

**Lives and Afterlives:  
An Exhibit in concurrence with the  
43<sup>rd</sup> annual New England Medieval Conference**

For those living in the Middle Ages, death was a constant presence: Plague, famine, war, and a lack of medical knowledge all contributed to high mortality rates among European medieval society, especially for those living in cities. Consequently, much of life was occupied by thinking about and preparing for death. The Church provided hope through its promotion of the afterlife, although the path to that blissful eternity was a narrow one. At the Final Judgment, upon the return of Jesus Christ, many souls would be forced into the mouth of Hell instead of being ushered into paradise. Given the inexorable approach of death, and the concerns of the living about what might come afterwards, many artists and authors from the Middle Ages to the present day have attempted to represent the lives and deaths of saints and sinners as well as imagining what life after death might entail. This exhibit explores representations of death and the afterlife, chiefly from medieval and early modern sources. It also displays various visual interpretations of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, arguably the most important work about the afterlife that has ever been written in Western culture. This exhibit was installed to complement the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual New England Medieval Conference, which met at Dartmouth College on November 19, 2016.

**Exhibit Case 1: Death and the Church in Fifteenth-century Books of Hours**

The manuscripts in this case are all books of hours, a genre popular in Europe in the Middle Ages, especially during the 1400s. Most books of hours contain collections of texts, prayers, and psalms that follow a common format but can also be customized to include materials that have significance for their owner. Among the various texts that were traditionally present in books of hours was the Hours of the Cross, a text that tells a different stage of the life of Jesus Christ from his betrayal to his crucifixion to his entombment. Another common inclusion for books of hours was the Office of the Dead, a prayer cycle of the Canonical Hours. This office was primarily an act of private devotion intended to provide rest or solace for the soul of the deceased. Hand-illuminated illustrations from both texts are among the images displayed here.

1. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [149-]. [Codex 001054](#)
2. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [c. 1450]. [Codex 003133](#)
3. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [1475-1500]. [Codex 001918](#)
4. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [1450-1475]. [Codex 003103](#)
5. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [1490-1500]. [Codex 001598](#)
6. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [c. 1425]. [Codex 003134](#)
7. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. [c. 1440]. [Codex 003141](#)

## Exhibit Case 2: Dante's Vision of the Afterlife

The *Divine Comedy*, completed by Dante Alighieri in 1320, is one of the greatest works of world literature and has made a lasting impression on generations of writers and artists from Chaucer to Dalí. This case reveals the myriad visual interpretations of Dante's masterpiece that were made by artists during the course of nearly five centuries, beginning with a woodcut image of Hell from an early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian text and ending with Salvador Dalí's vision of Dantean paradise.

1. Dante Alighieri. *Dante con l'Espositioni di Christoforo Landino et d'Alessandro Velutello Sopra la Sua Comedia dell' Inferno, del Purgatorio, & del Paradiso*. Commentaries by Christoforo Landino and Alessandro Velutello. Venice: Giovambattista & Brothers, 1578. [Rare PQ4302 .B78](#)
2. Dante Alighieri. *La Comedia di Dante Alighieri*. Commentary by Alessandro Velutello. Venice: Francesco Marcolini for Alessando Velutello, 1544. [Rare PQ4302 .B44](#)
3. Dante Alighieri. *Dante con l'Espositione di M. Bernardino Daniello da Lucca, Sopra la Sua Comedia dell'Inferno, del Purgatorio, & del Paradiso*. Commentary by Berdnardino Daniello da Lucca. Venice: Pietro da Fino, 1568. [Rare PQ4302 .B68](#)
4. Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum. Illustrated by Barry Moser. Berkeley: University of California Press, [1980]. [Illus M847dain](#)
5. Barry Moser. *Inferno* sketches. Undated. From the Papers of Barry Moser, 1932-2000. [ML-39](#), Box 9, folder 2
6. Dante Alighieri. *La Divina Commedia*. Illustrated by Salvador Dalí. Rome: Arti e Scienze, 1963-64. [Presses S153dadi](#)
7. Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso*. Translated by Lawrence Grant White. Illustrated by Gustave Doré. New York: Pantheon Books, 1948. [Illus D73da](#)
8. Dante Alighieri. *Le Terze Rime di Dante*. Venice: Aldine Press, 1502. [Presses A365d](#)

## Exhibit Case 3: The Dance and Defeat of Death in Early Modern Print

The introduction of the printing press to Europe in the 1450s meant that all manner of texts could be disseminated widely across the West, including small devotional treatises as well as weighty historical tomes. This case demonstrates the range of materials concerned with death and the afterlife that circulated in the first hundred years of printing. A small book of hours printed on vellum, an Elizabethan book of prayers, and a 16<sup>th</sup>-century printing of Hans Holbein's iconic images of the dance of death stand in marked contrast to the Nuremberg Chronicle, a massive history of the world from the Garden of Eden up until the year of its printing in 1499. Haunting visions of death leading members of society away to their inevitable fate are counterbalanced with a scene of the final judgment, when the dead will be raised from their graves and enter into everlasting paradise or eternal damnation.

1. Catholic Church. Book of Hours. Paris: Philippe Pigouchet for Simon Vostre, [1500-1505]. [Incunabula 154](#)
2. Hartmann Schedel. *Liber Chronicarum*. Nuremberg: Anton Koberger, 1493. [Incunabula 112](#)
3. Hans Holbein. *Imagines Mortis*. Cologne: Heirs of Arnold Birckmann, 1557. [Rare N7720.H6 I434 1557](#)
4. Richard Day. *A Booke of Christian Prayers*. London: John Day, 1581. [Rare BV245 .D35 1581](#)