

The Crystal Shrine Grotto:
Memorial Park Cemetery's Hidden Gem

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In comparison with many of the historical moments, events, people and places that have either taken place or been memorialized in Memphis, the Crystal Shrine Grotto is probably not the most compelling or exciting. Unfortunately for the Grotto, Memphis has been an important city since its establishment, and the city has seen many historically significant periods throughout America's history. Memphis was a huge player in the cotton trade industry, it is recognized as the place where soul music, the blues and rock and roll saw a great deal of development, it is sadly remembered as the location of the assassination of Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., and even now it is home to globally recognized organizations and companies like St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and FedEx.

So though Memphis does not lack reasons to be memorable and important, the city is home to many other, less celebrated places and events. The Crystal Shrine Grotto is one such rather unknown place. It must be considered a tourist attraction because it draws roughly 100,000 visitors each year,¹ and is mentioned on [memphistravel.com](http://www.memphistravel.com)'s list of free things to do and see in Memphis.² The Grotto would best be classified as a religious or artistic attraction since it is itself a sculpture and also a collection of other religiously themed artwork. The Crystal Shrine Grotto was intended to be experienced and enjoyed by people of all ages, and it certainly is. It is an

¹ "The History of Memorial Park," Katherine Hinds Smythe Collection box 1, folder 3, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

² "Free Things To Do," *Memphistravel.com*, accessed July 10, 2013, <http://www.memphistravel.com/free-things-to-do-in-memphis>.

endlessly interesting feature of Memphis that was created as “an inspiring place where thousands come each year for spiritual enrichment – for the pleasure of sheer loveliness – for worship or meditation.”³ The Grotto has held on to its original purpose with ease and today still represents that which it did when its construction began in 1935. It would be an interesting landmark anywhere, but since its home is Memphis, everything about the Crystal Shrine Grotto represents some aspect of the city and its incredibly rich history. Because it took roughly 60 years to complete, the Grotto’s development saw many decades and eras, was overseen by multiple administrators, and was contributed to by many artists of many different backgrounds. Like the city of Memphis itself, the Grotto is complicated and full of fascinating history.

It is necessary to mention that the Crystal Shrine Grotto is located in the middle of Memorial Park Cemetery. E. Clovis Hinds, a wealthy man from Mississippi, founded Memorial Park in 1924 after selling his life insurance company. Hinds was interested in the newly developing trend of memorial- and park-type cemeteries and it was in this tradition that he wished to establish Memorial Park.

History of Beautifying Cemeteries

Though cemeteries are necessary as a place of final rest for the deceased, they can also be a lucrative business endeavor, though that idea did not fully develop until the late 19th century. Cemeteries in America had been dark, dreary and uninviting. They did nothing to honor the dead and existed almost entirely because of unavoidable necessity. Aesthetically, they illustrated and invoked the feeling of that which they were in place to represent: death. Somehow the cemetery

³ “The Purpose of our Founder – A Perpetual Garden of Promise,” *Memphis Memorial Park The Cemetery Beautiful*, call no. HIST REF MPHS RM 363.750976M533, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

organizers of the United States had forgotten the beauty that could be embodied in memorials, as well as the Christian notion of eternal life in heaven after one's death on earth. The park cemetery style that was to develop during the 20th century "reflected contemporary socio-cultural attitudes that death was the beginning of everlasting life and that burial landscapes should symbolize life rather than death. The sunny open lawns accented with small planted areas which characterized park cemeteries became symbols of life which contrasted to the heavily planted, somber character of previous types of cemeteries."⁴

Several men were instrumental in changing cemeteries across the country from depressing and terrifying to beautiful and hopeful. Sidney J. Hare and his son S. Herbert Hare had a landscape architecture firm, Hare & Hare, based in Kansas City, Missouri that was founded at the turn of the 20th century.⁵ In 1896 Sidney Hare was appointed superintendent of Forest Hill Cemetery in Kansas City and that marked the beginnings of his ideas of cemetery reform and beautification.⁶ At the Association of American Cemetery Superintendents in 1901 "Hare discussed the cemetery as botanical garden, bird sanctuary and arboretum - - probably the first such convention of that topic on record in the design evolution of the modern cemetery."⁷ Hare "incorporated velvet lawns, groups of ornamental trees and shrubs, mirror lakes, curving roads and walks, and long vistas into the cemeteries he designed. By combining the distinctive features of parks and cemeteries, Hare set the precedent for two decades of refinements in cemetery design and ambience."⁸

⁴ Bettina C. Van Dyke, "The Evolution of 19th and 20th-Century Cemetery Landscape Types As Exemplified By Hare & Hare's Cemetery Designs" (master's thesis, Kansas State University, 1984), 142.

⁵ Cydney Millstein, "History of the Landscape Architecture Firm of Hare and Hare," *State Historical Society of Missouri*, last modified October 4, 2011, <http://www.umkc.edu/whmckc/hare/hare%20history.htm>.

⁶ Millstein.

⁷ Millstein.

⁸ Millstein.

The Association of American Cemetery Superintendents (A.A.C.S.) published a journal that for a time was called *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening*. It was to the March, 1922 edition of this publication that Captain E. R. Morse of the Vermont Marble Company contributed an article explaining the importance of how and why cemeteries should be regarded as things of beauty. He said “the initiative must come from within ourselves and one of the first steps toward building permanently for the future is a clean shop and attractive show room, with a few designs of real merit, rather than a room full of tombstones.”⁹ Morse also noted that “it is a fairly well established theory that the character of a community can be measured by its civic activities and care of its memorials... [cemeteries] are unkept because you and your neighbors have not realized that in their present state they are a reflection upon all of you and an eye sore to an otherwise attractive town.”¹⁰

The most direct inspiration for the beautification of Memorial Park Cemetery in Memphis came from Hubert Eaton and his work with Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California. At the 43rd Annual A.A.C.S. Convention in September 1929, Eaton discussed how he turned a small, uninspiring ten-acre cemetery into arguably the most extraordinary collection of memorials in the country. He did not want to simply bury the deceased, but rather to beautifully memorialize them for “it was the memorial idea that gave to the world the Pyramids, the Taj Mahal, which is acknowledged to be the most beautiful building in the world.”¹¹ On January 1,

⁹ Captain E. R. Morse, “The Monument Man, the Cemetery and the Public,” *Park and Cemetery and Landscape Gardening* 32, no. 2 (April 1922): 30-32, http://books.google.com/books?id=eUnmAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+modern+cemetery&hl=e&sa=X&ei=XbLkUejqD9SFqQHH_YHQBg&ved=0CC0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=the20modern%20cemetery&f=false.

