

Folk Gravesites in New Orleans: Arthur Smith Honors the Ancestors

The cemeteries of New Orleans, often called “Cities of the Dead,” are renowned for their elaborate above-ground tombs, arranged like little houses along narrow, labyrinthine pathways. New Orleans' oldest existing cemetery, St. Louis Number One (established in 1789) is located just outside the original French settlement known today as the French Quarter. This cemetery is of particular interest because of its picturesque beauty and the many historically significant New Orleanians who are interred there. The free-standing tombs, containing two or three vaults, are usually owned by middle and upper class families; large multi-vaulted “society tombs” are owned by benevolent and fraternal organizations. The cemetery walls also contain vaults, sometimes called “ovens” because they resemble an old-fashioned baker's oven, which are used by people of more modest means. In both the free-standing tombs and the “ovens,” individual vaults are used for successive interments, and many family or society members may be housed within the same vault. Decomposition is rapid in New Orleans' semi-tropical climate even when the dead are embalmed, and custom dictates that after “a year and a day,” the casket may be discarded and any remaining bones deposited in the back of the vault, making room for the next occupant.¹



View of St. Louis Cemetery Number One, February 8, 1987, showing wall vaults and raised tombs. Amanda Carroll's “oven” vault is in the Basin Street wall, just to the left of the main gate.

In New Orleans, with its blend of French/Spanish Catholic and African traditions, gravesite decorations are as distinctive as the cemeteries themselves. In comparison to the typical American cemetery, where idiosyncratic monuments and unconventional memorial decorations are discouraged or even prohibited, New Orleanians have considerable license in the embellishment of their burial places. Some New Orleans cemeteries require that gravesites be kept reasonably tidy and in good repair, but in others, anything goes.

Within the context of this exuberant style of cemetery decoration, my attention was particularly attracted by a gravesite in St. Louis Cemetery Number One. In 1986 I began to observe and photograph this highly individualized “oven” vault, located in the Basin Street wall just inside the main gate. The niche and its protruding marble shelf, plus the path directly in front of it, form an altar that is adorned with an ever-changing assemblage of objects. The focal point is always the image of an African-American woman wearing a wide-brimmed felt hat, derived from a studio photograph that has been repeatedly photocopied, enlarged, and hand-colored. The portraits, which are carefully wrapped in plastic, bear the crudely lettered inscription:

Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll
 Birthday . November-14-1892
 Death . November-3-1945
 At Rest. At Peace.

While the embellishment of the portraits and the placement of the inscription varies, they are all based on the same photograph. When I first saw the gravesite in 1986 it was decorated for St. Valentine's Day with pots of artificial flowers, Valentine's cards, sea shells, stones, and a whitewashed brick.



Gravesite of Amanda Carroll decorated for St. Valentine's Day, February 13, 1986. The photocopied portrait was smaller, and therefore more distinct, than in subsequent years.

In April 1987, the portrait was flanked by plastic jugs of fresh flowers and greenery, and a miniature garden of potted plants, surrounded by wire fencing, had been constructed on the path below. A brick was encased in a plastic wrapper with the printed slogan, “Make It a Memory.”



In 1990 I first noticed X marks, inscribed with a piece of soft red brick, on the wall above the niche. In New Orleans this practice is customarily used to invoke the spirit of the dead, and a small offering, such as coins, food, flowers, whiskey, or a votive candle, is left at the gravesite as payment for services rendered. The tomb of the legendary nineteenth-century Voudou Queen Marie Laveau, located just around the corner from Amanda Carroll's wall vault, is covered with Xs, and a variety of offerings are always seen on the surrounding pavement. Because southern folk art, gravesite decoration, and New Orleans Voudou are of consuming interest to me, I was utterly intrigued by Amanda Carroll's enigmatic wall vault.² Was this memorial kept by family members, by seekers of spiritual potency, by Voudou worshipers? It even occurred to me that these funky assemblages might be created by some local artist who had simply appropriated the space.



Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, February 23, 1990. X marks are faintly visible on the wall above the vault.

After five years of fruitless inquiry, I finally encountered the keeper of the gravesite in March 1991. Arthur Smith, the grandson of Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll, was at that time in his late fifties, a pleasant-looking golden-skinned man with a wispy goatee. He was born on his grandmother's fortieth birthday, November 14, 1932. He has worked as a handy man, butler, dishwasher, insurance agent, photographer, florist, and door-to-door sales agent for the Fuller Brush Company, but, he told me, he is presently unemployed and homeless, and supports himself by collecting and selling recyclable bottles and cans. Smith is eligible for Social Security benefits, but has never received a check because he is reluctant to become involved with the government bureaucracy. Although Arthur Smith was raised in a Catholic family, he later became a Baptist. In the 1960s he opened his own church, but soon abandoned this experiment and is not presently affiliated with any organized religion, adhering to a strictly personal interpretation of Christianity. Smith never married and has no close living relatives. Both of his grandparents and several other family members are interred in the wall vault, but there have been no recent interments because modern caskets are too large for the "oven" vault. Smith began his gravesite decoration when his mother died in 1978, and he presently cares for his grandmother's vault, his mother's grave uptown in the Carrollton Cemetery, and another grave at Holt Cemetery.³



Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, St. Joseph's and St. Patrick's Day Celebration, March 18, 1991. The Xs have become more numerous, and there are also some cross marks.

I was, of course, curious to know if Amanda Carroll had been associated with African-based spiritual practices, as the X marks would indicate. Without mentioning Voodoo, I asked Arthur Smith if his grandmother had been a religious leader in the community. "No," he answered, "She spent her life caring for our family at home while my mother worked to support us. When I was a child I suffered terribly from asthma, and she doctored me with home remedies. I keep this memorial to her out of love and gratitude."

I later learned that the X marks are made by tourists, who have been told by unprincipled tour guides that Amanda Dorsey Boswell Carroll was a “great Voodoo priestess of the 1930s and '40s.” A popular book of New Orleans ghost stories even implies, through inclusion of a photograph of Amanda Carroll's wall vault in the chapter on Marie Laveau, that it is the burial place of Marie Laveau's daughter, supposedly her successor as New Orleans' reigning Voudou Queen.⁴ Arthur Smith regards Voudou as black magic and is offended by the characterization of his grandmother as a Voudou practitioner. He tries to obliterate the X marks by painting over them.

When I met Arthur Smith in March 1991, there were many X marks and a few crosses on the wall behind the vault. The portrait of Amanda Carroll was hung with beads left over from Mardi Gras, and a “Thank You” sign, colored pink, rested against it. A piece of red carpeting adorned the path in front, and on it were arranged sea shells, small white stones, and bricks tied with yellow ribbons. At that time the successful conclusion of Operation Desert Storm, the United States' involvement in the Persian Gulf War, was being celebrated, and yellow ribbons were plentiful in New Orleans.

St. Louis Cemetery Number One was renovated in 1992. Tombs and walls were repaired and whitewashed, and for the next few years Arthur Smith's embellishment of his grandmother's gravesite was not as flamboyant as it had previously been. He seemed to be inhibited by this pristine white surface, so different from the crumbling brick and stucco of the old cemetery wall. On November 1, 1993, All Saints' Day,⁵ the occasion on which graves are traditionally cleaned and decorated in New Orleans, Smith's embellishments were limited to whitewashed bricks and potted red chrysanthemums. One new feature had appeared, however. In addition to the portrait of Amanda Carroll, there were also photocopied portraits of Smith's mother, Ethel Boswell Davis, and of Smith himself as a younger man, labeled “Arthur Raymond Smith Gravesite.”



Gravesite of Amanda Carroll, All Saints' Day, November 1, 1993. The photocopied portraits of Ethel Boswell Davis and Arthur Smith are on the sidewalk below the tomb. A nail is placed diagonally across each portrait.

