



He is a leading figure on Parisian cemeteries, especially Père Lachaise: Thierry Le Roi gives guided 'necro-romantic' tours in the course of which he vividly brings to life famous and anonymous people buried there. Veritable lessons in history and the history of art, mornings filled with anecdotes that are unusual, tragic, enthralling and enriching.



Where does this passion for cemeteries come from?

T. Le R.: It is mostly an insatiable curiosity that leads me and which has led me since the age of 13 to visit cemeteries in my home town Nantes. Nothing to do with morbid curiosity or the scary thrills of stories about skeletons! No, what fascinated me was the funerary architecture, the sculptures. Nantes has a very long maritime history, including the tragic time of the slave trade.

In the cemeteries, I discovered graves, epitaphs and sculptures relating extraordinary lives, exotic places: I made up stories for myself; it was literally like travelling going from one flagstone to another.

When I came up to Paris at the age of 20 and went to live in the 20th arrondissement, I discovered Père Lachaise. Of course, like everyone else, I knew the name, like one knows the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de triomphe. But visiting it for the first time was a real shock: first of all its size! With 44 hectares, it is the largest green space in Paris. A veritable city, with squares, paths, avenues, roads, roundabouts ... Then, the sheer number of monuments ... mausoleums in some cases. And the number of sculptures! Not forgetting the names: it is really 200 years of French history that is presented at Père Lachaise, a life-size lesson.

Where did you acquire your knowledge for your necro-romantic tours?

T. Le R.: I studied at the Ecole du Louvre to get a sound knowledge in art. And especially, I spent countless evenings in the company of Vincent de Langlade, who was the true 'inventor' of cemetery tours, in the 1950s. Of course, books previously existed about cemeteries, '*Philosophic Promenades*' and other pompous titles. But Vincent de Langlade succeeded in bringing these cemeteries alive and he amassed a considerable amount of knowledge gleaned from the grave diggers of funeral houses ... things that were not written down anywhere and which he passed on to me verbally. I'm part of this oral tradition: someone who hands down memories from the past.

What form do your guided tours take?

T. Le R.: I have always been keen for my visits to be lively, not simply a boring list of dates, names and historic facts. I state few dates: most visitors on my walks know how to read ... and in the cemeteries, everything is written on the monuments!

There are two aspects to my walks: obviously, I'm going to talk about famous people: Edith Piaf, Yves Montand and Simone Signoret ... But I'm especially going to explain 'why'. Why Eugène Delacroix has this monument, Théodore Géricault that one, Honoré de Balzac another. For some, it is because these were the wishes expressed in their last will. Alexandre Dumas fils, for example, buried in the cemetery of Montmartre, had expressed a written request that his monument be sculpted by the sculptor Saint-Marceaux. But I don't give an account of the biography of Alexandre Dumas or Delacroix: I place them in context and provide key elements. I evoke the 2,000

names that Balzac gave to the characters in his work: he came regularly to stroll around Père Lachaise and drew all his inspiration from it! You can have a Balzac tour of the cemetery and a Proust one too: Marcel Proust also used real characters, whose names and even sex he sometimes changed.

All the middle classes of the 19th century were buried in Père Lachaise. Balzac put it in writing: 'all Paris is there!' At the weekend, I take the public on guided tours, and in the week, school children and groups. I create themed walks for specialist groups: for landscape architects, for doctors, nursing students, etc. Each walk introduces personalities and monuments relating to the group's centres of interest.

Two criteria guide my choice during my walks: a name — impossible not to show Jim Morrison — or a piece of outstanding funerary art. Oscar Wilde has both. And I take pleasure in showing the graves of people who are unknown yet have a magnificent monument.

Balzac and Proust tours ... what other themes can you develop in a cemetery?

T. Le R.: It is almost unlimited! The theme of Egypt can be developed for example: firstly through the Napoleonic campaigns as many of those who accompanied Napoléon are buried in Père Lachaise, like Vivant Denon; broadening out the theme, you could include Champollion, and then all the 19th-century graves which showed the current fashion for Egypt: many Parisian buildings show evidence of this infatuation, and funerary houses were not the last to follow the trend.

It is moreover amusing to observe that a gravestone is a product of fashion. The 19th century was one of prodigious daring and creativity: people did not hesitate to have funerary busts, statues, even chapels created for themselves. But the 20th century was characterized much more by sobriety: 'no flowers or garlands', as they say. That saddens me! The musician Gilbert Bécaud, who died just ten years ago, has only a simple gravestone, a name and a date. A piano keyboard would have been good! Happily, the 21st century seems more promising to me, judging by some recent examples, at Père Lachaise, at the cemetery of Montmartre and elsewhere. Some families dare to be artistic. The grave of Alain Bashung or that of Mano Solo who died in 2009 and 2010 are two examples of remarkable contemporary funerary art.

