

Self-Guide

ART
INSTITUTE
CHICAGO

Memento Mori

As Halloween's ghostly ghouls and spectral skeletons prepare to make their annual appearance, this disquieting tour of the collection gets you in a morbid mood with works that remind us of our inevitable mortality.



GALLERY 1

The Getty Tomb, Graceland Cemetery, Chicago (1954/56) by John Szarkowski

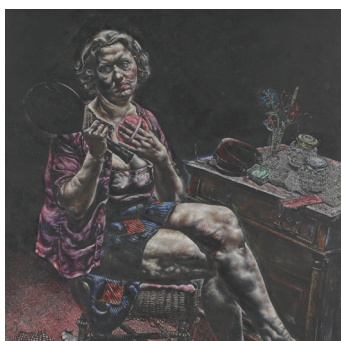
It doesn't get more deadly than a gravestone, but this photograph of the Louis Sullivan-designed Getty Tomb in Graceland Cemetery carries an extra bit of foreboding. The photographer of the work, John Szarkowski, along with Aaron Siskind and Richard Nickel, was immersed in capturing the organic dynamism of Sullivan's structures at a time when many of the architect's works were being destroyed through urban renewal. Rather than look at the architecture in isolation, Szarkowski was interested in portraying Sullivan's buildings as an integral part of the life of the city and its citizens. This image, with its contrast between the tomb's morbid significance and its vital and swirling design, seems to capture the impending doom that so many of Sullivan's buildings faced at this time.



GALLERY 155

Fragment of a Funerary Monument (4th century B.C.) Attributed to the Demagora Master

You've heard of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, but how about *My Big Fat Greek Funeral*? Funerals were lavish affairs in ancient Greece. Great expense went to pay for the best plots in the most exclusive cemeteries, a team of professional mourners to accompany the body to its eternal resting place, and the most gifted local sculptors to create monumental tombstones. This fragment, originally part of a grave marker that was six feet tall and carved from costly marble, depicts the poignant moment when family members must wish the departed a final farewell. Not only would the size of this tombstone have recorded the family's social and financial significance, but its position in the cemetery, likely on the outer edges near the busiest byways, would ensure that the family was well advertised.



GALLERY 262

Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida (1929–30) by Ivan Albright

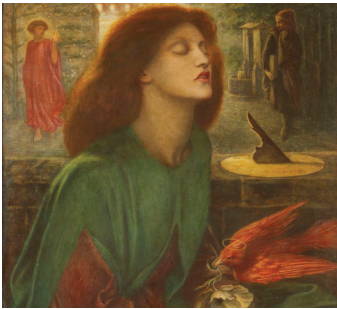
Looking at Ivan Albright's work in this gallery—*Into the World Came a Soul Called Ida*, *That Which I Should Have Done I Did Not Do (The Door)*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—leaves no doubt that the Chicago-based artist was a master of evoking mortality and the fleeting nature of physical pleasures. With *Ida*, every sign of aging and deterioration is emphasized from her bumped, bruised, and sagging flesh to the threadbare carpet and disintegrating furniture. Albright also included some traditional symbols of *vanitas* painting, the still-life genre that began in 17th-century Netherlands and focused on the transience of life. The money, burning cigarette, and dying flowers on her dressing table along with the cosmetics she uses to mask her physical decline and the mirror into which she stares regretfully all stem from this rich tradition of morbid symbolism. Of course, what might be most grim about Albright's painting is that Ida Rodgers, his subject, was just 18 when he painted her!



GALLERY 213A

***Still Life: Fruit and Flowers* (1787) by Paul Theodor van Brussel**

Filled with meticulous precision, realistic rigor, and naturalistic details, Dutch still lifes from the 17th century, like this work by Paul Theodor van Brussel, amaze and delight with their beauty and exactitude, but these sumptuous paintings frequently also convey a less-obvious message, namely, the fleeting nature of all earthly things. If you peer closely at this work's bounteous arrangement of flowers, leaves, fruits, and a vegetable (corn), you'll find hints that all is not perfect in this world of abundance. For example, a fly has landed on the peach, a stem of grass has been broken, and the raspberries are ripening in stages. The lush colors of the flowers and perfect plumpness of the fruits are undercut with signs of future decay. See if you can detect more evidence that these succulent earthly pleasures shall pass in time.



GALLERY 223

***Beata Beatrix* (1871–72) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti**

This mystical work by the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti adds an erotic twist to the rather dreary omen of death. The painting takes its subject from Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova*, the poet's recounting of his unrequited passion for a woman named Beatrice and her early death. In Rossetti's painting, the unattainable Beatrice sits in a pose of spiritual ecstasy while a bird presents her with a white poppy, a symbol of eternal sleep. While this foreboding of death dominates the scene, in the background a red-robed figure of Love beckons a spectral Dante to follow her. The model for Rossetti's Beatrice and many other of his classical beauties was his wife, the painter Elizabeth Siddal, whom he often compared to the character of Beatrice in her role as a muse. The work gets an autobiographical and somewhat macabre twist in that Rossetti created the first version to commemorate his wife's suicide in 1864.



GALLERY 291

***Untitled* (1988) by Kiki Smith**

In this sculpture by Kiki Smith, what remains of a dismembered head, torso, and limbs—the flayed, bloodied, and empty skin—hangs limply, lifelessly from the wall. A body, once so full of mass and energy, is deflated and void of life. Of course, it's not really human epidermis that adorns the gallery wall but a tissue-thin gampi paper that conveys the fragile and permeable quality of skin. Like much of Smith's figurative sculpture, *Untitled* considers the vulnerability of the body presenting it in a resigned, often damaged, state. While the artistic influences on Smith's corporeal work are widespread and varied, ranging from Post-Minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s to the elongated figures of Gothic wood carvings and Northern Renaissance altarpieces to Egyptian and Indian art, she has also looked to medicine and anatomy to further her study of the body. In 1985, she even trained as an emergency medical technician to better understand how the body functions in states of trauma and crisis.

Looking for less morbid Halloween fare?

Stop in for Family Programs' Costume Creations on October 30 and 31 from 11:00 to 3:00. Kids can bring their own ideas or find inspiration in the museum's collection as they design a wearable art piece to celebrate the season.

During Halloween weekend, families can also enjoy Chicagoween as Daley Plaza becomes "Franken Plaza" and fills with spooky entertainment, activities, and costume contests.