionally, the underground vault of the Cohan mausoleum is not seen in the other Tiffany creations, which instead line their sarcophagi up the sides of the walls. It should be noted that the other two Tiffany mausoleums, which use catalogue Tiffany designs that include a standard pitched roof with center ventilation shaft¹³, are in excellent condition, with only minor organic growth on the bottom edge of the side facades. In fact, The Currier Mausoleum is featured in the catalogue itself as the prime example of a Tiffany Mausoleum (*fig. 20*). However, both of the other mausoleums are endowed with maintenance plans, while the Cohan-Niblo mausoleum receives only general cemetery maintenance. These conservation issues require further investigation.

Despite the conservation issues that have emerged with age, the meaning of the mausoleum remains clear. With the death of his sister, and the impending death of his father, George M. Cohan, "The Man Who Owned Broadway," contracted Tiffany Studios to build a fitting tribute to his family. However, Tiffany's standard designs were not good enough, so Mr. Cohan commissioned a custom exterior and an interior filled with the best Tiffany could offer. When it became clear shortly after the commission that Josie's husband would not spend eternity by her side, a decision was made to place her in the position of honor within the altar upon the mausoleum's completion. Jere soon joined his daughter in a raised tomb facing hers, with a twin tomb ascribed to Helen. In an usual move, certainly unusual for a showman, George chose not to be in the featured

¹² Cohan-Niblo Mausoleum, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

¹³ Currier Mausoleum, Woodlawn Archives, Avery Architectural Library, Columbia University, New York, New York.

tombs above ground, but rather in the underground vault across from his wife of 35 years, Agnes. While his statue in Times Square highlights George's personal accomplishments, the Cohan mausoleum stands as a testament to the vaudeville troupe as a whole. George's biographer and noted theater critic, Ward Morehouse, in describing the long procession from St. Patrick's to Woodlawn, highlights this connection, "The Yankee Prince, the Man Who Owned Broadway, was being taken to join those who had gone before - to join his sister, the beautiful Josephine; his father, Jeremiah John, the Dancing Philosopher, and his mother Helen Frances, of the clan of Costigan, who had married a minstrel man, and who had somehow kept this turbulent, vital, restless and wonderful family together through the unheeding years. The Four Cohans were now reunited."¹⁴

¹⁴Morehouse, Ward. *George M. Cohan, Prince of the American Theater.*, Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1943. Print., pg. 234.

