The Ether Monument: A Hidden (But Important) Memorial

On the edge of the Boston Public Garden lies the Ether Monument. The monument itself is somewhat difficult to see, as it is obscured by trees and landscaping; I myself barely even noticed it was there until I was directly in front of it. Yet, the monument is the oldest one in the Public Garden, as it was erected in 1868. Visually, it consists of a long, four-sided spire reaching towards the sky, with a sculpture of two men at the top. The monument is also placed in the center of a fountain. The statue truly is a 360 degree experience; each of its four faces has a specific inscription. Also, in order to actually see the sculpture at the top, one must tilt their head back almost completely.

But why exactly is the Ether Monument in the Public Garden? Why was ether such a big deal? The answer is that the monument commemorates the first use of ether in anesthesia (depicted here in the memorial), and the reason why it is honored in the Public Garden is because the procedure occurred at Massachusetts General Hospital, located only about half a mile away. As the organization the Friends of the Public Garden details, in 1846, a local Boston dentist named William Thomas Green Morton “administered the ether” to an unnamed patient. The Doctor John Collins Warren was then able to remove a tumor from the same patient, effectively saving their life. This method quickly proved to revolutionize the medical field; patients’ pain during surgery dramatically lessened, and the number of “unnecessary medical deaths” plunged (Atlas Obscura). At Mass General Hospital, the operating room in which the procedure was
initially performed has even been renamed the “Ether Dome,” signifying the chemical’s importance to medicine.

However, the Ether Monument chooses not to memorialize the images of either Morton or Warren, instead opting to depict the image of the Good Samaritan, healing a wounded man with ether, as a symbol for their medical breakthrough. The Good Samaritan is a famous biblical story in which a man, lying injured on the side of the road, pleads to passersby for help. Yet, the only one to help him, nurture his wounds, and ensure his care is the one known as the Good Samaritan. In fact, the term “Good Samaritan” is often associated with those who selflessly help the helpless. This story relates to the Ether Monument in that Morton and Warren were strangers to their patient, yet, they were able to help them. It is also worth noting that by choosing to display a symbolic image as opposed to the likenesses of Morton and Warren, designer William Robert Ware has avoided the memorial’s modern-day “cancelation,” a phenomenon that has affected many other memorials that glorify problematic figures. The Ether Monument succeeds in glorifying an event as opposed to two men.

Continuing with the biblical theme, two sides of the monument display Bible verses. One verse is Isaiah 28:29, which states “This also comes from the Lord of hosts, he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom,” referring to the work of Morton and Warren. The other is a quote from Revelation, stating that “neither shall there be any more pain.” This verse specifically relates to the monument as the use of ether in anesthesia would have numbed the pain surgery causes. Furthermore, the inscription of these two verses imbues the monument with a somewhat divine quality; it compares the historic procedure with the actions of God, therefore labeling it as a type of miracle.
The Boston Public Garden (in addition to the adjacent Boston Common), is full of statues glorifying some of America’s greatest heroes. For example, the nearby George Washington statue depicts the venerated general riding into combat. The 54th Regiment Memorial commemorates the first African American regiment in the Civil War. A statue of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner stands above park-goers. The message here is clear: these people all fought for and served our country, shaping it into what it is today. Yet, the Ether Monument largely differs from this majority; it honors a medical breakthrough. The doctors who performed the procedure only saved one life in the moment; yet, by doing so, saved countless more in the future. They didn’t shape a country, but they did shape the world of medicine. Additionally, it is important to consider this monument in the context of the city of Boston. The ether procedure was performed at Mass General Hospital, and today, Boston is a large hub for the medical community. Yet, the Ether Monument seems to be one of the quieter memorials in both the Public Garden and the Common.

This same sentiment extends to how visitors interact with the monument. Due to the Ether Monument’s secluded nature, it mostly stood alone while I was there, save for a few passersby. There are a few benches surrounding the statue, yet they remained empty during my time there. In short, the Ether Monument is one that people walk by and stop to look at for a minute or two before carrying on with their day. However, just up the path lies the massive George Washington memorial. It truly differs from the Ether Monument in just about every way; it stands in plain sight of almost everyone in the Public Garden, and visitors continually stop to grab a picture with it. Additionally, the surrounding area is impeccably manicured with beautiful flowers. Even Washington’s position on the horse (riding into battle) directly contrasts with the meekness of the Ether Monument. In all, the Washington memorial conveys feelings of triumph.
and victory in the Revolutionary War. Strangely, this is a similar message to that of the Ether Monument: triumph and victory over pain and suffering. But why doesn’t it receive the same exaltation?

While I was visiting the Ether Monument, it was a chilly, cloudy day. Business as usual was carrying on in the Boston Public Garden; families walked the paths, visitors rode the Swan Boats, and people read books on the grass. The small circle where the Ether Monument was provided a brief escape from all this hustle and bustle. As I was there, a man set up a chair on a nearby path and began to play a song on his guitar, John Lennon’s “Imagine.” The song implores the listener to ponder a world where we all “live as one” in peace and harmony. I believe that this message translates to the message of the Ether Monument. Physically, the monument stands in a peaceful area, and its sculpture up top depicts the Good Samaritan using ether to heal a man of his wounds. The procedure the monument commemorates isn’t as large or bombastic as winning a war, yet it still has saved countless lives over the past 150 years. Yet, the Ether Monument doesn’t need the glorification other memorials possess; it instead serves a memorial for reflection. In the end, the Ether Monument does not just memorialize a medical breakthrough, but humanity’s ongoing journey to make life better for others, to ease others’ pain, and ultimately, to create a better world for us all.
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