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"Remembrance of Times Past at the 2009 MAPACA Conference"

Hailing from Atlanta, Georgia, a city that considers ancient anything older than a decade, I am always amazed at the myriad of ways in which the city of Boston gracefully blends the old with the new. Historic Faneuil Hall opens onto a bustling marketplace where vendors hawk all manner of tchochkes; Paul Revere's home in the North End sits snugly amidst nail salons and Italian trattorias. In Boston, disparate worlds constantly collide and, far from being jarring, as one might expect, the effect instead is splendid.

Boston thus seemed a most fitting place to host the 2009 MAPACA conference, for, like the city, the organization celebrates the ways in which the past intersects with the present and popular culture negotiates its highbrow counterpart. Chairs Lois Ascher and Marilyn Stern took full advantage of this synergy, arranging a trip to the North End, where conference-goers could witness first hand the city's dizzying variety, and a walking tour of Forest Hills Cemetery, where they could view contemporary artwork sharing space with Victorian graves.

Indeed, many of the papers presented at the conference seemed imbued with the city's spirit, for they too focused on the ways in which the past influences the present. Agata Tarkowski, for example, compared Dita Von Teese to Bettie Page, and illustrated how Von Teese's attempt to channel this nineteen fifties' icon reveals America's current insecurities about its place in the world. In contrast, Flavia Zuñiga-West looked at the present's attempt to improve upon the past. She analyzed the Whitney Museum's recent exhibition of the quilts created by the women of Gee's Bend. This exhibit, Zuñiga-West noted, corrected an earlier show's omission of the women's names, an omission that denied them their due as artists. Papers in the "Beowulf to Shakespeare" area also underscored the confluence of past and present, discussing Arthur's presence in Spiderman comic books, Merlin's stint in a television show, and a young Queen Elizabeth's omnipresence in children's historical fiction.

The conference's capstone event -- a Thanksgiving-themed dinner followed by a presentation from Cecily Miller, Executive Director of Forest Hills

Cemetery's Educational Trust -- continued the thread of the past's presence. Enjoying my coffee after a dinner that evoked memories of long-ago meals, I listened as Cecily Miller explained the ways in which the Trust uses art to bridge the distance between the cemetery's guests and its more permanent residents. She showed slides of various sculptures, many of which played with the idea of the past's eternal nature. I found the last slide of a sculpture entitled "Nightshirts" the most startling. In this piece, the artist, Leslie Wilcox, adorned some of the cemetery's trees with fine mesh gowns, transforming them into spirits. As the slide lingered on the screen, it struck me as a fitting end to the conference, for the ghostly trees seemed to offer a final farewell from a city that, like MAPACA members, refuses to let the past silently sleep.