

# Southern Gothic



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 104

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



The American Southeast has long been home to a particular genre of melodrama known as Southern Gothic. The literary term was originally coined by Ellen Glasgow in 1935 to criticize the work of two early Southern Gothic authors, Erskine Caldwell and William Faulkner. This new genre of “fantastic nightmares” (as Glasgow called it)<sup>1</sup> would soon enthrall many.

Southern Gothic is characterized by quirky characters, the supernatural, and, most importantly, redemption narratives that play out before the dark backdrop of Southern history. The genre often deals with themes of race, gender, and class, using absurd caricatures and situations. Not restricted to literature, the Southern Gothic style appears often in music, film, and, of course, visual art. For example, in the photograph *Southern Charm / Alabama, 1955* by Elliott Erwitt, a woman dressed completely in black passes in front of the words “Southern Charm” painted on a wall. Her outfit epitomizes 1950s Southern fashion and brings to mind questions of Southern womanhood and symbols of class, while the words on the wall seem to ask us, “What is Southern charm, really?”

For many people, the Antebellum era was certainly not charming. While neoclassical plantation homes gave the physical appearance of beauty, that beauty was bought with the blood of enslaved people and Native Americans. After the Civil War, that facade of pleasantry quickly fell apart. That decay is captured in Walker Evans’s *Breakfast Room, Belle Grove Plantation (1935)*. This photograph depicts a once-grand breakfast room in what was one of the largest plantation homes in Alabama. The image is ghostly and empty. It invites us to ask what might have happened in what was once such a beautiful home with such an ugly history.

Like Belle Grove, many parts of the South seem haunted by the past. Race remains at the forefront of the Southern consciousness, and Southern Gothic art and literature continues to examine its impact from the plantation era to the Civil War, from the rise of sharecropping and Jim Crow to the violent responses to the civil rights movement, as well as in our modern era of racial tensions.

In Peter Sekaer’s Depression-era *25th Street, Birmingham, Alabama (1938)*, we see two

Black women in a city once explicitly designed to separate its residents based on race and income. The home in this photograph is situated in one of these segregated neighborhoods, one that would eventually be segmented by the construction of an interstate highway in the 1960s. The picture gives us compelling insight into the domestic lives of these two women at the height of the Great Depression, which affected Black residents of the Southeast with particular severity. The drama of the historical moment intensifies the resonance of this everyday scene. In this image, the Southern Gothic frisson comes not from the subject but from the viewer's awareness of its historical context, making this moment of domesticity all the more compelling.

This exhibition considers images from many moments in time, including the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, the Atlanta child murders of 1979–81, and our current era. You, the viewer, will encounter both familiar and unfamiliar characters—from civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and the Great Depression's iconic face, Allie Mae Burroughs, to the anonymous woman of *Southern Charm* and Lee P. Brown, an unsung hero of the Atlanta child murders case, photographed by Leonard Freed. You will also meet the teenage residents of Vidalia, Georgia, young people caught in the ugly customs of a small town. Get to know these individuals, because in the Southern Gothic

tradition, stories are best explored through their characters.

Most importantly, don't confuse the melodrama of the South for a lost cause. In all the darkness of this imagery, there remains some light. Think of Hale Woodruff, both an artist and a teacher, whose students became successful artists themselves under his guidance. Or the raising of a soul to heaven in John McCrady's *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* (about 1937). Or consider Freed's photographs documenting the unsolved Atlanta child murders and share in the hope that reopening the cold case in 2019 will soon bring answers to the families who lost their children forty years ago.

Telling the story of the South is laborious and complicated, something that Southern Gothic writers have grappled with in their narratives. This exhibition considers how visual artists explored the complex past of a region through the lens of Southern Gothic aesthetics. While you will encounter many difficult topics in this show, *Southern Gothic* offers honest depictions of the South's struggles in the hope that acknowledging the beauty, humanity, and resiliency of the South will empower us to move toward a better future.

Abigail Smith '23  
Conroy Intern

**NOTE**

1. Bridget Marshall, *Defining Southern Gothic*, *Critical Insights: Southern Gothic Literature* (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press), 3–18.



## CHECKLIST

Anne Goldthwaite, American, 1869–1944

*Southern Pines (Alabama Pines)*, about 1915, etching on laid paper

Gift of Mrs. Hersey Egginton in memory of her son, Everett Egginton, Class of 1921; PR.954.20.154

Hale Woodruff, American, 1900–1980  
*Coming Home*, 1935; printed 1996, linocut on wove Lana Royal Crown paper

Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2015.11.7

Walker Evans, American, 1903–1975  
*Breakfast Room, Belle Grove Plantation*, 1935, gelatin silver print  
Purchased through a gift from the Class of 1935; PH.973.7

Allie Mae Burroughs, *Wife of a Sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama*, negative 1936; print by 1973, gelatin silver print  
Purchased through a gift from the Class of 1935; PH.973.8

*Bed, Tenant Farmer's House, Hale County, Alabama*, negative 1936; print by 1973, gelatin silver print  
Purchased through a gift from the Class of 1935; PH.973.6

John McCrady, American, 1911–1968  
*Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, about 1937, lithograph on wove paper  
Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.942.7

Peter Sekaer, American (born Denmark), 1901–1950  
*25th Street, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1938, gelatin silver print  
Purchased through the Elizabeth and David C. Lowenstein '67 Fund, the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund, the Julia L. Whittier

Fund, and a gift from Elisabeth Waterworth Russell in memory of Angus M. Russell, Class of 1952, and in honor of his class's 65th reunion; 2017.49

Elliott Erwit, American (born France), born 1928  
*Southern Charm / Alabama*, 1955, negative 1955; print 1977, gelatin silver print  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James Hunter; PH.978.28.9

Charles Moore, American, 1931–2010  
*Martin Luther King Arrested for Loitering, Montgomery, Alabama*, 1958, gelatin silver print  
Purchased through the Mrs. Harvey P. Hood W'18 Fund; 2015.15.1

Leonard Freed, American, 1929–2006  
*Press Conference with Lee P. Brown, Atlanta Chief of Police, at Task Force Headquarters, Atlanta, Georgia*, 1980, gelatin silver print  
Gift of Scott Osman, Class of 1980; 2019.111.14

*Candles and Flowers on the Site of 2 Victims along the Chattahoochee River, Atlanta, Georgia*, 1980, gelatin silver print  
Gift of Harley and Stephen Osman, Class of 1956, Tuck 1957; 2019.89.39

Gillian Laub, American, born 1975  
*God Is Alive, Vidalia, Georgia*, May 2010, color photograph  
Gift of Marina and Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2015.43.4

*Prom Prince and Princess Dance, Lyons, Georgia*, May 2011, color photograph  
Gift of Marina and Andrew E. Lewin, Class of 1981; 2015.43.7

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The exhibition *Southern Gothic*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, January 8, 2022–February 27, 2022.

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Cover: Walker Evans, *Breakfast Room, Belle Grove Plantation*, 1935. © Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Object photography by Matthew Zayatz.

Inside left: Elliott Erwit, *Southern Charm, 1955*, negative 1955; print 1977. © Elliott Erwit. Object photography by Matthew Zayatz.

Inside right: Peter Sekaer, *25th Street, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1938. Object photography by Christopher Warren.

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