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The Art of Death: Recognizing Links between Sex and Death in the Visual Record

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Throughout history and across mediums, the eternal themes of sex and death have long been paired in the literary and visual records. In our research, we used examples of modern and historical art representing sex and death to question how such subjects influence the thoughts and feelings of viewers. Do respondents recognize a link between sex and death, and if so, is the link positive or negative? Are there connections between a participant's sexual identity, religion, etc., and their perspective on sex and death? To investigate these questions, we surveyed respondents to gauge erotic and violent overtones in the images. We conducted two identical surveys, the first of which utilized Amazon's MTurk, targeting respondents of all ages; the second study targeted students 18-25 on the Mizzou campus. In the first study, individuals (N = 450) completed personality and individual difference measures regarding their perceptions of various forms of death, violence, and eroticism in visual art. In the second study, students (N = 40) took the same survey, but the group was evenly divided between heterosexual and non-heterosexual participants on MU's Campus. The images used in both surveys illustrated the themes in question and neutral control images. Analyses of the data also revealed whether engaging with images led respondents of different sexualities, religion, etc., to reflect further on death-related feelings towards sex and violence, and whether they recognized a link between sex and death.