¹⁰ Morse.

¹¹ Hubert Eaton, “Creation of a Modern Park Cemetery” (presentation, AACCS Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Convention, Los Angeles, CA, September 3-6, 1929), <http://www.iccfa.com/reading/1920-1939/creation-modern-park-cemetery>.

1917 Eaton wrote what he titled “The Builder’s Creed.” It was his “recipe for the ‘Creation of a Modern Park Cemetery,’” and it reads:

I believe in a happy Eternal Life. I believe that those of us left behind should be glad in the certain belief that those gone before have entered into that happier life. I believe, most of all, in a Christ that smiles and loves you and me. I therefore know the cemeteries of today are wrong because they depict an end, not a beginning. They have consequently become unsightly stone yards, full of inartistic symbols and depressing customs, places that do nothing for humanity save a practical act and that not well.

“I therefore prayerfully resolve on this New Year’s Day, 1917, that, I shall endeavor to build Forest Lawn as different as unlike other cemeteries as sunshine is unlike darkness, as Eternal Life is unlike Death. I shall try to build at Forest Lawn a great Park, devoid of misshapen monuments and other customary signs of earthly death, but filled with towering trees, sweeping lawns, splashing fountains, singing birds, beautiful statuary, cheerful flowers, noble memorial architecture, with interiors full of light and color, and redolent of the world’s best history and romances. I believe these things educate and uplift a community.

“Forest Lawn shall become a place where lovers new and old shall love to stroll and watch the sunset’s glow, planning for the future or reminiscing of the past; a place where artists study and sketch; where school teachers bring happy children to see the things they read of in books; where little churches invite, triumphant in the knowledge that from their pulpits only words of love can be spoken, where memorialization of loved ones in sculptured marble and pictorial glass shall be encouraged but controlled by acknowledged artists; a place where the sorrowing will be soothed and strengthened because it will be God’s Garden. A place that shall be protected by an immense Perpetual Care Fund, the principal of which can never be expended—only the income there from used to care for and perpetuate this Garden of Memory. This is the Builder’s Dream; this is the Builder’s Creed.”¹²

Eaton’s plan for a glorious cemetery was inextricably linked with the Christian notion of eternal life. Creating a resting place for the dead that instead of death evoked thoughts of vitality and beauty could only be accomplished with the help of religion, its symbolism and its profound effect on people. Eaton created a place full of worldly beauty, but he himself recognized the unparalleled importance of religion in calling his cemetery “God’s Garden.”¹³

¹² Eaton.

¹³ Eaton.

Hinds learned of Eaton's work at Forest Lawn during a trip to California. Like Eaton, he wanted to create a cemetery that was beautiful, full of life and a joyful inspirational to those who visited. He worked with landscape architects to incorporate "peaceful, rolling landscapes, formal gardens, fountains and lakes, and flowering vistas,"¹⁴ into the natural grounds of the cemetery land that would encourage the "visitor to meditate not on the finality of death but on the glories of heaven."¹⁵ But Hinds want to venture beyond these naturalistic types of decoration and beautification. Either through a developer in Arkansas named Justin Matthews, or his own extensive travels throughout the United States, Hinds became familiar with the work of Mexican cement artist Dionicio Rodriguez.

Background of Dionicio Rodriguez

Dionicio Rodriguez was born in Toluca, Mexico in April of either 1891 or 1893. As a young man in Mexico, Rodriguez worked with Luis Robbles Gil of Spain, a civil engineer and contractor as well as J.W. Douglas, a concrete contractor.¹⁶ He moved to Monterrey for a time before emigrating to Laredo, Texas and finally settling somewhat permanently in San Antonio to work for the Alamo Cement Company in the mid 1920s.¹⁷ Arkansas developer Justin Matthews learned of Rodriguez after a visit to Mexico City where he saw some of Rodriguez's early work. He commissioned Rodriguez to create several pieces, for three parks in Arkansas, including the recreation of an Old Mill in T.R. Pugh Memorial Park which can be seen in the opening scenes of the film *Gone With The Wind*.¹⁸ Rodriguez was very "secretive about his methodology, [he]

¹⁴ "The Purpose of our Founder."

¹⁵ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 106.

¹⁶ Patsy Pittman Light, *Capturing Nature: The Cement Sculpture of Dionicio Rodriguez* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 18.

¹⁷ Light, 18.

¹⁸ Sybil F. Crawford, "Dionicio Rodriguez (1891-1955)," *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, last modified October 17, 2012, <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=503>.

made no preliminary sketches of drawings and did not record the ingredients of the chemical washed used to tint his sculptures,”¹⁹ though the Texas State Historical Association cites that he “stained the cement while it was still wet, using chemicals such as copperas, sulfuric acid, muriatic acid, iron oxide, saltpeter, and lampblack for various tints.”²⁰ His *faux bois*, or fake wood, style became very popular in many states throughout the US due to “his inclusion of such painstaking details as insect holes, peeling back, and broken-off branches.”²¹ “His work, which he called *el trabajo rustico* [or rustic work], demonstrates a highly refined aesthetic as well as technical master of his medium” which is why so many builders and developers sought him and his expertise in the first half of the 20th century.²² According to his niece Manuella Theall, Rodriguez “didn’t have many friends because he was always going – he didn’t stay in one place too many days,” though additionally contributing to his lack of personal friendships was the language barrier between Rodriguez’s native Spanish and English which he never learned. He spent his entire professional career in America communicating with clients and partners through the help of a translator.²³ But despite his disinterest in forming personal relationships, he was always very professional; “Rodriguez always ‘dressed up, wearing a coat, vest, nice shoes and dress shirt with cuff links and tie.’”²⁴

Rodriguez Comes to Memorial Park

¹⁹ Crawford.

²⁰ Kendall Curlee, “Rodriguez, Dionicio,” *Texas State Historical Association*, accessed June 17, 2013, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/frouw>.

²¹ Curlee.

²² Curlee.

²³ Light, 18.

²⁴ Light, 18.

