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A Passion for Graveyard Art That Took a Criminal Turn; Tiffany Glass and Other Tales From the Crypt

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

In the backyard of Anthony Casamassima's unassuming red-brick house in Queens, there is a tabletop cemetery lavishly planted with bonsai trees. Tiny slate pathways snake their way around semiprecious stones, creating a glittering trail past Lilliputian mausoleums.

This ingenious homegrown tableau is notable for its creator -- a career grave robber who pursued his treasures with warped ardor.

Mr. Casamassima was the star witness in the trial of Alastair Duncan, a leading authority on Tiffany stained glass who was convicted last month of buying and selling a 9-foot-tall Tiffany window that Mr. Casamassima, armed with obsession and a screwdriver, pried off a mausoleum in Salem Fields Cemetery on the Brooklyn-Queens border.

Behind the bonsai graveyard is the workshop where Mr. Casamassima, 40, a former cemetery caretaker, fashions his own stained-glass windows and repairs fractured ones jimmied off tombs. It is a carefully designed and rather inventive work place, the walls covered with cabbage rose wallpaper, a Lionel train running on a track beneath the ceiling molding and the corners decorated with iron lions taken from a nearby Lutheran cemetery. Mr. Casamassima leashed Sophia, his massive Neapolitan mastiff, one afternoon recently to give a guided tour of the singular home he shares with his 78-year-old father, Alphonsus, a retired city employee. Mr. Casamassima was wearing a red tank top and a "Lost in Space" baseball cap (the "Lost in Space" television show being another enthusiasm, along with Popeye, the '64 World's Fair, model trains and real railroad bridges). He was in a contemplative mood.

Mr. Casamassima -- who has recently taken to calling himself "Anthony Big Mouth" -- was arrested in January after boasting of his 15-year nocturnal grave-robbing career to an undercover agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Among his crimes was the sale of the Salem Fields window for \$60,000 to a Bronx antiques dealer, who, in partnership with Mr. Duncan, resold it for \$219,980 to Takeo Horiuchi, a wealthy Japanese collector. After his arrest, Mr. Casamassima, along with the antiques dealer, Lawrence Zinzi, agreed to cooperate with the Federal Government in expectation of reduced

sentences, secretly recording conversations with Mr. Duncan that included discussions about stolen windows.

Mr. Casamassima is awaiting sentencing on a variety of charges, including stealing the window and trafficking in stolen property. Mr. Duncan, who is appealing his conviction, is to be sentenced on Oct. 27 and is facing up to 35 years in prison. The window itself sits innocently in a museum in Japan.

In two days of animated testimony last month in Federal District Court in Manhattan, Mr. Casamassima offered a riveting account of the underbelly of the antiques world, a "don't ask, don't tell" chain of bottom-feeders and erudite experts in which a window stolen from a Brooklyn cemetery percolated up to the stratosphere; in this case, a Tiffany museum in Nagoya, Japan. He told of midnight visits to overgrown cemeteries beneath shadowy expressway girders, forgotten corners of New York where Tiffany windows hung free for the taking.

In a sense, Mr. Casamassima saw himself as a rescuer, stealing Tiffany windows and other treasures, he said, to "liberate" them from vandalism and neglect.

"I fell in love with them," he said in court about the 80 or more sculptures, gates, pedestals, Tiffany windows -- even cremation urns with ashes -- he plundered from graveyards throughout the New York area, including the beckoning constellation of cemeteries encircling Middle Village, his neighborhood in Queens. "That is the reason I so-called stole them."

To cemetery officials like Meg Winslow, curator of the historic Mount Auburn cemetery in Cambridge, Mass., Mr. Casamassima is no gallant protector. "This is a horrific and tragic desecration of a family's private property, a place built to house people's deepest and most profound emotions," she said.

Mr. Casamassima started "collecting," as he put it, in 1982. At the center of his workshop is an ornate cabinet of Carpathian elm, padauk and mother-of-pearl inlay that he built with proceeds from his thefts to show off his own stained-glass work, installing theatrical lighting to highlight their brilliance.

The F.B.I. confiscated Mr. Casamassima's creations, down to the candy dishes. But they did not take his stash of Tiffany fragments, hundreds and hundreds of them.

He picked up an amber shard shaped like devil's horns and held it up to the light, slipping a striated blue piece in behind it. "Tiffany had a technique of layering to enhance his windows," he patiently told a visitor. "You can almost walk into them. It's like a 3-D effect."

When asked, he went on to explain that the pieces he was holding were stolen from a mausoleum in the Cypress Hills cemetery, which straddles the border of Queens and Brooklyn. "The window was all bent out of shape and dangling," he recalled. "The lock was off. All I had to do was walk inside."

Cemeteries and the art within them have held an allure for him since boyhood -- "forgotten treasures," as he put it, "just left out in the wild." Mr. Casamassima, who did not graduate from high school, learned how to drive sitting on his father's lap behind the wheel in St. John's Cemetery, four blocks from home, where he later got a job as caretaker before being fired for stealing a pedestal.

"We'd go to St. John's, and I was always looking around," he recalled. "It's hard to explain that inner feeling. It's very emotional."

He has always been attracted to old things, he said, and cemeteries have the oldest, most dazzling art he knew. "The mausoleums were built like Greek temples, with bronze on the doors," he said. As a young boy he remembers seeing a bronze relief of a woman. "It looked like her gown was blowing in the wind, and she was stepping on the head of a boar," he said. "Oh, my God, it was magnificent.