I have learned to be patient: some works are not installed for months, even years after the death of a person. I'm waiting to see what is going to be made for George Whitman, the founder of the bookshop Shakespeare and Company, buried in Père Lachaise on 22 December 2011: it would seem that there is an interesting project for his grave, in relation to Don Quixote, who he admired greatly.

Who are the foreign personalities that you show to visitors who come from afar?

T. Le R.: In fact, I try to adapt my discourse to my listeners. I like to please them by showing them graves that evoke their own history and origins: the Japanese pianist Ken Sazaki (1943-1991), the author of the Argentinean constitution Juan Bautista Alberdi (1810-1884), the American singer Jim Morrison (1943-1971), the Italians Cherubini (1760-1842) and Bellini (1801-1835), the Iranian writer Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951), the Belgian Gramme (1826-1901), the Guatemalan Miguel Asturias, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1899-1974), etc.

Your guided tours are in French; despite this do you have foreign visitors?

T. Le R.: Of course! Obviously I have French-speaking and Francophile visitors. I am also in partnership with the Franco-Japanese institute of Kansai, whose members benefit from a reduced rate for all my walks. I also give guided tours to groups accompanied by their own interpreter, and there everything is possible.

But as well as a foreign public, I also have blind visitors: I get them to touch sculpted or engraved works, especially those in bronze or granite — the gravestone of Géricault presents the raft of the Medusa in relief, and I give a fuller description of the works. I can give tours for people in wheelchairs. It is a matter of principle to me to tailor my tours, according to the public.

Your walks are interspersed with anecdotes, little stories which are often amusing.

T. Le R.: It is true that my guided tours are popular because I don't only talk about the lives of famous people buried there. What's more, some of these famous people are not yet buried: the drawer Siné, who is still alive, has already chosen his grave — in the cemetery of Montmartre — and even had the monument made, a rather

provocative cactus and the epitaph: *'Mourir ? Plutôt crever!'* ('I'd rather snuff it than die!'). The only thing missing is the date of death!

On a more serious note, again at the cemetery of Montmartre, the actor Jean-Claude Brialy bought a plot early on in his life next to the Dame aux Camélias, Marie Duplessis. He then took care to choose an art nouveau bas relief for the entire decor. These are the types of stories that everyone loves. It is of prime importance that these tours are carried out with intelligence and with the greatest respect for those who rest there.

I always remember that Brongniart, the architect appointed by Napoléon to create Père Lachaise in 1804, arranged everything so that Parisians would come to this place: he made it a landscaped cemetery, which was totally innovatory at the time. It is a place where people come and go but also somewhere to visit.

And what is the history of Père Lachaise?

T. Le R.: Whatever the theme may be, all my tours begin with the history of the cemetery: it was created in 1804 because of the need to clean up cemeteries that appeared at the end of the 18th century. Previously, there were cemeteries almost everywhere, up to 200 in Paris alone, almost all of which have disappeared. Did you know that there was once a cemetery where the chic rue de la Paix is today and another beneath the Bon Marché Rive Gauche department store? The cemetery of Père Lachaise was created outside Paris, as it was at the time, on a surface area of 17 hectares. It has been greatly extended and today the city completely surrounds it. Its real name is the cemetery of the East, but Parisians have always called it Père Lachaise, after the name of the emblematic figure of the chateau of Père La Chaise, confessor of Louis XIV.

Part of this cemetery and its burial plots is a listed monument, and 2.5 million visitors visit it every year, which make it the eighth most visited monument in Paris!

To finish, what addresses in the district can you recommend to us?

T. Le R.: Groups that I give a guided tour to often prolong their outing with a meal at the brasserie Au Rond point, which has a room especially for groups. There is also Obododo, formerly La Renaissance, which has been the traditional meeting place for avid Jim Morrison fans for 40 years. Plus, a hotel project on the theme of Père Lachaise personalities. Then, of course, the not-to-be-missed Père Lachaise shop: Agnès, the founder of the shop, has had objects made that are directly inspired from the personalities buried in Père Lachaise; the products are unique and exclusive. Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust and Jim Morrison are all evoked. You can also find a detailed map of the cemetery here and quality works. The cemetery attendants also hand out free small plans, one of which presents personalities from the world of show business, the other, personalities from the world of the arts, philosophy and the press. Marcel Proust is of course mentioned here; he is the author of my favourite phrase: *'Le seul véritable voyage n'est pas d'aller vers d'autres paysages mais d'avoir d'autres yeux'* ('The only true voyage of discovery, would be not to visit foreign lands but to possess other eyes').

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