A ‘dying’ art
How cultural, social, historical and natural contexts influence art.

A ‘dying’ art

Across the cemeteries of the NSW MidCoast are many different examples of grave art. Grave art is defined here as the head stones and grave markers, railings, sculptures and vases that decorate a grave. The style of the grave art is often based on the cultural beliefs of the person, popular trends in society, and the availability of materials and tools.

Headstones

Look at each of these headstones and consider what may have influenced its design.


Scott’s Creek Cemetery, J. Roberts, 2018.

Sculptures
Sculptures became a popular trend in grave art in the late 1800s.¹ This was particularly so because stone masonry firms began establishing themselves in Sydney. Joseph John Edstein established a stone masonry business in Raymond Terrace in 1896 before expanding to Taree in 1908.² Many of the head stones in the area bear the little Edstein mark.

The sculptures were hand carved and either made out of marble imported from Italy or locally quarried sandstone.³ Here are some examples:

³ Interview with Mr John Edstein, July 2018.
Carved sandstone angel, a marble urn with a drape, and a carved marble cross. Oxley Island and Scott’s Creek Cemetery, J Roberts, 2018.

What do you think is the symbolism represented in each of the above sculptural designs?

**Reflections of nature**
While grave art is often a reflection of the person or the society in which they live, it can also be a reflection of nature. Consider the following examples.

Wrought iron panels surround a grave in Mitchells Island cemetery. The design reflects the ferns that grow nearby. J Roberts, 2018.

**Your turn**
Explore modern grave art on the internet. How do modern head stones or sculptures reflect the social, cultural, historical or natural influences of our time?