On another visit to the cemetery in March, 1995, I found the tomb rather sparsely decorated with whitewashed bricks, a board covered with carpet samples, a pot of flowers, a garland made of plastic bags knotted together, a holy candle, and the photocopied portraits of Amanda Carroll, Ethel Davis, and Arthur Smith. The Xs had been covered over with pale yellow paint.

In April, 1996, when I was in New Orleans for the Jazz and Heritage Festival, the tomb was bare, and the portraits, soggy from a recent rain, were crumpled behind some bricks. Fearing that Arthur Smith had finally joined his beloved grandmother in death, I telephoned Robert Florence, a New Orleans writer on cemetery history and one of the more conscientious tour guides, and was relieved to learn that this was far from true. Florence, who has befriended Arthur Smith, told me that Mr. Smith is quite alive, still trundling around New Orleans with a grocery cart in which he salvages recyclables and collects promising materials for his gravesite decoration, and is becoming something of a celebrity among New Orleans collectors of “outsider” and “visionary” art.



Detail, hand colored enlarged photocopied portrait of Amanda Carroll. Over the years, successive photocopying and enlarging of the original studio portrait have made the image increasingly abstract.

Later that year, Robert Florence and New Orleans artist Leslie Staub arranged for Arthur Smith to exhibit his hand colored and collaged photocopied portraits at LeMieux, a gallery in the revitalized Warehouse District that specializes in southern, particularly New Orleans-related, folk and folk-inspired art. Although there was some doubt whether Smith could be persuaded to attend the opening, Florence and his wife picked him up at the appointed time and drove him to the gallery. Dressed in a new outfit purchased for the occasion, Arthur Smith charmed the patrons, sold all of his pieces, and left with several hundred dollars cash. The Florences offered to send him home in a taxi, but he preferred to walk the considerable distance and stop at a bar for a celebratory drink. "That night," he said, "I felt like I'd won the Academy Award." Since then Smith's interest in producing "art" for sale has flagged, and his creative energy is once again devoted to his personal projects. He does, however, appreciate the recognition accorded him in newspaper articles and in Robert and Mason Florence's recently published book, *New Orleans Cemeteries: Life in the Cities of the Dead*. He has already incorporated copies of Mason Florence's photographs into his gravesite memorials.⁶

On my most recent visit to New Orleans, in May, 1997, Amanda Carroll's vault was resplendent with a fresh coat of bright purple paint. There were no Xs. Arthur Smith's collage/assemblage technique had taken a leap forward. Instead of simply wrapping the photocopied portraits in plastic and setting them on the ledge, the faces of his mother and grandmother were cut out and adhered to the wall; the hand coloring wandered gaily onto the purple background. The decorations included five bricks painted purple and many vases of flowers, all connected with red plastic ribbon.



Gravesite of Amanda Carroll painted purple, May 22, 1997.

On this trip to New Orleans I had resolved to photograph not only Amanda Carroll's vault in St. Louis One, but also to document the related gravesites at Carrollton and Holt Cemeteries. Far uptown at the Carrollton Cemetery, the grave of Arthur Smith's mother was easily recognized. Ethel Boswell Davis's burial place, which is in the ground, was covered with a blue sheet held down by an accumulation of whitewashed bricks and stones and embellished with artificial flowers and colored ribbons. It was topped with the photocopied portrait of Mrs. Davis. The adjoining grave was also covered with a blue sheet, several stones, and Smith's own portrait. It is apparently Smith's intention to be interred here next to his mother.



Double gravesite of Ethel Boswell Davis and Arthur Smith, Carrollton Cemetery, May 21, 1997.

