DEATH: LIFE'S GREATEST MYSTERY
**Exhibition Details**

**Size:** 7,500 ft² (700 m²)

**Ceiling Height:** 12 ft (3.66 m)

**Tour:** Fall 2023 – Fall 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

Dr. Luis Muro Ynoñán
Anthropology Postdoctoral Scientist
Field Museum
Features

- 100 objects and specimens from Anthropology, Zoology, Geology, and Botany collections
- 5 replications, including reconstructions of a whale fall diorama and a tardigrade replica at 4,000 times its actual size
- 6 digital and sensory interactive elements
- Exhibition does not contain human remains
Cultural and biological perspectives hold possible answers to big questions about death and life.
LIFE GOES ON AFTER DEATH, AND COULD NOT WITHOUT IT

Death affects everyone and something around us—we all eventually die. But the choices we make about how we live and how we die deeply personal.

This exhibition explores the key questions we all have about death—and the many answers offered by individuals, communities, and cultures around the world.

LA VIDA CONTINUA DESPUÉS DE LA MUERTE, Y NO PODRÍA SER SIN ELLA.

La muerte afecta a todos y no se puede vivir sin ella. La muerte es parte de nuestra vida. ¿Qué significa la muerte para nosotros? ¿Cómo nos preparamos para ella? ¡La muerte es un tema que nos afecta a todos! Esta exposición busca responder a las preguntas clave sobre la muerte y a las numerosas respuestas ofrecidas por individuos, comunidades y culturas en todo el mundo.
Consider your own “big questions” about death as you explore natural and cultural responses to life’s inevitable conclusion.
Exhibition Summary
Through artifacts, specimens, interactives, and immersive media experiences, discover amazing animal adaptations for survival and learn how various cultures commemorate life. Reflect on death as part of the cycle of life, and leave with a profound new understanding of life’s most universal experience.
Death: Life’s Greatest Mystery

Intro

What is death?
Many ways to conceptualize life and death

What will happen to my body?
Things that physically happen to the dead

What will happen to my spirit?
Things that happen to the spirit after death

Life cycles media

How will my death affect others?
How individuals, communities, societies, and ecosystems respond to death

Do I have to die?
Immortality, longevity, vulnerabilities

Conclusion
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 I want to  
Make a difference

Before I die I want to
Eat an entire pie

Before I die I want to
Eat the world cuisine.

Before I die I want to
Travel the whole world

Before I die I want to
Complete my bucketlists.

Before I die I want to
Change someone's life for the better
Introduction
Life goes on after death and could not without it.

Deaths affect everyone and something around us. We are all eventually dead, but the ideas about death are different from person to person. This exhibition explores the way we think about death and the many answers we offer for the meaning and purpose of death in the world.

La vida continua después de la muerte, y no podría ser sin ella.

La muerte afecta a todos y a todos en algo alrededor de ellos. Todos moriremos eventualmente, pero las ideas sobre la muerte son diferentes para cada uno de nosotros. Esta exposición explora la manera en que pensamos sobre la muerte y las muchas respuestas que ofrecemos sobre el significado y el propósito de la muerte en el mundo.
What will happen to my body?
¿Qué le pasará a mi cuerpo?

What will happen to my spirit?
¿Qué le pasará a mi espíritu?

Do I have to die?
¿Tengo que morir?

How will my death affect others?
¿Cómo afectará mi muerte a los demás?

What is death?
¿Qué es la muerte?
What is death?
"I go to seek a Great Perhaps."
—François Rabelais

"Me voy en busca del gran quizás".
—François Rabelais

"To die will be an awfully big adventure."
—J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"Morir será la más grande de todas las aventuras".
—J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan

"Death is only the beginning."
—Anabyrin, The Alhambra

"La muerte es apenas el comienzo".
—An canvasmor, El Alhambra
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 replica
- 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: Dead or Alive?
What will happen to my body?
What do dead bodies smell like?
¿A qué huele los cadáveres?

