

Marie Bashkirtseff (1858-1884): "La dame en blanche"

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Marie Bashkirtseff, a *fin de siècle* Russian artist, produced most of her artwork in France. She was thought to be "la dame en blanche" and this theme became interwoven with her life. This motif appears throughout her later years in different forms: her descriptions of her appearance in her journal, accounts of her, and studio photographs that she commissioned to be taken of herself.

Bashkirtseff was born in 1858 in the Ukraine to aristocratic parents, Marie Babanine and Constantin Bashkirtseva. Three years later her parents separated. In 1870 her mother changed her name to Bashkirtseff and left Russia with her two children to travel through Europe. In 1871, the family settled in Nice, where they were shunned by most of the Russian expatriate community because Marie Babanine had left her husband. As Leo Tolstoy writes in his short story, "The Kreutzer Sonata," nineteenth-century upper-class Russian marriages were usually arranged, and although divorce rarely occurred, unhappy marriages were common.¹

Many of Bashkirtseff's marriage hopes were thwarted by discovery of her family situation. Indeed, in her journal, she often worries about the ambiguous social position of her family and how it will influence her marriage hopes. In 1877, the family moved to Paris and Bashkirtseff began her artistic studies at the Académie Julian. The Parisian artistic community was more accepting of the Bashkirtseffs. Her *oeuvre* consists of paintings, drawings, and sculpture. The prodigious output of these final years is evidenced in the extensive collections of her work in Paris, Nice and St. Petersburg. While Bashkirtseff exhibited in four Salons, from 1880 to 1884, she is best known

for her lengthy journal, begun at age seventeen and her self-portraits in which she presented herself as a professional artist (Figure 1). She battled consumption during her final years and died of tuberculosis in 1884.²

Bashkirtseff's association with white reveals how she conceived of herself and was viewed by society. Her repeated references to white in her clothing and works portray a complicated relationship to nineteenth-century feminine stereotypes. She did not believe herself to be pure, but rather adopted a white mask of femininity to obscure her unconventional personality and professional aspirations. In the nineteenth-century, whiteness of clothing and skin suggested purity, but actually veiled darker meanings of chaos connected with the female body. Mary Poovey in "Scenes of an Indelicate Character" describes the fears of nineteenth-century physicians that hysteria and uncontrolled passion lurked beneath the chaste appearance of women. Poovey explains that physicians felt intense anxiety about the crude sexual language that sometimes erupted from women in labor, when they were anesthetized with chloroform.³

Bashkirtseff's persona of femininity fit into nineteenth-century expectations that women should be child-like and innocent. Joan Rivière, a colleague of Sigmund Freud explains in her article entitled "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1930) why women create such masks. She describes a female subject's feminine clothing and flirtatious behavior, following the woman's lecture, as a "mask of womanliness." These qualities are meant to reassure the subject and her male audience that she poses no threat to their intellectual position.⁴ I extend the

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*, trans. David McDuff (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1985) 29.

² The most definitive account of Bashkirtseff's life appears in Colette Cosnier's biography of the artist. See Colette Cosnier, *Marie Bashkirtseff: Un portrait sans retouches* (Paris: Pierre Horay, 1985). Especially helpful to the reader in the appendix is Cosnier's chronology of Bashkirtseff's life, her listing of artworks and publications by the artist with their locations, and a bibliography. 83 notebooks of the original journal are kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (12304-12389 Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises). One notebook is kept in the Musée Masséna in Nice. Correspondence of the artist and her mother can be obtained at the Bibliothèque Nationale (12391 and 21699 N.A.F.), as can an album of anatomical drawings (12390 N.A.F.). Cosnier lists expurgated versions of the journal and correspondence. No complete versions of the journal nor of the correspondence have been published. The most recent monograph of Bashkirtseff's art is the *Catalogue des Oeuvres de Mademoi-*

selle Bashkirtseff (Paris: Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs, 1885).

³ Mary Poovey, "Scenes of an Indelicate Character: The Medical 'Treatment' of Victorian Women," *The Making of the Modern Body*, eds. Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987) 155.

