

A vibrant, stylized illustration of a cemetery. The scene is set in a bright, sunny environment with a clear blue sky and a large, bright sun. The ground is a mix of green and yellow, suggesting grass and sunlight. Several tombstones of various shapes and colors (pink, purple, blue, and grey) are scattered across the landscape. Some are simple slabs, while others are more ornate with crosses or arches. In the background, there are trees with green and yellow foliage, and a small building with a red door. The overall style is flat and colorful, typical of modern digital art.

Tombstone Motifs: How Do They Relate to Local Art?

By Ri Merk



Introduction

Greetings one and all,

When you go to a graveyard are you there to visit ghosts, loved ones that have passed, or simply to take in the view? I personally go to take in the view. Not only is the landscape often very lovely, out of respect for the dead, but also many tombstones are real works of art. Because of this I thought that there was a good chance that motifs of tombstones would reflect the local art of the time, or maybe even just the art of the time, local notwithstanding.

Research Question & Background

Do tombstone motifs match up with local art around the death dates of the tombstones?



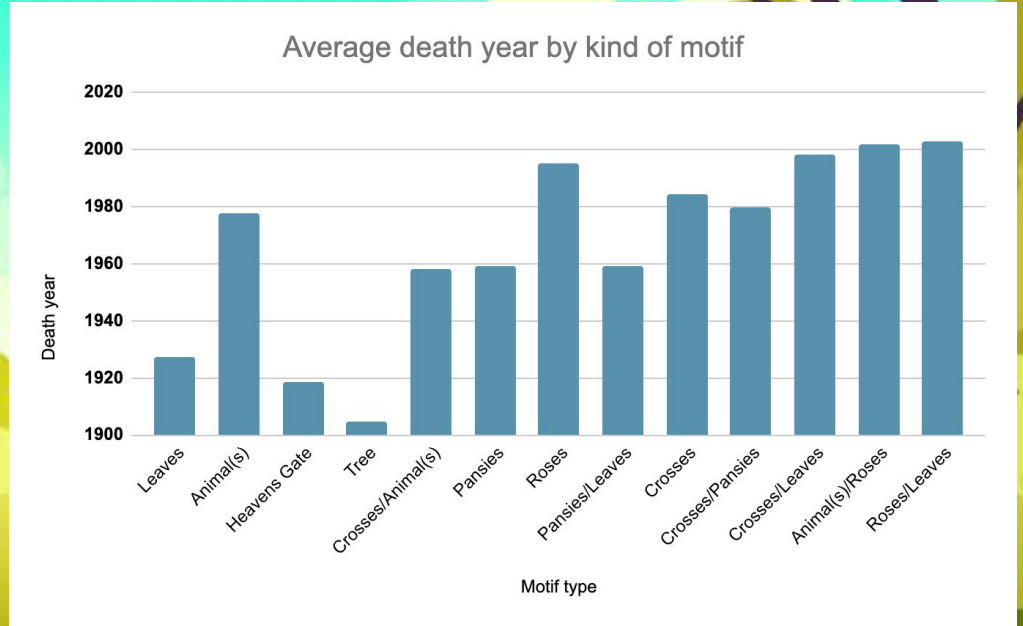
I looked into a local art exhibit spanning from 1880 to 2010, current motifs commonly being sold for tombstones, and I took pictures at the Nooksack cemetery. For the most part what I found is that tombstone motifs relate greatly with the culture of the area and the people who reside there. For Whatcom County, a great deal of our local art was either native or postmodernism.

Methods

I visited the same cemetery a total of 3 times. The first time I went, I was trying to get an idea of the motifs that were the most common. From there, I was able to narrow down what background research I might need, i.e. local art that shared those common motifs. After my initial research, I went to the cemetery again and took pictures of about half the cemetery, indexing and cataloguing as I went. I narrowed down the motifs to six categories and decided it would be best to collect 15 of each and make note of what had extra. This led to my third trip to the cemetery, where I took the rest of the pictures I needed to complete my data. From there it was just a matter of analyzing at the data.

