DEATH: LIFE’S GREATEST MYSTERY
Exhibition Details

Size: 7,500 ft² (700 m²)

Ceiling Height: 12 ft (3.66 m)

Tour: Fall 2023 – Spring 2028

Curators:
Gary Feinman, Ph.D.
MacArthur Curator of Mesoamerican, Central American, and East Asian Anthropology, Field Museum

Ryan Williams, Ph.D.
Associate Curator, Department of Anthropology, Field Museum
Features

• 100 objects and specimens from Anthropology, Zoology, Geology, and Botany collections

• 5 replications, including reconstructions of a whale fall diorama and ancient burials.

• 6 media and digital interactive elements

• Exhibition does not contain human remains

Contact Information:
travelingexh@fieldmuseum.org
Cultural and biological perspectives hold possible answers to big questions about death and life.
DEATH: LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY

DEATH IS ONLY THE BEGINNING
LA MUERTE ES SOLO EL PRINCIPIO

Life goes on after death, and could not without it. Death affects everyone and everything around us; we will all eventually die. But the way we deal with that fact is deeply personal.

This exhibition explores the big questions we all have about death—and the many answers offered by individuals, communities, and ecosystems around the world.
Consider your own “big questions” about death as you explore natural and cultural responses to life’s inevitable conclusion.
Exhibition Summary
Through artifacts, specimens, and immersive media experiences, learn how life and death are part of a universal, continuous, and cyclical process. Experience connections between life, death, growth, and decay in an immersive, ever-changing multimedia experience at the heart of the exhibition. See how life goes on after death—and could not without it.
Visitor Goals
### Sensory/Motor

**Visitors will**
- Encounter stories organized around the big questions about death we all face
- Feel a sense of harmony and quietude as they visit affective-learning spaces that center and calm visitors between galleries
- Investigate objects from multiple perspectives
- Explore immersive, multi-sensory experiences such as ancient burials, celebrations of ancestors, or the body of a whale on the seafloor
- Be invited to discuss and reflect on death with facilitators or with their visiting group

### Affective

**Visitors will feel**
- Like this is a safe and comfortable space for engaging with difficult or taboo subjects
- That the tone of the exhibition is respectful, but positive, with moments of humor

### Cognitive

**Visitors will know/learn**
- Death is not finite: the matter and meaning of dead individuals carries on after death
- Since everything and everyone eventually dies, dealing with death is universal
- Life, death, growth, and decay are cyclically connected
- Death disrupts social networks, and people meet this challenge with rituals, customs, and traditions that help cope with loss
- It is important to acknowledge and plan for death
Before I die...

Before I die I want to

Before I die I want to

Before I die I want to

Before I die I want to

Before I die I want to

Before I die I want to
Introduction
What is death?
WHAT IS DEATH?

Physical transformation and preservation

Many dead bodies are transformed by natural processes. Bio-natural processes alone sometimes change the physical form of a body. Decomposition can happen when a body is exposed to water, air, and chemicals. Over time, the body is broken down and the remains are returned to the environment. The rate of decomposition is influenced by factors such as temperature, moisture, and the presence of microorganisms.

Physical transformation and preservation

Many dead bodies are transformed by natural processes. Bio-natural processes alone sometimes change the physical form of a body. Decomposition can happen when a body is exposed to water, air, and chemicals. Over time, the body is broken down and the remains are returned to the environment. The rate of decomposition is influenced by factors such as temperature, moisture, and the presence of microorganisms.
If a flatworm is cut in half and both parts become new worms, did it ever die? If a person’s brain stops functioning but their other organs are still working, are they dead? Challenge what you “know” about death.
What is death?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Biological deaths
• Whale fall experience
• Immersive diorama
• Real whale bone from the deep sea
• Video from a ROV visiting a whale fall

Social deaths
• Goat skull shrine prop
• Capacocha figures
• Miniature ceramic vessels

Spiritual deaths
• Adam and Eve blouse panel
• Reclining Buddha

Poll interactive: Death can be many things
What will happen to my body?
WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY BODY?

Investigate the natural processes and human interventions that transform bodies after death. See a fossil slab that reveals how remains can be preserved over millions of years. Consider a recreated Chancay burial chamber from ancient Peru, and discover the wide range of treatments people today choose for their remains, from green burials to gemstones made from cremains.
What will happen to my body?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Undergo a natural process

Decompose
- Kusozu watercolors (x10)
- Decomposition smell interactive

Reuse
- Black-backed jackal
- American giant millipede
- Stony coral

Fossilize
- Leptomeryx bone bed
What will happen to my body?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Be transformed
- Cremated chickens
- Green burial display
- Chevra kadisha heirlooms
- Cremains gemstone

Be physically preserved
- Chancay burial reproduction
- Cuchimilco figure
- Canopic jars and animal mummies
- Contemporary embalming tools

Have a resting place
- Ghanaian canoe-shaped coffin

Poll interactive: How do you want to be laid to rest?
What will happen to my spirit?
Physical transformation and preservation

Many bodies are transformed by natural processes, like decay, and others by human intervention. Many people choose to transform their bodies through mummification, embalming, or other preservation methods. This transformation can be as diverse as we are.

