The inevitable reach of death into all strata of society has captured the imaginations of artists since antiquity. Themes such as funerals, suicides, love vs. death, dying for various causes, and personifications of death itself have all indelibly marked the visual narrative. This exhibition illuminates some of those categories through a series of artworks chosen in conjunction with “The Art of Death Project,” a study by ASH Scholars of the Mizzou Honors College, who partner with university researchers on particular topics of study. The project, led by Jamie Arndt (Psychology), Katina Bitsicas (Film Studies), and Benton Kidd (Museum of Art and Archaeology), includes twelve undergraduate scholars who investigate viewer perceptions of death in art.

Images documenting the funerals of dignitaries are well known to the history of art but much less so for the anonymous faces of humanity. Convicted art forger Francis Legrange documented the brutal life for inmates of the infamous Devil’s Island in a series of nightmarish paintings, some of which dealt with the merciless deaths that befell various inmates. In one painting an anonymous inmate is led to the guillotine, a wicker casket in place to catch his beheaded body. Another painting (not displayed) shows bodies being discarded into shark-infested waters.

Legrange’s cold and merciless vision is paralleled by El amor y la muerte (Love and Death), one of a series of eighty prints published in Los Caprichos by Francisco Goya. The artist intended the prints to be a bitter commentary on the callousness of Spanish society. Here he shows a doomed couple, the man dead or dying, possibly by his own hand, but implying that society has contributed to the man’s death. Moreover, Goya’s broader message implies that love and death may eternally battle, but death always wins.

That theme is also exemplified by Joseph Heintz the Younger’s The Card Game of Death, in which a personification of Death lays down a winning hand of cards on the orb of the earth. Eros (Love) attempts to play but Death beats him. A woman reeled backward, her losing hand held aloft. Father Time, personified by the winged figure at left, has dropped his hand and departs, indicating the woman’s time is up, as does the overturned hour glass.

Dying for political or religious causes has also been commemorated in various ways, including the visual record. Especially prevalent in the Catholic tradition are the martyrs, whose deaths became synonymous with unflagging devotion to the Catholic Church. By the Italian Renaissance, martyr images had proliferated exponentially, and entire series of artworks could be devoted to the stories of their tortured, grisly deaths. St. Andrew, for example, was crucified on an x-shaped cross while others were allegedly burned, flayed, boiled, or vivisected in an effort to force renunciations of faith.

Dying for religion has not historically been restricted to Christianity. Some Pre-Columbian cultures offered human sacrifices to various gods, such as Xipe Totec, a god associated with the death and rebirth of vegetation. Human men were sacrificed, flayed, and had their hearts excised at the annual festival in Xipe Totec’s honor. The flayed skin was then donned by a priest who performed a ritual dance. The flaps on the ends of the exhibited figure’s wrists and ankles, as well as around its mouth, indicate it is wearing the flayed skin of a human sacrifice.
Francisco de Goya (Spanish, 1746–1828)
"El amor y la muerte (Love and Death)" plate 10, from the series Los Caprichos, 1799
Etching, burnished aquatint and burin on paper
Gift of Mrs. Renato Monaco in memory of Alexander and Elsa Mohr (91.294.10)

Andrea Boscoli (Italian, 1550–1606)
"The Martyrdom of St. Andrew", ca. 1570–1606
Pen and brown ink with brown wash
Museum purchase (73.264)

Attributed to Joseph Heintz, the younger (Swiss, ca. 1600–1678)
"The Card Game of Death", 1668
Oil on canvas
Gift of Mr. Russell Arundel (68.455)

Figure Impersonating the God Xipe Totec
Early Classic Period, Upper Remojadas I
Ca. 300–600 CE
Mexico, Central Veracruz
Terracotta
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Marcus (70.18)