Decaying human bodies give off a unique set of scents, caused when bacteria—which usually occupy our skin, gut, and even the air around us—begin breaking down tissues.

Los cuerpos en descomposición desprenden distintos olores que se originan cuando las bacterias—que viven en la piel, los intestinos y el aire—empezaron a descomponer el tejido muerto.

Please smell... if you're sure you want to.
Huele... solo si estás seguro.
ALL ABOUT CREMATION, AS TOLD BY CHICKENS
TODAY OBRA LA CREMACIÓN, SEGÚN LOS POLLOS

Cremation
This is the choice after traditional cremation, in which the high temperatures destroy inorganic matter and ashify the body. The body is burned at about 1420°F (770°C). This is the most common method of disposal for pets.

Alkaline Hydrolysis
This is a choice after alkaline hydrolysis, a method of cremation: the body is partially disassembled using strong alkalis. This is a gentle and environmentally friendly method.

Promession
This is an advanced form of cremation: a mixture of chemicals breaks down the body into small particles. This is a new environmentally-friendly option.

Cremains Diamond
This is a new method where the atoms of the body are used to create diamonds. This is a unique and sustainable method.
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
- Islamic burial traditions

Have a resting place
- Ghanaian canoe-shaped coffin
- New Orleans jazz funerals

Poll interactive: How do you want to be laid to rest?
What will happen to my spirit?
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 experience a colorful and intricate presentation of a Chinese drama, “The 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?
"No one really knows why they are alive until they know what they'd die for."

— Marcel Proust

"Nadie sabe realmente por qué está vivo hasta que no descubre por qué moriría."

— Sin autor conocido
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?
HOW WILL MY DEATH AFFECT OTHERS?
¿CÓMO VA A AFECTAR MI MUERTE A LOS DEMÁS?

When we die, we live on in the memories of people who have known us. A death can challenge or disrupt relationships, but it can also bring people together to grieve, mourn, celebrate, remember, or find comfort. It's part of the fabric of life, and it's a time for reflection and celebration. When a loved one dies, it's a time for us to honor their memory and to share our grief with others.
Everyday reminders of labor struggles around the world

Commemoraciones diarias de conflictos de trabajo mundiales
Death—and memories of the dead—shape the lives of the living. Meet the surprising variety of animals that grieve. Examine a replication of one of the earliest deliberate human burials, and understand how rituals help people cope with loss, individually and collectively. Encounter a Day of the Dead ofrenda, where loved ones are welcomed back into the world of the living. “Spark a Memory” of a loved one who has passed and share what you would like to do before you die…or after.
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
- A Chicago Beit Azza, or House of Mourning

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
Descubre tu historia con una experiencia interactiva: 

1. Coloca tu mano en el aire para activar la historia. 
2. Escucha las canciones de la vida de los otros. 
3. Unige los movimientos de tu mano para crear una historia. 
4. Únete a nuestra comunidad y comparte tu historia. 

Tu historia es única. 

Sueño de la vida de los demás. 

Echa a volar tus sueños. 

Tu historia es la que cuenta esta historia. 

El sueño que vivimos todas. 

Plantas suben en el cielo para vislumbrar. 

El sueño que vivimos todos. 

Tu historia es la que cuenta esta historia.
Conclusion
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
Before I Die...

- Wave Children
- See the Moon Rocks
- GET A DIP
- LIVE FOREVER
- Be a Good Nurse
- FORGIVE MYSELF
- HUG MY FAMILY
- Learn Korean
- Make a difference
- Rent a house from mom
- Learn more about sneezing
- Be a Famous Artist
- Write a book
- Run a Marathon
- Bury my parents
- Sing a song
- Take a walk in the mountains
- Build a spaceship
- Hang my family
- Meet a new love
- Do it for me!
This exhibition was organized by the Field Museum.
Lead support is generously provided by Lilly Endowment Inc.

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