

Problem 3, Documentation The Seibert Mausoleum

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The mausoleum of Seibert attracted me when we were choosing from a pile of pictures for our assigned documentation – it was quite distinguished from the prevailing classical patterns, and to analyze its naive yet exquisite design later became a major work in my documentation assignment.

The owner of this mausoleum, Frank A. Seibert, was the third child of a couple immigrated from Germany, and he had five siblings. According to the 1880 census, he had already been working in a wagon factory at the age of 15, with two elder brothers being molder and tinsmith. Brought up in a typical German family professed in technique and craftwork, Frank ended his career as president of the Manhattan Brass Company, a company designed and manufactured beautiful lamps (and produced brass as well). Seibert retired at a quite young age of 47, in 1913, and from then on we found him in a series of shooting competition. He held the Grand American National Championship for shooting in 1915, 1920 and 1922, and won piles of high scratch in the Travers Island traps held by the New York Athlete Club from 1921 to 1925 (he still performed excellent shooting as late as in 1939 in the practice shoot for the 34th annual amateur championship of clay target shooting). In 1929, his wife Josie passed away after their 34-year marriage, and Frank himself died after a long illness in 1948. Now in the Seibert mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery buried Frank, Josie as well as Frank's second wife Lillie, who died in 1950 at the age of 55. The craftwork background and later connection with lamp production, and even the long suffering of illness and a lineage from Germany, might explain much of the subtle, artistic pattern of this mausoleum.

The Seibert family began to contact the Woodlawn Cemetery in the November of 1927, and Farrington Gould & Hoagland Company as the designer, to construct their family mausoleum. Frank asked for a plot "as near to the east" as could be, and the completed building faces east, coincidentally or not, but the reason remains unclear. The door was designed by an Italian artist named Gaetano Federici, a sculptor famous for his realistic style. The door was probably designed separately as it was not recorded in the official Woodlawn files about artists and companies of mausoleums.

Approaching from the Hickory Avenue after entering from the Jerome Avenue entrance and going along the Filbert Avenue, the Seibert Mausoleum present a 2/3 side face across a couple of other mausoleums to the right, and across branches and leaves to the left if approaching from the other direction. Though the Seibert family wished to get a spot near east, the east side is certainly blocked by trees when they chose the lot (and later by other mausoleums), and at a distance from the main road. We may only assume that the Seibert wanted the mausoleum to face the east, to his motherland, and didn't mind the slight loneliness created by the surrounding of trees and meadows at all. Today we can see this completed mausoleum shaded in the canopy of trees, as if unwilling to show a straightforward frontage, which reminds me of the Saint Peter's Cathedral, the best observing position of which in the plaza is occupied by an obelisk. Nevertheless, the mausoleum is located on a gentle slope towards the road and takes on a friendly appearance; on the other hand, the facade framed by tree leaves adds to its naturalistic decoration and mysterious flavor, which will be discussed later on.

As a matter of fact, the location and arrangement of Seibert's mausoleum is quite to the taste of classical Chinese garden culture (and an ideal residence in city is always located in a garden). In a man-made garden where space is limited, hiding the destination from being seen at first sight is the best way to raise its glamour, and Chinese truly enjoys the interplay between the transforming natural scenery and artificial creation. Such romanticism seems to be in sympathy with the spirit behind the allocation of this little mausoleum here.

Visitors are welcomed by the sloping meadow and the succeeding stairs to the mausoleum – a little cabin of granite sits on its stone base. A pair of stone goblets and then a pair of stone benches prolong the routine into the main entrance. Two Corinth columns stand in front of the door, holding and highlighting by the bulk above the column a banal inscribed with the name "SEIBERT", and framed a recessed arch door, whose relief decoration has formerly been dimmed in the mild shadow created by its recessing pattern. Through the bronze gate we can directly see the bright art glass window on the back wall, which marks the end of the routine.

The defining components appear simple so far, but it doesn't contradict the exquisiteness of the mausoleum's design. The body of the house is almost cubic, with a dimension of 11'6"×10'11"×11'10" (height below the pediments). This concentrating volume is activated by some subtle variations of the wall surface, such as the two slightly protruding stone belts, the upper one of which marks the end of the enclosing wall, and the fillet on rectangular corner, which runs its trace across the horizontal stone belts towards the roof, connecting all these vertical parts together, and all the architraves along these demonstrating ups-and-downs entangled, consolidating even more the whole entity, in a fairly subtle pattern. The roof consists of four pediments, one on each side of the house (balanced by four other supporting stone blocks between each other), and a squared slab crowned over them – a complex rich in sense of sculpture and volume, which is in harmony with the solid mason body.

The cubic/rectangular shaped body of the Seibert mausoleum can be assorted into a few rectangles, yet it's a pity that none of them resembles another in proportion. The top of the columns reaches the golden section of the height of the cabin, and the height and width of the art glass window obtains a golden proportion – such are the only connection we find in the mausoleum with classical design here.

The decorative details adhering to the house also speak to an aesthetics differing from classicalism. The door of recessed arch obviously emanates a Romanesque character, which applied portal of this pattern for sake of its extremely thick wall. This is certainly not the question of the mausoleum here, thus the arch door is to some extent simplified, with no capital on those slim columns supporting the arch. The two most external arches are decorated by naturalistic pattern of plants – both are the time-honored motif of acanthus, but different in exact shape, with the inner ones symmetrical while the outer ones more rakish, as if winding along the arch. The style of the columns is a little harder to judge, as the pointed shape of shaft ornament looks medieval, while the high pedestal and segmented shaft seemed to be from later periods. As a matter of fact, these patterns, for their naturalistic decorative character, are all embraced by the arts and crafts movement, which had prevailed in America as well as in its birthplace, and Frank Seibert, as posterity of German immigrants and practitioner of lamp manufacturing, was very likely to have a predilection for such pattern.

The interior of the mausoleum is quite simple, with polished granite floor in the middle, and then covered by marbles, including two catacombs made of marble slates on each side, marble claddings on exposed granite walls, and ceiling composed by marble pieces in a grid pattern, which is fixed to the top slab by four bronze rosettes. But most interior space is squeezed away by the catacombs, leaving a thin long space directing, concentrating the viewers' sight to the glowing art glass window in the bright afternoon sunshine, whose sill acts like a little altar, and arouse a feeling to pray for the dead.

An old Chinese saying goes that, the residence, whether of the living or the dead, acts as the crux between heaven and earth, and the paradigm of human ethics. In general, the mausoleum here, as it is supposed to, erects a monument and reveals a symbol of life for its owner. The little cabin, though appears monumental in its erecting shape, resembles more to a souvenir decorated, and simultaneously moderated, by the preference of its owner, rather than a sacred temple monument of routine form. When it remained in an austere dimness among the almost transparent leaves in the afterglow of sun, and with the glass window shining even brighter through the bronze front door, I saw at the same time a cult fairy tale from Germany, and a pilgrimage towards the life of the dead.

