

THE ART OF DEATH



“Dying is an art, like everything else.”

–Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus”

The inevitable reach of death into all strata of society has captured the imaginations of artists since antiquity. Themes such as funerals, love vs. death, martyrdom, suicides, and personifications of death itself have all indelibly marked history’s visual narrative.

Viewer reactions to such images vary greatly, and can range from fear to fascination. This exhibition stems from a collaborative project supported by the MU Honors College’s ASH (Art, Social Science, Humanities) Scholars Program and the MU Office of Undergraduate Research. Led by Jamie Arndt (Chair-Psychology), Katina Bitsicas (Digital Storytelling), and Benton Kidd (Museum of Art and Archaeology), the “Art of Death Project” studies human response to mortality through reactions to artwork of wide-ranging mediums linked by the subject of death. Each researcher leads groups of four to five undergraduates in various studies focused on this overall methodology. Some student comments are recorded on labels of specific artworks. Research was presented at the annual spring Undergraduate Research Forum sponsored by the MU Office of Undergraduate Research.



Matthäus Merian the Younger (Swiss, 1621–1687)

Sophonisba or Artemisia, 1647

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William Olden (66.348)

Sophonisba, daughter of a leading Carthaginian general, was allegedly taken hostage by the Romans during the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE). Her ex-fiancé, who had lost her when he became a Roman ally, tried in vain to secure his love's release but failed to convince her captors. He then arranged for Sophonisba to drink poison, and thus avoid the shame and horrors of Roman captivity. Suicide in classical antiquity was deemed a courageous, acceptable mode of death if one faced great shame and humiliation.

An alternate theory suggests that the subject of the Merian painting is Artemisia II, an ancient Karian queen (r. 353–350 BCE) who drank some of her husband's ashes dissolved in wine, so deep was her love for him. She is said to have followed him to the grave two years later, succumbing to her own profound grief.

"Suicide is both cowardice and courage: the choice to shy away from facing life, and the bravery to confront a staggering unknown."

– Lauren G., sophomore, Anthropology
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Hans Sebald Beham (German, 1500–1550)

Death of Cleopatra, 1520-1550

Etching

(66.5)

Graeco-Roman history and literature are rife with suicides, including that of the famous Cleopatra (r. 51–30 BCE), the ambitious Ptolemaic queen whose alliances with Julius Caesar and Marc Antony are as remarkable as her dramatic death. A crushing defeat by the Romans in 31 BCE led Cleopatra and Antony to take their own lives, rather than face the shame of defeat and capture. While Antony fell upon his sword, Cleopatra's extraordinary suicide by snakebite to the breast has captivated artists for two millennia. Some modern historians doubt the Roman accounts of the snakebite suicide, citing envenomation by an Egyptian cobra (asp) as a painful, lingering way to die, and therefore an unlikely choice.

"When the world around you espouses tyranny, the idea of dying for a cause turns perversely tempting."

– Javier C., freshman, Biochemistry/Psychology
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Andrea Boscoli (Italian, 1550–1606)

The Martyrdom of St. Andrew, ca. 1601

Pen and ink wash

(73.264)

Dying for one's religious beliefs, or martyrdom, has a long history among the world's religions. Lists and accounts of Catholic martyrs, or *martyrologies*, have existed since the 5th century CE. The often grisly deaths associated with martyrs have long attracted the attention of artists.

St. Andrew was initially a disciple of John the Baptist and then one of the first followers of Jesus. He is said to have been crucified on an X-shaped cross at Patras in Greece, probably in the 60s CE. Some of his bones are now sacred relics in the Church of St. Andrew in Patras.

"To die for religion is to endure agony for pious fame. Not worth it in my opinion, but I guess it depends whom you're asking."

– Weston G., freshman, Biomedical Engineering
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College

"I'm not religious, so the principle behind martyrdom is something I can't personally relate to. But I can only imagine a love large enough to die for."