Hinds first contacted the artist in October 1933 while Rodriguez was still in Arkansas working for Matthews.²⁵ The two wrote back and forth for a time but Rodriguez was not officially hired to work for Hinds at Memorial Park until 1935. According to a written history of the cemetery, “Matthews wrote to Hinds to prepare him for working with the unusual artist: ‘He will need a tent and a little coal oil stove and various acids and stains that he will tell you through his interpreter. He will also need copper wire and steel; he will tell you how much.’”²⁶ During the decade or so that Rodriguez intermittently worked for Hinds the two developed a very interesting relationship; “Throughout the years, Hinds treated Rodriguez with a paternalistic attitude, providing him with advice and handling his finances.”²⁷ A book entitled *Capturing Nature: The Cement Sculpture of Dionicio Rodriguez* goes on to say “Hinds served as a kind of paternalistic financial manager for Rodriguez, depositing Rodriguez’s earnings in the bank and then sending money when he needed it. Rodriguez would work on a credit basis when Hinds’s collections were slow.”²⁸ Further enforcing their unique patron-artist relationship was Hinds’ interest in Rodriguez’s health, which at times was not very good. Rodriguez suffered from diabetes in his adult years and it was left untreated for some time before Hinds, along with former client Justin Matthews, decided to send Rodriguez to a doctor in Arkansas. Hinds began the majority of his letters to Rodriguez with “Friend Rodriguez” and this, along with his financial

²⁵ *Seasons – A Publication of Memorial Park and Funeral Home* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1983), Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery folder, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

²⁶ *The History of Memorial Park*, Memphis, Tennessee, call no. MPHS RM 363.750976H673, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

²⁷ Light, 21.

²⁸ Light, 89.

and medical assistance, suggests that Hinds was interested in the well being of Rodriguez both as a successful artist and also a healthy, happy person.²⁹

As arguably the best *faux bois* cement artist of his time, Rodriguez was aware of his skill and in the midst of the Great Depression, he was paid rather well, “Rodriguez’s hourly wage ranged from \$1.00 to \$2.25.”³⁰ With this wage Rodriguez bought himself a new car every year and “was able to support himself and other members of his entourage rather well.”³¹ One local laborer who was hired to assist Rodriguez on the construction of the Grotto was John Richmond who “recalled...at times Rodriguez would keep the colorants in the trunk of his car, and if anyone came too close, he would immediately shut the trunk lid...Rodriguez would break the bottles of chemicals when they were empty in order to keep anyone from learning their ingredients.”³² He was very secretive, perhaps to the point of paranoia, but it seems that the measures he took to ensure the secrets of his skill were successful in maintaining his superiority in the artistic medium of cement. But despite his curious demeanor, Richmond also recalled “great crowds of people coming out to watch Rodriguez work, especially on Saturdays and Sundays.”³³ E. Clovis Hinds would also be present and he “loved to talk to people, telling them about plans for the finished work and describing what Rodriguez was doing.”³⁴

Hinds had very clear vision for what he wanted his cemetery to look like and how he wanted the grounds to feel to visitors. He called Memorial Park “The Cemetery Beautiful” and compared it to the beautiful gardens and memorials and monuments of the dead of ancient

²⁹Copies of correspondence between Rodriguez and E.C. Hinds on Rodriguez sculptures in Memorial Park, 1933-1942, Katherine Hinds Smythe Collection box 1, folder 4, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

³⁰ Light, 21.

³¹ Light, 22.

³² Light, 23.

³³ Light, 94.

³⁴ Light, 94.

civilizations. “The Purpose of our Founder” statement issued in a booklet made by the cemetery says that, “this same kind of immortality now is available to every family – enduring beauty and security on a more democratic level – in a community of peaceful, rolling landscapes, formal gardens, fountains and lakes, and flowering vistas, all tended with the same meticulous care accorded to world’s great gardens.”³⁵ That official statement was in regard to how the aesthetics of the cemetery were to entice families to bury their loved ones at Memorial Park. But even more than that Hinds wanted his cemetery to be a place where happy families came to spend a recreational afternoon, and a place where children were not afraid but could play as children do. In an interview with Hinds’s granddaughter, Katherine Hinds Smythe, she said “my grandfather loved children. He wanted them to feel comfortable coming to the cemetery and not just come in a time of sorrow.”³⁶

The grounds of Memorial Park feature sculptures inspired by various tales and traditions; but as Katherine Hinds Smythe suggested in an interview, “grandfather didn’t mind mixing it up,” and the sculptures featured in the cemetery suggest just that.³⁷ In addition to the Crystal Shrine Grotto, Hinds commissioned Rodriguez to recreate the legendary Fountain of Youth and a double seat called Annie Laurie’s Wishing Chair. The seat is based off an old stone chair in Scotland that was created after the death of a woman named Annie Laurie. It is said to have been blessed by fairies and, according to legend, “good fortune will forever smile upon the lad and lassie who sit here, hand-in-hand and repeat a quaint Scottish verse on the tablet in front of the

³⁵ “The Purpose of our Founder.”

³⁶ Barbara Bradley, “Grotto Tells its Story in Concrete,” unidentified newspaper article, Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery folder, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

³⁷ Bradley.

wishing chair.”³⁸ How Hinds knew of this particular legend and why he wanted to recreate the wishing chair in his cemetery remains a mystery, but it can probably be assumed that he suspected the tale of the enchanted chair would be enticing and exciting to children.

Though Hinds had an interest in many, multi-cultural stories and traditions, he seemed to find biblical stories and characters most relevant. Clustered around the Crystal Shrine Grotto is where the sculptures of places and things mentioned in the Christian Bible are located, but this area is not just a collection of independent cement sculptures. Here Rodriguez created an oasis of sorts, located in the heart of the cemetery and made entirely out of cement. The Cave of Machpelah, which was the burial place of Old Testament patriarch Abraham, his wife Sarah and their two sons, Isaac and Jacob, is the first tomb mentioned in the Bible, in Genesis 23. Hinds had Rodriguez recreate this particular burial sight intentionally to allude to the first Christian tomb which housed such an important man in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths. In doing so, “Dionicio Rodriguez [was] the first naturalistic artist that [had] ever attempted an exact reproduction of the first historical burial in the world.”³⁹ Just outside the entrance to the Tomb (which cannot be entered) is the Pool of Hebron. Hinds had Rodriguez recreate this particular historical body of water because the original was located in the city in which Abraham resided; and Hebron was also the home of several other prominent biblical figures such as King David and John the Baptist. Following the theme of Abraham-inspired markers, Rodriguez sculpted Abraham’s Oak, which in the cemetery is large enough to step into and even has benches inside so that visitors can take a seat inside the *faux bois* tree. The fusion of all these pieces makes the

³⁸ “Annie Laurie – 1682-1764,” untitled guide pamphlet to sculptures in Memorial Park Cemetery, Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery folder, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

³⁹ “Cave of Machpelah Tomb of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, etc.,” untitled guide pamphlet to sculptures in Memorial Park Cemetery, Memphis Memorial Park Cemetery folder, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

setting seem like an experience that momentarily transports visitors out of Memorial Park and far away from metropolitan Memphis that surrounds the cemetery. It is an unexpected and rather odd environment, but despite some initial confusion and skepticism, it is difficult not to enjoy and marvel at this concrete oasis that lies safely tucked away behind the stone walls of Memorial Park.