Appendix.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

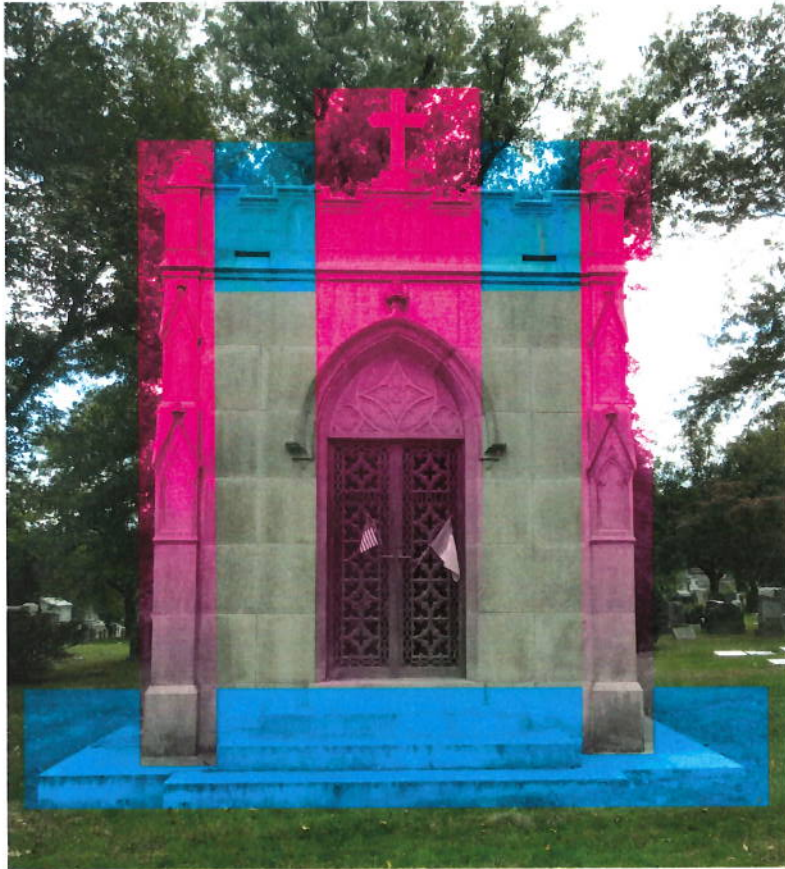
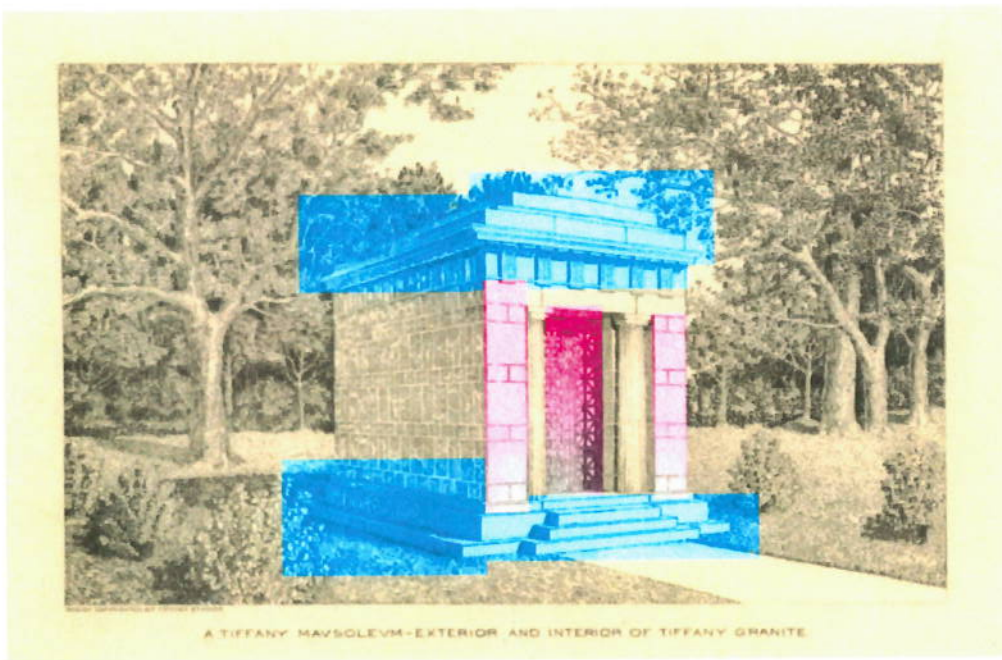