– Lauren G., sophomore, Anthropology
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Jacques Stella (French, 1596–1657)

Miracle of the Martyrdom of St. Catherine of Alexandria

Ca. 1625

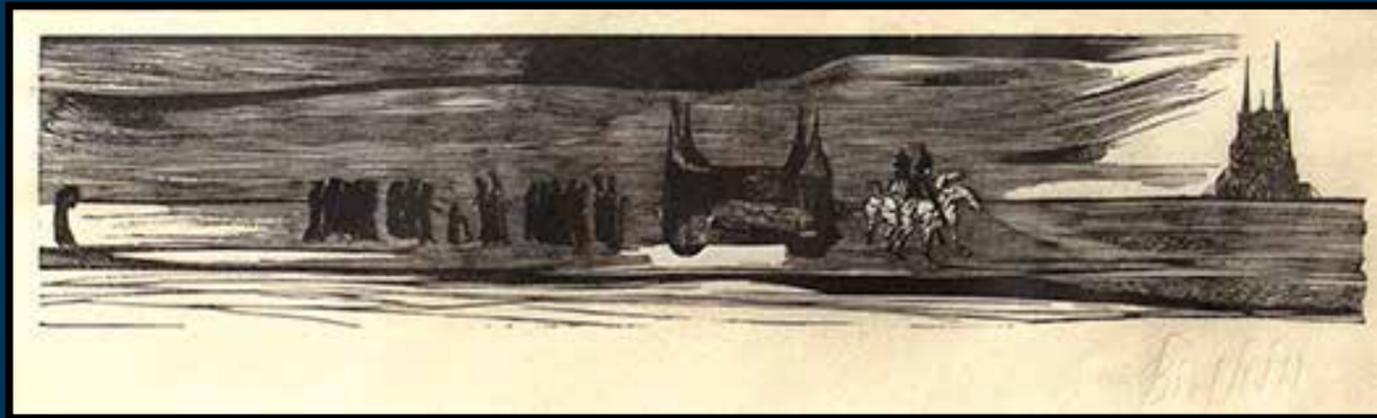
Oil on obsidian

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2009.126)

According to early martyrology, Catherine was a young Alexandrian girl who converted to Christianity after a religious vision. When she chided the emperor Maxentius (r. 306–312 CE) for his cruelty and impiety, he had her imprisoned and tortured, finally ordering her body broken on a spiked wheel. At the touch of her body, however, the wooden wheel shattered. The enraged emperor then ordered Catherine beheaded but milk poured miraculously from her neck rather than blood. Angels are said to have conveyed her body to a high mountain for burial, where it was found hundreds of years later, uncorrupted, and exuding fragrant oils that were used in miracles.

“The obsidian’s blackness brings to mind the planet’s fiery creation, its birth, but also the darkness of dying and the unknown. I can imagine the oil paint flaking away easily from the slick surface, and the obsidian resting millions of years from now, the memory of angels and martyrs long gone.”

—Luci C., senior, International Studies/German
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Leonard Baskin (American, 1922–2000)

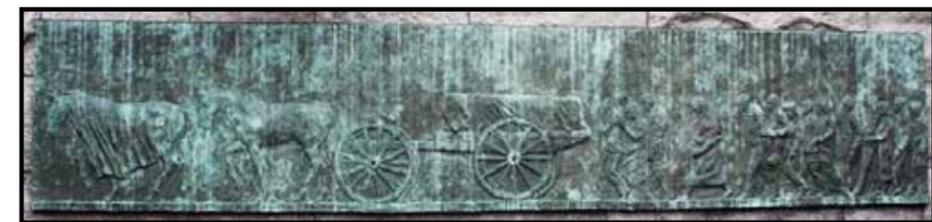
The Funeral, 1957

Wood engraving

Gift of Saul and Gladys Weinberg (86.30)

Leonard Baskin was a New Jersey-born sculptor, book illustrator, printmaker, and publisher of fine-press books. He founded the Gehenna Press in the 1940s; it was one of the first fine art presses in the United States.