(Photo by author)

Since Abraham is equally important in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this collection of sculptures fuses these three traditions and suggests “one single, eternal, overarching truth.”⁴⁰ Religion almost always becomes important in the midst of death. We all are inclined to believe that our loved ones, and someday ourselves, will live on in some way and that death is not the end but rather the beginning of something new. Specific religious traditions become less important and here they are melded together to suggest that everyone dies the same way and will undergo the same post death experience. There exists no written explanations or reasons as to why Hinds commissioned the sculptures that he did, however, it seems logical to assume that he

⁴⁰ McDannell, 104.

understood how focusing on Abraham would allow the greatest number of people a way to relate to these religious cemetery sculptures.

The Crystal Shrine Grotto is located just next to the cluster of Abraham-themed sculptures and it, like the Oak, the Pool and the Cave, features religious imagery, though the images in the Grotto are limited to only the Christian tradition.

The Grotto – Rodriguez’s Structure

The Grotto is both a work of art itself as well as a structure that houses several other works of art. Dionicio Rodriguez is the artist who deserves the majority of credit for the Grotto since without him the entire structure, and thus everything else inside, would not exist, at least not as it does today. Rodriguez created something that is beautiful to look at on its own but due to his mastery of cement work and interactivity of the cavern, the Grotto is much more than an ordinary large-scale sculpture.

Just before Hinds and Rodriguez began their Crystal Shrine Grotto, the Midwest region of the United States had seen the creation of several comparable grottos filled with religious imagery. Dickeyville Grotto, located in Dickeyville, Wisconsin and The Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa were both begun, if not finished, before construction on the Crystal Shrine Grotto commenced in 1935. These two Midwestern grottos were built on the grounds of churches by German immigrants and they, like the Crystal Shrine Grotto, feature many religious sculptures and other decoration. No written evidence exists to substantiate this claim, but perhaps Hinds knew of these Midwestern grottos and resolved to create the Crystal Shrine Grotto as his own, Memphis-style contribution to the interesting trend.

Entering the Crystal Shrine Grotto is an experience that offers several different visual and emotional reactions. From its exterior it looks like a peculiar protrusion peeking out from above the trees nearby.



(Photo by author)

Though the Grotto does not quite match the lush, green landscape of the cemetery grounds, its natural rock-like appearance helps to blend the eclectic mix of sculptures and features inside with the simplistic world around it.

With his cement, dyes and tools, Rodriguez made the Grotto look relatively similar to the natural caves of the Ozark Mountains, only this particular cave stands alone. Rodriguez carved into a natural hill and this is where the majority of the interior space of the Grotto is hidden. Inside the amazingly believable rock façade, Rodriguez sculpted his cement so that there were ten clearly identifiable niches, each designated to display a scene from the life of Jesus from birth to resurrection. But before those could be filled in and completed, Rodriguez had to arrange and insert the quartz crystals, which are an enormous part of the Grotto both in name and experience.

The crystals were installed in nearly every surface of the Grotto's interior. Even the two completely independent and roughly shaped columns, which are certainly in place for structural support, are covered in them. Some of the quartz crystals are clear and pure while others look more like semi-shimmery rocks. Though not every single inch supports a crystal, the cave is relatively large and a great many crystals had to be collected and brought to Memphis from the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas and Missouri. Katherine Hinds Smythe, granddaughter of E. Clovis Hinds, "recalls tales of Hinds and Rodriguez crawling on their stomachs in Ozark caves to gather the mounds of crystal that would be worth a fortune today."⁴¹ As exciting as those adventurous tales must have sounded, especially to a young Katherine, there is probably only a slight degree of truth to them. Hinds and Rodriguez would certainly have visited the crystal caverns together to look at discuss the details of the crystals and how they would be used, but the two would not have been able to collect and transport such a large quantity of heavy stones without at least some additional man power and machinery.

It is undeniable that crystals make up a large part of what is so magnificent about the Grotto, but still it was a very interesting choice on the part of Hinds. Though no records of who or how exactly the idea and plans were drawn up for the Grotto exist, it must be assumed that since Rodriguez had no history of working with crystals like these that Hinds was mainly responsible for the idea to include mass amounts of crystals. The two would have worked together to plan the details and logistics of arranging and placing the crystals within the Grotto but it had to have been Hinds who had the vision. Unfortunately there are no documents remaining that explain his thoughts or reasoning, but it seems that this feature can be attributed to his will to create "an inspiring place where thousands come each year for spiritual enrichment

⁴¹ Bradley.

– for the pleasure of sheer loveliness.”⁴² But his was certainly not the first religious Grotto in existence, since religiously inspired Grottos have been popular for centuries all over the world. Like the natural crystal caves of the Ozarks, Hinds probably hoped that his man-made crystal cave would be delightful and inspirational to everyone and in particular would captivate and mystify children, all with the overarching Christian theme of Jesus’ triumph over death.

The original plan for the interior of the Grotto devised by Hinds and Rodriguez included ten niches. Some are deeply recessed while others are flush with the wall and the viewer is forced to stand back behind a cement and crystal guardrail that matches the other interior surfaces. When one enters the Grotto the left wall gently guides viewers straight ahead to the first niche containing the nativity scene. But before arriving in front of that scene, one must first pass an oil painting entitled *The Good Samaritan* painted by Mary Rembrandt in 1939 and a shallow relief carving called *Christ and the Children* done by Miriam Dahlstrom in 1937.⁴³ These works are lovely and must be acknowledged as components of the Grotto, but they are not included as part of the ten major scenes.

The Grotto – Scene 1

⁴² “The Purpose of our Founder.”

⁴³ Hope Gumprecht, condition assessment report of Crystal Shrine Grotto, conducted by SOS! Save Outdoor Sculpture! Program, Washington D.C., 26 February 1997.