Fig. 4

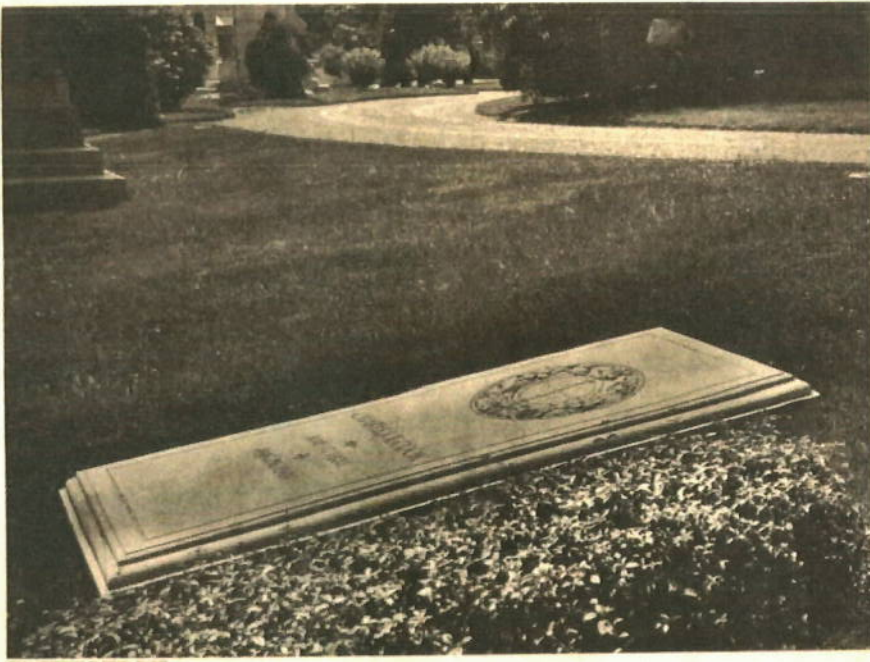


Fig. 5



A TIFFANY MAUSOLEUM-EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR OF TIFFANY GRANITE