Baskin produced this engraving after creating a similar scene on a thirty-foot long bas-relief sculpture for the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial in Washington DC. The memorial was authorized in 1955 but not made until 1994. Baskin seems to have drawn inspiration for this print from his relief sculpture idea. In both interpretations, Baskin replaced the cars of modern funeral processions with walking mourners, adding to the air of solemnity.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, Washington DC
Bronze bas-relief by Leonard Baskin



Francis Lagrange (French, 1894–1964)

Untitled [Alternative title: *Approaching the Guillotine on Royale*], from the *Devil's Island* series, 1955

Oil on canvas

Transferred from the Office of the Vice Chancellor
for Administrative Services (2004.81)

Convicted of art forgery, Francis Lagrange was sentenced to Devil's Island, the notorious penal colony off the coast of French Guiana. He was placed in solitary confinement where he allegedly painted in secret, using handmade brushes and paints smuggled in by guards he had befriended. His paintings recorded his experiences as an inmate.

Here Lagrange depicts a bound man led to a guillotine as a priest bestows a final blessing. A cheap, wicker casket rests in front of the guillotine to catch the prisoner's beheaded body. Lagrange's grim, impersonal vision of death is further illustrated by another painting (not exhibited) in the series that shows human bodies being discarded into shark-infested waters.

"Execution is state-sponsored demise of possibility."

– Weston G., freshman, Biomedical Engineering
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Sarcophagus of Nehnusappy, Priestess of Hathor

Egyptian, First Intermediate Period, ca. 2100 BCE

Cedar

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. T.E. Bachman (61.69)

The hieroglyphic inscriptions translate as follows:

footboard:

Invocation offerings for the Sole Royal Ornament, Nehnusappy.

headboard:

Invocation offerings for the Sole Royal Ornament, Nehnusappy, revered by the Great God.

lid:

An offering, which the king gives to Lord Anubis, asking that she be buried in her tomb at the necropolis, and that invocation offerings go forth to her, the Sole Royal Ornament, Nehnusappy, the Priestess of Hathor, revered by the Great God, Lord of Heaven.

right side:

An offering which the king gives to Anubis, who is upon his mountain, the Lord of the Sacred Land, present in all his good places, asking that funerary offerings go forth to the Royal Ornament, Nehnusappy, daughter of the overlords of Upper Egypt, revered of Hathor, mistress of Dendera.

left side:

An offering which the king gives to Osiris, Lord of Busiris, Lord of Abydos, present in all his good places, asking that funerary offerings go forth to the Sole Royal Ornament, Nehnusappy, daughter of Hathor, and of those who are revered and beautiful of character.



Philip Galle (Dutch, 1537-1612)

after Maerten van Heemskerck (Dutch, 1498-1574)

Mors (Death) from the series *Six Triumphs of Petrarch*

Ca. 1565

Engraving

(76.65.3)

Mors originates from the *Six Triumphs of Petrarch*, which are illustrations for poems by Italian scholar, Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374). His six triumphs include Love, Chastity, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity. This engraving explores the "triumph" of Mors (death) into all strata of society. The skeletal figure charges in on a chariot drawn by bulls, cruelly trampling and scything the living in his path. He claims all and does not discriminate, as indicated by the Latin inscription. Young and old alike lie dead under spiked chariot wheels; a crown, bishop's hat, and helmet indicate no one escapes death. In the background, two paths to eternity are illustrated: a "Hellmouth" surrounded by flames and a temple in the clouds symbolizing heaven.

"Looming over us all is the specter of death. What matters is what we do before he reaches us."

– Nick C., freshman, Physics/Mathematics
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College

"Individuals, understandably, value their lives and achievements narcissistically, but our greatest accomplishments do not matter when the chariot comes our way."