(Photo by author)

This picture shows the first of the ten scenes, which features the usual characters of the nativity: the infant Jesus, his parents Mary and Joseph, the three wise men, shepherds and livestock. It is a typical nativity scene, but this one is incredibly interesting. It is set in the deepest of the ten niches, inside of which Rodriguez created a *faux bois* stable, all from the same cement that was made to resemble rock in the rest of the Grotto. The three walls of the pseudo barn look like wooden logs stacked horizontally atop one another. Even more impressive is the ceiling of the barn, which is entirely separate from the ceiling of the cave – a structure within a structure. For the stable’s ceiling, Rodriguez created more faux logs similar to those in the walls, but he arranged them to resemble what a real ceiling support system made from wood would look like. These triangularly shaped pieces support the thatched roof of the barn, which, like all the other parts of the stable, is made entirely of cement. The texture and details of the roof are astounding; Rodriguez even added sagging holes in places to make the structure look old and worn, like parts of the roof were caving in. These holes serve a double function, however, because in addition to the authenticity they give the barn, they also allow a line of vision to the

ceiling of the Grotto, which supports some translucent crystals. These particular crystals were intended to “simulate stars in a night sky,” since a star was another important detail of the story of Jesus’s birth.⁴⁴ The floor of this scene is even covered in real hay, adding to the barn-like feel.

The sculptures in this niche, unlike the other nine, are not the work of any specific artist. They were imported from Italy, and though they are dateless it is most likely that they were installed in the Grotto shortly after its completion in the late 1930s. What is interesting about these sculptures is not that they are without a named artist, though that does additionally separate them from everything else about the Grotto, which can be dated and identified as the work of a specific artist. The sculptures were intended to illustrate the birth of Jesus, which they successfully do, but this first niche elicits a very different aesthetic experience than the others. While most of the other scenes feature sculptures that are inventive and unique, the figures here are noticeably less so. They are ordinary and expected, they have a mass production feel, and with their universally recognizable and relatable appearance, they can rather easily be described as kitschy.

Kitsch is “a debased copy of genuine culture” but it also “provokes immediate emotions that are vividly recognizable.”⁴⁵ Kitschy religious art is an interesting phenomenon because “what in the nineteenth century was considered tasteful and pious, in the twentieth century came to be seen as tacky and irreligious.”⁴⁶ So even though this type of religious representation was once extremely popular and desirable, by the time of its installation in the Grotto it had already developed a much less admirable reputation. The kitschy appearance of these sculptures is so interesting here because of the stark contrast it creates to the Grotto’s other sculptures, which can be inarguably categorized as art. “Art is idealized and kitsch is devalued. Art is progressive, it

⁴⁴ Gumprecht.

⁴⁵ McDannell, 163.

⁴⁶ McDannell, 164.

pushes the consumer/viewer to respond in new and creative ways to the world. Rather than being progressive and challenging, kitsch is conservative in form and content. Kitsch is based on fixed structures, clichés, and conventional subjects...the enjoyment of kitsch is easy, immediate, and familiar.”⁴⁷ This scene requires no interpretation or individual reaction since its sculptures are so customary and routine, but it is interesting that *The Nativity* is the only scene like that. The other nine scenes are filled with art rather than kitsch, it seems that Hinds, Smythe and any others involved in the development of the Grotto were interested in creating something thought-provoking and unexpected rather than an uninteresting or uninspiring experience.⁴⁸

Illuminating Rodriguez’s exceptionally intricate *faux bois* stable and the eleven kitschy sculptures are red and blue spotlights that sit on either side of the foreground of the niche. Since the Grotto is mostly devoid of natural light it only makes sense to add artificial brightness, but the red and blue color choices are curious and give this particular scene just another intriguing layer. The original plans for lighting in the Grotto are unclear, so they may have specifically called for multi-colored spotlights. Or perhaps this detail came about unintentionally. No matter their origins, however, the red and blue lights illuminating *The Nativity* are peculiar and intriguing.

The Grotto – Scene 2

⁴⁷ McDannell, 166-7.

⁴⁸ Day mentioned that he had discussed with Smythe creating new sculptures for *The Nativity* to replace the original Italian figures, but that plan never came to fruition.



(Photo by author)

Moving clockwise through the Grotto, the second scene is relatively similar to the first. The title is *Jesus in the Temple* and the five polychrome plaster figures were created by Marie Craig in 1939.⁴⁹ The background is a painted relief done by Rodriguez directly on the wall of the Grotto and features columns and windows arranged to resemble a temple. It is set into the wall only slightly so the sculptures are less concealed than those of the Nativity scene, though they “are protected by integral barriers also designed by Rodriguez as part of the Shrine,” like all of the ten scenes.⁵⁰ Marie Craig attended what is now Memphis College of Art; she studied in Europe and exhibited her work all over the United States. It is possible that Hinds had plans to have Craig create sculptures for more of the scenes but she left Memphis to join the military in 1942 and less than a year later was tragically killed.⁵¹ Her plaster figures are comparable to those in the Nativity scene, but it is obvious that Craig’s sculptures have a bit more individuality and reflect more on the artist’s personal style. The paint has no doubt dulled and dirtied since 1939

⁴⁹ Gumprecht.

⁵⁰ Gumprecht.

⁵¹ “Notes on Artists,” Katherine Hinds Smythe Collection guide booklet, page 14, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

but the aged appearance of the figures matches that of Rodriguez's background and the scene flows nicely.

The Grotto – Scene 3

The third scene, the *Sermon on the Mount*, is inserted slightly deeper into the wall than *Jesus in the Temple* and the sculptures installed here as well as miscellaneous rocks are arranged at various depths. This third overall scene is the first of six done by native Memphis artist David Day. Following Rodriguez, Day is the second most important contributor to what the Grotto is today, though his sculptures did not enter the cavern until nearly 1980, over forty years after Rodriguez completed the structure. Day studied at Lambuth College, graduated from Memphis State University, and received his master's degree in sculpture from Louisiana State University in 1974. His *Sermon on the Mount* sculptures are dated 1976, the same year that Katherine Hinds Smythe, founder E. Clovis Hinds's granddaughter, began her time as president of the cemetery.⁵² Memorial Park had been searching for artists for ten years when Day's aunt saw an advertisement in the cemetery's newsletter, *Seasons*.⁵³ She told Day about it and he quickly arranged a meeting with Smythe, who told him more about the project and requested sketches of the work he planned to do.⁵⁴ Day jokes that as a sculptor of mainly wood and stone, his drawings were little more than cartoonish figures that were helpful mainly in planning how much of each material he would need; but they were enough to impress Smythe, who soon after gave him the go ahead to get started on the pieces for the *Sermon on the Mount*.⁵⁵ According to Day, upon his professional arrival at the Grotto, the six niches that he would eventually end up filling were

⁵² "Scope and Provenance," Katherine Hinds Smythe Collection guide booklet, page 1, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

⁵³ Day, interview.

⁵⁴ Day, interview.