Tombstone Motifs over the Years

Despite only collecting 15 of each motif (though less for a few) it should be noted that almost a full third of the cemeteries motifs were pansies.



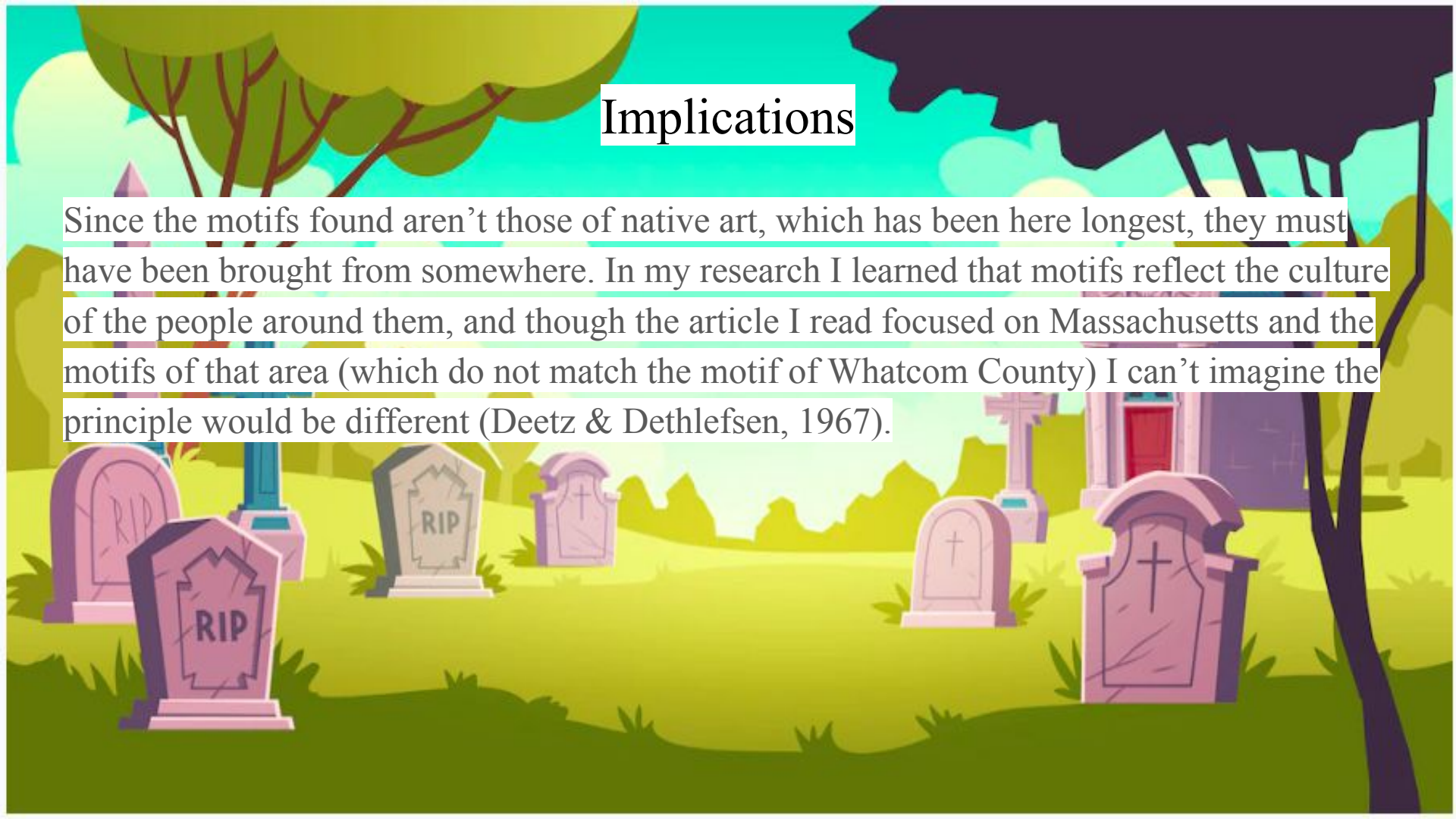
Interpretations

Through all my research and data collecting, I found a distinct lack of correlation between local art and tombstone motifs. As earlier stated, most local art was either native or of the postmodern variety (Matilsky, 2022), while the tombstones themselves were of a more classic and traditional flavor, flowers, animals, and religious effigies. There is not a lot of similarities here, however it does lead to the question, when did these motifs become the tradition and from where did they start?



Implications

Since the motifs found aren't those of native art, which has been here longest, they must have been brought from somewhere. In my research I learned that motifs reflect the culture of the people around them, and though the article I read focused on Massachusetts and the motifs of that area (which do not match the motif of Whatcom County) I can't imagine the principle would be different (Deetz & Dethlefsen, 1967).



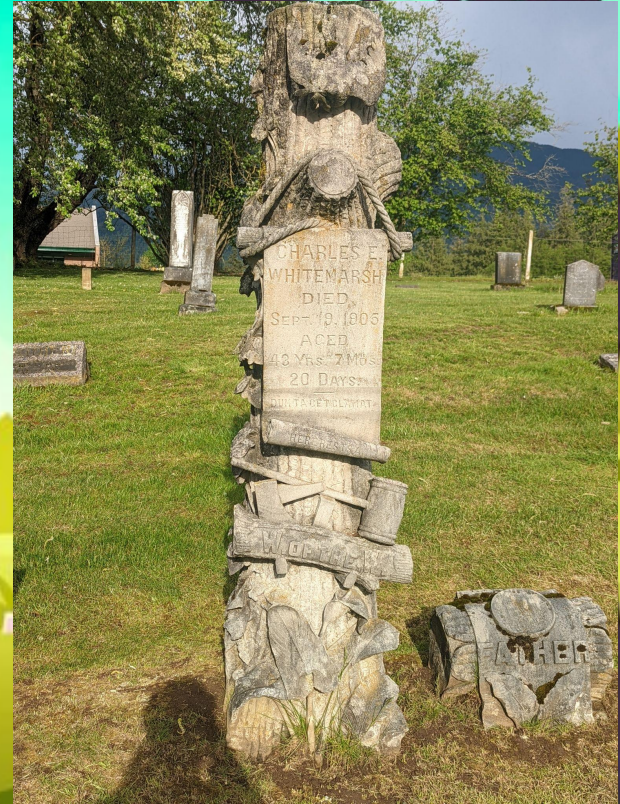
Limitations

So where did these motifs come from? Sadly, I did not have to time to look into this. I also wonder what I might have found had I gone to all of the cemeteries in the area. Would I still see a complete lack of cross over between the local art and the tombstones? I'm inclined to believe not, but then again, my whole theory was that it would be common practice, and that was proved quite incorrect.



Woodman of the World

The Woodman of the World motif is more of a bonus content than anything having to do directly with my research. See, I found two of these tombstones and they were just so extravagant and over the top that I was compelled to look into them. Turns out they are the result of an association formed in 1892 in hopes of uniting people by one Joseph Cullen Root. The tombstone motifs were originally part of the life insurance policy, and became something the association was most famous for. Looking at them, it's easy to tell why.





Acknowledgements

Shout out to Dr. Jennifer Zovar for helping me find background research and encouraging me through my personal struggles.

To my honorary sibling Chris Kleeves for patiently dealing with me while I struggled through executive dysfunction.

And to my twin for going to the cemetery with me and keeping me on task while conducting data collection.

Y'all are lovely and wonderful, and I am truly appreciative of all the work you guys did to help me.



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