– Javier C., freshman, Biochemistry/Psychology
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Joseph Heintz the Younger (Swiss, 1600–1678)

The Card Game of Death, 1668

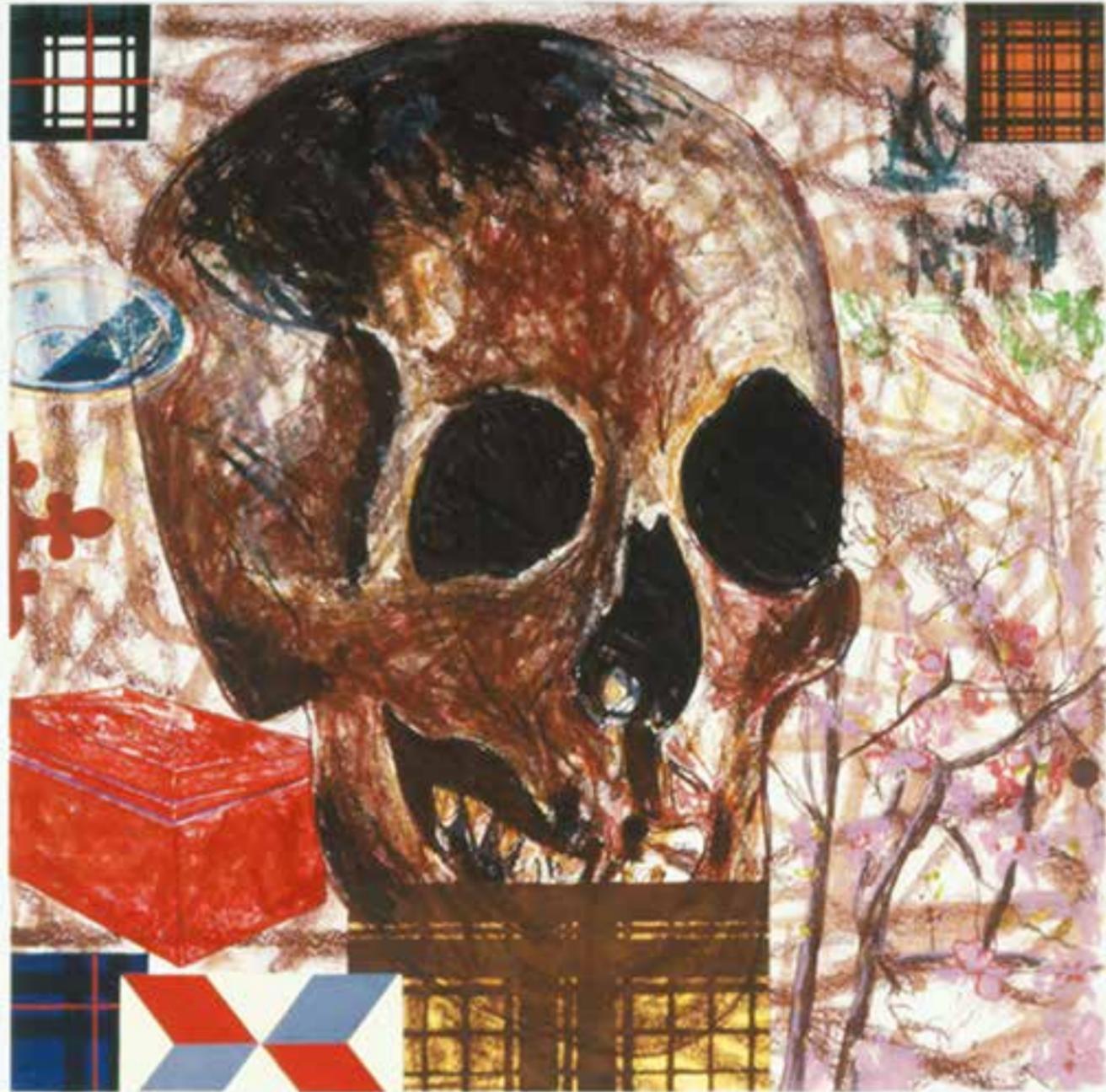
Oil on canvas

Gift of Russell M. Arundel (68.455)

Memento mori (“reminders of death”) imagery illustrates figures and objects symbolic of life and death. In this dramatic Baroque composition, a skeleton, representing Death, displays his winning hand of cards onto the orb of the earth. A shocked woman reels backward as Death trumps her hand. A winged male figure (a personification of time) has dropped his cards and flees, indicating that time is no longer a player, and that the woman’s time is up. Cupid/Eros (symbol of love) tries to play, but Death wins. Beneath the orb lies an overturned hourglass, symbolizing that time inevitably stops for all.