⁵⁵ Day, interview.

virtually empty, save for disposable cardboard-like figures, no doubt meant as temporary stand-ins until real sculptures could be permanently installed.⁵⁶

It had been predetermined by E. Clovis Hinds, possibly with some input from Rodriguez, which biblical episodes the ten niches would illustrate, but this was the only instruction that Day received from Smythe.⁵⁷ She did not tell him specifically what characters needed to be present, how they needed to look, or what medium she preferred he use; rather she left all creative decisions up to Day. Once Day's drawings for the *Sermon on the Mount* were approved he began working on the sculptures for that scene in his studio. When they were completed, he brought them to the Grotto, installed the tableau and then brought Smythe in to see the final arrangement.⁵⁸ Again, Smythe loved what Day had done and so began their collaboration on the remaining five scenes.

As mentioned, Day worked primarily with limestone and several different southern hardwoods.⁵⁹ For the *Sermon on the Mount* he combined these two materials, but used limestone only for Jesus's clothing, setting him apart from the rest of the figures who are much less three dimensional and set farther back in the niche. Day also mixed woods within each sculpture, allowing him to create the effect of contrasting colors indicating different figures and parts of each figure. For example, there is a very apparent difference between the colors of the wood used for the skin of Jesus's arms and face and the wood used for his hair and beard, though since the installation much of the wood has darkened and now Jesus' skin and hair are virtually indistinguishable in color.

⁵⁶ Day, interview.

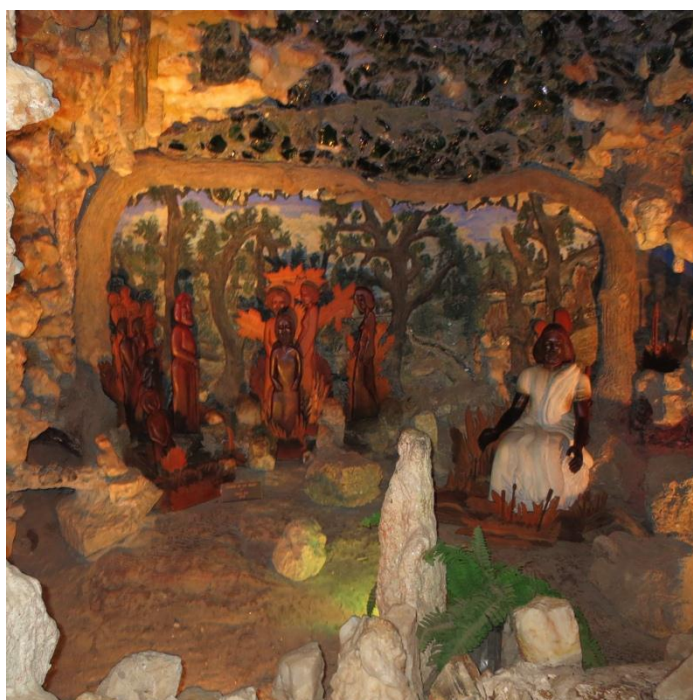
⁵⁷ Day, interview.

⁵⁸ Day, interview.

⁵⁹ Day, interview.



(Photo courtesy of David Day)

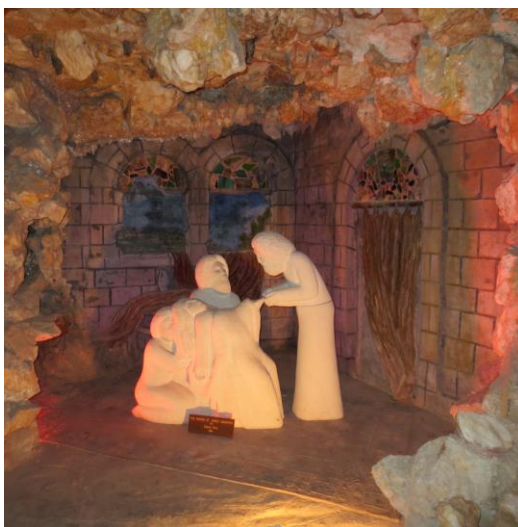


(Photo by author)

Similarly, some of the other figures in the background are much lighter than others. These color variances give the entire scene depth and complexity, as does the cave wall that creates the background. Like the temple background of scene two, Rodriguez sculpted and colored the wall of scene three, but here he made the cement wall resemble an outdoor landscape of green trees, blue skies and a bed of rocks that flows seamlessly into the actual floor of the cave. Unique to only this small area of the Grotto is the deep bluish green ceiling. This glass was installed by

Rodriguez and gives this particular scene a much heavier and more imposing feel than many of the others.

The Grotto – Scene 4



(Photo by author)

Scene four, also done by Day, is called *The Raising of Jarius' Daughter*, and is dated 1980. Rodriguez's shaped this fourth niche deep into one corner of the Grotto, which allowed him to create two, perpendicular background walls that he sculpted and painted with bricks, a doorway and two windows that frame an outdoor landscape. He made the ceiling above hang low, further enclosing the faux room and giving the viewer a sense of looking upon a family's intimate moment. Day's sculptures for this scene are made entirely of limestone, and though

they depict four characters, he made them in only three pieces; Jesus and Jarius were both individually sculpted and Jarius' daughter and wife were carved as one piece.



(Photos courtesy of David Day)

The Grotto – Scene 5

Scene five is called *The Transfiguration* from 1979. Though the biblical story in Matthew mentions more characters, Day only chose to include Jesus, Moses and Elijah. In these sculptures, Day again used both limestone and wood, but used them independently of one another. Jesus stands alone as the central, forward-most figure made of limestone, while the wooden figures of Moses and Elijah stand slightly behind and on either side of him. Directly behind Jesus, and also connecting Moses and Elijah, Day assembled a wooden backdrop, which mimics the rays of light that were said to emanate from Jesus at the time of his transfiguration. There are clouds all around the three figures, including several above their heads, which conceal a spotlight above that brightens the entire scene.