Holt Cemetery, on City Park Avenue behind the parking lot of Delgado Collage, was originally a burial ground for the indigent. There are no above-ground tombs at Holt. The markers are handmade and hand lettered. Some graves are delineated by pipe fencing or contained within raised “copings” made of cement or wood; some are covered with Astroturf. The markers are handmade and hand lettered. At Holt, people feel free to decorate as they please and to leave offerings for the dead: a can of beer, a rubber duck, a bingo card.⁷

Even in this environment, Arthur Smith's work stands out. Nobody seems to know who is buried in the grave that he tends; he considers it a memorial chapel for all the dead of Holt Cemetery. In May 1997 it was truly spectacular, surrounded by baby bed railing, wire garden fencing, and topped

with a shag carpet, a tangle of lawn chairs, bicycle wheels, and various other artifacts. This display was apparently too much even for the patrons and caretakers of Holt Cemetery, and Mr. Smith was asked to remove it.



Gravesite decorated by Arthur Smith, Holt Cemetery, May 21, 1997.

Cemetery historian Robert Florence had told me that I must also see Arthur Smith's house, the ultimate manifestation of his artistic vision. The tiny, narrow “single shotgun” house is located in a predominantly black neighborhood below the French Quarter. Inside are remnants of Smith's short-lived church: a shrine room dedicated to the Heavenly Father and a Queens' Room that memorializes Smith's mother and grandmother. Over the years the house, which has no electricity or running water, has filled with junk. According to Florence, “Arthur doesn't really live there and he won't let anybody in; he says it's infested with rats. He sleeps at a homeless shelter or on the street.” The facade, the front steps, the door, the shutters, and the gate (which bears a “Beware of Dog” notice) are gaily striped and stippled with red paint, as is the collection of wire and plastic lawn chairs, metal grates, milk crates, and flower pots in front. The sidewalk is covered with a piece of red carpet. Stuck among the chairs and grates are artificial flowers, plastic toys, ribbons, and several commercially printed signs that announce, “New Orleans: Proud to Call It Home.” While the neighbors feel kindly toward Arthur Smith and have no problem with his exterior decorations, they object to the rats and junk and fear that the house is a fire hazard.



Arthur Smith's house, 1306 Music Street, May 25, 1997.

How do Arthur Smith's house and gravesite decorations fit into the larger context of African and African-American cemetery traditions and attitudes toward the dead?

In the traditional religions of Western and Central Africa (homeland of most African-Americans who arrived via the slave trade), great reverence is shown for those who have lived a wise and virtuous life. The ancestral spirits serve as guides and advisors to the living, and are believed to withhold their assistance or even cause harm if they are not properly honored with an elaborate funeral and regular offerings.⁸ Among the Kongo people of central Africa, for example, metal cooking pots, crockery, and glass bottles were placed on graves to ensure that the spirit would not return in search of these necessary items. Earth from a grave was often an ingredient in Kongo *nkisi* charms, as were white objects, representing the “white realm of the dead,” and sea shells, which symbolize the water from whence the spirits came and to which they will return.⁹

African-influenced gravesite decorations are found in African-American cemeteries all over the South, where family and friends leave personal objects belonging to the dead for their subsequent use in the spirit world. These “grave goods” include cups and saucers, candy dishes, pitchers, medicine bottles, figurines, clocks, lanterns, automobile parts, and bed frames. The dishes and medicine bottles are often those used by the deceased during their last illness, and must be cracked so that the spirit of the vessel is released to serve its owner in the next world. Graves may also be ornamented with sea shells and outlined with bottles driven neck-down into the earth.¹⁰

Just as Africans sought spiritual aid from the ancestors, African-Americans may use the cemetery and the spirits of the dead for supernatural power. These practices were abundantly documented all over the South in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Harry Middleton Hyatt in his monumental five-volume work, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork*, and by the reports of the WPA Federal Writers' Project fieldworkers. Graveyard dirt or shavings from a wooden grave marker were incorporated into magical charms; an image of the intended target of the charm or a bottle containing his or her bodily products was buried in the cemetery. Offerings, usually of money, were left to pay the dead for their assistance. Many of Hyatt's informants specified that the grave--and therefore the spirit--of a "sinner" should be used for evil work and the grave of a good Christian or an innocent child for beneficent magic. These practices were found in every locality.¹¹