⁴ Joan Rivière's article entitled "Womanliness as Masquerade" was originally published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1929. I use the version edited by Victor Burgin and Cora Kaplan in *Formations of Fantasy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986) 35-44. Tamar Garb provides an analysis of Bashkirtseff's photographs and journal in conjunction with Rivière in her article on Bashkirtseff. See Tamar Garb, "Unpicking the Seams of her Disguise. . .: Self-Representation in the Case of Marie Bashkirtseff," *Block 13* (Winter 1987/88): 79-86.

mask of femininity to include Bashkirtseff's mask of whiteness. She wore white to appear like an innocent child, both religious and chaste, but also ultimately available to men. Seen as historical documents, her photographs both sustain and subvert nineteenth-century French expectations of women's roles and behavior. As shown in Bashkirtseff's journal, she both identified with and felt removed from these images. In a journal entry from 1877, she describes her distance from this other self:

Indeed the woman who is writing and her whom I describe, are really two persons. What are all her troubles to me? I tabulate, analyze, and copy the daily life of my person; but to *me myself*, all that is very indifferent. It is my pride, my self-love, my interests, my envelope, my eyes, which suffer, weep or rejoice; but *I myself*, am there only to watch, to write, to relate and to reason calmly about these great miseries, just as Gulliver must have looked at the Lilliputians.⁵

In this quotation, Bashkirtseff presents herself as having two personae. As the writer, she records the daily life of her person, transcending her existence. Bashkirtseff's admitted duality in her journal also appears in its constant vacillation from child-like naiveté to profound self-knowledge and awareness. Bashkirtseff writes in an 1876 journal entry that she was known by her European admirers as "la dame en blanche." In this entry, she divulges when she was first called this name at a masked ball in Rome. Finding her dressed in black lace, her admirers inquire "why are you not in white?" A young Roman, Pietro Antonelli, confides that he worships the "woman in white," who resembles Bashkirtseff. Although she wears a black and silver dress to the ball, he can conceive of her only in white.⁶ Bashkirtseff may have violated a social norm by not wearing white to the ball, for young women were expected to wear white to a *bal blanc* (a "white ball," a ball for young women).⁷

However, Bashkirtseff often wears white dresses in her photographs and mentions wearing them in her journal. For example, in one photograph (Figure 2), she wears a white ballgown adorned with a garland of flowers reaching from her bodice to her train. The white dress and flowers accentuate her fair skin. She poses, self-consciously looking to her right, providing no resistance to the viewer's gaze. The obvious artifice of the photograph, taken in a studio, reveals its purpose, to show Bashkirtseff's beauty. Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Differ-*

ence discusses how a female subject's gaze can allow or obstruct the viewer's appropriation of her. Bashkirtseff's gaze and the centrality of her figure in the composition closely resemble that of the young girl in Auguste Renoir's painting entitled *The First Outing* (1876). According to Pollock, the girl's position in the composition invites the viewer to appreciate her as a pretty framed image.⁸ Unlike Renoir's subject, Bashkirtseff expected an audience and with her photographer fabricated the photograph for their consumption. Tamar Garb agrees that Bashkirtseff frequently created her photographs to be pretty pictures, noting that her "obsession with her own physical appearance" appears in the many photographs commissioned by her.⁹

In a sentimental photograph (Figure 3) Bashkirtseff poses as a beautiful and sweet "innocent." Her sincere look and simple white house dress convey a child-like purity. Although she is framed as a beautiful subject, she directly addresses the viewer with her gaze. This photograph might be understood in the context of self-portraits of other female artists, such as that of Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun (n.d.) inspired by Peter Paul Rubens' *Chapeau de Paille* (1620-25). Like Vigée-Lebrun, Bashkirtseff "directly engages the gaze of the spectator" and "offers herself as a beautiful object to be enjoyed and admired."¹⁰ Through a direct gaze, the female subject can both entice and accost the viewer. Timothy J. Clark describes the effect of the gaze of the subject of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). He explains that Olympia composes her look, which is "candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance," to show her status as prostitute to her viewer/client.¹¹ Bashkirtseff has also composed her own look for the viewer, but merely to convince them of her beauty and purity.