"We have all won 'games of cards' with death. But the fact is that death is always ready for another hand."

—Nick C., freshman, Physics/Mathematics
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Jennifer Losch Bartlett (American, b. 1941)

The Elements: Earth, 1992

Soft ground etching and aquatint

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (97.19.4.1)

California-born Jennifer Bartlett fluctuates between painting, drawing, printmaking, and object making, and often combines two or more of these media. *The Elements: Earth* is part of a series devoted to air, water, earth, and fire. The skull and the box in the print are *memento mori* symbols, reminding viewers of our inescapable connection to death and return to the earth.

"It does death a disservice to regard it as something either to fear or not. Death is as ubiquitous as life; it is a universal human experience."

—Luci C., senior, International Studies/German
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



Figure Impersonating the God Xipe Totec

Early Classic Period, Upper Remojadas I

Ca. 300-600 C.E.

Mexico, Central Veracruz

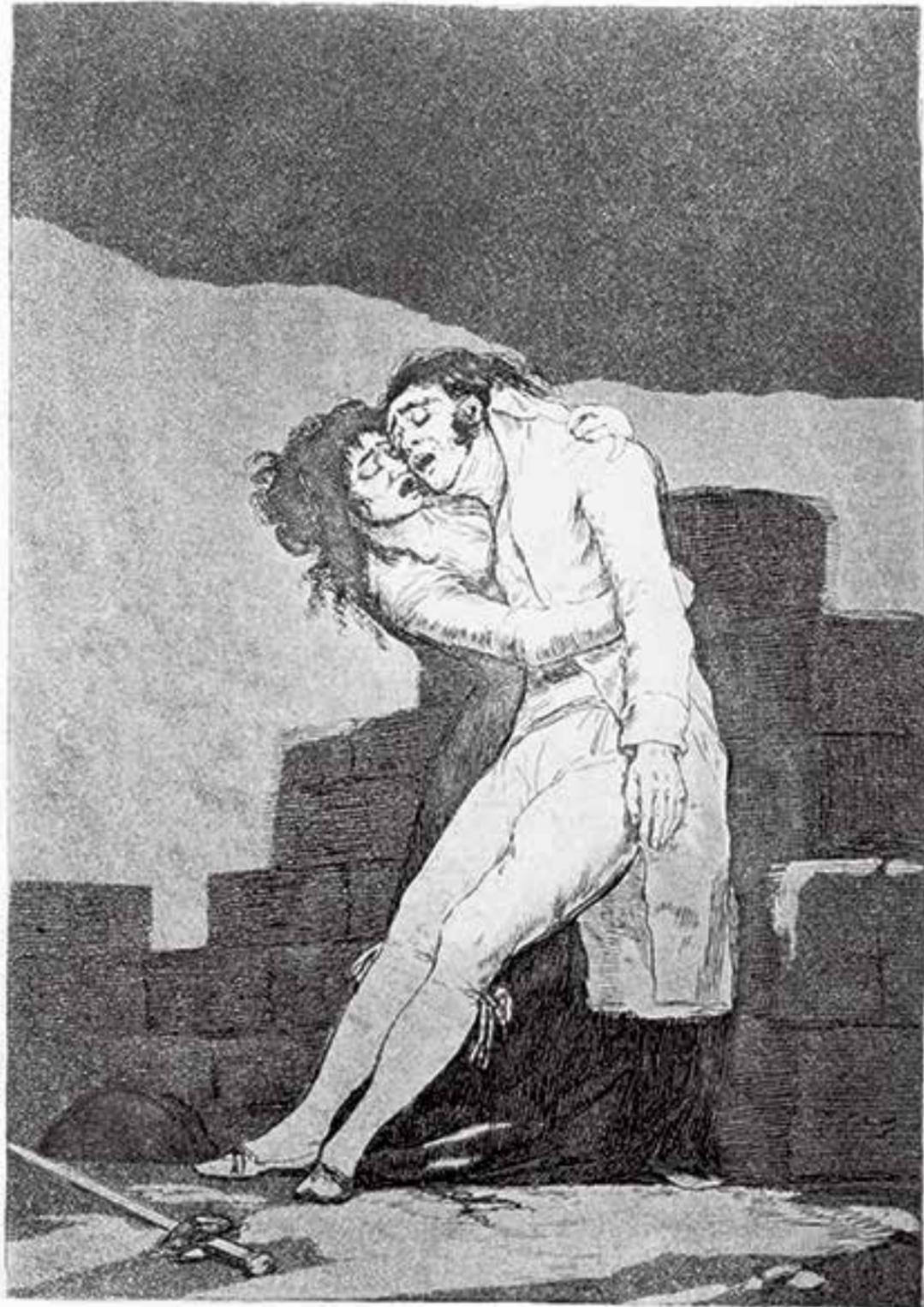
Terracotta

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Marcus (70.18)

Xipe Totec was a Mesoamerican god of life, death and rebirth, and thus associated with the cyclical life of vegetation. He was said to have flayed himself to give food to humanity, paralleling the process in which maize seeds lose their outer layer before germination and snakes shed their skins to rejuvenate. 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, and around its mouth, indicate it is wearing the flayed skin of a human sacrifice. The small hands around the pedestal may also represent those of sacrificial victims.

"I have had three heart transplants; the hearts of the dead have literally kept me alive, and one still does. In that way, I have lived most of my life with both death and life inside me."

—Luci C., senior, International Studies/German
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College



El amor y la muerte