(Photo courtesy of David Day)

In addition to acting as the sun and shining on everything in the scene, when aimed correctly, the spotlight filters through Christ's acrylic hair and dramatically illuminates his eyes. To create this effect, Day carved Jesus's face into a piece of plexi-glass, which would become his hair and beard, and then poured sand into the space, not quite filling it completely. This allowed the plexi-glass to focus the light from above directly onto Jesus's eyes, giving them a supernatural glow.⁶⁰ The effect of this spotlight is so integral to the figure that "the face actually disappears when not lit."⁶¹

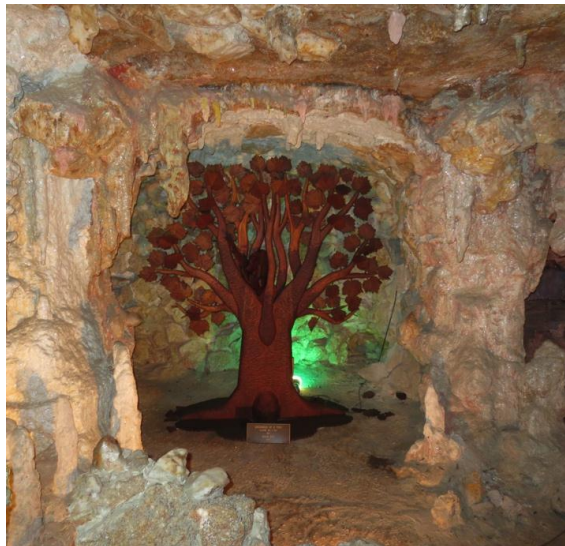


(Photo courtesy of David Day)

⁶⁰ Day, interview.

⁶¹ "Notes on 'The Transfiguration' For Tour Information," Katherine Hinds Smythe Collection box 1, folder 6, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, Benjamin L Hooks Central Branch.

The Grotto – Scene 6



(Photo by author)

Zacchaeus up a Tree is the sculpture of scene six. The sculpture is literally of a man in a tree and consists of only one complete piece, though that complete piece was assembled from many, separately carved pieces.⁶² It is set deep into the wall and is illuminated from behind by a green light, probably to mimic the natural green of tree leaves. Each leaf is individually attached

⁶² Day, interview.

to its branch by a small peg inserted into a pre-drilled hole.⁶³ As you can see to the right of the tree trunk, some leaves have fallen off since the sculpture's installation in 1981.

The Grotto – Scene 7



(Photo by author)

Scene seven is Day's interpretation of *The Last Supper*. It is one large piece, whose dozens of parts Day says were never fully assembled until he installed it in the Grotto in 1980.⁶⁴ The piece is an incredible combination of shallow relief sculpture that transitions to a deeper relief before eventually incorporating some fully three-dimensional parts, like the dinnerware

⁶³ Day, interview.

⁶⁴ Day, interview.

resting on the table. The majority of the sculpture is a combination of hardwoods, except for the limestone heads of the twelve disciples, each of which Day individualized with distinct facial features and different hair styles and textures. Jesus's head is the only one made of wood and it protrudes from a light-colored wood outline of crucifix that extends down the visible length of Jesus's robe. This niche and scene, along with the previous two, are the only of the ten that do not feature original, cave wall backgrounds by Rodriguez.

The Grotto – Scene 8



(Photo by author)

The eighth scene includes an original background by Rodriguez depicting a hillside village and a slightly three dimensional tree standing much closer to the foreground. To meld the lone figure of the niche in to the background scene, Rodriguez sculpted the completely three dimensional base of a tree whose roots extend like fingers over the rocky terrain of the scene, and whose branches split and continue horizontally over the kneeling Jesus. This scene is entitled

Christ in Gethsemane, and is the only scene in the Grotto featuring the sculptural work of artist Luther Hampton. This niche, like the six filled in by Day, remained empty for a long time following the completion of the Grotto. Luther Hampton graduated from Memphis Academy of Art (not Memphis College of Art) in 1973, during which time he was hired to create the sculpture for this scene.⁶⁵ His polychrome plaster figure shows Jesus kneeling at an altar-like ledge and gazing upward toward an area illuminated by white and red lights, but hidden by a cement and crystal column.⁶⁶ Unlike the multi-colored lights that seem awkward in *The Nativity*, the odd colors here suggest divine power and an otherworldly presence. They logically enhance the scene rather than confusingly complicate it. Similar to the amalgamation of background-foreground design in the *Sermon on the Mount* niche, Rodriguez's background setting here also flows seamlessly into the tangible figures in the three dimensional space of this scene, making the two, very distinct mediums and styles come together as one, united and complete whole.

Christ in Gethsemane is dated 1972 and is the only sculpture Hampton created for the Grotto. Katherine Hinds Smythe did not fully take over management of Memorial Park until 1976, but she began working part-time at the cemetery in 1963. At that time Memorial Park was under the leadership of Bess Hinds Anderson, daughter of E. Clovis Hinds and aunt of Katherine Hinds Smythe.⁶⁷ Since it was under Smythe's official administration that the interior of the Grotto was finally fully completed, it is likely that she was also responsible for commissioning Hampton in the early 1970s, marking the beginning of her efforts to fill the empty niches. It is unclear how Smythe and Hampton became acquainted or what the parameters of their professional agreement were, but since *Christ in Gethsemane* was the only contribution Hampton made to the Grotto it is clear that something was not completely satisfactory to one or both of the

⁶⁵ "Notes on Artists."

⁶⁶ Gumprecht.

⁶⁷ "Notes on Artists."

parties. Perhaps the cemetery did not have the funds at this time to continue commissioning sculptures, or maybe Smythe and the rest of the administration did not love the piece that Hampton installed. Either way, Hampton did not return, at least artistically, to Memorial Park and another four years would pass before David Day was hired and a finished Grotto was near.

The Grotto – Scene 9



(Photo by author)

The ninth niche is the only without any independent sculptural work. The floor of the niche is bare except for the informational plaque indicating that Rodriguez was solely responsible for the artwork of the scene depicting *The Crucifixion* in 1936. The shallow relief of the smoother niche wall is naturally framed by the jagged and crystal studded surrounding walls and ceiling. Jesus and the two thieves who were crucified on either side of him are shown hanging on their respective crosses. Rodriguez sculpted these figures in much deeper relief than

the rest of the scene, commanding the attention of viewers' eyes. The crosses stand upright on Calvary and look over several buildings, surely meant to represent Jerusalem.

The Grotto – Scene 10

The tenth and final scene was done by Day in 1979 and depicts *The Resurrection*. The wall features an original Rodriguez polychrome background that is nearly identical to that of *The Crucifixion* except that the three, empty crosses are set much deeper into the landscape, like a distant and forgotten memory. Perhaps not quite as original as Rodriguez's mural, this niche also featured the figure of a risen Jesus with outstretched arms, hovering against the backdrop of a painted sky.



(Photo courtesy of David Day)

This photograph must have been taken sometime during Day's process of creation and installation because it shows both the original sculpture of Jesus, which Day removed and replaced, as well as Day's angel that still stands in the niche.

Day's replacement Jesus is stylistically very different from the original, but they hang in the same spot and are roughly the same size. Rather than outstretched arms, Day's Jesus

triumphantly holds his crown of thorns in his left hand while his right hand is raised and making a gesture that appears to be the sign of benediction, but only his thumb and index finger are somewhat extended.