In an 1881 journal entry, Bashkirtseff explains how she constructs herself as a vision in white. She describes her routine of returning from the studio, bathing, clothing herself in a white dress and draping her head "with a fichu of Indian muslin and lace, like Chardin's old women and Greuze's little girls." This veil hides her "sad thoughts" and makes her feel "more at home, more at rest." Yet, this passage evidences the dichotomy in Bashkirtseff's personality between disclosure and concealment, for while the fichu covers her hair, she admits that it sets off her face, making it "magnificent."¹² Perhaps she believed that mystery emphasized her beauty.

White clothing and drapery not only heightened Bashkirtseff's beauty, but made her appear religious and pure.

⁵ May 30, 1876. Marie Bashkirtseff, *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff*, trans. Mathilde Blind, vol. 1 (London, 1890) 333.

⁶ Feb. 18, 1876. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 1: 71-73.

⁷ Paul Robert, *Le Grand Robert de la langue française*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Paris: Robert, 1985) 17.

⁸ Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 78.

⁹ Garb 82.

¹⁰ Rozsika Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1980) 96.

¹¹ Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1985) 133.

¹² January 15, 1881. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 2: 153.

The Robert French Dictionary notes from Isaiah 1:18 how the pure in heart are "white as snow." In the French language, *vêtements blanc* were white clothes worn by a child until a certain age in honor of the Virgin.¹³ Perhaps Antonelli thinks of her in white because he believes her to be pure and holy. He tells his mother that she is "good" and "religious."¹⁴ Bashkirtseff believes that Antonelli fell in love with her because of her first name. For when "at death's door six years ago, his mother made him eat slips of paper, on which this word was written over and over again, "Maria, Maria, Maria" to cure him.¹⁵

The role of martyr overwhelms her, when faced with Antonelli's decision not to marry her because of her background. When his parents send him to a monastery to atone for his sins, she becomes lost in almost sensual mortification. In her journal, Bashkirtseff compares her performance of self-sacrifice to the story of Beatrice Cenci, the subject of a popular painting then attributed to Guido Reni. Beatrice Cenci murdered her father, when he tried to molest her, and was condemned to death:

Do you see that I have been posing as a martyr! It's too silly!.... My hair is dressed à la Venus Capitoline; I am all in white like a Beatrice, with a rosary and an ivory cross round the neck.

Whatever one may say, there is in man a certain need of idolatry, of material sensations. We must have images to look at and crosses to kiss.

Last evening, I counted the beads of the rosary—there are sixty—and I prostrated myself sixty times, each time hitting the floor with my forehead. I was quite out of breath, but it seemed to me I had done something pleasing in the sight of God. No doubt it was absurd, but the intention was good.¹⁶

Bashkirtseff portrays herself as a statue like Venus or Beatrice, all in white. The Venus/Beatrice connection suggests that although immersed in religious ecstasy, she remains concerned with her physical appearance. To perform as Beatrice, she must also resemble her. While she considers herself religious, Bashkirtseff realizes that like other people, she must express her spirituality through material and physical sensations. Hence, she counts the rosary and prostrates herself, hitting her head against the floor.

Following this immersion in religious ecstasy and the cult of Beatrice, Bashkirtseff appraises her behavior, perhaps em-

barrassed, but proud enough of it to record it in her journal. She had read other portions of her journal to Antonelli and may have hoped that he would read this section, which proved her love and religious fervour. But this fit of ecstasy also cleanses her of the affair, which ended soon after. For that same year she exclaims: "Poor Pietro! My future fame prevents me of thinking seriously about him. It seems to rebuke me for the thoughts which I bestow on him." Comments added to these entries in her twenties mock her expressions of melancholy for Antonelli and explain that she never really loved him.¹⁷

Bashkirtseff's small size and beauty encouraged others to perceive her as child-like and innocent. Indeed, she enjoyed adopting this appearance and manner. She writes in her journal in 1882:

I truly believe that R.F. [the painter Tony Robert-Fleury] has a very correct opinion about me; he takes me to be what I should like to appear, that is to say, perfectly amiable, or, to speak more seriously, a very young girl, a child even, meaning that while talking like a woman, I am at my heart's core, and in my own sight, of angelic purity.¹⁸

She later notes how she attempts to charm her colleague Jules Bastien-Lepage "by artificial childishness."¹⁹ Bashkirtseff's male friends probably were aware of her artifice, but like her they enjoyed playing the game.

