



**LaBranche Mausoleum
Woodlawn Cemetery, New York**

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HP Studio I, Fall 2015
Problem 3: Formal Documentation and Analysis
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LABRANCHE MAUSOLEUM

To consider the LaBranche Mausoleum in New York City's Woodlawn Cemetery is an exercise in considering the subtlety of distinction between replicated convention and synthesis in design, as well as the distinction between simpleness and simplicity. Constructed by the Harrison Granite Company in 1926 at the request of George Michel Lucien LaBranche after the death of his wife, Ada (née Seagrist) in 1925,¹ this mausoleum presents a quiet, dignified sense of stateliness and modernity and therefore stands as a testament to the era in which it was created as well as the life of its primary occupant.

George M. L. LaBranche was by occupation a stock broker and long-time member of the New York Stock Exchange. While his profession situated him comfortably within the realm of New York's elite, his legacy is based more on his reputation as "the Babe Ruth of fly fishing"² and his pioneering contributions to the world of sport through his books, *The Dry Fly and Fast Water* and *The Salmon and the Dry Fly*. Born in New York City in 1875 to a wine merchant transplant from New Orleans,³ and asserting himself into the financial sector in lieu of finishing a high school level education, his is the story of self-made wealth and prestige. [See fig. 1]

His mausoleum, however is far from an overzealously decorous personification of the quintessential "rags-to-riches" tale so popular during the American Gilded Age and is instead a more subtle statement of distinction aligned with a movement toward Modern architecture's distillation of style through its conspicuous lack of ornamentation. The mausoleum is nestled midway on the northern edge of the Myosotis Plot on Prospect Avenue, an offshoot of Central Avenue not far from the Jerome Avenue entrance gate. While it is not a palatial structure set on one of the most expensive circular lots, the mausoleum is a strong statement of an esteemed social standing and is located in an area of Woodlawn

¹Woodlawn Archive

²New York Herald Tribune

³Ancestry Library

considered fashionable in the 1920's, surrounded by other affluent neighbors, and thus serves as a reflection of the class and status of LaBranche.⁴

Perhaps this locale was an intentional choice by LaBranche. The orientation of the structure within the plot lines, coupled with the landscape design suggests a desire for seclusion. Situated along the apex of an arc created by Prospect Avenue, the LaBranche Mausoleum (or more specifically, its side elevation) should be readily visible when turning off of Central Avenue. But the structure is set about ten feet back from where the property line meets the road; further removed from the street than any other surrounding mausolea, most of which predate the LaBranche construction. Adding to this illusion of privacy, and continuing with the theme of simplicity, the landscaping is composed of one conifer tree flanking either side of the façade and one evergreen bush pruned to an elliptical shape and placed in front of each tree. There is also one deciduous tree planted on the eastern side of the mausoleum that forms a triangle between the evergreen tree and bush, but based on its small size, this seems to be a later addition to the original landscape. The resulting effect is a sense of isolation within the natural world as well as a framing device for the mausoleum's front elevation. [See fig. 2]

In this way, the orientation of the mausoleum and its landscaping reflect LaBranche's personal life. It creates the illusion of being removed from society, but in doing so also draws the focus of the viewer's eye to the structure. Similarly, LaBranche sought to remove himself from the City. Though he maintained apartments in fashionable East Side neighborhoods from the 1920's to the end of his life, most census records place him in various residences in the suburban setting of Westchester County to the north of the city. He cultivated a reputation as an outdoorsman, hosting events such as quail hunts at his estate in the country⁵, and in doing so, distinguished himself as a pillar of New York society. Based upon anecdotes in his book, *The Dry Fly and Fast Water*, fly fishing requires a highly sensitive interpretation of the natural landscape. LaBranche's ability to read subtleties in nature, coupled with his desire to primarily reside in his homes outside of the City of New York give credence to the possibility that his mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery is oriented specifically to view the towns of Pelham and New Rochelle where he spent most of his time.