(Photo courtesy of David Day)

The body of Jesus was carved from limestone and is affixed to a flat, wooden mount that resembles a mandorla; a popular feature in religious paintings throughout several art historical periods, a mandorla is an almond-shaped outline situated to fully encompass and thus denote the divine holiness of Jesus, and occasionally other holy figures such as the Virgin Mary. Around Jesus's head is a round, halo-like detail which is again surrounded by over a dozen of the same, though much smaller, quartz crystals used in other parts of the Grotto.⁶⁸

The face and body of Day's angel are made from limestone from which her beautifully polished wooden wings extend. She is beautiful, but she, as a female, is odd. The passages in the Bible telling of Jesus' resurrection always mention at least one angel. In some accounts the angel is referred to with male pronouns while in others the angel's gender is left completely ambiguous. Day took this ambiguity to enforce his creative liberty and depict the angel as a

⁶⁸ Day, interview.

female. Day said that he did this intentionally, despite his recognition of their usual maleness, because he was more accustomed to and more comfortable with sculpting women, and specifically female angels.⁶⁹

Each of these ten scenes is incredibly distinct from one another, even the six that were all done by Day. In some, the sculptural work is the only focus, while other scenes rely heavily on what surrounds the sculptures to achieve their most impressive potential. The affect, whether intentional or otherwise, of some scenes is realized with the assistance of unnaturally colored lighting. In *Christ in Gethsemane*, the multi-colored brightness of visibly unknown origin toward which Jesus is oriented, suggests the magnificent power and sanctity of God, to whom his prayers are surely directed. Here the artificial lights are effective rather than strange and seemingly out of place, like the two located in *The Nativity* that cast a bizarre red and blue light onto the already kitschy, ceramic figures. There are a few other miscellaneous green lights situated around the interior of the Grotto that are similarly odd and lack a reasonable explanation other than their purpose of brightening a rather dark cavern. There are white lights scattered throughout the Grotto as well, but the colored ones have effectively given the entire cave a mysterious glow that adds a complicated layer onto the already eclectic assemblage of artwork.

The strange and unknown feeling that the colorful lights create is very different than the uplifting message that the visual story of Jesus suggests. Hinds had very specific intentions with what he wanted the Grotto to represent; he once said, “Please do not consider these works of art merely as such, for they really form an important part in the religious life of the people. They are an education in the best sense, and help to elevate our thoughts and foster the desire to reach a

⁶⁹ Day, interview.

higher spiritual plane.”⁷⁰ So though Hinds was deeply concerned with creating a beautiful space that would entertain all people, he was equally interested, if not more so, in the religious, and specifically Christian, nature of what he was creating. The artwork he and his family commissioned examines and displays what Christianity says about death:

Death forces us to face the chaotic, alienating side of nature. Christianity denied the permanence of death and thus transformed death from being the natural end of life to being a passageway into a new life. Just as humanity triumphed over nature by cultivating it into a garden, so did the Christian defeat death through his or her belief in Christ. Through the Christian message, one controlled and cheated death.⁷¹

These scenes were intended to remind those burying loved ones in Memorial Park that death is not the end for their deceased friends or family. Hinds wanted Jesus’ story to be comforting and reassuring to visitors because, regardless of one’s religious affiliation, the notion of a peaceful and happy life after death that Christianity suggests is a pleasant one.

Not much has changed inside the Grotto since the final installation (*Zacchaeus up a Tree*) was put in place in 1981. Some leaves have fallen off of Zacchaeus’s tree, Jesus’s arm in the *Sermon on the Mount* has been poorly reattached, some of the wood in Day’s sculptures has darkened, and a small amount of paint has chipped off of Rodriguez’s backgrounds, despite Day’s slight retouching in the 80s.⁷² Though the Grotto has remained virtually untouched, much has been going on around it. Most noteworthy was the addition of the Grotto, along with Rodriguez’s other works in the cemetery, to National Historic Register in 1991. Today the grounds on which the Grotto rests are a popular location for professional photographers and are even frequently used as a wedding venue. In 1997, the National Institution For The Conservation

⁷⁰ *The History of Memorial Park.*

⁷¹ McDannell, 115.

⁷² Day, interview.

Of Cultural Property conducted a report on the Crystal Shrine Grotto, and found the structure “generally in good condition,” so it seems that the Grotto will be around for a long time to come.⁷³

Just as Hinds had intended from the beginning, Memorial Park and the Crystal Shrine Grotto still receive visitors almost every day. It continues to amaze children and adults alike, providing an exciting and individualized experience for every person. The picture one might draw up in his or her own head, even with the help of actual photographs, could never compare to what the space inside the Grotto is truly like. Most people, at least those that I have witnessed, who come through the Grotto are stunned, confused, curious, fascinated – and the list of reactions goes on.

Most children are noisily excited, quickly moving through the space while tirelessly pointing out certain details of the scenes, asking questions and making comments to those they are with, thus defining the Grotto as a place that encourages socialization and discussion, and as a place to be visited with friends and family. But other visitors enter the Grotto alone. To some of those, the Grotto may be a place that holds the hope of a somber but comforting experience, like coming to terms with the death of a loved one. Or maybe it simply provides an escape that allows a moment of peace to someone who needs just that. One’s purpose may be religiously infused since the sculptural work does illustrate the story of Jesus’s time on Earth. Christ’s last appearance in the temporal world is depicted in the tenth niche of the Grotto; in this scene Jesus has risen from the dead and is ascending into heaven where, according to Christian tradition, all followers of Jesus Christ will spend eternity after the death of their bodies on Earth. The promise of this everlasting happiness is wonderfully encouraging, especially to those who find themselves in Memorial Park for the traditional reason that cemeteries are visited. But even to

⁷³ Gumprecht.

those uninterested in the religious aspect of the Grotto, its dark and curious beauty is something to behold and it too is inspiring. The Grotto today represents a wide variety of things to a wide variety of people and it cannot be reduced to only one purpose or meaning.

The Crystal Shrine Grotto is truly a unique place, both inside and out. It is a man-made cave filled with crystals in the middle of a cemetery, it is work of art that houses other works of art, it is a product of the time known as the Great Depression, it represents the cooperation of men from different backgrounds and even different countries, it is a religiously infused space that serves to teach and to inspire. So, like Memphis, the Crystal Shrine Grotto is made up of many complicated and diverse historical influences. The Grotto is countless things and it deserves to be remembered for all that it represents to everyone who has experienced it.

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