# Between Myth and Reality

## Charting the Evolution of Islands for the Dead in Europe and Australia from 1778 to 1938

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Charting the Evolution of Islands for the Dead in Europe and Australia

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Grounded in the Enlightenment's revival of classical mythology, islands for the dead offer a potent and emotive locus for the creative imagination of architects, landscapers, artists, and writers. The emergence of these sites in the 18th century coincides with widespread agitation across Europe for burial reforms to counter the horrors of intramural (ad sanctos) burial in churchyards such as the infamous Cimetière des Saints-Innocents, Paris. Following initial resistance, these reforms spread quickly across the continent and to distant colonies.

Literary accounts, artistic depictions, and physical sites show a distinct polarisation of spaces for the dead into either a grim, menacing landscape or a picturesque idyll. Through this duality, the reality of built sites combines with myths and symbolism in artistic depictions to expand on humanity's drive to understand our place in the cosmos. Following the death of Jean Jacques Rousseau in 1778, his friend and student, the Marquis René de Girardin – a pioneering landscape designer and commentator – interred the philosopher in a classically inspired tomb on an ornamental island at his Ermenonville estate (Figure 1). The island tomb, surrounded by poplars, became an important place for pilgrimage and is the subject of numerous artistic works.[1] These works either depict the site accurately or follow a fantastical approach, as in Hubert Robert's works exploring romanticism and the sublime.

In Australia, grand funeral monuments in landscape settings were an exception, as only high-ranking individuals or families with dynastic ambitions could afford them. One of the earliest is Judge Ellis Bent's 1825 tomb on Garden Island, Sydney.[2] Bent's memorial was a physical site that was featured in several accurate artistic depictions and other romanticised works. Despite the persistence of idealised romantic views of islands for the dead, most cemeteries emerged in response to prosaic and practical constraints to serve the wider community.

Venice's iconic Cimitero di San Michele opened in response to Napoleon's 1806 Edict of Saint-Cloud, requiring the relocation of cemeteries beyond city walls for better hygiene and promoting burial equality. A similar approach led to the establishment of a dedicated island cemetery at Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1833. Here, the Reverend John Manton used convict burials in unmarked graves

1.

Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: The Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1987) 63–68; 196–198; 205–210; 230–236.

2.

Lisa Murray, *Sydney Cemeteries: A Field Guide* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2017) 8–16.

Figure 1:
Jean Michel Moreau, the Younger, Tomb of Jean
Jacques Rousseau, 1788
 Etching on paper, 26.5 x 35.5 cm.
(Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Dorothy Braude
Edinburg to the Harry B. and
Bessie K. Braude Memorial Collection, www.artic.
edu/artworks/149488/, CC0 Public Domain)

on the undesirable lower slopes of the island as a pointed social censure.[3] In contrast, free individuals across the social spectrum were buried on the island's crest with elaborate memorials. Globally, most island cemeteries perpetuated discrimination and ill-treatment of the deceased, although some institutional sites did consciously pursue higher-quality settings and respectful burial practices.[4]

Imbuing depictions of islands for the dead with mythic and symbolic content reached a high point with the symbolist painter Arnold Böcklin's 1880 work Isle of the Dead. Working iteratively, Böcklin returned to the subject and reproduced six variants of this work over his lifetime. After incorporating the white figure and coffin into the second version at the behest of his patron, Marie Berna (who wished to commemorate her husband's death), Böcklin was deeply conflicted over its composition and symbolism.[5] Widely regarded as the preeminent painter of Teutonic romanticism, Böcklin's work was extensively promoted and reproduced during his lifetime. Consequently, his composition and symbolism came to epitomise depictions of islands for the dead. Following Böcklin's death in 1901, his work fell swiftly out of fashion.

However, Isle of the Dead remained a vital influence for a diverse range of 20th-century creators, including Herman Hesse, August Strindberg, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Giorgio de Chirico, and Salvador Dali.

While the Isle of the Dead's direct impact on specific works is well-known, documented and researched, the overarching artistic and architectural history of this genre of burial site from Girardin onward remains understudied. The complex meanings, myths, and symbolism conveyed through islands for the dead continue to resonate with the public and inspire the imagination. Identifying these sites, depictions, and imaginings in this paper is a start to bridging the gap between myth and reality, revealing new readings of Western burial practices.

3.
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Richard Tuffin, "The Post Mortem Treatment of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land, 1814–1874," Journal of Australian Colonial History 9 (2007): 99–126.

4.
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Emma Sheppard-Simms, "Islands of the Abject: Absence, Trauma and Memory in the Cemetery Island," Landscapes of Violence 4, no. 1 (2016): article 2.

5.
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Federico Zeri, Marco Dolcetta and Elena Mazour, Böcklin: The Isle of the Dead (Richmond Hill, Ontario: NDE Publishing, 2001), 1–15.