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)

Los Caprichos includes eighty prints that Goya published in a single album. The prints reflect Goya's condemnation of his own society, and he characterized their content as representative of "prejudices and deceitful practices that custom, ignorance, and self-interest have made commonplace."

Here a woman mourns a dead or dying man; a sword may indicate a suicide. In any case, Goya's nihilistic view of society leads us to believe the man's death is unjust, and was thus preventable. As early as Classical Greece, philosophers lamented over the inevitable battle between Eros (love) and Thanatos (death), while history's literary tradition abounds with lovers destroyed by passion, from Dido and Aeneas, to Romeo and Juliet, to Gatsby and Daisy. While Roman author Ovid proclaimed that "love conquers all," that idea seems illusory, even delusional, for death claims us all in the end.

"Suicide is a brief affair for those taking part but unending for those left behind."

— Weston G., freshman, Biomedical Engineering
The Art of Death Project, MU Honors College

Max Klinger (German, 1857–1920)

Amor, Tod, und Jenseits (Love, Death, and Beyond)

Plate 12 from *Intermezzi*, 1881

Etching and aquatint on chine appliqué

Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2014.5)

Klinger's *Intermezzi* highlights the unpredictability of life through a series of twelve fantastical prints. Among other themes, it includes a sequence of four prints highlighting Klinger's favored themes: love and death.

Like Goya's print in this exhibition, love and death are again paired, but here more symbolically as Eros (love) draws a coffin-cart for Thanatos (death) followed by an amorphous tangle of human and animal parts, as if love and death leave a chaotic nightmare in their path. Love is often compared to torture, a madness, a prison, even hell; in fact, it seems strangely allied to death itself. Sigmund Freud argued that Eros and Thanatos are inextricably linked, and from that relationship emerges the sinister intertwining of eroticism, pain, and violence.