Bashkirtseff's early death only magnified the legend of her purity and innocence. Confined to her home by tuberculosis and ensconced in her chair, she became a vision in white for her visitors. Bram Dijkstra argues that the nineteenth-century attraction to the consumptive look represented society's belief that women should be helpless, but ultimately led to fears of whether the invalid retained her sexuality and was actually fatigued from her "solitary vice."²⁰

An 1876 photograph of Bashkirtseff dressed as a capuchin monk (Figure 4) combines spirituality with other meanings. Like her white fichu, the robe both obstructs and emphasizes her sexuality and femininity. Bashkirtseff commissioned this photograph and ironically bought the habit from a boutique as a cover for a dressing gown (*robe d'intérieur*). While she pretends to be a capuchin monk, eyes turned downwards, her body covered completely by the robe, the majority of her audience would have recognized her as the subject. Her distinctive eyes and face are clearly visible amidst the white cloth. Indeed, she undermines the "masculine" effect of the monk's habit with her

¹³ Robert 17-18.

¹⁴ May 17, 1876. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 1: 125.

¹⁵ June 24, 1876. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 1: 165.

¹⁶ May 19, 1876. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 1: 129.

¹⁷ July 2, 1876. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 1: 171.

¹⁸ August 17, 1882. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 2: 272-273.

¹⁹ Dec. 23, 1882. Bashkirtseff, *Journal*, vol. 2: 310. Garb refers to these quotations to show Bashkirtseff's "expressed knowledge that 'celebrated women' frighten people and her anxiety to reassure herself and others of her innocence." See Garb 85.

²⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 68-76.

coy "feminine" gaze.²¹ Madame Babanine, a devout member of the Russian orthodox church, may not have perceived the irony of the photograph, for following Bashkirtseff's death from consumption in 1884, she placed her photograph as the focal point of Bashkirtseff's shrine in her Paris apartment.²²

Bashkirtseff actually never lived in the apartment. Yet, Mara Witzling writes that Babanine gave tours of this room as if it were the one in which her daughter died. She went to extreme lengths to preserve a clean image of her daughter. Before publishing her journal, she removed accounts of Bashkirtseff's sexual encounters, her association with the women's suffrage movement, and her anger over the oppression of women. She even placed a later birth date on her tomb to emphasize her daughter's early death.²³

Following Marie Bashkirtseff's death, Marie Babanine and the architect Emile Bastien-Lepage constructed and decorated her tomb (Figure 5). Located near the entrance to the Passy cemetery in Paris, the tomb resembles a Russian orthodox church, consisting of a chapel and a crypt. On the north-east façade (Figure 6) appears Marie Bashkirtseff's name with its French spelling and her "dates" (1860-1884) surrounded by a pattern of crosses, butterflies, and palettes. On the northwest façade lies a list of her works, including drawings and sculpture (Figure 7). Most intriguing in light of my topic, however, are the verses above this list, created for the tomb by a friend André Theuriot (Figure 7):

O Marie, O the white, radiant beauty,
Your entire being is not somber in the black
night,
Your spirit is alive, vibrant is your memory,
And the immortal perfume of the flower re-
mains.

Theuriot equates the paleness and purity of Marie Bashkirtseff with light. He calls her a white beauty, radiating her whiteness into the black night (death). The light of Marie becomes a metaphor for life. Her spirit remains like the "immortal perfume" of a flower.

Above the door to the tomb, on the side facing the cemetery wall sits another poem, created by E. Ducros. Ducros also considers the soul of Marie to be immortal. He writes:

Her name is immortal and luminates like a
candle,
Throughout the centuries, I hear her memory
blessed,
Because of her precocious genius,
So that all of the arts, in mourning, cry on
her tomb.

For Ducros, immortality of the spirit comes from divinity and genius. Not only does Bashkirtseff live on because of her purity and sanctity, but because she created beautiful art.

