The Ether Monument

The Ether Monument, also known as the Good Samaritan Monument, was erected in 1868. It stands at 40 feet and is placed near the northwest corner of Boston’s Public Garden. It is constructed as both a statue and fountain and is made up of granite and marble. Atop the monument depicts a doctor dressed in a medieval Moorish-Spanish robe and turban with a patient who is almost naked slumped over the doctor’s knee. At the base of the monument, four lions are carved into each side and from their mouths, water spouts out. Moving up, the midsection of the statue holds four separate images of various scenes.

While the statue’s visage may appear somber, in reality, this historic monument commemorates the application of ether in anesthesia which was a breakthrough in the field of medicine and pharmacology. In the year 1846, Doctor John Collins and dentists Wiliam Thomas Green Morton performed the first successful demonstration of ether by operating on an anesthetized patient’s tumor which was celebrated by all of Boston as a milestone in human civilization. ¹ It was only natural that the proud Bostonians wanted to commemorate this achievement, and that's why they chose to construct the Ether Monument. The monument in a way honors and memorializes this achievement and symbolizes the relief of human suffering. Before the introduction of ether, surgeries and medical operations were torturous and excruciating, and many of these surgeries were often too painful to bear through. The

introduction of ether alleviated these horrific experiences and mankind was thankful for its creation, and from their gratitude, the Ether Monument was constructed to celebrate this achievement.²

We can see the commemorative nature of this statue in the various details the statue holds. Commissioned by Thomas Lee, the base of the statue was designed and created by Henry Van Brunt and William Robert Ware. Brunt then asked the talented John Quincy Adams Ward to create the crowning statue atop the memorial. Ward then took inspiration from the Bible and created the top scene based on the tale of the Good Samaritan.³ This Biblical tale follows the story of an injured man who was left to die on the side of the road. Passersby ignore him and leave him for dead and he is left to his own devices until a Samaritan comes by and helps care for the stranger until he is fully recovered. Thereafter, the Samaritan was chronicled as the Good Samaritan in the Bible and teaches the virtue of helping others, even those that we don’t know. In a similar vein, the introduction of anesthesia strives after the same ideal. With anesthesia, doctors and nurses can help ease the pain of their patients and help them recover with as little pain as possible. Anesthesia also requires one to put complete faith into strangers as one is completely unconscious and unaware of what goes on in their absence. This trust in strangers is allegorized by the Good Samaritan. It’s this beautiful and divine faith in the good of humanity that makes the Parable of the Good Samaritan so impactful, and one of the reasons why Ward chose to design the ether monument in respect to this Biblical tale. The imagery of the monuments goes to celebrate the goodness in human nature and the relief of pain.

Furthermore, the midsection of the statue delineates similar sentiments as well, as each of the depictions illustrates pain being relieved and soothed. The north depicts a wounded soldier being treated near a medical tent, the south depicts a patient that is currently being operated on, the east depicts the Angel of Mercy granting mercy, and lastly, the west depicts the Triumph of Science. Additionally, these scenes also carry unique inscriptions atop themselves which all commemorate the discovery of ether. Each of these scenes holds some semblance to the importance of kindness and compassion and ultimately acts as a memorial for all that ether has done for humanity. Ether has soothed the physical pains of war, alleviated the horrors of surgery, granted mercy to those that have fallen ill, and is a manifestation of a medical breakthrough.

However, the memorial wasn’t erected without controversy. Thanks to its great success, many figures wanted credit for its development. Three men (Thomas Green Morton, Horace Wells, and Charles T. Jackson) all fought for credit over the discovery. Additionally, the monument also found itself facing backlash from religious groups as many made claims that the use of ether was associated with Satan. They believed that God had intended for humans to feel pain as a form of divine punishment for our sins and that the application of ether to nullify that pain was the devil’s work. Ether was especially controversial in childbirth as a select few believed that women are supposed to feel the full brunt of birth due to bearing Eve’s curse of woman.

Yet, even in spite of these controversies the Ether Monument still stands today. This is because the monument takes no stance and it celebrates no one in particular. It doesn’t crown a single individual nor does it hold any political agenda. The monument is simply a commemoration of the success that ether has in the field of medicine. Contributing to no one but
the object itself, the Ether Monument is a memorial that encapsulates society’s appreciation and acceptance of ether. Their gratitude stems from the alleviation of suffering that ether grants and the monument embodies this recognition. But the monument also symbolizes the community’s spirit in helping others and caring for those in pain and The Ether Monument conveys these messages of self-sacrifice and altruism through its various merciful imagery and Biblical allegories. In the end, the Ether Monument ultimately epitomizes the impact of ether as well as expresses the Bostonians’ sense of altruism and community.
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