⁴ Dolkart p64

⁵ Smith

A cursory glance at the LaBranche Mausoleum yields the impression of standardized conventionality. To a small degree this is a true assessment. The primary exterior material, Barre Granite from Barre, Vermont,⁶ occurs regularly in the setting of Woodlawn Cemetery as does the patinated bronze double door with long, vented windows and the overarching influences of Classical architecture such as the symmetrical massing created by columns. This continuity, however, does not mean the LaBranche Mausoleum is devoid of design or intention. The structure's rectilinear shape creates a weighty horizontality, and is emphasized by five horizontal recessed grouting lines running across the entire building, uninterrupted even by the four Doric pilasters on the front and back elevations. The horizontal spread of the mausoleum is further enhanced by the roughly 15 inch foundation block and pair of wide, gently rising steps atop which the structure sits as well as the shallow differentiations of extending elements on the façade. This is a strongly symmetrical structure in its massing. The front elevation's center line drives through the separation of the double bronze doors which are framed by a carved geometric pattern in the granite. To either side of these doors, the evenly spaced pilasters support an entablature with a frieze on which are placed four carved granite rosettes. The verticality of these pilasters is checked by the weighty stone ledge and flat roof slab (slightly pitched to allow water drainage, but flat in perception) that also offers a horizontal symmetry to the mausoleum by using repetition of color and material creating the illusion of dark, light, dark. *[See fig. 3]*

Comparing it to other Harrison Granite Company productions within the same time period such as the Classical temple mausoleum of Marie Clemens or the predominately Gothic monument for Louis Herrmann demonstrates that the lack of embellishment of the LaBranche mausoleum is not a result of lack of sophistication, but is actually a statement of progressive design. Placing it within the timeline of larger architectural movements in the United States, the LaBranche Mausoleum reflects the early transitions of style toward a Modernist perspective and "Stripped Classicism" in which Classical styles and traditional building elements were beginning to shift and blend with changes in technology.⁷ This use of simplified form to invoke a sense of grandeur echoes the architectural philosophies of Modernists such as Louis Sullivan, whose approach to monumental building in the form of skyscrapers was based on the

⁶ Woodlawn Archive

⁷ Growth Efficiency and Modernism p. 12

clarification of design elements. While the LaBranche Mausoleum is far from a skyscraper, the deceptively horizontal flatness of the façade and its lack of embellishment lend a massive, monumental air to the structure. The field of light granite is unified by uninterrupted horizontal lines and forms a cohesive wall of material while the slight protrusions of the pilasters and rosettes, and generous inset framing the bronze doors define depth within the field. Used in conjunction, the impact of these stylistic systems is an impressive stateliness, and monolithic quality to the mausoleum.

Crossing the grassy setback, this monolithic quality is opened and rendered approachable by the low rise of the wide, gentle steps. The doors to the interior swing inward and present the white marble tomb that holds the remains of George LaBranche and his first wife, Ada. This tomb is the central focus of the mausoleum's interior with its importance emphasized by its proximity and placement within the line of site upon entry. Catacombs within the right and left side walls justify the rectangular shape of the mausoleum and house the remains of the LaBranche family members including daughters Virigina Lake, and Estelle, sons Robert, and George, Jr. with his wife Sara Spahr LaBranche, and their daughter Sara Jane Hitchcock.⁸ Measuring approximately fifteen feet by eight feet, this interior space is relatively large with the feeling of openness enhanced by light reflecting off the Knoxville Grey marble⁹ panelling of the interior. This lightness invites an ethereal quality to the space that is supplemented by the choice of a vibrant stained glass window centered in the back of the mausoleum above the LaBranche tomb.

[See fig. 4]

The window depicts a bucolic landscape of cypress trees framing a stream winding into the infinite horizon under a prismatic sunset and is influenced by the religious landscapes of Louis Comfort Tiffany. The original contract between LaBranche and Harrison Granite Company confirms that this window is not actually from the Tiffany Studio, but it does represent an important cultural shift in iconographic themes and perspectives on death. Beginning in the 19th century and continuing to rise in popularity, landscapes and the natural world became an expression of the Christian afterlife.¹⁰ This particular trend is a fitting one for the outdoorsman, LaBranche, and is featured prominently; the one

⁸ Woodlawn Archive

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ De Rosa

splash of color in the grey, white, and green palette of his mausoleum, set in the western facing wall to capture the sunset and allow the vibrant colors to illuminate the space.

Thus in death is expressed the portrait of a man's life. A father, a husband, a man who enjoyed the natural world, a man who created a wealth to his own existence, a man very much of his time. So too is the legacy personified in the LaBranche Mausoleum an expression of its time. With its weighty, but refined air the mausoleum is the embodiment of an era in flux, an era discovering new ways to interpret old forms. Similar to the 1930 Lehman Mausoleum in Woodlawn Cemetery characterized as "an eloquent example of the monumental dignity to be attained by sheer simplicity of detail together with monolithic construction,"¹¹ the LaBranche Mausoleum does possess a dignity in its use of simple forms. These forms, together with attention to placement, environment, and use of materials, create a structure of beauty and presence in a final place of rest.

¹¹ Dolkart p 66

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George La Branche. Museum collection.

*Figure 1
Journal of the American Museum of Fly Fishing*



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4