References to Bashkirtseff's artistic significance and her religious faith also appear in the one-room chapel above her crypt. Babanine chose Bashkirtseff's insipid *Saintes Femmes* (1882) to be placed at the back of the room which she embellished with mementoes of the artist and religious objects. Ironically, people even stole the mementoes for keepsakes, as if they were saints' relics. Bashkirtseff's marble bust on the tomb at Passy, beneath which the Salon of Sainte-Marie later met, memorializes her sainthood.²⁴ Today, the interior of the tomb, now blocked with a plexiglass cover, still contains some mementoes of the artist. Her bust adorns an altar beneath the *Saintes Femmes*. A bust of her father is placed to the right of the altar and one of her mother is placed to the left. A chair, perhaps from her studio, also sits to the left of the altar and to its right a *prie-dieu* (a low reading desk with a ledge on which to kneel in prayer). Photographs of her family and prints of her paintings adorn the walls along with crosses, candle holders, and her palette.

Bashkirtseff encouraged the romantic image of herself as a maiden in white which is projected by the tomb. She asked to be buried like Ophelia, draped in white, hair tangled, arms uncovered, and bare of foot.²⁵ This romantic image combined the concept of the genius *en désordre* with that of the white Ophelia, who died for love. Dijkstra explains how Ophelia, the most popular subject in the nineteenth century, came to represent virginity combined with madness and suppressed sexuality.²⁶

A posthumous newspaper article written by Madeleine Zillhardt on October 20, 1934 from *Le Jour* fabricates the romantic notion that Bashkirtseff died from unrequited love. The photograph depicts the artist clothed in a white hooded cloak, not long before her death, arising from the waters of the Mont-Dore spa. Beneath this seemingly sympathetic photograph lies a text entitled "Les fiancés de la mort." It explains that she deserved to die for love because she tried to seduce married men. In essence, the article posits the innocent-looking young woman as a whore, explaining that the cloak conceals her disease-ridden body.²⁷

The metaphor of the white dress as representative of purity, but also of veiled seductiveness, recurs throughout her works. This metaphor defines the life and works of Bashkirtseff, who frequently posed as the woman in white. The fact that her audience often recognized her masquerade leads to the conclusion that Bashkirtseff had more complex reasons for wearing white—to show her purity, but also to allude to underlying enig-

²¹ The proof of the femininity conveyed despite the habit appears in Garb's mistaken belief that the habit is that of a nun (Garb 85).

²² Cosnier 319.

²³ Mara Witzling, *Voicing our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: Universe, 1991) 111-112.

²⁴ Cosnier 320-322 and 346ff.

²⁵ Lucienne Mazonod and Ghislaine Schoeller, *Dictionnaire des femmes célèbres de tous les temps et de tous les pays* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992) 66.

²⁶ Dijkstra 43-45.

²⁷ Cosnier 346ff.

mas. This reading can lead to an analysis of all of her works as subtle subversions of an adopted mask of femininity because they exhibit extraordinarily complicated portrayals of the female identity.

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Figure 1. Marie Bashkirtseff, *Autoportrait*, drawing, n.d., Musée du Petit Palais. Photograph taken by the Musées de la Ville de Paris/Pierrain.



Figure 2. [above] Commercial Studio Photographer, *Marie Bashkirtseff* in a Ball-gown, photograph, n.d. From Colette Cosnier, *Marie Bashkirtseff: Un portrait sans retouches*. Collections of Cosnier, Ed. Pierre Horay, or Ivanoff family.



Figure 3. Studio Photographer, *Marie Bashkirtseff*, photograph, n.d. From Colette Cosnier, *Marie Bashkirtseff: Un portrait sans retouches*. Collections of Cosnier, Ed. Pierre Horay, or Ivanoff family.



Figure 4. [right] Studio Photographer, *Marie Bashkirtseff* Dressed as a Capuchin Monk, photograph, 1876. From Colette Cosnier, *Marie Bashkirtseff: Un portrait sans retouches*. Collections of Cosnier, Ed. Pierre Horay, or Ivanoff family.



Figure 5. Tomb constructed by Emile Bastien-Lepage, *Tomb of Marie Bashkirtseff*, architecture, c. 1885, Passy Cemetery in Paris. Photograph by author.