"I would see monuments of hands praying, or a lamb, and it just got to me," he continued. "The respect and dignity they felt. They decorated tombs like they expected someone to come over, like the court of Caesar, with wraparound marble benches. Even though I knew what I was doing was kind of illegal, I wanted them."

His art appreciation took a criminal turn in 1982, when, seeking ornaments for his backyard, he learned from friends in the neighborhood about a scrap pile of broken pedestals, statuary and gates at nearby Lutheran Cemetery. "When I heard about it, I had to go inspect this for myself," he said. "Sure enough, they were ripping up old plots and throwing out the debris. I was shocked."

He took the pieces home and discovered he had a knack for repair. "I figured well, they're throwing it out, it's not going to be missed," he said. "That's when I started going into other departments."

Five years later, he got a caretaking job at St. John's Cemetery -- Casamassima nirvana -- where he acquired the pass key he later used to break into mausoleums throughout the New York area, including Salem Fields and the historic Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

He began noticing vandalized tombs and damaged stained glass. He had never heard of Louis Comfort Tiffany, the master turn-of-the-century artist and designer, but began extricating the broken windows from tombs and bringing them home to see whether he could repair them. Mr. Casamassima enrolled in a six-week course in stained glass at an adult center in Forest Hills, Queens. "They were teaching us how to make sun-catchers with suction cups," he recalled with bemused disgust. He discovered he had a natural talent for cutting and foiling. "That's when I went full speed ahead with the stained glass," he said. He had a handy theft guide in Alastair Duncan's classic work, "Tiffany Windows."

"You know, I hate to say it, but his book helped me," Mr. Casamassima said, still expressing deep regard for the heretofore-esteemed expert he testified against.

During the nine-day trial Mr. Casamassima said that he made \$12,000 to \$13,000 in unreported income from his thefts over 15 years, before the \$60,000 Tiffany windfall.

To steal the window, he recalled in his workshop, he crept into Salem Fields at dead of night, taking a route behind a reservoir so isolated "that even the cops avoided it."

He broke into the grounds through a damaged fence, and, worried that a gang might further vandalize the mausoleum, he said, spent the night in the cemetery.

He chose the Glaser-Bernheim mausoleum because of its decrepit condition. "It looked like a cave," he said. "There were calcium deposits on the ceiling. The grass was growing inside. The window was stress-cracked. The building was unsettling and closing in around it."

The window weighed more than 500 pounds, so he made "a sandwich out of plywood" to carry it out with three friends, who arrived the next morning in a van. The "window with a problem attached to it," as its provenance was referred to in court with deadpan understatement by Mr. Zinzi, the antiques dealer, remained in Mr. Casamassima's workshop for six years until it was purchased by Mr. Duncan, who, Mr. Zinzi testified, knew the window was "swagged," or stolen.

Mr. Casamassima remains weirdly purist about the window. At one point, according to court testimony, Mr. Duncan had the window's original yellow background altered to include a sunset, which Mr. Duncan said he did at his client's request. "They changed the fingerprint, that's what they did!" Mr. Casamassima said, gesturing extravagantly for dramatic effect. "It was a Tiffany! Can you believe it? It's like you telling me, 'You know, I like the Mona Lisa, but she looks better in glasses.' "

After shipping the window to Japan, prosecutors said, Mr. Duncan asked Mr. Casamassima to "seek and find" another window, which he dutifully did. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Casamassima made a reconnaissance trip to Kensico Cemetery in Valhalla, N.Y., bringing along a tape measure, a camera and "another low-life" who turned out to be an undercover F.B.I. agent.

They passed a house for sale next to the cemetery. "Can you imagine if I lived here?" Mr. Casamassima said exuberantly, according to the agent's testimony. "This place would be emptied out in a week."

Fallout from the Duncan case is already changing the landscape of Tiffany collecting. "Provenance is going to be a key issue," said David Donaldson, a private Tiffany dealer and consultant in Orlando, Fla., and the former curator of the Charles Hosmer Morse Museum of American Art, in Winter Park, Fla., home to one of the country's finest Tiffany collections.

Ultimately, the mystery of Anthony Casamassima, who learned about art in part by stealing it, may be akin to the enigma of the scholarly Alastair Duncan himself: why someone with obvious talent and a deep instinct for beauty would squander them.

In a reflective moment, Mr. Casamassima said he was motivated by "laziness" and his underappreciation for his own work, in addition to the enticingly decayed condition of the tombs. "I figured if they weren't taken care of and there's no more family, what am I doing that's wrong?"

"They ought to wise up," he added, speaking of cemetery managers. "They should go through their inventory. The national historic preservation society should step in."

In the end, his professed desire to protect objects was surpassed by his need to possess them, at any cost. Three years after he began his career as a grave robber, Mr. Casamassima bought Christmas wreaths and placed them at every mausoleum he had stolen from.

"I guess it was to say thank you for letting me take these things," he said. "It was to clear my conscience, to show my intentions were good."

Photos: Anthony Casamassima, a grave robber whose testimony helped convict a leading authority on Tiffany windows on charges of dealing in stolen mausoleum art, built a bonsai-studded cemetery tableau at his Queens home, including a soldiers' monument, top.
(Photographs by Jeffery A. Salter/The New York Times)