Physical transformation and preservation

Many bodies are transformed by natural processes, like decay, and others by human intervention. Many people choose to transform their bodies through mummification, embalming, or other preservation methods. This transformation can be as diverse as we are.
What happens to the spirit after death? Questions about the afterlife have been explored by nearly every culture and religion. View depictions of ghosts and spirits from around the world, inspect miniature objects and figures that were meant for use in the afterlife, and encounter a colorful and intricate presentation of a Chinese drama, “Courts of Hell.”
What will happen to my spirit?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Remain on Earth
- Yurei ghost scroll

Go somewhere else
- Stone girdle
- Egyptian Book of the Dead
- Mummiform shabtis
- Egyptian model house
- “Courts of Hell” masks and figures

Enliven something else
- Statues of Hindu gods
- Haitian ritual flags
- Moche pottery
Do I have to die?
Do you want to live forever? Learn how people in China and ancient Greece have thought about immortality, and witness how animals prolong their lifespans with wild adaptations—like a lungfish entering suspended animation or a tokay gecko regrowing its tail.
Do I have to die?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Concepts of immortality

- Mars and Venus basin reproduction
- Lingzhi fungus and tray
- Rhino horn cup
- Daoist immortal figure

You should try to be more like animals

- Howler monkey
- Virginia opossum
- Alligator snapping turtle
- Termite queen and workers
- Mayflies
- Giant tardigrade replication
- Starfish, lizard, and lungfish specimens
How will my death affect others?
Physical transformation and preservation

Dead bodies are transformed by natural processes, like decomposition or natural mummification. How we remember or preserve a body can be significant to our understanding of the deceased.

Physical transformation and preservation

Dead bodies are transformed by natural processes, like decomposition. How we remember or preserve a body can be significant to our understanding of the deceased.
Death—and memories of the dead—shape the lives of the living. Encounter the surprising variety of animals that grieve, including elephants and gorillas. Examine a replication of one of the earliest deliberate human burials, and understand how rituals help people cope with loss, individually and collectively. Take in the sights and sounds of a typical Day of the Dead celebration to welcome the return of those who have died, inviting loved ones back into the world of the living.
How will my death affect others?

SECTION ELEMENTS

Is grief human?

- Cicada killer
- American burying beetle
- *Thrinaxodon* and *Broomistega* fossil burrow cast
- Animal grief atmospheric photos
- Magdalenian woman replication
How will my death affect others?

SECTION ELEMENTS

How people respond at different scales
• Ofrenda recreation
• Day of the Dead figures
• Oaxacan incense burner and effigy figure
• Colima dog
• Nazca and Wari musical instruments
• Moche drummer figure
• Haida mortuary and memorial poles
• Ibeji figures

How people respond at different scales
• Hopewell artifacts
• Memorial architecture photos

Spark a Memory interactive
Many of us carry memories of loved ones who have passed.

Place your hand here to spark a memory.

The sound of their laugh
Their special recipe
The color of their eyes
The smell of their hair
Their favorite chair in the living room
The ring they always wore
The walks you used to take together
Their place at the dinner table
That signature dance move
The story they told over and over
The dream they shared
Conclusion
WHAT IS DEATH?

Physical transformation and preservation

Any dead bodies are transformed—by man-made processes, like cremation, or natural ones, like decomposition (you can see this in the watercolor up ahead). Or, many humans stop this transformation through mummification, embalming, or other preservation methods. And whether preserved or transformed, bodies’ final resting places—fossil beds, elaborate coffins, or even diamonds—are as diverse as we are.

Physical transformation and preservation

Any dead bodies are transformed—by man-made processes, like cremation, or natural ones, like decomposition (you can see this in the watercolor up ahead). Or, many humans stop this transformation through mummification, embalming, or other preservation methods. And whether preserved or transformed, bodies’ final resting places—fossil beds, elaborate coffins, or even diamonds—are as diverse as we are.
Conclusion

SECTION ELEMENTS

How to prepare for your death

• Prepare an Advance Directive
• Create a Life File
• Consider organ or body donation
• Before I Die participatory art
• After I Die participatory art
DEATH: LIFE’S GREATEST MYSTERY

This exhibition was organized by the Field Museum.
Lead support is generously provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

Field Museum – Traveling Exhibitions
travelingexh@fieldmuseum.org
312.665.7119
312.665.7311