The cross marks and Xs found on Amanda Carroll's tomb, even though they are made by tourists who have little knowledge of their meaning, are in fact rooted in African tradition. In the religions of Africa, particularly that of the Kongo people, two crossed lines represent the intersection between the realm of the living and the realm of the spirits--a point of concentrated power. Archeological evidence indicates that the cruciform symbol was formerly used by slaves in South Carolina, where earthenware vessels with Kongo-influenced crosses and Xs inscribed in their bottoms have been recovered from coastal river beds. It is thought that the vessels, containing magical ingredients, were ritually thrown into the water, the cross being drawn to establish contact with the spirits.¹²

The African cruciform became syncretized with the Christian cross in the Afro-Catholic religions of the New World, and is frequently seen in Santería and Vodou.¹³ The New Orleans custom of drawing cross marks or Xs on the grave markers of persons believed to possess great spiritual authority, although not found elsewhere in the United States, is related to Haitian Vodou practice. It may have been introduced into New Orleans by the many Haitian immigrants who, fleeing the turmoil of Haiti's revolution, arrived in the early nineteenth century. According to Haitian Vodou priest Max Beauvoir, "the practice is called *kwasiyen*, meaning to sign with a cross, and is used to establish contact with the *lwa* (Vodou deities) and on tombs when one wishes to be remembered by the dead. It is an X sign, although some people transform it into a Christian-like cross."¹⁴

It was customary in the 1880s and 1890s to leave offerings of cooked food, fruit, whiskey, coins, or jewelry, burn a candle, draw cross marks, and perform charm rituals at the tombs of Marie Laveau and other spiritual leaders. This practice is documented in interviews by WPA Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers with elderly black New Orleanians who had grown up in the neighborhood of the French Quarter and the St. Louis cemeteries. The tradition prevailed at least until 1940, as documented by Zora Neale Hurston in 1928-1929 and by Harry Middleton Hyatt and the Louisiana Writers' Project between 1936-1940. Local newspapers also reported the drawing of Xs and cross marks on the tombs and told of charms "planted" in the cemeteries for malign purposes. These charms sometimes took the form of symbolic ingredients like red pepper, along with the photograph or the name of the target of the charm, placed inside a calf's head or a beef heart or tongue, sewed up with black thread and stuck full of pins and needles.¹⁵

Arthur Smith's gravesite assemblages, according to his own statement, have no connection to Vodou or conjure practices like those described above, nor does he leave offerings to his mother and grandmother to solicit their aid for magical purposes. His work, and the choice of materials such as

whitewashed bricks and stones, sea shells, and the baby bed railing, certainly falls within the tradition of African and African-American grave decoration and respect for departed ancestors, but it is not strictly analogous to the Kongo-influenced graves found all over the American South. Smith does not consciously leave these tributes on the gravesites of his relatives for their use in the afterlife. His decorations are a more personalized expression of love and respect for his hard-working mother and for the grandmother who raised and cared for him. He offers them Valentines and Mardi Gras beads, flowers, ribbons, and holy candles, and commemorates these two supremely important women with hand-colored photocopied portraits. By including his own portrait in recent years, he seems to be saying that he feels ever closer to the spirit world, and is ready to go when called.

Notes

¹ Samuel Wilson and Leonard Huber, *The St. Louis Cemeteries of New Orleans* (New Orleans: St. Louis Cathedral, 1962); Leonard Huber, "New Orleans Cemeteries: A Brief History," in Mary Louise Cristovich, ed., *New Orleans Architecture Vol. 3: The Cemeteries* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1974), 3-62; Robert Florence, *City of the Dead* (Lafayette, La: Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1996), 13-15; Robert Florence, with photographs by Mason Florence, *New Orleans Cemeteries: Life in the Cities of the Dead* (New Orleans: Batture Press, 1997), 9-29.