Fig. 6



A TIFFANY LEDGER STONE

Fig. 7

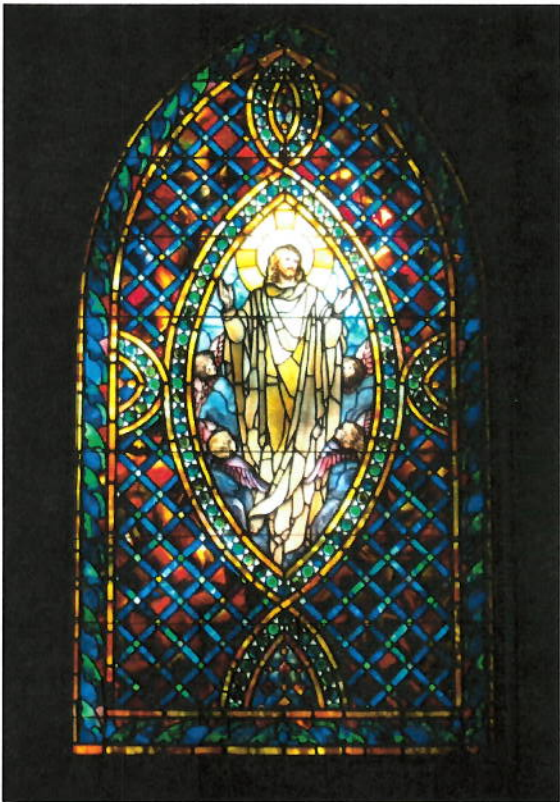


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

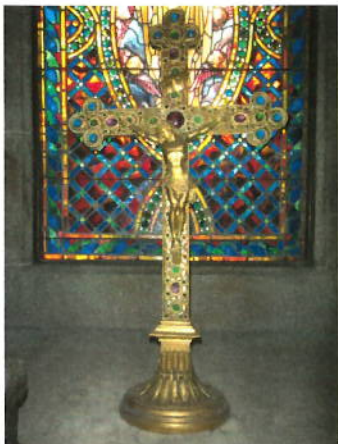


Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16

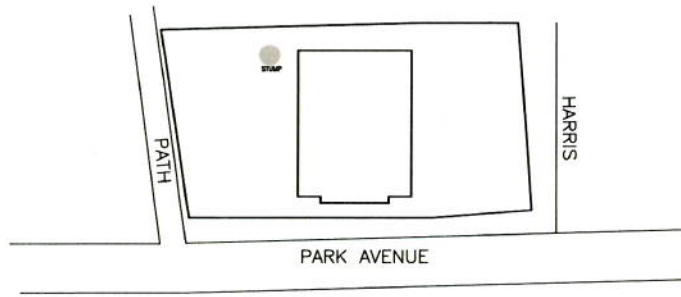


Fig. 17

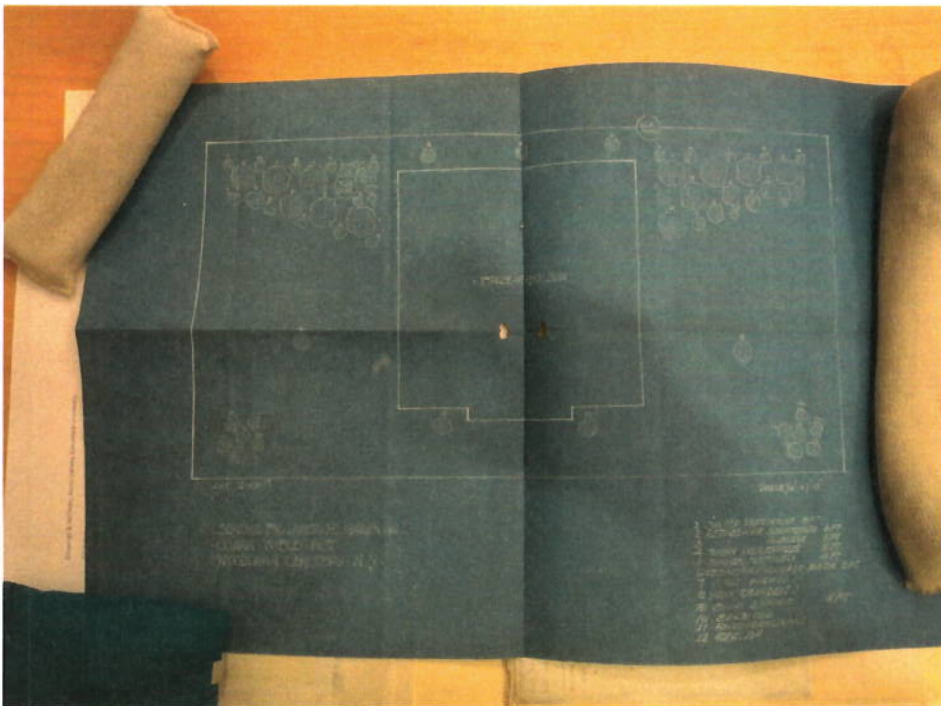


Fig. 18



Fig. 19

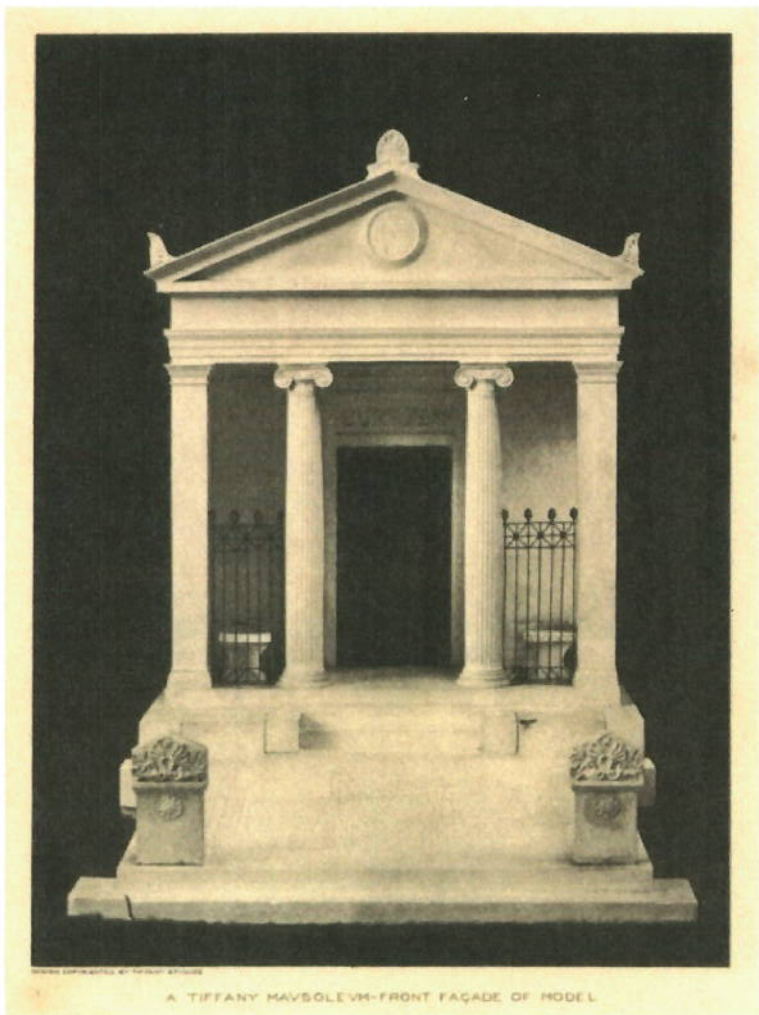


Fig. 20