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Reading Historic Buildings
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Problem Three: Field Documentation and Formal Analysis – Jacob Dreicer Mausoleum

The Bronx's Woodlawn Cemetery is the final resting place of many prominent New Yorkers. The numerous stone mausolea throughout the grounds serve as testaments to the wealth of the cemetery's patrons. Standing tall on a corner lot is the Jacob Dreicer Mausoleum. It serves as a monument to the success the Dreicers achieved in their lifetime and its location among prominent New Yorkers rightly places the family among its peers.

Jacob Dreicer and his wife Gitel immigrated to the United States from Europe in 1866.¹ They were jewelry makers by trade and cut their own gemstones that they purchased from Europe. Dreicer and Co. was one of the first commercial retailers to establish a Fifth Avenue store north of 42nd street.² When the company established a jewelry store at 560 Fifth Avenue in 1906, Jacob and his son Michael became very involved in real estate in the area. In 1908, they made the largest real estate deal of the area in over eight years for commercial development.³ Dreicer hired the fashionable architectural firm of Warren and Wetmore for the Fifth Avenue storefront but in 1912, 1913 and 1917 had Henry Otis Chapman design three buildings for the Dreicer Realty Co.⁴ Henry Otis Chapman would be hired to design the Dreicer Mausoleum in 1914 indicating that the Dreicers and Mr. Chapman had a good working relationship. Michael

¹"Mrs. Jacob Dreicer, Gem Expert, Dead." *New York Times (1923-Current file)* 7 Dec 1932. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

²"Michael Dreicer Dies At His Summer Home." *New York Times (1857-1922)* 27 July, 1921. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

³"Big 5th Avenue Deal: Site at 47th Street Sold for \$1,275,000" *New York Tribune (1900-1910)* 13 Nov 1908. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *New York Tribune* (1841-1922) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

⁴Office for Metropolitan History, "Manhattan NB Database 1900-1986," (October 14, 2012), <http://www.MetroHistory.com>.

Dreicer died on July 26 of 1921, roughly one month before his father. At the time of death, both Michael and Jacob left behind estates in excess of one million dollars.⁵

Dreicer & Co. was a very fashionable maker of fine jewelry. In addition to selling rare gemstones, they are considered the firm that contributed most to the popularization of pearls in the United States.⁶ Michael Dreicer was also a prominent socialite and businessman. He served as president of not only Dreicer & Co. but also president of Standard Paint Company, the Houbigant Company and served as a director at Harriman National Bank. He additionally was a member of the Fifth Avenue Association and many New York social clubs.⁷

The Dreicer Mausoleum at Woodlawn cemetery is a large stone mausoleum built for Jacob Dreicer and his family. It was designed by Chapman and the construction was contracted out to a monument company Stone, Gould & Farrington. In plan it is a roughly square structure with corners cut off with quarter circles creating a somewhat stunted Greek cross plan. At approximately twenty-nine feet, it is one of the taller mausoleums in its vicinity. Its large low dome adds to the structures' prominence. The overall design is meant to impress upon the visitor the monumentality of the building. In addition to the impressive dome, there is a columned entrance portico with several steps that lead to the large ten foot nine inch tall bronze doors. Inside, the tombs flank the room up to eight feet, where the walls step outwards creating a vast open space overhead with a high coffered marble ceiling. The exterior stonework of the mausoleum is Light Barre Granite from Vermont and all the interior stonework is Rutland.

⁵ "Mrs. Jacob Dreicer, Gem Expert, Dead." *New York Times* (1923-Current file) 7 Dec. 1932. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

⁶ "Tells How Dreicer Lifted Pearl Myth" *New York Times* (1923-Current file) Feb 28, 1925. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

⁷ "Michael Dreicer Dies At His Summer Home." *New York Times* (1857-1922) 27 July, 1921. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The New York Times* (1851-2008) with Index (1851-1993) Web. 4 Oct 2012.

“Italian” Marble, also from Vermont. The mausoleum was scheduled to be completed by November 15th 1914, well before Jacob or Michael’s death.⁸

As a visitor approaches the mausoleum, it stands tall on a corner lot. The entrance to the mausoleum does not face perpendicular to the street, nor does it align with any approach to the building. This helps to illustrate how this structure is not limited to one façade. Excluding the entrance portico, and the rear window, the structure has a rotational symmetry in four directions. The round dome of the building adds to this rotational dimension as there is no gable or pediment to suggest a preferred side. While the entrance portico provides the majority of the external decorative detail, the triglyphs that complement the Doric columns follow the entablature around the building. Since the building can be approached from three different routes, this attention to detail helps make the building approachable from all directions.

The building itself is a relatively simple and well-designed building. It is similar in concept to roman circular temples or *tempietos*. While the building is not circular, it has a sense of multi-directionality and it also utilizes columns and a monumental dome. The slight reference to the Greek cross form in its plan is also apparent throughout many styles of churches and ceremonial spaces. It uses classical elements throughout, including the low dome, carved garlands and a well-proportioned Doric order. While not an apparent copy of any nearby mausoleum or historic structure, it combines some basic forms and traditional detailing in the creation of an original composition reflective of its design by a professional architect.

Despite the classical detailing, the stained-glass window does not fit with classical details. It is an eclectic collection of glass fragments that are generally medieval in appearance yet are not consistent with one another. While the mausoleum records lack any mention of the

⁸ Contract with Stone, Gould and Farrington for Construction of Dreicer Mausoleum. Jacob Dreicer Mausoleum. Woodlawn Archives. Avery Library, Columbian University. 14, May 1914.

window, it seems possible that throughout the Dreicers travels to Europe, they may have collected old fragments of stained glass and had them installed within the window. This theory is somewhat strengthened when considering that the Metropolitan Museum of Art was left a large collection of Medieval painting, sculpture and decorative art by Michael Dreicer upon his death.⁹ Further investigation would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

Overall, this mausoleum represents a wealthy family whose members were notable for their skill in the decorative arts as well as their business acumen. Its grand scale, and prominence in its area of the cemetery represents the family's social prominence and real estate wealth, yet its elegant, professional design immortalizes the Dreicer & Co. legacy. The mausoleum is a way for the Dreicer family to maintain their fashionable status among their peers in death as well as in life.

⁹“The Michael Dreicer Collection.” *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* vol. 17 no. 5 (New York: May 1922).



The Jacob Dreicer Mausoleum

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