



Nothing Gold Can Stay

A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 109

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.
—Robert Frost

Both this exhibition and the poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” from which it derives its title, center around the inevitable cycle of life. As death is a natural rite of passage, grief is an almost-universal experience. However, each person experiences their own version of grief. This exhibition offers a glimpse into how a few select artists in the twentieth century visually translated their personal relationship with loss in recognizable ways. *Nothing Gold Can Stay* examines grief as a fluid and complex process by using works from different stages of that process. The exhibition also explores various types of grief, from personal loss to the widespread cultural trauma caused by war or the death of beloved public figures.

Käthe Kollwitz's *Tod und Frau* (*Death and the Woman*) is a searing depiction of the trauma grief can inflict on the body. Often, emotion is understood as a mental rather than physical state, but Kollwitz portrays her subject's ongoing trauma through her body. The tension of the woman's muscles as death sinisterly embraces her, coupled with the way her head tilts back in agony, showcases the visceral impact of her impending death. The woman's arched body and clenched muscles show her own fear of death and leaving her child behind.

In addition to illustrating the grief one has over their own impending death, Kollwitz also shows the most common form of grief: the sadness of losing a loved one. The child grips the mother's breast but cannot reach her tormented face. The woman is bound, arms restrained, between death and child. The child unsuccessfully tries to hold on to the mother as she slips through the child's fingers. The bodies of the woman and child offer a poignant visual description of the experience of loving someone on the brink of death.

Kollwitz was no stranger to despair; in fact, most of her works dealt with topics like violence, hunger, and death. She believed that death was an inevitable human experience that should be explored rather than feared, allowing her to create such painfully honest works. *Tod und Frau* directly confronts the viewer with the emotional realities of a child losing their mother, forcing the viewer to sit with this discomfort.

George Tooker's *Farewell* (cover) immerses the viewer in the personal dimension of his loss, painting his mother moments before her passing. The subtle inclusion of red and yellow in the otherwise-blue composition refers to the cracks of light from the doors along a hospital corridor. Tooker creates tension as the perspective lines push outward from the center while each new box pulls further in, conjuring his distraught mental state. He has said that the work is “about a state of shock . . . about how I felt at the time of my mother's death.”¹ The mother's gaze directly confronts the viewer. Her facial expression is not one of fear, like the mother's in *Tod und Frau*; rather, it reflects calmness, possibly suggesting she is at peace with her fate.





Tooker's painting also serves as a means to grapple with grief. For viewers who understand and resonate with the mental state he expresses, *Farewell* signals that the grief they may be experiencing is valid and understood. The painting is a testament to how art can be cathartic both for the artist and the viewer.

The Vermonter (If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death) by Ivan Albright provides another example of the ways in which art can help manage and overcome grief. Albright portrays his neighbor, Harper Atwood, as an old man decaying before our eyes. Yet throughout his leathery old skin, small concentric color rings pierce through the canvas to give the aging Atwood an ethereal glow. The way Albright painted Atwood reflects his philosophy regarding loss and death. To Albright, death was an essential part of living, a condition that gave life its meaning. Death and old age were not to be

feared, but rather viewed as necessary parts of life. Albright believed that the soul, represented by the light rings, served as the true self, while the body was simply an impermanent vessel for the soul. What should be an unsettling portrait of Atwood near the end of his life transforms into a captivating expression of how life transcends the body. Instead of grieving Atwood, Albright pushes the viewer to reflect spiritually on why we fear death in the first place.

Grief is complex and inevitable, and this exhibition brings together disparate works from the United States and beyond to underscore how differently we grieve. Although nothing gold can stay, these artworks show how we can nevertheless explore, embrace, and even celebrate loss.

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NOTES

1. Quoted in Brian Kennedy, Katherine W. Hart, and Emily Burke, *Modern and Contemporary Art at Dartmouth: Highlights from the Hood Museum of Art* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College), 58.

CHECKLIST

Käthe Kollwitz, German, 1867–1945. *Tod und Frau* (Death and the Woman), 1910, etching and drypoint on wove paper. Purchased through the Class of 1935 Memorial Fund; 2011.45

José Clemente Orozco, Mexican, 1883–1949. *Affliccion; El Campesino* (Grief; The Peasant), 1930, lithograph on wove paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.985.40.2

María Izquierdo, Mexican, 1902–1955. *Sin título (escena dramática)* (Untitled [Dramatic Scene]), 1938, transparent and opaque watercolor on paper. Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund; 2019.34

Jackson Pollock, American, 1912–1956. *Untitled (Bald Woman with Skeleton)*, about 1938–41, oil on smooth side of Masonite attached to stretcher. Purchased through the Miriam H. and S. Sidney Stoneman Acquisitions Fund; 2006.93

Unidentified Fon maker. Funeral winding cloth (shroud), collected 1966, multicolor cloth. Museum Purchase; 167.6.24065

George Tooker, American, 1920–2011. *Farewell*, 1966, egg tempera on gessoed Masonite. Purchased through a gift from Pennington Haile, Class of 1924; P.967.76

Ivan Albright, American, 1887–1983. *The Vermonter (If Life Were*

Life There Would Be No Death), 1966–77, oil on Masonite. Gift of Josephine Patterson Albright, Class of 1978HW; P.985.31

Harry Benson, Scottish and American, born 1929. *Untitled (Coretta Scott King at Her Husband Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Public Funeral Service at Morehouse College, Atlanta, April 9, 1968)*, negative 1968; print 2014, archival pigment print. Purchased in memory of Edward A. Hansen, Member of the Board of the Hopkins Center and Hood Museum of Art, through a gift from his wife, Julia, his children, Victoria, Class of 1988 and Christopher, Class of 1985; 2014.84.1

Harry Benson, Scottish and American, born 1929. *Untitled (Senator Robert F. Kennedy and Ethel Kennedy at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Atlanta Funeral Procession from the Ebenezer Baptist Church to Morehouse College, April 9, 1968)*, negative 1968; print 2014, archival pigment print. Purchased in memory of Edward A. Hansen, Member of the Board of the Hopkins Center and Hood Museum of Art, through a gift from his wife, Julia, and his children, Victoria, Class of 1988, and Christopher, Class of 1985; 2014.84.3

Nancy Haynes, American, born 1947. *Absent Myself*, 1989, oil on panel. Gift from Wynn Kramarsky; P.989.32

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The exhibition *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, October 29–December 23, 2022.

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Cover image: George Tooker, *Farewell*, 1966. © Estate of George Tooker

Inside left: Käthe Kollwitz, *Tod und Frau (Death and the Woman)*, 1910. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel

Inside right: Ivan Albright, *The Vermonter (If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death)*, 1966–77

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