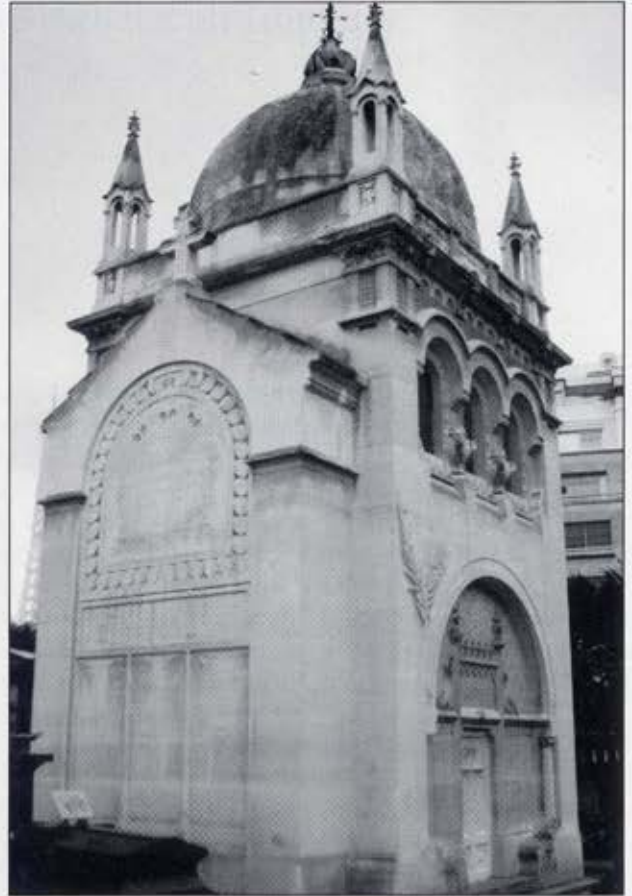


Figure 6. Tomb constructed by Emile Bastien-Lepage, *Tomb of Marie Bashkirtseff*, architecture, c. 1885, Passy Cemetery in Paris. Photograph by author.

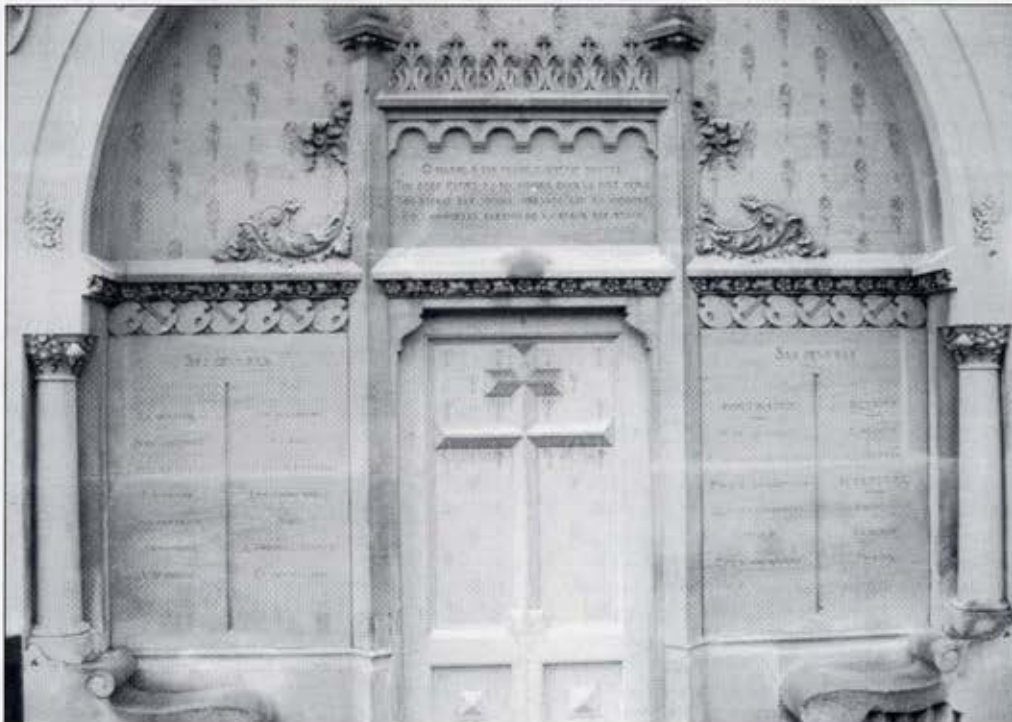


Figure 7. Tomb constructed by Emile Bastien-Lepage, *Tomb of Marie Bashkirtseff*, architecture, c. 1885, Passy Cemetery in Paris. Photograph by author.