² New Orleans Voodoo, closely related to Haitian Vodou, is an authentic Afro-Catholic religion concerned with serving the deities and the ancestors and soliciting their spiritual power. Denigrated and suppressed by the Anglo-Americans who took control after the Louisiana Purchase, Voodoo acquired the negative connotation of sorcery and devil-worship and is feared by many people who still accept this negative stereotype. There is, at present, no really good reference work on New Orleans Voodoo. For a historic overview of New Orleans Voodoo and its African and Haitian antecedents, see Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941, reprint Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 245-251; and Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 75-82. For information on early twentieth century Voodoo practice, see Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America" (*Journal of American Folklore* 44 (October-December, 1931), 320-417; Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935, reprint New York: Harper and Row, 1990); and Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork* (Hannibal, Missouri: Western Publishing, 1970-1978). Robert Tallant's *Voodoo in New Orleans* (1946, reprint Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 1983) is a racist and sensationalistic interpretation of data compiled by the WPA Louisiana Writers' Project; the original interviews and other material are housed at Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana, Watson Memorial Library, Cammie G. Henry Research Center.

³ Biographical information supplied by Arthur Smith on March 18th, 1991 was supplemented by conversations with Robert Florence and by his published writings on Arthur Smith: "In Loving Memory," *New Orleans Times-Picayune* (November 1, 1994); and "Homage from the Heart," in *New Orleans Cemeteries*.

⁴ Victor C. Klein, *New Orleans Ghosts* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Professional Press, 1993), 97-105.

⁵ For more on the All Saints' Day celebration in New Orleans and environs, see Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer, and Robert Tallant, eds., *Gumbo Ya-Ya: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales*, compiled from reports by the Louisiana Writers' Project (1945, reprint Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing, 1988), 316-365; Leon Ronquillo, *Matters of Life and Death* (New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum, 1979), 15-18 and plates 40-45; Florence, "All Saints' Day," in *New Orleans Cemeteries*, 31-50.

⁶ Robert and Helene Florence, interviews May and August, 1997.

⁷ Christopher Rose, "Mourning Glories," *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Living Section (Sunday, October 27, 1996).

⁸ Herskovits, *Myth of the Negro Past*, 63, 197-206; Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 12-13.

⁹ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 117-121; Wyatt MacGaffey, "The Eyes of Understanding: Kongo *Minkisi*," in

Astonishment and Power: Kongo Minkisi and the Art of Renee Stout (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1993), 59-68.

¹⁰ John Michael Vlach, "Graveyard Decoration," in *The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), 139-147; Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 132-142; Elizabeth Fenn, "Kongo-American Graves in the American South," *Southern Exposure* (September/October 1985), 42-47).

¹¹ Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork*. Georgia Writers' Project (Savannah Unit), *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (1940, reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

¹² Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archeology and Early African America* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 26, 110-116.

¹³ Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 108-115; Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti* (1959, reprint New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 166.

¹⁴ Max Beauvoir, e-mail response to my question about crosses and X marks in Haitian Vodou, September 13, 1997.

¹⁵ The drawing of crosses or Xs is documented in unpublished interviews with Alexander Augustin, Cruz (caretaker of the St. Louis Cemeteries), Marie Dédé, Aileen Eugene, Oscar Felix, Anita Fonvergne, Theresa Kavanaugh, and Sophie Rey by Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers Hazel Breaux, Edmund Burke, Robert McKinney, Henriette Michinard, Zoe Posey, and Maude Wallace, 1936-1940, folder 25; and in a newspaper article, "Voodoo Faithful Put Magic Marks on Great Queen's Grave," New Orleans *Item Tribune* (June 22, 1936), p. 14. Charm rituals performed in the cemetery are documented in Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 223-224, 227-229; Hyatt, *Hoodoo-Conjure-Witchcraft-Rootwork* Vols. 2 and 3; unpublished interviews with Madame Ducoyelle, Rachael Johnson, Josephine Jones, and Sophie Rey by Louisiana Writers' Project fieldworkers Robert McKinney and Zoe Posey, 1936-1940, folders 25 and 44; and in a newspaper article, "Voodoo Charm Found by Two Women on Mother's Grave," *Item Tribune* (March 9, 1931), p. 10, c. 8-9.